

ABIGAIL OWEN

*When fairy tales
turn into nightmares...*

BLUE
VIOLET

SVATURA  SERIES

BLUE VIOLET
BOOK # 1 OF THE SVATURA SERIES

BY ABIGAIL OWEN

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To everyone who has ever supported my writing - from the time I was eight years old to now. You are the reason I have the confidence to follow my dream.

And to my husband, Robbie. You are my *te'sorthene*.

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Excerpt from Hyacinth - Book #2 of the Svatura Series](#)

All flowers have a meaning. In the Victorian era, people used flowers as symbols to express their feelings.

blue violet: watchfulness, faithfulness, I'll always be true

Chapter 1

The first day was always the worst. Ellie Aubrey stood in the administrative office, as she had many times before, and shifted from foot to foot. She waited with growing boredom for one of the counselors to give her the usual “new student” spiel. Ellie would tolerate it. Just one last time she would tolerate it for what she had to do. Even though she risked her life just being there.

So far, her experience at this school was pretty much the same as all the other times before... Same generic brick buildings, very institutional looking and obviously not updated in fifty-some-odd years. Same teenagers hanging out in random patches around the school waiting for the starting bell to ring. Same secretary wearing a heavily decorated sweater, this one winter -themed in keeping with the season. It was mid-January and Ellie was the new girl. Again.

Ellie glanced out the window. At least the locale seemed a little different than her previous residences. Estes Park nestled into a valley in Colorado, just outside the entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park. In the distance you could see the beaver-shaped notches of Long’s Peak. At this time of year, Estes Park appeared to be a typical sleepy little mountain town, blanketed in white snow. Although Ellie had the impression that, come summer, it would fill with tourists out to enjoy the many entertainments the beautiful surroundings could offer.

“Ellinore?” a voice asked from the doorway behind her.

“Ellie,” she corrected the counselor automatically, as she turned and offered a polite smile. Her full name could be considered very old-fashioned having not been popular in decades, if not centuries. Ellie held in a sigh as the counselor, Miss Langston, introduced herself. She epitomized the usual counselor-type who wanted to connect with the students and thought she was up on the latest fashions and fads, but probably mentally used words like *hip*.

As she followed Miss Langston through the hallways to the counselor's office, Ellie made sure to make eye contact with each person she passed, always with a pleasant expression. She'd discovered the best way to handle the first week or so in a new school was to look confident and generically nice, not cocky. It also helped to try to blend in as much as possible. A fine line to walk, especially for someone like her.

The students in this school appeared to be no different than those in all her other schools. The girls sported long, straight hair. And most of the boys had shaggy hair, although Ellie happily noticed the clean cut look had started to infiltrate this particular high school. She hadn't really enjoyed those styles the first time around.

"So I understand that you've just moved here from Texas," Miss Langston said, consulting her files after they had seated themselves in her tiny office. She looked up over her black-rimmed glasses at Ellie.

Ellie nodded. She knew exactly what that folder contained. School records were still notoriously easy to alter.

"Estes Park High School is quite a bit smaller than your previous school," Miss Langston continued.

Ellie kept herself from shifting in her seat and proceeded to nod at appropriate intervals as Miss Langston droned on and on. A full half hour later, armed with school rules, a map, and her schedule, Ellie finally made her way to her first class.

She resisted the urge to cringe as she felt the gazes of the other students follow her. In smaller schools like this, the students recognized when a new face appeared among them. They already knew everyone else there and had known them since kindergarten in many cases.

She wondered briefly what exactly they saw when they looked at her. She guessed they'd see a petite, almost pixie-like girl with gleaming, long, black hair that hung in waves down her back, and blue eyes so deep in color they appeared to be almost violet. Not beautiful exactly, more girl-next-door

with a slightly exotic coloring. She actually had tiny freckles across the bridge of her nose that almost made her cute.

Ellie had deliberately dressed down a bit, sticking to her tried and true rule of blending in. She wore the uniform skinny jeans, flats, and a fairly plain blue top that was flattering, but nothing special. Today she'd pulled her long hair into a straight ponytail hanging down to the middle of her back. She couldn't do much to downplay her striking eyes but hadn't bothered to highlight them either. Experience had taught her if she wanted to make any girlfriends on the first day, the best way was to avoid being seen as *competition*.

Ellie didn't necessarily have a problem with being the center of attention. She just didn't love the "new girl" attention — a combination of curious and strangely hostile.

With another inward sigh, Ellie reminded herself that she had an extremely good reason for doing this. She took a deep breath and entered her first period classroom, senior-level English—one of her favorite subjects. She walked up to the teacher's desk and handed over a slip of paper to be signed.

"Hi, I'm Ellie."

The lovely, blonde woman nodded. "I am Mrs. Cavender and this is AP English. Were you in the advanced class in your previous school?"

"Yes." The counselor had already asked her that.

"What books had you made it through when you'd left?"

"We'd finished *Canterbury Tales* and *Hamlet*."

Mrs. Cavender nodded again as she got up from her desk. Pulling a book off the shelves behind her, she said, "We're in the middle of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, so you'll have some catching up to do."

Ellie nodded. She'd already read it more than once. In fact, she'd read it when it had been first published in 1960. But of course she couldn't tell the teacher that.

Mrs. Cavender pointed. "You can sit behind Jill over there."

“Thanks,” Ellie muttered and made her way to her seat, resisting the urge to see if one of her targets happened to be in this class. She plopped down at the small desk, dropped her backpack on the floor, and gave a shy smile to the girl seated in front of her. She received a sweet, curiosity-filled one in return.

English went about how Ellie expected. They had a vocabulary quiz. She aced it. They discussed a few chapters of the book. She pretended to listen as if she hadn’t already read it. They wrote a timed essay comparing and contrasting two different marriage proposals from pieces of literature that Ellie already knew well. Good times.

So far so good, Ellie thought. No one put themselves out to be particularly nice, but at the same time no one had been remotely nasty, either. If she could get through lunch—the worst part of the first day—she could make it through anything. And then start all over tomorrow.

“Lather. Rinse. Repeat,” she muttered under her breath.

The bell rang signaling the end of class and the start of the early lunch period. Ellie held back, trying to time her entry into the lunchroom to be after the bulk of the students were settled, but not so late that her appearance in the room was too obvious, a trick she’d learned at previous schools - give most of the students a chance to sit down so that Ellie didn’t make the mistake of sitting at an already claimed table.

Ellie sat alone at a table in the far back corner of the cafeteria. She desperately wanted to lift her head and look around for the three students she had come here to find. But she couldn’t do that without risking attracting their attention. Pretty quickly the curiosity surrounding her arrival in the school would fade. And then she could finally focus on the true reason she’d moved here. A moment that had been such a long time in coming, Ellie could barely contain herself.

Chapter 2

“Hi.” The soft voice caused Ellie to jump a bit in her seat.

Glancing up, she almost jumped again—this time in shock. She immediately recognized the girl standing next to her as Adelaide Jenner, one of the three students she’d just been thinking about... The reason why she’d decided to risk her life to come here.

“Um, hi.” Ellie took in the girl’s appearance. Adelaide had pretty green eyes and honey blonde hair worn in a short, chin-length cap. Despite the fact that she’d approached Ellie, she seemed shy and soft spoken. She dressed casually like the other students, but on the girl’s superb figure, she looked more like a high fashion model than a high school kid.

“You’re new here, right?” the girl asked softly. At Ellie’s nod she continued, “I’m Adelaide Jenner.”

“Ellie Aubrey,” she responded

Adelaide gave Ellie a strangely intent look.

Uh-oh, Ellie thought, her heart pounding a little harder. *She knows.*

At that exact moment, another voice echoed in her mind. “*Do you need me to say I told you so?*”

“*Griffin?*” she thought back.

“*Now who else would be in your head, Sis’?*” the voice teased.

“*But I thought you weren’t going to get involved?*”

“*I’m not,*” came the emphatic response. “*I’ll see you when you get home.*”

“*Ookkaayyy.*”

“*Oh, and Elle?*”

“*Yeah?*”

“She doesn’t know anything. Not yet at least. And don’t even think about using my mind reading on them.”

Holding on to her brother’s last comment, Ellie hid her thoughts and raised her eyebrows. “Do I have something in my teeth?” she asked, covering her mouth and feigning embarrassment. She knew she didn’t have anything in her teeth.

She breathed a sigh of relief when Adelaide seemed to shake herself out of her reverie. “No, you’re fine.... Um, would you like somebody to sit with? The first day at a new school can be pretty brutal.”

Ellie had no idea what to think, but decided that if Adelaide wanted to be friendly that was better than the alternatives.

“That would be nice, thanks.” She scooted her lunch things closer to make more room.

“Great! Umm...” Adelaide hesitated, her hand resting on the back of a chair, “Do you mind if my sister and my boyfriend join us?”

Ellie blinked. There were three people she was here for, and on her first day she was already going to have lunch with them. Tricky situation. She’d only planned on observing from afar.

“No problem!” she responded brightly, hoping her thoughts remained well-hidden. She didn’t know yet what they were capable of.

Adelaide turned and waved the other two over. The girl who walked up to the table looked exactly like Adelaide except that her hair hung to the middle of her back, and she seemed more confident and more serious. The boy was unusually tall and lanky with sandy brown hair. His dark eyes flashed an engaging twinkle.

“This is my sister, Lila. That’s short for Lilianna. We’re—”

“Sisters?” Ellie guessed. “Yeah, I kinda figured that one out.” She grinned at Lila. She kept her hands deliberately under the table, rather than offering to shake. “I’m Ellie.”

“Nate,” the tall boy said, as he pulled out a chair across from her.

“So where’re you from?” Lila asked. She sat down and pulled out a sandwich and an apple from her lunch bag.

“Texas,” Ellie said, watching for a reaction. She found it interesting what preconceptions people had about places.

“Oh? Which part?” Adelaide appeared interested.

“Austin, so right in the middle of the state,” Ellie said.

“Austin’s known for the music scene, right?” Nate asked around his bit of pizza.

“Yeah, there’s lots of live music there. I’ll miss that. But it’s beautiful here,” she commented, gesturing to the scenery outside.

“And cold,” Lila said wryly.

“Why’d you move here?” Nate asked.

Ellie cleared her throat. “Um... family stuff.” She gave a casual shrug. She’d gotten good at being vague over the years. *Family stuff* covered a whole host of possibilities without being too specific.

“What year are you?” Lila asked as she finished her sandwich and picked up her apple.

“I’m a senior. What about you guys?” Ellie leaned back in her chair. Her nerves made eating lunch impossible at this point.

“Lila’s a junior. Delia and I are seniors,” Nate answered.

“Oh! Maybe we have some classes together. What do you have in the afternoon?”

“Cool, we have French together,” Adelaide said when they compared schedules. “Lila too.”

“You’re in third-level French?” Ellie remarked with surprise, until she reminded herself that these three were like her. *Special*. That would take some getting used to. She didn’t

meet many people like her any more. If anything, she avoided them.

“We tested out of first-level French last year,” Lila explained. “We took a trip to France in junior high, so our parents made us learn it first... talk about sucking the fun out of a vacation!” She sighed and Adelaide scrunched her nose. Ellie had to laugh at their identical, disgruntled expressions.

Ellie happily observed that they seemed to be such nice people. And she would love to be friends with them, but that fell in the category of *not a good idea*. Apart from its complicating her situation, it also could put their lives in danger... the last thing Ellie wanted. As they talked and laughed, Ellie thought about the situation and realized that, given her reasons for being here, there was no way they could ever be *friends*. She'd have to keep a polite distance. Of course, it would be much easier if Griffin would help.

Ellie stifled a large sigh.

After lunch Adelaide, Lila, and Nate walked to Ellie's calculus class with her.

“See ya, baby.” Nate gave Adelaide a quick peck on her cheek before he and Ellie headed into the room.

Fortunately the calculus teacher, Mr. Kramer, seated her across the room from Nate. The less interaction the better.

As soon as the bell rang, Ellie made her way to the front office, dropped off her signed class slip, and headed for the parking lot. At least the first day of school was over. Tomorrow she'd be less of a novelty.

Ellie was walking out of the main building when she was ambushed by her new friends.

“Hey, Ellie!” Adelaide called out.

“Hi!” She waved and tried to keep walking, but the others caught up with her easily.

“How was your first day?” Adelaide asked, skipping up beside her.

“Typical first day in a new school,” Ellie grinned.

“So Nate, Lila, and I study together a lot. You probably already guessed that. Since you share some classes with us, I thought you might like to join us some time,” Adelaide continued.

Ellie didn't want to encourage a friendship, as tempting as that seemed. At the same time, she didn't want to drive Adelaide away.

“Sure! That sounds great.” She'd just have to make sure her schedule was booked any of the times they asked. They'd stop asking eventually.

“Okay. So how does Wednesday night sound to you?”

Nuts. She hadn't realized that Adelaide would immediately make plans. And being new to town, her original excuse of *busy* would stand out as an obvious excuse.

“I think that will be alright, but let me check. Okay?”

“Sure,” Adelaide agreed.

Suddenly, Lila let out a squeal of delight. “Alex!” She shot across the front courtyard.

Beside Ellie, Adelaide limited herself to a milder reaction, just smiling widely. Ellie couldn't quite see the person Lila had greeted with such enthusiasm until she launched herself into his arms, and Ellie had a direct view of him.

Suddenly Ellie's world tilted at a slightly crazy angle. One moment she was walking along, trying to think of an excuse to miss out on studying. The next moment she could hardly breathe. Feeling slightly dizzy, Ellie wondered fleetingly if what she was feeling was some kind of effect from the boy's powers.

The boy's good looks could be considered almost in-your-face handsome... tall, broad shouldered, and with similar coloring to her own - black hair cropped short, slightly longer on the top, and blue eyes. Even from where she stood, she could see that his eyes were a paler blue than hers, almost silver. Drop dead hot was an understatement. Ellie had seen her fair share of handsome guys over her lifetime, but none had ever piqued her interest. And despite a rather optimistic

personality, she did not believe in love at first sight. But something about this guy was getting to her after just one glance.

Adelaide muttered, “What’s Alex doing home?”

Ellie realized that she’d managed to keep casually walking despite the havoc occurring inside her. Alex hadn’t noticed her yet, first talking to Lila and then Nate as he joined them. She willed him to glance up and feared it at the same time.

And then he did. He looked up directly into her eyes... into her soul. It could only have been a few moments. Just seconds. Heartbeats. Adelaide gasped beside her, and the sound was sharp enough that it caused Ellie to break eye contact. She turned to a startled Adelaide, and without even thinking, put her hand on her arm. They both jumped when an electric jolt passed between them.

Ellie jerked her hand back. “You shocked me,” she accused Adelaide jokingly. *Deliberately*. Adelaide gave a somewhat distracted, half-hearted shrug and started walking again.

Ellie didn’t know how she did it, but she somehow pulled her thoughts away from what she’d just seen when she’d touched Adelaide and followed her. She kept her eyes lowered when they first approached the little reunion going on in the parking lot. She made sure to stop and stand just far enough back so when they were introduced Alex wouldn’t try to shake her hand.

“Ellie, this is Alex,” Lila said, waving a hand in her general direction. “He’s our older brother.

Ellie took a deep, silent breath, and pasted a blandly pleasant expression on her face. This usually had the effect of putting people at ease and causing them to not study her any further.

She looked Alex directly in the eyes and offered him a slightly lopsided smile. “Hi.” Her voice sounded a little too breathy to her sensitive ears.

In return, he gave her a long, lazy grin that caused her heart rate to increase even more. It hadn’t yet settled down

from the first moment she'd laid eyes on him. All Ellie could do was stare back and try desperately to get her erratic breathing under control.

"This is Ellie..." Adelaide broke the spell. "She just moved here this week."

Glancing at the other three, Ellie gratefully realized that nothing had seemed odd to them.

"I see. I hope you like it here, Ellie," he replied in a deep, velvety voice.

Get a grip, girl, she scolded herself silently. She'd read tons of books with female heroines who swooned at the sight of their true love and had thought them to be incredibly wimpy. And now here she stood, barely able to keep herself upright. Not that she was in love... far from it. But a girl could appreciate a bona fide hottie when she saw one, right?

"So far so good," Ellie said with a nonchalant shrug.

It suddenly dawned on her that she needed to be keeping her distance from everyone in this family. She turned to Adelaide. "I guess I'll see you guys tomorrow," she said. Throwing another glance Alex's way, she added, "Nice to meet you, Alex." And with a brief wave to all of them, she turned and headed to her own car, her mind reeling.

Chapter 3

As soon as Ellie got home, she could tell Griffin wasn't there. Her heart sank a little. Maybe he wasn't coming after all. Maybe he'd changed his mind.

She ran upstairs and changed out of her generic, trying-to-blend-in high school outfit and into something better. She nodded at her reflection, appreciating the way the red, cowl-necked sweater brought out the color of her violet eyes, and the way the black stretch pants clung to her slim figure. A look more suited to the woman she was, rather than the teenage girl she pretended to be.

Feeling more like herself, Ellie returned to the kitchen and got busy making dinner, trying to ignore the loneliness that crept up on her.

"Well, at least they picked a nice place to live," a low voice grumbled.

Ellie jumped and let out a little yelp. Then she turned to see her twin brother standing by the back door. "You came!" she squealed as she flung herself into his arms.

Griffin hugged her back, his bronze, muscular body engulfing Ellie's petite frame. His golden blond hair, cropped short, was a stark contrast to Ellie's long, ebony locks. To look at the two of them together, one would never think they were related, let alone twins. When they were little, their mother had teasingly dubbed them Artemis and Apollo after the sibling Greek gods associated with the moon and the sun, the night and the day.

Griffin pulled back and regarded her silently with solemn concern clouding his tawny, almost leonine eyes. With a sigh of frustration, he glanced away.

"I won't have anything to do with these people," he eventually replied. "But I also won't leave you alone. You're the only family I've got." His expression was resigned as he added, "I guess you counted on that fact."

“No... but I hoped. You know things just don’t work without you.” She gave him another big hug to emphasize her words. “I’m so glad you decided to come. And I won’t push you to get involved with my... little project.”

Leading him out of the kitchen into the main floor of the house, Ellie couldn’t keep the chuckle out of her voice as she pointed and said, “Your room’s right down that hall...the master bedroom.”

“Nice pick for the house,” he said, as he headed down the corridor.

“Hey, it’s cozy,” she called after him. “And it’s bigger than it looks on the outside.”

The three story house appeared to be deceptively small, and because it sat fairly high up on the hill, it had an unhindered view of the entire valley. There was a spacious wrap-around porch from which to enjoy the beautiful scenery. But with all the snow, Ellie hadn’t spent much time out there yet. Even so, she’d caught glimpses of the wildlife from the panoramic windows, including some elk and even a bear. It was quaint, comfy, and unlike any place she’d lived. Which was saying something, given how long she’d been alive. Ellie adored it.

Returning to the kitchen, Ellie choked back a laugh when she heard her sibling’s low grumble of annoyance. When she’d moved in a few weeks ago, she’d set up his room exactly as she knew he’d want it, hoping Griffin couldn’t stay away too long. At the sound of his footsteps in the hall, she swiftly hid her amusement.

“So what are you planning to do while we’re here?”

He took a seat at one of the three stools at the bar situated between the kitchen and the dining room. Reaching for a bowl of candy, he popped a couple into his mouth.

“Why do I have a terrible feeling that you’ve already got something lined up for me?” Griffin eyed his sister suspiciously.

She threw him an innocent look over her shoulder. “Not really.”

“What’s your set up?”

She lowered her gaze and grimaced. “I’m a student at the high school...Again. Today was my first day, actually.”

Griffin’s eyebrows shot up. “Why on Earth would you do that willingly?”

“Three of the people in the family still attend high school —”

Griffin held up his hands. “Forget it. I don’t want to know.”

“There’s too much I need to tell you,” Ellie confessed, shaking her head.

“Jeez, Elle,” he growled. “You’ve only been at school one day. How much trouble could you get into in that amount of time?”

“I’ll tell you more about it while I’m making dinner. But you should know that you’re playing the role of my *guardian* while we’re here. I’ll be introducing you as my older, though not necessarily wiser, brother.” She set a bowl of salad on the table and gave him a playful nudge to the ribs on the way by.

“Huh,” Griffin grunted. “And why is that?”

“Same reason we always use. If you’re not in school with me, you couldn’t be my twin. You’d have to be older. And as a high school student, it would look odd if I didn’t have adult supervision. You know how it goes.” She opened a drawer, scooped up some silverware, and handed it to him along with some plates.

“Yeah, but you didn’t even know I’d be here until today,” he grumbled. Taking the hint, he hopped up to set the table.

Ellie ignored his comment. “Also, while you’re here, I wanted to know if you’d mind if I tapped in periodically to help me with my—”

“Snooping? Spying?”

“I was going to say *investigation*,” she corrected with a grin. “Thanks!”

“Hey! I didn’t agree to anything—”

“You will!” She laughed and returned to the kitchen.

Chapter 4

Ellie thought about her day as she browned some ground beef for the spaghetti sauce. She had *a lot* to think about. Like her immediate acquaintance with the three people she'd come here to watch. *That alone is an issue*, she thought. If she wasn't careful, she could place them in extreme danger.

And then there was Alex...Ellie bit her lower lip as she remembered the way his eyes locked with hers, sending shockwaves of awareness through her in a way that electrified...and terrified...and amazed her. A delicious combination of feeling she'd never experienced before.

And then there was Griffin. She was thrilled that her brother had finally showed up. She had known he'd come to his senses eventually...he'd never abandon her. They'd been each other's only companions, hiding from the world together for so long, she didn't know how to function without him. *Especially now that I need to tap into his power.*

Her own powers were quite handy in their own right, but could only get her so far when she couldn't use them overtly. Griffin's ability to read minds was a little more subtle. *Oh boy, it would've been especially useful to have had access to his power this afternoon with Adelaide, Lila, and Nate.*

As children, Ellie and Griffin had always assumed abilities like theirs were perfectly normal. Everyone in their tribe had them. As they got a little older, they'd begun to understand how unusual that was, and that most individuals—let alone an entire clan—didn't have any special abilities. It took even more time for them to realize that their people were unique. Their people called themselves the *Darane Svatura*, and they existed as the largest assemblage of people with extraordinary abilities in existence. Or at least that's what they'd all thought.

From what Ellie and Griffin could tell, people with these gifts were extremely rare and tended to roam alone, or sometimes in pairs as the brother and sister did now... ever since their entire people had been slaughtered. Their murderers

continued to roam free, still a threat, and the reason they had been hiding for so long.

Ellie still missed her family, especially her mother. It hurt to breathe whenever she thought about her. Her mother had been a lovely, gentle, kind soul who'd made her husband and her children the center of her world. Ellie suspected it was the same for Griffin with their father.

They were on their own now. Ellie was used to it being just her and Griffin.

A small frown marred her smooth brow as she remembered the nickname Ellie's mom had given her as a young girl – Artemis. In mythology, Artemis was the huntress. Ellie felt she was anything *but* a hunter. She'd never tried to find her kind before, let alone track them. She had no idea how to go about it.

“Ugh. High school *again*.” Griffin's voice cut into her thoughts. “Are you absolutely sure about what you're doing? It's not too late to quit.”

The Svatura people, along with their powers, also inherited a gene that extended their lifetime. They were not immortal. Eventually they did die. But they lived much longer than regular humans. So while Ellie could currently pass as a student, she had actually been born in the late 1800's and had been through high school several times. Her great-grandfathers had long had a rule that their tribe attempt to blend into society as much as possible. Once Ellie and Griffin had found themselves on their own, the rule still made sense for them.

By pretending to be in school, Ellie and Griffin could then stay in one place for longer, and interact in society more easily... without attracting undue attention. Possibly more given how young they looked. It also had an added benefit of protection. By appearing to be normal humans, they hoped that it would disguise them from others like them, and from their pursuers.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the worry written on her cautious sibling's face. “You know I can't do that, Griff. My dream—”

“Doesn’t mean anything. It was just a dream.”

Ellie tapped the spatula on the side of the pan and laid it on the counter. Turning to face her twin, she crossed her arms over her chest. “It was *not* just a dream, and you know it. I know that premonition is not one of our gifts. But that vision, or whatever you want to call it, somehow led me to the Jenners.”

“But why did you suddenly dream about them?” Griffin countered with his typical argument. “For all you know you are walking straight into a trap. Those people could be hunting *us*.”

“They’re Svatura, like us,” Ellie insisted. “How can you walk away from that? We’ve been alone for so long. Don’t you think it’s worth the risk just to know they exist?”

“The risk to us might be worth it... maybe. But you’re putting them at risk too.” He stood up, placing both hands flat on the countertop to emphasize the seriousness of his point.

Ellie looked down and then slowly turned back to finish cooking the sauce. “I know,” she acknowledged softly. “But I can’t help thinking that dream led me to them so that we could protect them...save them.”

“And if we did have to protect them? What if you morph into that monster inside you? What then? I’d have to protect your new family from *you*.”

“That won’t happen,” Ellie insisted. “I can keep from shifting into that form, you know that. Besides, I’d never hurt them.”

Ellie poured the sauce into a large bowl, picked up the cooked noodles, and headed to the dining room. Griffin remained silent while they served themselves.

“So now you’ve found them. Now we know they do exist. Time to go home,” he started back in on her.

“And where exactly *is* home?” She took a big bite of spaghetti.

“That’s not fair,” he muttered.

“It’s the truth, though. You know as well as I do that after our entire clan was decimated, we stayed in hiding for too long.”

“Because of the *Vyusher!*” Griffin slammed his fork down and yelled. “They will hunt us down and kill us if we’re not careful, and you know that! And deliberately seeking out our kind is *not* being careful. These people you dreamed about might *be* Vyusher for all we know.”

Ellie stopped eating, folded her hands in her lap, and silently regarded her twin for a moment. “Griffin, we were raised to be in a community. We were part of the *Darane Svatura*.” Pride practically pulsed off her in waves... evident in her posture, the tilt of her chin. “We were a part of the largest gathering of our people in existence, an extraordinary assembly of abilities in one single tribe. Hundreds strong—”

“And every single one is dead... except for us.”

Bitterness laced Griffin’s words.

“—and much as I love you, I need a family again. I need to be able to share who and what I am with others like me. No matter the risk.”

Griffin remained silent for so long Ellie started to worry. In all of their arguments about this, she’d never told him that she needed family. That she needed more than just him.

Finally Griffin nodded. “Okay.” He forked some food into his mouth, slurping up a loose noodle.

“Okay?”

“Yeah. Okay. I get it. I understand.” Griffin ran a hand through his golden hair, a sure sign of his agitation. “So, these people you’re following, have you thought about how they’ll react to us?”

“Yeah, you are a bit hard to take,” Ellie teased. Then more seriously, “Yes, I’ve thought about it. We are a bit... overwhelming, I guess. But we don’t know how many Svatura there are in their group. Maybe some of them have multiple gifts, too. I’m hoping there’s enough that our possessing more than one power isn’t terrifying at least.”

“More than one power is a bit of an understatement.”

Ellie wrinkled her nose as she got up to head back into the kitchen, knowing that he was right. She and Griffin were extraordinary, even compared to other Svatura. Abilities were genetic, passed from parent to child, but with a subtle variation. Of course, having any powers was so rare, most only had one. But Ellie and Griffin, fourth generation Svatura, and coming from a longstanding and large clan, had more. Ellie remembered her mother once telling her that when she'd been pregnant, she'd worried about one child with four distinct powers. She'd felt like it would be too much for anyone to handle. Instead she had given birth to twins, and the babies had somehow split their parents' abilities between them.

But even more than that, Ellie and Griffin were unusual in a way that no other Svatura had ever encountered.

Chapter 5

Ellie and Griffin were made even more exceptional by their ability to use each other's powers. Ellie suspected it had something to do with their being twins.

Griffin eyed his sister as she made her way around the kitchen cleaning up from dinner.

"Stop worrying," Ellie suddenly spoke up, interrupting his thoughts.

"I can't help it if I'm concerned about you. It's obvious that you've put a lot of hope in these people. What happens if it doesn't work out? Are you prepared for that?"

"I'm prepared for anything at this point. Anything is better than nothing." She dried her hands on the dish towel, walked over to where he leaned against the kitchen island, and gave him a hug. "It's time," she whispered in his ear. "We knew we'd have to come out of hiding eventually."

After a slight hesitation, Griffin hugged her back. "Like I said... okay."

They moved into the living room and sat down. She quickly filled him in on what had happened during the few weeks they'd been apart. After Ellie had finally discovered where the Jenners lived, she and Griffin had had a huge fight about tracking them closer. Ellie, thrilled she'd found the people she had dreamed about and fed up with waiting for her brother, had taken off for Estes Park without him.

"I'm guessing it was Claude who called you?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's how I found you."

Claude was their lawyer who'd handled the purchase of the house for her. Ellie and Griffin had benefited from the fact that their family had amassed a large fortune, including investments in land, mines, and other continuously producing sources. It also helped that a member of their clan had possessed the ability to turn anything she touched to gold. Humans, in various roles, had managed the money,

communicating long distance with the Aubreys through various media... online being the method these days.

Periodically Ellie or Griffin would pretend to die and will their fortune to themselves. Their great-grandfathers had set up this system long before, although Griffin, good with technology, had advanced things through the years, as well as adding to their investments.

“Well, you can’t say this is a show piece house at least.” She flashed him an impish grin.

“Huh,” Griffin looked around. “Definitely not drawing any attention here. That’s for sure.” They tried not to flaunt their wealth, fearing it would bring too much attention both from humans and from Vyusher. Hence the rather unassuming house she’d purchased here. “So,” he prompted, “let’s get on with you telling me about your day.”

Ellie took a deep breath and told him about meeting Adelaide, Lila, and Nate. About Adelaide’s mystifying actions in the lunch room. About them befriending her. And finally, about her encounter with Alex and with Adelaide’s power.

“She felt the shock, I know it.” Ellie dropped her head into her hands.

“Did she seem to think anything of it?”

“I don’t think so, but I can show you. I need to show you what I saw when I touched her, anyway.”

Ellie eyed her brother, unsure if he would go that far. She felt lucky that he was listening to her at all, given his reluctance to be involved. But beyond a tightening of his lips, Griffin didn’t object, and gave a brief nod for her to go ahead.

Ellie closed her eyes and concentrated on her memories of that afternoon in the school parking lot. She knew Griffin would be using his mind reading skills to watch her thoughts along with her.

She started with the shock she’d given Adelaide when she’d touched her arm briefly. She knew that people felt something similar to a charge of electricity when she used her power manipulation on them. Usually she could control it so

that they wouldn't feel the shock, and therefore wouldn't know what she was doing. But when she wasn't paying attention... like today...zap!

Ellie tried her best to remember Adelaide's reaction accurately.

Griffin closed his eyes and whispered, "It looks like she didn't really notice the shock. She seemed too preoccupied with something else, but I couldn't tell what. I think you dodged a bullet there. You touched her though. What'd you see?"

"I didn't touch her long enough to get any clue as to what I was seeing. It looked like glittering, almost electrical, strands of light in different colors...Like this..." Ellie concentrated on the image so Griffin could see it in her mind. She would've needed to hold the touch longer to be able to understand what the colors meant, but she'd seen a thick silvery strand between herself and Adelaide. And she'd seen a bright red line that shimmered and faded and then grew stronger, almost in waves, which connected Ellie to Alex. She felt fairly sure those glittering lines, and not the feel of shock, had made Adelaide gasp.

"I can't be sure, but I'm guessing that Adelaide has the ability to see relationships between people, and that's what those sort of shimmering strands of light were." Opening her eyes, Ellie tried to gauge her brother's reaction. "What do you think?"

Griffin wandered to the couch as he mentally walked through what she'd just shown him. While he'd been able to watch everything Ellie thought, it was a little like a game of telephone. He'd seen it all through Ellie's eyes, through her emotions and her filters.

"That was quite a shock you gave Adelaide," he started.

Ellie blinked. "Wait... *you* felt it?" she squeaked.

"It surprised me too," Griffin admitted, allowing himself a small grin at his sister's obvious astonishment. "One minute I'm driving through the mountains on my way here, the next..."

Ouch! I didn't know what it was until you showed me just now."

Ellie frowned and joined him on the couch. "You've never felt things through our link before. If the shock was that powerful, Adelaide surely would've noticed."

"I don't think she did."

Ellie took a deep breath of relief.

"You'd be the best judge as to Adelaide's abilities and what those strands of light mean," Griffin continued.

"I didn't touch her long enough to determine much," Ellie muttered.

Seeing ideas starting to form in Ellie's eyes, Griffin said, "I think you should wait a while before you try to figure that out."

Ellie wrinkled her nose. "Fine," she grumbled.

Griffin paused for a second. "They don't know about me yet, right?"

Ellie shook her head.

"Okay." Griffin fell silent.

Ellie didn't push him; she just felt grateful that he seemed to want to help. They were at their best when they acted as a team, and she needed him now.

After a couple of minutes, he said, "Let me think about this for a while. We can talk again in the morning."

With a nod of agreement, Ellie hopped up and headed upstairs to work on her homework and do some more thinking herself. Ellie hadn't shown Griffin what had happened to her when she'd first seen Alex. It was too new. Too unclear to her how she felt and what it meant.

...but she knew she definitely felt *something*... and she felt both terrified and oddly eager to find out what.

Chapter 6

Alex tried his best to keep his mind off the girl he'd met today. *Ellie...cute name...what was that short for?* He remembered as she'd walk away in the parking lot, he'd felt like he'd just been punched in the gut. That sensation had lingered, bothering him for the rest of the afternoon. He was *not interested* in high school girls. Not even when he *was* in high school. But when he'd looked up and his gaze had connected with hers, he'd felt a connection. A strong one.

Alex rolled his shoulders and forced the girl from his mind. He'd come home for a specific reason. And it wasn't to crush on one of his younger sisters' friends, no matter how adorable she was.

After Ellie had walked away, he'd ushered his siblings over to their car. "Did I hear something about a study session? You might need to cancel that, Delia. This week at least."

"I figured there was a reason you're here," Adelaide replied.

"Yeah, what's up, Alex? You're supposed to be off at college," Nate added.

"Your mom called. She's having one of her *feelings* again." Alex locked his eyes on Adelaide.

All three frowned at this news. Lila and Adelaide's mother, Lucy, had the ability to sense others' emotions and intentions. Sometimes this translated to an intuition of something coming. She could feel if it was negative or positive. And almost always it related to her family in some way. Lucy herself didn't claim this as part of her powers. She thought of it more as *mother's* or *women's intuition*. Either way, they'd all learned to take her premonitions seriously.

"Did she say what the feeling was?" Lila asked. She tossed her backpack in the trunk of Nate's car.

"No, she just asked me to come home. And when I got there, she sent me here to make sure you three came straight

back after school.”

“Well, let’s go find out what this is about,” Nate said, and they all loaded up in their cars.

Adelaide and Lila beat him back to the house. As he walked in the door, he heard Adelaide on the phone.

“I’m sorry we have to flake on you, Ellie,” she was saying. “But with Alex home from college, we’ll be doing family stuff most of the week...”

Alex tamped down on his unusual curiosity about the girl he’d met today and went into the living room where the others were gathered. He greeted everyone he hadn’t seen yet with warm hugs.

“What’d you tell her?” Nate asked, as Adelaide sat beside him on the floor and took his hand.

“That with Alex home, we decided to have some family time,” she replied with a shrug.

Nate nodded. “Not bad. About as truthful as you could be.”

“Mmm...yeah.” she agreed. “You know I don’t like lying.” She paused for a moment, her expression thoughtful. “Besides, I have get the impression that she sees a lot more than she lets on.”

“Who are you talking about?” Lucy walked into the room, followed by Hugh. They headed straight to Alex to give him warm hugs.

“Oh, this girl Adelaide met at school,” Lila answered. “New girl. Her name is Ellie, and today was her first day. Lila walked right up to her in the lunch room.”

Lucy raised her eyebrows as she took a seat on the couch. “You don’t think she suspects anything?” she asked with a concerned frown.

“How could she? She’s only known us one day,” Nate said.

Lucy’s frown didn’t let up.

“Do you think your feeling has something to do with this girl?” Hugh asked quietly. He rested one hand on his wife’s leg in an attempt to soothe her.

“I don’t know...” Lucy glanced around the room at the faces she loved so much. “It’s different this time. Almost like I’m getting two separate signals.”

“Are they centered on a specific person?” Hugh prodded.

“No, I...” Lucy shook her head, visibly frustrated. “Part is good.” She looked up at Alex. “Like what I picked up on just before we found you. And that part seems to be very strong. But even stronger is this sense of *dread*. Something bad is coming. I feel like we’re all in danger. That’s why I asked you to come home, Alex. I think we need to protect ourselves, and the best way I can think of to do that is by being together.”

The room fell silent.

“Do you think you should meet Ellie right away?” Alex asked his adoptive mother. He shifted to prop his ankle on his knee.

Lucy shook her head. “No. I think if she was like us, it would’ve been pretty obvious to you guys. Or she might have said something. There’re not many of us around. I think she’d be too surprised to find three together— let alone *nine* —not to say anything.” She turned to her daughter. “Delia? Did you see anything?”

Adelaide shrugged. “I saw some relationships between her and a few of us, but nothing I’m worried about.” She didn’t like to share what she saw about developing or future relationships. She tended to get a little apprehensive that she would influence the people involved and affect what could have been.

The others all nodded. Alex quietly blew out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and squashed that small kernel of hope that had irrationally popped up. He thought, *Dang. If she had powers then maybe...* But Lucy was right. If she *was* of their kind, she’d have come forward.

Hugh leaned forward, absently tapping his glass. “I think our only option at this point is to stick together and keep our eyes open. Alex, we’ll need you to stay home for a while.”

Alex nodded his agreement and saw Ramsey do the same across the room. In truth, he often felt a little homesick while he was away at college. He’d become used to having a family around him, despite the years he’d spent alone. After his grandfather had passed away in 1917, leaving Alex without any remaining living relatives, he’d wandered for years. So now secretly, he was pleased with this chance to be home.

Alex and the rest of the family failed to see the large, oddly colored golden falcon perched high in the trees just outside the house.

Chapter 7

Ellie took a break from her homework and went downstairs, only to find the house empty. Griffin had apparently gone out. She'd been so distracted with thoughts of Alex Jenner, a Vyusher could have walked directly in front of her, in full wolf form, and she wouldn't have noticed.

Huh. Now that I think about it, Griffin's tapping into my morphing ability. That's a little strange, she thought. Ellie was a metamorph, with the ability to shift into specific animal forms. One being a falcon, inherited from her father. Griffin hated to fly, but the only one of her morphs he'd been able to master was her strongest form—the falcon.

He must be out doing some scouting of the area, Ellie decided, not bothering to tap into his mind reading ability to find out what was going on. He'd come home eventually and probably tell her about it. She went to make some homemade hot chocolate to pass the time while she waited. She didn't know if Griffin would be home any time soon, but decided to make enough for him, too. She was just mixing in the milk when the phone rang.

"Hello?" She picked it up without bothering to check the ID. Very few people had the number.

"Hi, Ellie, it's Adelaide."

"Oh, hi!" Ellie grimaced. *I wonder what this is about.*

"I'm so sorry to do this, but we need to cancel our study session this week," Adelaide said, her voice ripe with contrition.

Ellie frowned. "Oh! Why?" She was proud of how she pulled off the right mix of surprise and casual interest despite her thumping heart.

"With Alex home from college, we'll be doing family stuff most of the week...sorry we have to flake."

"Oh, no prob. We'll do it some other time." Ellie hoped the relief she felt wasn't obvious as she spoke.

“Thanks, Ellie! Gotta go.”

“Okay, bye!” Ellie put the phone back on the receiver.

Phew! There’s one complication avoided... at least for now.

She fleetingly wondered why Alex had suddenly come home, but assumed nothing serious had motivated the decision. He’d looked perfectly relaxed at the school that afternoon. Ellie’s mind drifted to that moment. The first moment she’d seen him... and then when their gazes had locked. She’d never experienced anything like it.

I wonder if he’d felt anything too, or if I just looked like any other high school girl to him? Other than her eyes, she knew she really wasn’t a stand-out beauty. Alex, on the other hand, was gorgeous. Dark, brooding, yummy. Why would someone like him be remotely interested in someone like her?

Ellie gave herself a mental shake. *Not gonna happen, Ellie... Let it go.* With that, she deliberately put all thoughts of Alex from her mind and finished making her hot chocolate. She then settled down on the couch in the living room to work on her math homework. She’d finished several problems when she heard Griffin making his way into the house.

“Hey, Griff,” she called.

She didn’t look up when he walked into the room, until she realized that he stood directly in front of her, patiently waiting for her attention. Slowly, she raised her head and then her eyebrows.

“Do you want something?”

“I just spent the last few hours listening to the Jenners... You were right about Adelaide’s ability,” Griffin said. He leaned against a chair crossing one ankle over the other.

Ellie bit her lip. “She thought about today?”

“Yeah. She sees relationships between people. She saw strong relationships between herself and you, as well as between Alex and you. But she didn’t think about the

specifics. They did seem to be positive relationships in her mind, though.”

“That’s a relief.” Ellie smiled, and then gave her brother a very direct look. “Why did you listen in on the entire family tonight?”

“Because when I felt that shock earlier today, I also managed to hear a little of Adelaide’s thoughts when you touched her. And what I heard made me think that she was beginning to wonder about you.” He dropped into the chair he was leaning against and propped his feet up on the coffee table, looking deceptively relaxed.

“Oh.” Ellie cringed.

“Exactly.” He gave her that utterly *Griffin* look that she hated...a look that stated quite clearly *here you go again, Ellie*.

“...So I figured a little reconnaissance wouldn’t hurt.”

Ellie waited a second for him to continue. “And...?” she prompted when he remained silent.

“Well, the mother’s name is Lucy. She and her husband Hugh are *te’sorthene*”

Ellie’s eyes lit up at this bit of information. Her mind reeling. Ellie remembered her mother telling her about *te’sorthene* as a child. The word literally meant a friend bonded by heart or spirit. But the Svatura used the term to refer to what equated to soul mates. Rare, because of how few Svatura existed, but more common in their large clan due to sheer numbers. *Te’sorthene* was supposed to be a pre-destined bond between two people that was elemental, almost physical. Most of the mated couples in their tribe were *te’sorthene*.

In Ellie’s experience, if Svatura were lucky enough to meet their *te’sorthene*, their fated mate, it typically happened much later in life—if ever. *Te’sorthene* seemed to only occur between Svatura. It hadn’t been known to happen between Svatura and humans. But people with their abilities were few enough in number that many married humans rather than

waiting on the somewhat remote possibility of meeting their *te'sorthene*. That decision was a personal choice.

Seeing that he'd lost her attention, Griffin cleared his throat, and she contained her excitement with some effort.

"They're Adelaide and Lila's parents."

"Not Alex's?"

"I don't think so. Her power is a very subtle one, but one you need to be very aware of," he warned. "She can somehow see a person's essence, who they are, and their intentions. With Svatura, she can see that they are gifted."

Ellie wrinkled her nose. She was going to have to avoid Lucy.

"Right," Griffin agreed, as he'd followed the path her mind had started down. "I think I can help you with that."

Ellie tilted her head quizzically. "Have you decided to start helping me now?"

She caught a resigned look in his eyes, before he masked it with a mischievous quirk of his mouth. "How else am I going to make sure you don't give us away too early?"

Ellie played along and grinned back, but that flash of apprehension in her brother's eyes bothered her. Plus, he was still blocking her from seeing his thoughts. Something he only did when he knew something he didn't want to share. Something that had him upset.

Griffin continued, "It seems like Lucy used her power to gather the family together. With her cunning sense of intuition, Lucy somehow knew when she was faced with one of their kind. She could sense their intentions and the heart of who they were. Everyone but their daughters she's added to their group gradually."

"Who else?" Ellie leaned forward, fascinated.

"There's a woman named Charlotte Pierce. Her husband's name I didn't catch. They're *te'sorthene* as well. There's also another boy around Nate's age whose name I don't know either."

“Jeez. Two sets of *te’sorthene* in such a small group. That’s incredible!” Ellie bounced in her seat in her excitement, knocking her homework onto the floor, which she then leaned down to pick up.

“Three sets.”

Ellie froze where she was, bent over the scattered papers on the floor. “Wait... what!?!”

“Adelaide and Nate as well.”

“Holy cow! I... I can’t believe it!” Ellie blinked. The odds of that many *te’sorthene* pairs happening in such a small assembly of Svatura were inconceivable.

“Did you figure out any other powers while you were listening?” Knowing that would be a huge help in her quest.

“Only one... Mostly, they were all concentrating on their discussion. But Charlotte has the ability to teleport. Although, as far as I can tell, she can only go short distances.” Seeing that Ellie was still frozen mid-action, Griffin moved to help her finish gathering her homework off the floor. They sat down on the couch together. Griffin picked up her legs and propped them in his lap.

“So what did they talk about?”

“Ummm... someone named Alex just arrived.”

Ellie nodded, blocking her true thoughts from her brother. “Yeah, I met him today. What about him?” She hoped she sounded casual, even though her heart bounced around a bit at the mention of his name.

“He’s been away at college, and Lucy asked him to come home. Apparently her power also includes some kind of general intuition. Feelings that something good or bad is going to happen. The family seem to take her feelings pretty seriously. And she’s got one now.”

That sounds pretty ominous, Ellie thought. Aloud she asked, “Good or bad?”

“A bit of both,” Griffin answered. “Based on what I heard, she’s not sure which. On the plus side for us, they think you’re

just a normal high school girl...that you would've figured them out or approached them by now if you weren't."

Relief whooshed through Ellie as she released a big breath.

"But," Griffin continued, "that *does* mean you're going to have to be extra careful until we know for sure we can trust them."

"We can trust them. I already know that."

"How do you know?"

"I just do," she insisted.

He looked skeptical.

"I could always use Lucy's power to show you. You said she sees intentions," Ellie suggested.

"Pass."

Of course, Griffin hadn't gone into any details about what he was really bothered about, but Ellie knew it would be useless to ask him. He tended to be a bit of a thinker, and would only open up when he decided it was best. *If* he decided it was best.

After a few moments of contemplative silence, Griffin ran his hands over his face and said, "If you're sure you're right about being able to trust them, then I think you shouldn't avoid Adelaide, Lila, and Nate."

"Seriously?" Ellie loved the idea of befriending the trio. It'd been a long time since she'd had anyone except Griffin as a real friend.

"Can you do it without their finding out?"

"Ummmm..." Ellie managed to momentarily put on hold her desperate wish for friends who truly knew who and what she was, to give that question the serious consideration it deserved. "Yeah, I think I can. Especially if I have your help," she finally decided.

"Okay." Griffin nodded and ruffled her hair. "You'd better finish your homework, young lady."

Ellie stuck her tongue out in response. It felt so good to have Griffin on her side again. Ellie headed upstairs, her head full of what tomorrow might bring.

Chapter 8

Ellie woke bright and early the next morning. Hopping out of bed, she dressed in her warmest running clothes and headed out the door. She got in her car and drove down to Lake Estes. After locking up, she walked over to a path partially covered in snow and broke into a steady jog. Ellie kept her run fairly short this morning, circling the lake only once, and then jogging over to the downtown, stopping briefly at her car to grab her book.

Once downtown, she headed into a small coffee and pastry shop. Although she hadn't been living here long, this was already one of her favorite places. The food was good, and the shop opened early. Ellie settled down to enjoy her breakfast and read more of her book for her English class.

"Ellie, right?" a deep voice resonated just above her.

Glancing up from the book, Ellie's mouth dropped open. Alex Jenner was standing beside her, coffee in hand, also decked out in running clothes. Just as frickin' gorgeous as he had been the day before. And all Ellie could think was *I just finished running, and I look and smell like nothing very pleasant. Why, oh, why did he have to bump into me now?*

Just barely resisting the urge to fix her hair or sniff herself, Ellie closed her mouth with a decided snap. With a concerted effort, she pulled it together, proud of her oh-so-casual, "Alex, right? Adelaide and Lila's brother?"

"Good memory," he toasted her with his coffee cup. "Mind if I join you?" he asked, nodding at the empty chair beside her.

"Sure."

After seating himself, Alex looked over and caught Ellie watching him. With a blush, Ellie lowered her eyes to her book.

"Good book?" he asked, bringing her gaze back to him.

Ellie shrugged, showing him the cover.

“*To Kill a Mockingbird*. I’ve always liked that one,” he said.

“Me too,” she agreed, and kicked herself. Ellie usually wasn’t tongue-tied, but somehow the connection from her brain to her mouth seemed to have jammed up.

“You just finish working out?” Alex asked.

“Yeah...I run most mornings.”

He raised his eyebrows, impressed. “Even when it’s snowing outside?”

Ellie shrugged, tucking her feet under her. “The only time I won’t is when it’s pouring. I like to run. It’s when I do my best thinking.” Ellie frowned for half a second. She didn’t usually provide additional commentary when she answered people’s questions.

“Where do you run?”

“Around the lake, usually.”

“Do you drive down and park there?”

“On weekdays I do. But on weekends, I run from our house.”

Alex looked slightly surprised. “How far a run is that?”

“It’s about eight miles to run to the lake and all the way around it.”

“Does insanity run in your family? No pun intended.”

Ellie laughed at that bit of nonsense. She was a closet sucker for bad puns.

“Don’t your parents worry about you?” He tilted his head.

“Not anymore,” Ellie hedged.

“What do you mean by that?” His eyes twinkled with curiosity.

“My family trusts me, and knows where I am,” she said. “What about you?”

“What about me?” he asked around his coffee cup as he took a sip.

“Did you just finish working out?”

Alex gave her his adorable lopsided grin, and her heartbeat picked up in response. “I also just finished a run.”

“In this weather?” Ellie teased. She was rewarded with a deep chuckle that danced up and down her spine.

“Hey, maybe we could run together some time,” he suggested. Ellie gave silent thanks that he hadn’t noticed her reaction to him.

“Maybe...” Ellie nodded and smiled to take the sting out of what could’ve been perceived as a rejection.

“You do that a lot, you know,” he said.

It was Ellie’s turn to raise her eyebrows in surprise. “Do what?”

“Answer with something vague.”

“Do I?” Ellie feigned surprise. *Huh. Impressive. Most people don’t even notice when I’m giving vague answers,* she thought.

“There you go again!”

“Huh.” Ellie grimaced and tried a different approach. “I don’t even notice I’m doing it. I guess I don’t talk about myself much in general.” *Especially to hot guys,* she mentally tacked on.

“Fair enough.” Alex let her off the hook with good-natured grace. “So back to that run?”

Ellie laughed. Clearly she wasn’t going to get away with keeping her distance. Not that she wanted to. She was just trying to avoid further complication. And Alex Jenner had the potential to be a rather *major* complication.

“Sure. Meet me at the lake parking lot tomorrow at five-thirty for a quick five miles?”

Alex froze with his cup half-way up to his mouth. “A.M.?” was his incredulous response.

“That’s my offer, take it or leave it.”

Alex regarded her for a moment, his eyes intensely focused. “I must be a glutton for punishment,” he muttered, almost to himself. “Five-thirty a.m. it is. What’s your cell phone number, just in case?” After they’d exchanged numbers, he said, “Well... See you tomorrow, Ellie.” And with another salute of his coffee cup he got up and started to leave, pausing to ask, “You want a ride to the lot instead of having to run back to your car?”

Ellie chortled, but waved him away. “No, thanks. I like to run.”

“Suit yourself, crazy girl.” And with a final sexy grin he turned and left.

“Ellie,” Griffin called her name the second she got home. Disapproval was running rampant through his voice, mimicked by his posture as she discovered when she found him in the living room where he’d been sitting watching TV.

“I know. I know. One more complication that we don’t need,” she answered, as she made her way over to the couch.

Griffin sighed in resignation.

“Okay. It’s done now. Besides, I don’t like you running by yourself anyway. Especially when it’s so dark outside.”

Ellie gave a mental eye roll. This was an old, well-hashed argument between brother and sister. “You could join me,” she suggested.

“I only run when someone is chasing me.” Turning his eyes back to the TV he grumbled, “At least use the time tomorrow to try to get more information.”

“You got it.” Ellie hugged him and then flew upstairs to shower and dress for school. She hugged the idea of seeing Alex again to herself, secretly thrilled... whatever the cost might be.

Chapter 9

Ellie headed to school, which she hoped would be an improvement over her first day. So much had occurred in such a short time, Ellie almost couldn't believe it was only the second day at her new school. The night before, she'd spent the remainder of the evening working on her assignments. Since Svatura only needed a few hours of sleep each night, the extra time came in handy for keeping on top of homework. At least that's what Ellie often thought. She often wondered how the normal kids managed to do everything with fewer hours available.

More often than not, however, the extra hours could become tedious. Lonesome. And these days Griffin was so grumpy, it wasn't like he was great company.

Ellie pulled into a space in the school parking lot. Just as she was reaching for the door handle to get out, she caught a flash of movement in the distance.

"Griffin," Ellie called her brother mentally.

"What?" he immediately responded.

Ellie remained silent for a minute. *"Elle?"* Griffin prompted.

"Nothing. It's nothing," she finally answered. *"I thought maybe I saw something. I think you've got me spooked with all the talk about the Vyusher."*

"Good. You need to be spooked. You take too many chances."

Ellie shot her brother a mental image of sticking out her tongue.

"You sure you didn't see anything?" he asked. Even in her mind Ellie could hear his worry.

"I'm sure."

"Better to be absolutely sure. I'll go check it out just in case."

“I’m absolutely sure. But you do what you think is necessary. I’m going in to school now.”

“Alright. I’ll let you know if I find anything.”

The morning was a cold one, so she grabbed her backpack, huddled down into her parka, and made a dash for the building. As soon as she walked in the main doors, she saw Lila.

“Hey, Ellie!” Lila waved her over. “Delia, Nate, and I hang out in the cafeteria before school. Wanna come sit with us?”

Ellie smiled, hitching her bag into a more comfortable position on her shoulder. “Sure!”

When they got to the cafeteria, Ellie slumped into one of the chairs at the table. “Hi, guys,” she greeted Adelaide and Nate. They both gave her a generic but friendly greeting in return. The three of them concentrated on their homework-

Talk stayed fairly minimal until the starting bell. This high school revolved through a block schedule, five classes each day, but a different five classes every other day. Today, Ellie’s first class was P.E. Ellie liked most sports, so she usually enjoyed it, except for having to dress out in the mandatory ridiculous gym uniform.

Jill, the girl she’d sat behind in English the previous day, was getting dressed in the locker room. She’d seemed very nice, so Ellie decided to approach her.

“Hi,” Ellie said as she sat down and started pulling off her shoes. “Jill, right?”

The other girl gave her a big grin. “Yeah!”

Ellie didn’t need Griffin’s mind reading to know that Jill was pleased that she’d noticed her.

“You’re from Texas, right?” Jill asked, as she pulled her gym shirt on over her head.

Ellie’s eyebrows shot up. “How’d you know?”

“Small school. We don’t get new kids often.” Jill grinned. “Why’d you move to Estes?”

Ellie shrugged nonchalantly. “The usual reasons... family commitments,” she answered. “Have you lived here all your life?”

“Yeah. Born and raised. It’s too bad you moved here in the winter.”

“Why? It’s gorgeous!”

“But in the summer the tourists fill the place up.”

Ellie was confused. “And that’s a good thing because...?”

“Uh, hello! Boys!” Jill laughed.

Ellie laughed along with her as they finished dressing and headed to the gym, Jill chattering all the way. Today was basketball, so they didn’t have much time to talk any more while they practiced passing, dribbling, and shooting. After P.E. finished and they’d showered and dressed, Jill walked with Ellie to economics still talking a mile a minute. By the time they reached the classroom, Ellie had the low-down on practically the entire school.

At the door Jill paused and waved. “Hey, Brian!”

A good looking, red-headed boy returned her wave with a nod. “Hey, Jill.” He casually strolled over to the girls. “Who’s your new friend?”

“I’m Ellie.” Ellie held out her hand with a friendly smile.

Shaking her hand, Brian said, “The new girl in school, huh?”

“Yeah.” Ellie returned the smile as she surreptitiously sized him up. *Cute, definitely cute...* In that captain-of-the-football-team kinda way.

“How’s it going so far? You liking Estes Park High?” he asked.

“Can’t complain. Everyone I’ve met has been really nice,” she answered.

“Well, you let me know if anyone gives you trouble and I’ll set ‘em straight.” Brian winked and Ellie hid her

amusement. *Definitely* the captain of the football team type. Probably popular.

Although Brian was in Ellie's class, he didn't sit near her. So Ellie was surprised when he waited while she gathered her books and then started walking with her to the lunch room.

"Would you like to sit with us?" he asked in a friendly, yet casual tone as he pointed to a group seated in the far corner.

As she approached the table, Ellie tapped into Griffin's mind reading and quickly picked through the minds of those already seated. She grimaced inwardly. She'd somehow been befriended by some of the most popular people at the school, and while this wasn't a bad thing by itself, it could be tricky given her situation. It would put her in a more public spotlight, which made it harder for her to just blend in. Most normal people—people *without* abilities—never suspected her or Griffin of being anything other than ordinary. But she'd learned through experience that they were less likely to suspect anything if she just remained in the background, unnoticed.

As she listened, a very subtle strain caught her attention.

"...*Lila better be right, that this girl is nice,*" from one girl.

"...*Man, Nate was right. She's hot,*" a boy was thinking.

"...*As long as she doesn't hit on Brian, she's cool,*" another girl mentally decided. In fact several of the girls at the table had feelings along that line.

"...*I wonder why Adelaide's acting so weird. She's too shy to approach someone she doesn't know,*" was a final train of thought Ellie picked up on.

Adelaide, Lila, and Nate clearly belonged in this high school clique. In fact, based on a few passing thoughts of the people at the table, it seemed as though Adelaide had orchestrated Ellie's invitation to join them for lunch. Ellie silently gave Adelaide top marks for skills of subtle manipulation and decided to play along.

Ellie turned to Brian and grinned. “Sure, I’d love to join you. Thanks!”

After grabbing their food, she and Brian sat down at the table.

“Hey, guys, this is Ellie,” Brian introduced her.

Ellie sat down next to a beaming Adelaide, pulling out her homemade lunch. School lunches somehow still managed to be atrocious. “Hi, Ellie, welcome to the table.”

Ellie spent the lunch hour being good-naturedly grilled about anything and everything. She didn’t need Griffin’s mind reading skills to know that several of the girls in the group weren’t thrilled with her joining them. They already saw her as competition rather than as a potential friend. Ellie confined herself to a mental eye roll. This was nothing unusual for girls. The boys—other than Nate, who only had eyes for Adelaide—all vied for her attention. Some overtly, some more subtly. Ellie avoided talking about herself as much as she could, preferring to turn the conversation to other topics. She knew the cardinal rule when trying to get into any clique—Always make friends with the girls first. And the best way to do that was to not appear too interesting to the boys, or too interested in them.

“So what do you do around here for fun?” she asked as she popped the top on her Coke can.

“Oh, there’s a ton to do,” a boisterous girl named Kayla answered. “Especially in the summer.”

“If you can manage to avoid all the tourists,” a boy named Mark grumbled with a smirk.

“Hey, Mark, don’t knock ‘em.” Brian grinned. “Didn’t you date a tourist girl last summer?”

Mark gave him a dark look in return.

Lila continued. “In the summer there’s all the outdoorsy stuff. You know... hiking, biking, camping, white water rafting. There’s lots of shops downtown... if you can afford them.” Everyone groaned at this. The shops had great stuff, but weren’t exactly priced for the average teenager.

“What about in the winter?” Ellie glanced out the window. Snow covered everything outside. Today was particularly cold and windy, the air snapping crisply. Ellie actually enjoyed this weather after many years in the heat of Texas. Snow was a rare thing in Austin.

“There’s not too much skiing close by,” Nate explained around a large bite of his sandwich. “But there’s still other outdoor stuff, snowshoeing, that kind of thing. Mostly we hang out indoors during the winter.”

“Ellie, you should come with us to the movies this Friday,” Brian suggested. He named a recently released movie with one of Ellie’s favorite actors, and she decided that she actually liked the thoughtful boy. Using Griffin’s power, she could tell that the invitation was friendly and genuine.

“Sure!” she accepted happily. “Sounds like fun.”

After her last class of the day, Ellie suppressed a flash of disappointment when she saw that Alex wasn’t in the parking lot like he’d been the day before. It was ridiculous to feel this way...she’d barely spoken two words to him. But still, the tightening of her chest was hard to ignore.

She faked a smile and waved bye to Adelaide. Although the temptation to ask Adelaide about her brother poked at Ellie, she forced herself to remain quiet. She headed to her car, jumped in, and drove quickly down the road. She didn’t head straight home, taking some time first to get some errands done.

When Ellie got home and tromped up the stairs from the garage in the basement, she found Griffin in the kitchen making dinner. She dropped her backpack on the floor by the stools. “Hey, Griff, what’re we having?”

“Pork chops,” he replied.

“Mmmm... with your cherry sauce? My favorite! You trying to butter me up for something?”

Griffin gave her one of his rare grins. “Nope, just had all the ingredients on hand.”

Ellie went to stick her finger in the sauce for a taste, but got her hand playfully slapped as punishment.

“Were you listening in today?” she asked him, sneaking a taste anyway.

“A little,” he grunted. “Adelaide sure gets props for being able to get people to do exactly what she wants without their knowing.”

Ellie laughed. “Seriously... I am now officially part of her circle of friends without having to lift a finger or read a single mind.”

“I don’t think you have to worry that they suspect anything,” Griffin said. He turned back to the pork chops in the frying pan.

“Well, that’s something. Did you listen to any of the rest of their family today?”

Griffin shook his head. “No. I spent most of the day moving in and listening to you at school.”

Ellie hid her impatience. She wanted to know more about the others. Especially Alex. *What was he like? What could he do? What had he thought about their encounter that morning?* ...Although she’d rather find that last bit out for herself.

Ellie started to set the table when her cell phone beeped, signaling a text message. With a small frown, she picked it up, and then almost dropped the phone. A text message from Alex blinked at her.

“Hi,” the message said.

“Hi, yourself. Chickening out on our run?” she messaged back.

“Lol. No. Still on for that.”

“Okay... what’s up?”

There was a pause long enough for Ellie to get nervous.

“Just wondering how your day was,” he eventually answered.

Ellie blinked. And a small ray of hope lit up inside her chest.

“Typical day in the life of a high school student. You?”

“Typical day in the life of a law office intern.” Another pause and then, “I’ll see you tomorrow at the crack of dawn.”

Ellie sent back a smiley face. “See you tomorrow.”

Chapter 10

Dinner was fairly quiet, with both Ellie and Griffin preoccupied with their own private thoughts. When she was done eating, Ellie gathered up the dishes and took them to the kitchen.

“Hey,” she called to Griffin, who merely grunted. “I’ve got to get out of the house. I’m going to go fly for a bit. Okay?”

Her favorite and strongest morph was that of a Peregrine Falcon, inherited through her grandfather. It wasn’t unusual for Ellie to spend some time each night in this form, she so loved the feeling of freedom and the power of soaring through the open sky.

Usually when she went flying, Griffin couldn’t care less. This time, however, he looked up at her with slightly narrowed eyes.

“You’re not going to go watch them, are you?” he demanded, moving around the bar and into the kitchen.

“As a matter of fact, I’m not.” Tempting as it was, she had no intention of going anywhere near the Jenners and Pierces tonight.

“...Because we agreed that I would do most of the watching right now since they don’t know anything about me, remember?” Griffin continued.

“I remember what we agreed to,” Ellie put her hands on her hips, her voice ringing with irritation. It drove her nuts when Griffin got on his superior soap box—like he was so much older than her, when really he was younger by ten whole minutes.

“Okay,” he finally relented. “Just so you keep to the plan.”

Ellie didn’t bother to reply. She headed out of the back of the house and trudged up the snow-covered hill and into the woods. As soon as she was camouflaged by the thick trees, she transitioned into her falcon form.

To any onlooker she would've appeared to blur before their eyes, shimmering like a mirage in a desert. There was no sound to accompany her transformation, and in mere moments a falcon appeared where Ellie had just been. In all of her morphs, Ellie's exotic coloring showed through as a midnight black body and violet-blue eyes. As a falcon, this was quite striking up close, but from a distance, no one would notice anything unusual about her appearance. She spread her long wings, and with a mighty *whoosh*, she took flight.

Ellie quickly gained altitude. She worked off her frustration and impatience with the situation in a series of incredible dives. She would flap her strong wings to get high up in the air...spread out her feathers hovering a moment, enjoying the view, and then rocket back toward the earth. Sometimes she would level out well above the ground, other times she waited until the very last second before pulling out of the stoop. Her maneuvering left her both exhilarated and in a much-improved mood.

Ellie kept her word and didn't go near the Jenner and Pierce properties, although she couldn't resist occasionally turning her powerful sight in their direction, hoping to catch a glimpse of any of them. She had no luck, however. Cold and tired, she eventually turned back for home. Once she reached the clearing where she'd started, Ellie quickly morphed back into her human form, fully clothed. The control of her shift happened in her mind, and so when she returned to human form, it was exactly how she'd left it. She'd always been entertained by descriptions of shifters in stories showing them as naked when they turned back to human, thankful that that wasn't how it worked.

"That was stretching it a bit, don't you think?" Griffin called out the second she walked in the door. So he *had* been watching.

"If you don't want me to block you from reading my mind completely, I suggest you keep your nose out of my business and have a little faith," she replied using the fake voice she knew drove her brother nuts. She found him in his room

reading a book. She paused in the doorway, leaning against the frame. "I stuck to the plan."

He grunted and narrowed his eyes.

"I'm going to get some homework done, and then I'm going to sleep," Ellie continued, too tired to argue. She knew he didn't approve of her decision to come here, despite his agreeing to help her. In Ellie's mind it was too important to pass up this chance. More important than keeping the peace with her twin.

The next morning at five-thirty on the dot, Alex pulled into the parking space beside Ellie's car.

Ellie didn't need Griffin's mind reading ability to know that the bleary-eyed, I'm-so-tired routine Alex gave her was a pretense. He was Svatura after all. He needed just as little sleep as she did. But she grinned and played along.

"Come on, sleepyhead." She grabbed his sleeve, careful not to touch him directly, and pulled him on to the path. "Time to wake up and get moving."

They both started jogging. Alex adjusted his pace to stay beside Ellie.

"So do you compete in track at school?" Alex asked after a few minutes of comfortable silence while they jogged.

"Nah."

"Do you participate in any extracurricular activities?" he prodded.

"Not yet. I've only been at this school a little while," she reminded him.

"Well, what about at your previous school?"

"Yeah, a few," she answered.

Alex chuckled. "There's that vagueness again."

"Ugh. Sorry!" Ellie snagged a loose lock of hair and tucked it behind her ear. "I mostly participated in academic

extracurricular activities like scholastic competitions and language clubs.”

“Ah! So you’re a brainiac rather than a jock?”

“Not really.”

“Because...?” Alex prompted after a lengthy pause.

“Mostly because we move so much. It’s easier to get into academic activities because the seasons for athletic activities are very specific, and I’d frequently miss try outs.”

“You move a lot, huh?” Alex almost sounded disappointed at that news, but glancing at his face Ellie could only see mild curiosity and so dismissed that thought as wishful thinking.

“Yeah, family reasons.” Ellie shrugged.

Alex cocked an eyebrow at her, mouthing, “*Vague.*” Ellie responded by wrinkling her nose at him.

“What about you? Law intern, huh? You must be some sort of brainiac yourself.”

“Nah,” Alex shrugged modestly. “I just worked really hard in school. I plan to go into environmental law like my dad.”

“Any sports?”

“Not really. Like you, we’ve moved around a lot. You know... family reasons.” Alex winked.

Ellie just pursed her lips and shook her head at him.

They chatted easily the rest of their run, and eventually made their way around the lake, arriving back at the point where they started. As they leaned against their cars to stretch out their muscles Alex said, “Breakfast?”

“Sorry. Can’t. I have some more studying to do for class.” Ellie lied.

“Maybe tomorrow, then,” he said, trying not to appear disappointed.

Ellie’s heart rate picked up and she smothered a dorky grin. “Sure.”

“Same time and place?”

Ellie nodded. “See you here.”

They hopped in their cars and with a wave, both drove away.

Alex headed home from his run with Ellie with mixed feelings. She really was adorable, although a little reticent about her background. When he'd seen her at the coffee shop the previous morning, he'd thought about walking away before she'd noticed him. But something about her drew him to her, and he'd approached her despite all the reasons he knew he shouldn't. And then he'd gone and not only asked to run with her, but he'd practically insisted on it. And now he'd made it a standing thing between them.

What are you doing Alex? He questioned himself. As much as everything in him insisted that he pursue her, it simply wasn't possible. And beyond stupid. Regardless of the age difference, he might be putting her in danger based on Lucy's latest premonitions. *I have no choice. I'll keep everything light and casual with Ellie, and walk away if things get intense.* He made the mental vow.

And then he immediately went back on those few good intentions by texting her again later that night.

“Hey.”

“Hey back atchya.” Alex chuckled. He loved her sassy little text comebacks.

“Had fun on our run this morning.”

“ :) Me too.”

“We still on for tomorrow?”

“Same bat time, same bat channel.”

Alex shook his head, completely confused. “Huh?”

“Didn’t you ever watch that old hokey Batman show on TV?”

“Lol. Can’t say that I did.”

“Sheesh. I thought everyone knew that expression. You missed out.”

“Sounds like it. See you tomorrow.”

“With bells on.”

Chapter 11

Ellie's life fell into a pattern. At school, there were a few more people she recognized. A few more friendly faces in the halls. Her days of being the focal point of everyone's curiosity were over. Now she was just another regular student.

Meanwhile, she was becoming addicted to her mornings with Alex. They'd take a quick run around the lake and then breakfast at the little shop where they'd bumped into each other the first time. They chatted about any and everything, a casual comfort stealing into their interaction that had Ellie opening up a little bit more each day.

She felt a little thrill when she thought about their time together, despite the fact that he treated her more like a little sister than anything else. A disappointment she chose to ignore for the time being. And he'd stopped the flirty little texts. She wasn't quite sure how to feel about that either. Thankfully, Griffin had kept whatever thoughts he had about the situation to himself.

Ellie spent time with the Adelaide, Lila, and Nate at school, and felt like they were becoming true friends. Although they never mentioned how Alex and Ellie met every morning to run. After the first day, Griffin informed her that Alex hadn't shared this fact with his family yet. So Ellie kept their secret.

One day, as she was just about to get into her car, Ellie heard someone calling her name and turned around.

"How's it going?" Adelaide asked once she made her way over. She searched in her purse, pulled out sunglasses, and popped them on.

"Same ol', same ol'." Ellie grinned, leaning an arm along the top of the car door.

Adelaide got straight to the point. "So, I know it's been a while since I asked..." She gave Ellie an apologetic look. "But things seem to have calmed down at home since Alex got back. So how about that study session we talked about?"

Ellie had been patiently waiting for this invitation. Griffin had assured her that it would come eventually, but it had been almost two months and she'd started to lose hope. "Sure! That sounds great!"

"Okay. So how does Thursday night sound to you?"

They had a French test coming up, so it was perfect timing. Ellie had a ready answer this time, and, for once, was thankful for the recent snowfall.

"Um..." Ellie feigned remorseful surprise. "I'd love to come over, except my family doesn't feel comfortable with me driving all the way to your house in the dark while it's snowing. We didn't have snow very often where I was in Texas, and I'm not very good at driving in it yet."

"Oh." Adelaide bit her lip, clearly disappointed. But Ellie had a plan. She couldn't invite them to her house; Griffin needed to stay off their radar for as long as possible. Plus, she'd have to explain about having no parents. While she and Griffin already had their story prepared, Ellie didn't want to lie to her new friends. But there were other places they could study.

A little hesitantly she asked, "Would your parents be okay with you staying in town and studying at the library with me?"

Adelaide perked up. "Yeah! At least, I think they'd be fine with that."

"We could study after school, and maybe get some pizza for dinner before you go home?"

"Sounds great! I'll ask my parents tonight. Is tomorrow still okay?"

"Sure."

As the two girls exchanged hugs, a car horn sounded close by. Adelaide turned, raised her hand and waved. "There's Alex." Turning back to Ellie she explained, "He had to borrow the car today so he's picking us up. Gotta go, see you tomorrow." She skipped away to join Lila and Nate.

Ellie fought with herself for a moment. She wasn't quite sure what to think about the fact that her friends didn't appear to know about her morning runs with their brother. Not wanting to turn around and see him and unable to resist it at the same time, she lost the battle and glanced over her shoulder, her gaze immediately colliding with Alex's.

She had no idea why, but a blush crept slowly up her face. Annoyed with her lack of self-control on so many levels, she moved to get into her own car, only to be stopped by Jill. They'd become friends over the last few months. Jill was a sweet girl, but a little boy-crazy.

"Did you see Alex Jenner?" Jill gave a dramatic sigh. "He is just *so* gorgeous!"

Ellie grinned her mutual appreciation. "Do you know him?"

"No." Jill's expression was hilariously tragic. "He graduated a few years ago. Before I was in high school. I think he's a sophomore in college now."

"Oh..." Ellie was at a loss for words. "Well, I'd better get home. See ya, Jill!" And with a wave, she hopped in her car and drove away.

The following day as she was pulling into the school parking lot, Ellie saw Adelaide's car pull in behind her. Once again, Alex was driving his siblings to school. He parked in the spot next to hers and came over to her door.

"Hi, Ellie."

"Hi, Alex," she replied, mimicking his casual attitude. Ellie looked around, unable to think of anything else to say since she'd just seen him earlier that morning, and became aware of the three pairs of curious eyes watching them.

"Hi, guys!" She gave Lila and Adelaide quick hugs, as always making sure she was careful not to touch their skin.

"Bye, Alex," Lila called over her shoulder. They turned in tandem to walk into the school.

“Bye,” he called back. “See you later, Ellie...”

Ellie turned to smile back at him, and found him watching her with an oddly intent look. And the blush, the one that she was beginning to truly hate, flamed up her face again and she turned away as quickly as she could. She thought she heard his soft chuckle as she continued to hurry away. She just barely suppressed a hum of frustration.

Chapter 12

I must've looked like a blithering idiot, Ellie thought. She couldn't believe how she could be so awkward with Alex now, but so comfortable with him when they met in the mornings. Lila linked an arm through Ellie's, pulling her away from her inward contemplation.

"If it's okay," Lila started, "Can we get a ride with you to the library after school?"

"Of course."

"Thanks! Alex is using the car again today. He'll pick us up when we're done with dinner."

"Sounds like a plan," Ellie said.

The day dragged on. Ellie found that even her favorite classes, English and French, were particularly boring today. She spent a lot of time absentmindedly doodling Alex's name with little hearts in her notebook and watching as the hands of the clock seemed to cease all movement.

Ugh... This day is just never ending!

Sometimes, just to amuse herself, Ellie would tap into Griffin's mind reading power and idly listen in on the high school gossip. Usually she didn't like to invade people's privacy, especially his. And if she did stumble on anything personal or anything mean, she always immediately moved away from those thoughts. Today there was apparently very little going on.

A bit of a competition was brewing between two of the girls Ellie sat with at lunch, Kayla and Rose, over Brian, the boy from Ellie's economics class.

"Kayla just needs to back off. She's soooo obvious, coming on to Brian that way," Ellie caught Rose's thoughts during lunch.

"Jeez. Rose should get a clue that Brian is not remotely into her," Kayla was thinking during economics.

Brian tended to be the focus of a lot of the girls at the school, and Ellie could understand why. He was hot, outgoing, genuinely nice, smart, and athletic. A good catch for *anyone*. Brian didn't tend to show favoritism for any one girl, which led all the girls interested in him to think they had a chance. It was silly, but this small bit of drama managed to keep Ellie's mind occupied to get her through the day.

As soon as her last class was over, Ellie met Lila, Adelaide, and Nate in the parking lot and drove them all to the library. Ellie hadn't been there yet. The building was one of the first you came to when going down the main street of downtown Estes Park. All wooden beams and stone, it looked more like a lodge than a library. It wasn't very busy on a Thursday night in March.

They trooped into the building and headed upstairs where the tables and study carrels were located.

"Awesome!" Nate exclaimed. "The biggest table is still open."

They pulled out chairs and spent the first several minutes getting settled and spread out...organizing their books and notes and booting up their laptops.

Ellie had never studied with other people before, always working on her homework in the middle of the night, and never allowing herself to make friends at any of her previous schools. In general, her impression was that most students used studying in a group as an excuse to socialize, never really getting any work done.

As Ellie looked at her new friends, she thought, *I should just tell them who I am.*

"*Don't you dare, Ellie,*" Griffin's voice echoed in her mind. "*You agreed we would wait until I could find out a little more about them.*"

Keeping her expression carefully blank, she mentally replied, "*This is getting silly, Griffin. I know these are good people.*"

“Just a little longer Elle. I can’t shake this feeling that something is wrong. At least give me till the end of the week. That’s only a few more days. Okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed reluctantly.

Breaking the mental contact with her brother, Ellie turned to concentrating on school work. Fairly quickly, the three girls knocked out studying for their test scheduled for the end of the week. Since they were all fluent, it wasn’t that hard. French was Ellie’s “easy A” class. Apparently it was the same for Adelaide and Lila.

“How’d you get so good?” Lila asked as she put away her textbook, and pulled out homework for another class. They’d decided they were all ready for the exam.

Ellie answered with her usual practice of sticking as closely to the truth as she could and being as vague as possible about the rest. “My mother’s side of the family’s from France.” She made sure to gloss over the verb tense as she said it. “I’ve spoken it since I was a child.”

Ellie caught a slightly perplexed look on Lila’s face. But she covered it up so rapidly, Ellie wondered if she’d really seen it.

“Did your parents meet in France?” Adelaide asked propping her chin on her hand.

“No... ummm... they met in the U.S. Most of my family was here by then.” Ellie shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She hated getting creative with the truth. She was brilliant at it, but hated it, regardless.

“Hi, guys,” a deep voice conveniently interrupted the conversation. *His voice.* Her heart raced and her breath tightened in her chest.

Alex was standing directly behind her. Ellie took a quick second to compose herself before she turned around to stare directly into his silver-blue eyes.

“Hey,” he said softly, talking to her alone, giving her long hair a gentle tug.

“Hi, Alex.” Ellie was proud of how she managed to pull off a casually confident sounding reply. “What’re you doing here?”

“Working on some research for Dad.” He grabbed a chair from the table and straddled it beside her.

“Don’t look now,” Lila leaned over to Ellie to whisper. “But Brian Reynolds is staring at you.”

Ellie kept her expression carefully neutral. She’d heard a lot about Brian today listening in on thoughts of various girls at school. But she hadn’t bothered to listen to Brian’s thoughts, and so hadn’t been aware that he was even at the library.

“I’m sure he’s not looking at me,” she whispered back. She glanced over at Alex, surprised to see a rather peculiar frown on his face.

“He’s really staring at you, Ellie,” Adelaide chimed in with a conspiratorial grin.

Ellie turned around, and immediately saw Brian across the library. He gave her that head dip guys tend to use when she caught his eye and waved her over.

“Umm... maybe he wants help with his homework,” she muttered. “I’d better go see.”

“Hey, Ellie.” Brian gave her a confident grin as she approached him.

“Hi.”

“I didn’t get a chance to talk to you today,” he said. “You seemed kinda distracted during economics.”

“Ummm... I was just bored. Letting my mind wander.” Ellie gave a nonchalant shrug.

“Oh. Anyway... how’d you like to go to a movie Friday night?”

“Oh!” She’d joined in on several activities organized by the crew Brian hung out with in the past few months. She always had fun, which had been a pleasant surprise after so

many years of keeping to herself. “Sure! Are Lila, Adelaide, and Nate going?”

Brian looked puzzled, and Ellie was confused...She'd obviously missed something. With an inward sigh of resignation, she tapped into Griffin's power again.

“... *Guess she didn't figure out that I was asking her on a date,*” Brian was thinking.

Ellie bit back her amusement. *I should've known*, she thought. But high school boys often didn't like to be direct when they were interested. They sort of fished around, or hinted, or assumed that you knew they were asking you on a date. Her first few times in high school she'd even confused an offer as a date when it wasn't. It was never very clear either way. She didn't know how normal girls managed it without mind reading abilities to help them out. Boys got better at asking girls on a date properly in college she'd found.

Pretending she hadn't heard Brian's thoughts, she continued, “Do you mind if I ask them along too?” She gave him an innocent, oblivious look.

Truthfully, she was flattered. Brian was a great guy. But there was a very good reason that she couldn't date him. Although she was a student at the moment, she had been in high school several times. But being over two-hundred years old made dating a real teenager... creepy. There was something just not right about it. Knowing the track Brian was on, Ellie already had a plausible excuse prepared for when he did get around to asking her out properly.

Chapter 13

Alex tried to appear like he wasn't watching Ellie. He tried not to notice that the boy she was talking to looked like the athletic, popular type that all the girls go for. He tried really hard not to think about how Ellie would probably be flattered by the attention. And most important of all, he tried not to think about the vaguely irritated feeling that came over him when Lila told Ellie she was being admired from afar. That feeling hadn't gone away, and if anything, was growing stronger as he watched Ellie let out a small giggle and the other boy lean closer. Alex gritted his teeth. What could he do? He'd tried his best to keep his relationship with Ellie as casual as possible. Had even stopped texting her and tried to treat her like a little sister when they were on their runs. But that didn't diminish his growing feelings toward her. Feelings he could never act on, no matter how strong they were becoming.

Alex shook his head and turned his attention back to his siblings, and caught Adelaide's amused expression. He sighed.

"Ok, Delia, what do you see?"

Her eyebrows shot up. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Alex," she replied, pursing her lips.

Shrugging, Alex let it go. She'd tell him when she wanted to, *if* she wanted to.

While Ellie and Brian were talking about the movie on Friday, an idea popped into her head. She didn't date boys in high school, but she supposed being *friends* with them was alright. She tapped into Griffin's power and checked through Brian's thoughts a little more in depth. As far as she could tell, he wasn't actually attached to the idea of dating her. She just happened to be the new girl in his group. Someone he had yet to date. And someone who hadn't shown much interest which,

of course, made him all the more interested. So if she encouraged friendship, and remained clear about that distinction, she wouldn't hurt him. And she needed a distraction from Alex. He seemed to be occupying way too much of her brain space these days. Too much for her comfort.

"If you're here alone, why don't you join us?" she said to Brian. She waved her hand in the general direction of the group.

Brian looked pleased and glanced at his watch. "I have to leave in about thirty minutes," he said. "But I could hang out 'til then." He stood up, collected his gear, and followed her across the room.

When they approached the table, Ellie explained to her friends, "I invited Brian to join us while he's here."

"Hey, Reynolds!" Nate greeted Brian with a high-five. Nate played tight-end on the school football team, while Brian was the quarterback and team captain. The two boys were understandably friendly even though it was off-season.

"Brian, this is our brother, Alex," Lila said. The two boys shook hands with a nod. Brian pulled out a chair and got settled.

"I'd better get to work," Alex announced. With a casual salute, he left the rest of them to their studies.

After a little while, when Brian and Nate seemed to run out of conversation about basketball, Ellie nonchalantly asked, "So what movie are we going to see Friday, Brian?" Looking at the others at the table she kept her expression carefully innocent as she added, "Are you guys going, too?"

Lila glanced at Brian. "Is a group going to see a movie?"

Listening to Brian's thoughts, Ellie almost laughed out loud as he mentally gave up on having a date with her. He just barely stopped himself from answering with a sigh. "Yeah," he said. Ellie had to give him some credit, he bounced back quickly. "I'm getting a group together to go on Friday. You guys in?"

“What’s the movie?” Nate asked. “I’m not going to see some lame chick flick.” He scrunched up his face comically, eliciting a laugh from the others. Adelaide bopped him in the arm.

Brian named a movie that was definitely a guy’s guy type movie. All action, lots of blood probably, short on plot, but very entertaining.

Nate punched a fist in the air. “Yeah, man!” he exclaimed. “I’m in.”

Adelaide and Lila rolled their eyes in unison. “Not really my type of movie,” Lila said with a wry twist to her lips. “But I’m in, too.”

Adelaide shrugged her shoulders in resignation. “I go where Nate goes,” she agreed, snuggling in to him.

“What about you, Ellie?” Adelaide asked.

Since Ellie happened to enjoy that genre of movie, she grinned. “I’ve already told Brian that I’d go,” she confirmed. “I hope that it’s going to be as good as the first two.”

Both boys gave her a dumbfounded look. “No way,” Nate teased. “A girl who likes action movies? I don’t believe it.”

“Hey! Lots of girls like action movies,” Ellie defended.

“Not the girls in my life,” Nate declared, winking at Adelaide.

Ellie tapped her pen on her notebook. “I like almost all types of movies, but action and fantasy happen to be my favorites. Best movie ever, hands down... *Star Wars*.”

“Wait,” Brian narrowed his eyes at her. “Which one?”

“Duh...” Ellie rolled her eyes dramatically. “Episode four.”

“I beg to differ,” Nate scoffed. “*Empire* is clearly the best of the *Star Wars* movies.”

Ellie shook her head. “*The Empire Strikes Back* is too dark for me.”

“Sorry to interrupt your geek-out moment,” Lila started. “But after listening to basketball talk for twenty minutes, I’m afraid that sci-fi talk would send me over the edge.”

Ellie just laughed and bent her head back to her studies. About the time Brian left, Ellie moved on to her English assignment, writing her term research paper. This happened to be one of Ellie’s favorite assignments at this school so far. She was researching Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, one of her favorite novels, rich in both characters and in satire. The internet provided the opportunity to do the majority of her research from the comfort of her home, but Mrs. Cavender had insisted that her students include citations from real books. What better place to do that research than in the library? With that in mind, Ellie hopped up and went to the computer terminal and started to look up material that might help her with the assignment.

She was standing amidst the aisles leafing through one of the titles when a voice murmured in her ear, “That must be fascinating reading.”

She was so startled that she dropped her book and jumped back. She managed to remain cognizant of the library rules, and restrained herself to a little squeak of surprise, rather than a loud yelp. Alex was leaning against the shelf, arms crossed over his broad chest, one foot casually crossed over the other, and watching her with a highly amused expression.

“Jeez, Alex. You scared me,” she accused in a half-whisper.

“Sorry.” He gave her an unapologetic grin. “You know you’ve been standing there reading that book for a good fifteen minutes? I’m amazed at your powers of concentration.”

Ellie hid her chagrin that, unbeknownst to her, Alex had been watching her that long. She felt flattered and unnerved all at the same time. She bent to retrieve her dropped book, but Alex beat her to it. “Jane Austen fan?” he asked as he glanced at the title.

“What girl isn’t?” she quipped. She made sure their fingers didn’t touch as she accepted it.

Alex stood back and re-crossed his arms over his muscled chest. The look he gave her indicated he was waiting for a real answer. Ellie knew that expression from their morning runs. She was being too vague for him again.

She gave an exaggerated huff, pretending to be annoyed. “This is for an English paper. But, yes, I do like Jane Austen. As a rule I prefer British classical authors over American. Although there are a few exceptions.”

“See? That wasn’t so hard to share, now was it?” he teased.

She just looked at him with a bland expression, but he still caught the slight twitch to her lips and his smile widened. Ellie tried her darndest to ignore what that grin did to her equilibrium.

“Ready for pizza? They sent me to get you.”

The change in topic came so suddenly, it took her a moment to catch up. “Oh! Are the others ready to leave?” She peeked at her watch. Sure enough, it was well past the time they’d agreed to stop studying and head to dinner. She was a little shocked. The evenings and nights often dragged for her, but the time here with her friends had flown by. Maybe that’s what she’d been missing. Griffin was wonderful, and they were very close, but she needed more companionship than just him.

Alex nodded. “They’re waiting for you.”

“Are you joining us?” She gathered her research results holding it all against her chest in a defensive posture.

“If you don’t mind.”

Ellie just shrugged. “Why should I?”

“I’ve taken about as much legal research as I can for one night.” He rolled his shoulders, easing some tension out of the bunched muscles. Her hands itched to smooth the knots out for him. She clenched them around her books instead, irritated by

her completely irrational responses to this boy. “And I’m driving everyone back after dinner, so it makes sense,” he continued, thankfully unaware of her internal struggles.

“If you don’t like legal research, why are you studying to be a lawyer?”

“Did I say I didn’t like it?” It was Alex’s turn to be evasive.

Ellie tilted her head. “You didn’t have to.”

They stood there staring at each other for what was probably seconds but felt like a long while to Ellie. She didn’t need Griffin’s mind reading ability to know that she and Alex were thinking the same thing... that they seemed to be very in tune with each other. Even from the small amount of interaction they’d had, it was clear that they just got one another, saw things about one another that other people seemed to miss.

Sensing a dangerous connection being made, Ellie forced herself to execute a little half-turn to head down the aisle. Glancing back at Alex, she gave her head a little jerk. “Come on,” she said, “Let’s go get some pizza.”

After taking a moment to gather all their school gear, all five of them headed across the street and towards the downtown area. The pizza place was situated along the river walk. The area was gorgeous. Lots of quaint little shops that edged a rushing river. The mountain directly across the water was protected land and untouched, and currently covered in snow. Ellie couldn’t wait for early summer when everything would be green again and the wildflowers would come out.

As they neared the restaurant, she suddenly heard Griffin in her head. “*Ellie?*”

“*I’m with the Jenners right now, Griff, can’t talk,*” she thought back.

“*You need to find an excuse to get out of there.*”

Ellie noticed Adelaide giving her another of her odd looks and immediately smoothed her frown.

“*What’s up?*” she thought at Griffin, as she attempted to keep her expression neutral and carefree.

“*I saw a small pack of wolves... possibly Vyusher. Three at most. I think we should try to follow them.*” The urgency of the situation came through loud and clear.

“*We’re about to eat pizza, Griff. What on Earth should I say? Where are you anyway?*”

“*I’m just down the street. It seemed like a good idea for us to do this together.*” That sounded like her prudent brother.

“*Okay...*” Ellie’s mind raced. “*Stay out of sight until we’re in the pizza place. Then call my cell phone. Make it sound urgent. I’ll meet you outside.*”

“*Alright,*” came his quiet reply. Just like Griffin to not make a fuss or ask questions.

They were just sitting down inside the restaurant when Ellie’s phone rang. She made a bit of a show about checking the caller ID, frowning a little, and then answering it like she wasn’t sure what he would want. “Hi, Griffin.” She put a questioning lilt in her voice.

“I’m waiting outside.”

“I’m at that little pizza place downtown. You know along the river...” She made a little show of acting like he’d cut her off and widened her eyes. “Oh!” she injected with surprise. “You are?” She turned to look out the window and saw him standing there. She waved.

In her mind she told him, “*Turn around and pretend like you’re talking some more,*” and watched as her twin did just that.

She pretended to listen carefully. “Okay. Hold on, I’ll come out. Just a sec.”

She turned her attention back to the table to encounter four pairs of very curious eyes. She scrunched her face apologetically. “Sorry. I’ll be right back.” Getting up to leave she added, “Order me a Coke, please?” With that she hurried outside to her brother.

“Okay, Griff, they’re watching. They have no idea who you are or what you want with me. I’ll go back in after we talk for a second and tell them that I have to go home. Hopefully I can move fast enough that they won’t have time to ask questions. So make it look urgent.”

Griffin gave her a pointed look.

“Well,” Ellie amended, “As urgent as it really is, I guess.”

“There’re three of them,” Griffin started. “They were within about five miles of the Jenner and Pierce houses but headed that direction, so I’m guessing they’re much closer by now. I think they’re just checking things out. It seemed like a good idea to follow them together in case something does happen and we need to intervene.”

Ellie nodded gravely. “Good thinking. Let me go get my things and make an excuse to them. I’ll be right back.”

Griffin waited outside while Ellie ran back in.

“I’m so sorry,” she began, avoiding Alex’s intense gaze. “I’ve got to go home.”

“Who’s that?” Adelaide asked staring out the window.

Ellie glanced over her shoulder. “Oh, that’s just Griffin,” she dismissed airily, pretending not to see the confusion on Alex’s face. She hadn’t mentioned Griffin to him yet. Glancing around at her friends, something about the look on Adelaide’s face made Ellie debate whether or not the other girl could see the real relationship between Ellie and her brother. But she couldn’t deal with that right at the moment.

“Is anything wrong?” Lila asked, concerned.

“Umm... I don’t think so,” Ellie said, “Just a bit of a minor emergency it sounds like.” She swung her backpack onto her shoulder and grabbed her purse off the back of her chair.

She circled the table and gave Adelaide and Lila both hugs. “I had a lot of fun tonight, even if it was just homework...” She grinned. “We definitely have to do this again. Maybe next time I’ll actually get to eat.”

As she started to move away, Alex stood and caught her elbow. Bending down he murmured in her ear, “You’re being vague again, Elle. Everything really okay?”

Ellie could see true concern in his silvery eyes, and her heart warmed a little bit more toward him. “Everything’s fine,” she lied. “Still on for our run in the morning?” The worry didn’t ease from his eyes, but he let go and nodded.

“See you at school tomorrow,” she said to the rest of her friends, giving them a little wave. And then she headed for the door.

“Do you know that guy?” Alex asked after Ellie left. He felt irritated with himself for the absurd twinge of jealousy he’d felt watching her talk to the golden-haired boy outside. Sheesh. He’d only just been dealing with those same feelings with the boy at the library. Twice in one night was borderline ridiculous. He couldn’t seriously act this way with every boy that talked to Ellie. He wouldn’t allow himself to be that insecure.

“Alex? What the heck? You run with her?” Nate’s voice broke into his thoughts. He’d forgotten for a second that his family didn’t know about his daily jogs with Ellie.

Alex sighed and then proceeded to bring them up to speed.

“You know you can’t keep seeing her, Alex,” Lila said.

He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “I know,” he agreed quietly. He’d known all along that pursuing that relationship would be a colossal mistake.

Adelaide was still looking at where Griffin and Ellie had been talking. She had a slightly perplexed expression on her face.

“What did you see?” Alex prompted.

She turned a reproachful look on her brother. “You know I’m not going to tell you. But it’s nothing dangerous, just... interesting.”

Alex shrugged and gave up. Adelaide was his sweet, quiet sister, but she could be darn stubborn when she wanted to be.

Adelaide contemplated what she’d just experienced. She had the ability to see relationships between people... past, present, and future. She saw them as various colored bands of energy connecting individuals. Different colors and thicknesses meant different things.

And she was very confused by what she’d seen between Ellie and Griffin. She wondered why Ellie appeared to be lying to them.

Chapter 14

Now that Adelaide thought about it, Ellie didn't really talk about her family, and any references she'd made to them were pretty ambiguous. She realized Ellie was elusive when it came to saying *anything* about herself. This fact didn't really worry Adelaide, because of the developing strand of relationship she saw between Ellie and various people in Adelaide's own family. But what *did* confuse her was Griffin. He and Ellie appeared to have the same relationship as she and Lila did. Relatives, definitely. Siblings, also definite. Twins, most likely. But if that was the case, Adelaide had a ton of questions. Like why wouldn't Ellie have told them about him? Why was she being so secretive about something that should be so innocuous? And why wasn't he in school?

Adelaide decided she'd talk with Lila about it later and see if she'd picked up on anything odd. Lila's gift was the ability to see if people were being truthful or not, and they would often compare their combined observances. She and Lila had no secrets from each other. Based on the future relationships she could see between Ellie and Griffin and herself, as well as with the other members of her family, Adelaide knew she'd find out in time. For now, she'd give Ellie the benefit of the doubt that she had a good reason for not saying anything. And while she waited on Ellie, maybe she and Lila would be able to figure it out and help move things along.

Ellie only breathed a sigh of relief when she and Griffin made it all the way back to the library without incident. They hopped in her car and drove it home, just in case they were being watched. It would be pretty awkward if one of the Jenners or Pierces saw her car still parked there later.

Once they were safely at the house, Ellie and Griffin rushed inside and opened the window in her bedroom. It

provided the most privacy and would allow them to enter and exit relatively undetected – hopefully. Griffin tapped into Ellie’s power and together brother and sister each morphed into the peregrine falcon form, one inky black and one golden. Then they took flight.

The falcons made a striking pair as they wheeled in unison and headed to where Griffin had spotted the wolves. They scouted from the air, flying in ever-widening circles, and still had no visual sighting of the pack.

“*Let’s try their tracks,*” Griffin’s voice sounded in Ellie’s mind.

Together they swooped into a great dive, flaring their wings at the last second and shimmering back into human form as they landed. They immediately found the tracks. Ellie quickly morphed into the form of a great, midnight black jaguar.

As a jaguar, she used her hunting instincts to try to find the wolves. But the ominous clouds that had been circling above now rolled in over the mountains. A light snow began to fall, making tracking extremely difficult. Finally, the scent and the lead abruptly ended. As if they’d disappeared midstride.

She morphed back into a human. Having followed her thoughts, Griffin did the same.

“Well, either someone in their group is a teleporter who is strong enough to transport others with them, or they can all morph like you do and they took flight,” Griffin said.

Ellie shook her head, grim. “We’ve never known of anyone else with multiple forms. We’re only about a mile from the Jenner and Pierce houses. They’re getting awfully close.” She wrapped her arms around her body in a feeble attempt to ward off the biting cold.

Griffin furrowed his brow. Leaning down he traced one paw print with the tip of his finger. “You think they’re testing the situation? Seeing how close they can get with no one noticing?”

Ellie bit her lip and nodded. “That’s what it seems like. But if the wolves you saw are Vyusher, wouldn’t they already know everyone’s powers in those houses? Why would they need to test anything?”

“I’m not sure,” he replied, standing back up. “When I saw them earlier, I tried to listen in...but as wolves, the pack mind really takes over. I had difficulty making sense of any of it. That’s the closest I could come to any kind of explanation. It was...” Griffin searched for a word. “Recon... of some sort.”

Ellie shivered and Griffin added, “They’re long gone now. It’s freezing out here. Let’s go home.”

When Ellie got back to her bedroom, she saw she had a text message from Alex:

“Can’t make it in the morning. Sorry to flake. See you later.”

Ellie shook off a feeling of disappointment. If Alex couldn’t make it, he’d have a good reason.

After school Friday, Ellie headed home to get ready for her night out with her friends. It was only the movies, but still, she could sometimes be a girly-girl and wanted to look nice. The theater was situated in the shopping center just below the Stanley Hotel. Ellie adored the old hotel that had been built by the maker of the Stanley steam engine many years before. It was also the hotel the novel *The Shining* had been based on.

The setting was idyllic. Mountains rose up behind the gleaming white buildings with their red tile roofs, and she could easily imagine holding a beautiful wedding there. Suddenly, an image of Alex popped in her head...his charming but slightly goofy smile, strong arms, eyes that crinkled around the corners when he laughed. The way he listened to her with total focus, like she was the most interesting person on the planet. The way his laugh made chills run up her spine. She’d missed his company on her run the last few mornings. More than she wanted to admit.

Brian had caught her coming out of calculus earlier that day and offered her a ride to the movies. Since they both lived in Carriage Hills, Ellie accepted. She knew he was going to ask her on a date, just the two of them this time. But this worked out anyway. It would give her the chance to establish their boundaries as just *friends*.

“Explain to me why you’re going out with these high school kids again,” Griffin said. He was leaning in the doorway of her bathroom watching as she primped.

“I do happen to *be* in high school, Griffin,” she said. She put down the curling iron and fluffed out her hair.

“But you’ve never done *this* before,” he complained, gesturing to the abundance of grooming paraphernalia scattered around the bathroom. Ellie grinned as she got up and grabbed her jacket and purse.

“I’ve never had to before, and it always seemed safer to stay in the background. But I have to admit it’s kind of nice to spend time with people other than my brother.” She poked her index finger in the center of his chest.

“Hey!”

Laughing, she hugged him to take the sting out of her words. “You know I love you. But it’s been just us for such a long time. Do you remember when we had family? A whole clan of people around us? It’s just nice to have something a little bit like that again. That’s all.”

“Yeah,” he grumbled. “I guess I get it.”

“Tell you what,” she cajoled. “At our next place, you can go to college and you get to have the friends.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” he said, finally smiling back.

Brian knocked on their front door right on time.

Chapter 15

Griffin deliberately made himself scarce, heading back to his own bedroom before she opened the door. It was just easier not to have to try to defend their relationship until they had to, despite having had years to rehearse the plausible story they used when questioned.

“I’d invite you in,” Ellie greeted Brian, “but no one else is home, and I’m not allowed to have friends here on my own.”

Brian smiled and held out a hand. “That’s okay,” he said, taking her arm. “We need to get going anyway.”

He acted the perfect gentleman, escorting her to the car and opening the door for her. Ellie hadn’t been on many dates, but knew that she did like old-fashioned manners, and appreciated Brian’s attempts at chivalry.

Almost as soon as they started driving, he turned to Ellie and said, “Maybe sometime, just the two of us? Like a date?”

“Wow, Brian,” she stammered, trying to sound both surprised and sincere. “That’s so nice of you to ask me. I’m really flattered. Really.”

“I hear a ‘but’...” He sounded resigned but somewhat amused. Ellie felt relieved. Brian seemed to be a very confident guy. Her rejection was not likely to do much damage to his ego or his feelings.

“Well, there’s someone else...” she trailed off suggestively. As she said it, an image of Alex worked its way into her mind. She mentally shooed it away.

“In Texas?” Brian asked, hitting his turn signal as they came up to a stop sign.

“Mmmm...” He could take that as confirmation if he wanted to. She wouldn’t correct him.

“He’s a lucky guy,” Brian finally muttered after a long moment of silence.

Ellie gave a little laugh. “Well it’s nice of you to say so.” She gave him a sideways look. “Friends?”

“Of course!” He’d taken her rejection so well, if Ellie hadn’t known better, she would’ve been a little miffed.

“Cool.” She nodded, satisfied. “You’re a good guy Brian.”

“I won’t argue with you,” he agreed with a wink.

She rolled her eyes. “You might want to work on that ego, though,” she teased back.

“I’ll think about it.” He cocked an eyebrow and Ellie laughed again. They couldn’t find any space in the movie lot, so they parked in the larger lot up by the grocery store and walked down to the theater. The rest of their friends were already there, waiting outside despite the cold. Most of the people from their lunch table plus a few others had come. Adelaide, Lila, and Nate included.

Ellie noticed a few raised eyebrows among the group as she and Brian walked up together. High school drama could be really fun when you didn’t take it too seriously. Kayla was clearly pea green with envy.

“Hey!” Ellie greeted Adelaide, Lila, and Nate all with her usual careful hugs.

“Are you on a date?” Nate asked bluntly, never shy about asking what everyone else wanted to know. Ellie considered it to be one of his more endearing qualities, even if it rubbed some people the wrong way.

“No,” she said. “We’re *friends*. We live in the same neighborhood. He gave me a ride. That’s all there is to it.”

“Are you sure?” Nate teased, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Ellie chuckled. “Positive.”

“Hey, who was that guy at the pizza place the other night?” asked Lila.

“Griffin’s my brother,” Ellie answered, aware of Adelaide’s power. Hoping to head off additional questions

about him, she added, “He... takes care of me.”

She saw Lila and Adelaide exchange a meaningful look. Once again, she resisted using Griffin’s power on the sisters. She’d also avoided using her own power on them, making sure to limit any physical contact. They were already suspicious. What if one of her powers caused Adelaide or Lila to find out her true identity before she was ready to tell them? Griffin still maintained that it was too early to share that secret. And she respected her brother’s wishes. Although her patience really was wearing thin.

“Everything okay?” Adelaide asked her quietly.

“Oh!” Ellie had forgotten to think of an appropriate emergency. She stuck as close to the truth as she could.

“We thought there might be an intruder, but we didn’t end up finding anyone or anything.”

“That’s scary!” Lila exclaimed.

“Yeah,” Ellie agreed. “We checked everything though, and so it looks like we’re okay.” ...*For now.*

Brian held out his arm. “Ready to go in?”

While they were buying tickets, Ellie noticed that Brian actually blushed when he talked to the girl behind the counter. Feeling slightly guilty, but too curious to resist, Ellie tapped into Griffin’s power and tried to see what the connection was.

“Damn, she is so hot. I should just man-up and ask her out, but she’s not interested in me,” Brian’s thoughts came through loud and clear.

The girl, named Juliette, was a bit harder to read, keeping her thoughts close in to her heart. But after poking around a bit, Ellie heard, *“Why do I act like such a clumsy moron when he’s around. I should just get over this stupid crush. He is soooo not interested in me.”*

Juliette was adorable, with silky pale blond hair that fell to her shoulders and pretty green eyes. Ellie offered her a friendly smile, and despite the fact that Juliette seemed to be under the impression Ellie was Brian’s date, she returned it.

Nice, too. A thought began to form in Ellie's mind...a little matchmaking could be a fun distraction from all the drama.

She was just figuring all of this out when she noticed Adelaide giving Juliette and Brian a speculative look. The same curious glance that she herself had received just the other night, right after Griffin had showed up at the pizza place. *Not the time to worry about that. Shake it off,* she scolded herself. *But maybe Adelaide can help me with my matchmaking idea.*

The movie was really good, but Ellie spent most of it trying to come up with ways to throw Juliette and Brian together. The only plan she could come up with was befriending Juliette herself. They didn't share any classes, but there had to be some way.

When the movie finished, they all decided to head to the Dairy Queen downtown. As they were leaving the theater, Ellie noticed Juliette leaving as well. "Adelaide," Ellie called her friend over. Nodding toward Juliette she said, "Do you know her?"

"Juliette?" Adelaide seemed a little surprised by the question. "Sure! She's in my English class."

"Why don't you ask her to join us at the Dairy Queen?" Ellie suggested.

"Alright," Adelaide drew out the word. "What're you up to?"

"Just following a hunch. Trust me. I think it could end well."

Adelaide remained inquisitive, but shrugged it off. She went over to Juliette who was headed to her own car. They had a short conversation and Juliette walked over to the larger group, clearly having agreed to join in.

"Juliette, this is Ellie Aubrey," Adelaide introduced them.

"Hi," Ellie said, offering her hand to shake. "I've seen you around school."

“I’ve seen you too,” Juliette shook the proffered hand. “You’re new here right?”

Ellie grimaced, shifting on her feet. “Yeah,” she pretended to look around as the others headed for their cars. “Hey, why don’t you ride over with me and Brian,” she offered. “We can drop you back at your car on the way back.”

Juliette looked somewhat reluctant. “Okay,” she finally agreed.

When they got to the car, Ellie insisted that Juliette ride in front. “But you’re his date!” Juliette protested.

“Oh!” Ellie widened her eyes in feigned surprise. “No. Brian and I are just friends. He lives in my neighborhood and offered me a ride... He’s really the nicest guy. If I wasn’t already interested in someone else, I’d definitely go for him.”

She flashed a guileless smile and hopped in the back seat. The ride to the Dairy Queen was very short; they could’ve walked if it hadn’t been so cold outside. Ellie started chatting about this and that and then sat back as Juliette and Brian took up the conversation and talked between themselves. Ellie crossed her arms, feeling a little smug. They seemed to have a lot in common. Ellie muffled a small giggle. *And was that a bit of flirting going on? Who knew that matchmaking could be so fun in an oddly satisfying sort of way?*

After hanging out at the Dairy Queen, the group broke up to head to their respective homes. They got back to the theater only to discover that Juliette had a flat tire, and Ellie knew immediately who had been responsible. Nate could barely contain himself, to the point that his mental laughter was loud enough for Ellie to pick up on with very little effort to tap into Griffin’s power. Apparently Adelaide had put him up to it, doing a little matchmaking herself.

“It’s too late for you to bother dealing with it now,” Brian insisted to Juliette. “I’ll bring you back for your car in the morning if you’d like.”

A shy blush stained Juliette’s cheeks. “Thanks.”

“Where do you live, Juliette?” Ellie asked. After hearing her reply she said, “Drop me off first Brian. I’m on the way.”

When Ellie unlocked her front door and walked in, she immediately met Griffin’s disgusted glare.

“You seriously used my powers to set those two kids up?” He looked so disgruntled Ellie had a hard time not laughing.

“What’s wrong with that?” Ellie brushed past him and headed to the kitchen.

Griffin just shook his head, clearly baffled. “Do you want first shift?” he asked, changing the subject. After Griffin’s sighting of the wolves, they’d agreed to take turns watching the Jenner and Pierce properties through the night. Even Griffin agreed that the danger the Vyusher presented was too great to ignore.

“Sure,” she replied, patting him on the shoulder as she walked by. “I’m still fairly wide-eyed and bushy-tailed.” With that she headed upstairs to change and then took off to man her post. She kept her inner-most thoughts hidden from Griffin as she left. Somehow watching the byplay between Brian and Juliette tonight had brought to mind what wasn’t happening, what she wanted to happen but knew was impossible, between her and Alex. And what really sucked was now she got to spend hours watching over him. So close, yet not close enough. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 16

Another six weeks passed without incident. No sightings of the wolves. No more suspicious looks from Adelaide or Lila. But there was Alex, or more specifically, Alex's disappearance from her life. The first few days after hanging at the pizza place, he texted to say he couldn't run with her the next morning. Then one night, the text said that he wouldn't be able to run with her for a while, and nothing since then. Ellie had seen him when he dropped his siblings off for school, and when he picked them up afterward. But he'd only given her a nod and a half smile. He didn't get out and talk to her. And he didn't show up in the library on their study nights again.

Part of Ellie worried, hoping that he was okay. Another part was insecure, wondering what she'd done to scare him off. And another part was just pissed that he'd drop her like that, without any explanation. She had a strong suspicion he was avoiding her, and she wondered why. But then the next moment, she'd convince herself that she was being completely self-centered. Sure, *she* felt a connection with him, but obviously that feeling was one-sided. What Alex probably saw when he looked at her was a normal high school girl... too young... too inexperienced... and not of his kind.

Ellie'd pretty much convinced Griffin that the Jenners and Pierces weren't a danger to them. But both she and Griffin were still concerned that revealing themselves to the Jenners and Pierces might put them all in a great deal of danger. Especially given the wolf sighting not too long ago.

April had given way to an unseasonably warm May. The snow was mostly gone, at least for the moment. Ellie was standing outside in the parking lot, enjoying the lovely weather and chatting with Adelaide, Lila, and Nate. She waved to Brian and Juliette as they arrived, and hid a self-satisfied smile.

"You're pretty proud of yourself, aren't you?" Adelaide teased, following her line of sight.

Ellie grinned. “I just hope they remember me at their wedding.”

Adelaide chuckled. She also thought that Brian and Juliette made a good couple, but her reasons for feeling so were slightly different, and she kept them to herself.

The couple had been inseparable since that movie night. They’d also become particularly good friends of Ellie’s, often coming over to her house to study on nights when she wasn’t at the library with Adelaide, Lila, and Nate. Sometimes they’d join the little library group, and even Griffin liked them. He’d finally warmed up to the idea of making friends... Or, at least he’d grudgingly accepted the concept.

Ellie glanced up and froze, the blood draining from her face. Across the street, in the shadows of a grove of trees, stood a giant black wolf, seemingly watching the school. As Ellie watched, the wolf slowly backed up into the shadows and disappeared.

“Ellie?” Adelaide laid a concerned hand on her sleeve. “Are you okay? You look like you’re about to pass out.”

Ellie pulled herself out of her shocked state with difficulty. She slowly focused on Adelaide’s worried face, and then shook her head a little, trying to clear it. “Umm... yeah.” She pinned what she hoped was a cheerful look on her face, hoping the color was coming back into her blanched cheeks. A loud *trill* shook her senses.

Saved by the bell, she thought with wry amusement. The irony of the situation was not lost on her.

“*Griffin*,” Ellie called for her brother mentally as she followed her friends into the school.

“*Yeah?*”

She mentally showed him what she had just seen. Somehow, she also managed to communicate her panic. “*It’s him. The black wolf.*”

“*I know,*” was his grim response. “*I’m on it. You go to class. I’ll see if I can find him. I’ll keep in touch.*”

“Be careful. Please.”

“Do you really have to say that to me?”

“Probably not.”

Ellie didn't hear from Griffin again after that, and it made for an incredibly long day. She must have acted pretty spacey, because her friends kept giving her odd looks. Once school was finally over, she rushed out to the parking lot, her mind focused on one thing and one thing only: to get home and see if she could find Griffin.

Halfway across the lot she stopped suddenly, shocked. Alex was leaning up against her car. Given that six weeks had passed since she'd last seen him and he'd done little more than nod at her in passing, his timing was suspicious.

“Hi, Alex,” Ellie said as she approached him. Despite her state of panicked rush, and her anger with him, she secretly felt thrilled. It just figured that he'd pick *today* of all days to finally talk to her. She unlocked the passenger-side door and threw her backpack in the back seat. Alex still blocked the driver side.

“Sorry, Alex, but I'm in a bit of a hurry.”

He didn't move. “Oh? Where're you off to in such a rush?”

“Just home.”

“Griffin there?” he asked in a too-casual way, and Ellie's eyebrows popped up.

“Yeah.” She drew out the word, implying by her tone that she thought that a bit of a silly question.

They eyed each other for several moments. With an impatient gesture, she finally snapped, “Do you mind?” and tried to shoo him away from her car. From the corner of her eye she saw Adelaide, Lila, and Nate approaching them.

“Who exactly *is* Griffin, anyway?” he asked her.

Ellie hid her surprise. Adelaide knew Griffin was her brother. *Guess she didn't pass that on to Alex*, Ellie thought.

Her stubborn streak kicked in. *Well, after the silent treatment the last few weeks, I'm not in the mood to enlighten him.*

“I really am in a hurry, Alex,” Ellie answered brusquely. Why on Earth did he decide that the one moment he wanted to talk to her was the one moment she couldn't? And why talk to her about *this*? She risked touching him, pushing against him to try to move him out of the way. She was tempted to let her hand linger on his arm. It felt warm and rock hard. And touching him at all just seemed so intimate, so right. A strange yearning settled somewhere in her heart.

Alex stared into her eyes so intently, Ellie felt almost trapped. She couldn't turn away even if she'd wanted to. Her breathing accelerated along with her heart rate. It was the kind of look a man gave a woman he wanted. *Knowing. Sensual.* Slowly, he obligingly scooted aside. Still caught in his gaze, Ellie just managed to yank open her car door in an awkward motion and flop in. Turning the key, she revved the engine. Alex signaled her to roll down the window, and she took a deep breath and complied.

He leaned down as if to speak with her, but then he suddenly popped his head through the window and placed a light kiss on her unsuspecting lips. Ellie gave a little squeak of surprise and stared at him with wide, astonished eyes.

With a sexy grin he said, “Just giving you one more thing to think about.” And with that mystifying comment, he turned and walked over to where his siblings were waiting.

Ellie sat for a moment, gathering her chaotic thoughts and emotions. *Holy crap, he just kissed me!* Quickly followed by, *Who the hell does he think he is? Sheesh! The guy completely ignores me for six weeks, and then wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am!*

Finally it registered that maybe Alex Jenner wasn't indifferent to her after all, and a bubbling excitement fizzed through her entire system, threatening to explode.

But Ellie squashed her growing excitement. One kiss didn't make him any less of a jerk. And as much as her body wanted to focus on that amazing moment, Ellie had more

pressing matters to deal with at the moment. She put her car in gear, and with a slightly dazed wave in the general direction of her friends, she headed home.

Alex watched Ellie as she drove away. He didn't even hide it now. Adelaide, Lila, and Nate had all seen him kiss their friend. Adelaide smiled serenely, while Nate and Lila gave him incredulous looks.

“What the heck was that all about?” Nate demanded.

Alex just shrugged. Mentally, he swung back and forth between a crazy satisfaction at that kiss, and feeling like a complete fool. He'd been thinking about her almost non-stop for weeks. He'd blown off their runs, and then stopped contacting her completely. He'd thought he was doing the right thing. Saving her from... from a lot of things, not the least of which was the possible danger they were in. He didn't blame her for being mad at him at all. But then she'd basically given him the cold shoulder, her mind obviously elsewhere. And he'd thought, *I'll give her something to think about*, and something had snapped. He'd wanted her focus solely on him, and he'd kissed her.

Jeez, Alex, you're such a jerk, he mentally berated himself. But as he thought more about it, something in his head clicked. It'd been brief, but he *had* felt her respond, had seen something spark in her eyes, confirming his hope that she wasn't as indifferent to him as she seemed. He didn't think he could ever forget the look she'd given him afterward. Part fury, part stunned surprise, part sparkling need. He'd seen the mutual desire in her eyes.

He didn't know what he was going to do about it. But he'd decided to do *something*. It wouldn't be long until she went to college...a few months. He could wait for her until then. And hopefully by then he could figure out exactly what he wanted. Alex just prayed that he hadn't already blown his chances.

Chapter 17

Griffin arrived just as Ellie pulled into the driveway. She saw him fly inside and quickly followed.

“Well?” she demanded, hands on her hips.

Griffin paced back and forth. “Nothing.” If possible, he looked even grimmer than before.

“What do you mean ‘nothing’?”

“I mean *nothing*. I couldn’t find a single thing. Not a track, not a scent, no trace. Are you sure...?” He turned to face her, trailing off as Ellie was already shaking her head.

“I know what I saw.” Ellie blew out a heavy breath. She’d been so sure that something was coming today. She’d been a crazy nut, focused only on her worry.

“The Jenners and Pierces suspect something’s up with you, by the way,” Griffin said, as he pulled his sweatshirt over his head and tossed it on the back of a chair.

“Oh?” Ellie eyed her brother through narrowed eyes and sat on the couch.

“It’s partly why Alex tried to talk you.”

Ellie’s suspicious look turned furious. She glared at her brother as she tried to decide which made her angrier... the fact that Griffin listened to the Jenners and Pierces or that the kiss Alex gave her apparently was just some kind of ploy or ruse.

“Sorry about listening in on them. But I was concerned about you, and the Jenners and Pierces happen to think of you more than any others at the school.” He jumped up, headed into the kitchen and started pulling out stuff to make dinner.

“Why not just ask me directly?” she asked through gritted teeth as she followed him.

“You were a bit... spacey all day. It seemed like a good idea to see how others were seeing you.”

Ellie grimaced and shrugged. She supposed she could understand that.

“Look on it as good news that none of them seemed to notice my poking around in their heads,” he added, opening the refrigerator.

Ellie made a face. “I guess.”

“And I don’t think he kissed you to use or delay you.”

”Thanks for the insight, but it’s none of your business.” Ellie knew Griffin wouldn’t approve of her feelings for Alex and she wasn’t in the mood for an argument right now.

He looked over his shoulder at her. “From what I could tell, he was worried about you.”

“Worried?” Ellie’s eyebrows knitted together. “About what?”

“A couple of things. He seems to think he put you in danger. And he’s worried about me.”

“Why would he worry about you?”

“He doesn’t know I’m your brother.” He reached for a green pepper, washed it, and started chopping.

Ellie picked up a strip and munched on it. “Yeah. But why would that worry him?”

“He thinks I’m some sort of boyfriend or something.”

“Oh.” Ellie frowned. Sure they’d kept Griffin hidden initially. And he still didn’t spend much time with any of her friends except Brian and Juliette. Adelaide and Nate knew her relationship to Griffin by now; she’d just figured Alex would, too. And it hadn’t occurred to her to say anything to him on their runs.

A delighted smile spread across her face. “So he’s *jealous*? That’s so...great!”

Griffin groaned. “I don’t pretend to understand you, Ellie. How about we get back to the bigger problem?”

“Oh yeah!” Ellie pulled her thoughts back to the more immediate issue. “I’ll take watch tonight. You just spent all day out tracking.”

“Alright,” Griffin agreed, tossing the chopped veggies into a sizzling pan. “I’m pretty beat. It takes a lot of concentration to use your power continuously like that.”

Ellie walked over and wrapped her arms around her brother giving him a big bear hug. “Thank you. I know you didn’t want to get involved originally. And I haven’t really thanked you yet... So thank you.”

In typical Griffin fashion, he gave her a brief hug back. “No problem,” he whispered.

As she started her watch that evening in her falcon form, Ellie’s concern for the Jenners and Pierces had her heading directly over to their property. She spent about an hour circling the area looking for any sign of the wolves. Seeing nothing, she decided to see if she could track them from the ground. She started with the last place she and Griffin had spotted them.

As soon as she arrived at the right spot, she blurred and shimmered, morphing from falcon to jaguar. Once she settled into the shape of the massive black cat, she sniffed the air... nothing. She sniffed again...still nothing. She shifted back into her human form and continued to look around, oblivious to her close proximity to the houses. She was crouched directly across a large field from the back of one of the homes, when she looked up and saw Alex. He stood by a window, looking her way.

Ellie froze and swore softly under her breath as she slowly stood up. She didn’t think that he could see her at the very edge of the trees, but she couldn’t be certain. She would’ve tried Griffin’s power on him, but she had to be closer to her brother in order to have access to his powers.

Gingerly, she inched back into the woods until she was sure Alex could no longer possibly be able to see her. As soon

as she felt safely hidden, she turned into the falcon and flew home as quickly as possible. Griffin was already waiting for her.

“He saw you,” he confirmed her worst fear the second she flew in the window. “But he’s not entirely sure of what he saw. Apparently, you were already on his mind.”

Ellie sat down and buried her head in her hands. “Is he going to say anything to me?”

Griffin listened for a moment and then shook his head. “He’s still debating it. He won’t come tonight.”

Ellie groaned and tapped one fingernail on her teeth. “Well, at least tomorrow is Saturday, so he can’t catch me at school. I guess I’ll skip my run in the morning. Unless...”

Griffin shook his head, following her thoughts, “We shouldn’t tell them. Not quite yet. With that wolf sighting today at school, there’s still too much danger involved in bringing us all together.”

“But that wolf wasn’t watching me. He was watching Adelaide,” Ellie insisted.

Griffin placed his hands on her shoulders, calming her agitation. “Trust me please, Ellie. If the Vyusher are after the Jenners and Pierces, maybe we can help. We would have the element of surprise on our side. If they’re after us, then we protect your friends by staying away from them. If your friends are with the Vyusher, then we protect ourselves by keeping our distance. The timing of telling them is as important as the telling.”

Ellie’s shoulders slumped. Her brother was right. She would protect her friends without hesitation or thought. And she couldn’t argue with Griffin’s logic.

“Go to bed,” Griffin ordered. “I’ll keep tabs on them until morning.” He glanced outside. “Besides, it’s starting to snow.” Winter and summer apparently battled for dominance during the spring season in the mountains. They’d just had a warm streak, and now the snow had returned.

Ellie nodded her agreement and went up to bed. She'd had such an emotional day that she fell asleep the second her head hit the pillow.

The next morning she woke up to the urgent ringing of the doorbell. Groggily she pulled herself out of bed, threw on a robe and some warm slippers, and made her way downstairs. She noticed with bleary eyes the fresh blanket of snow covering everything outside. She also realized that Griffin wasn't home.

The doorbell went off again. She went to answer it, shielding her eyes from the sun that bounced off the bright powder.

"Alex?" Ellie stepped back and tried to hide her astonishment at seeing him standing on her front porch. Her heart thundered and she pulled her robe tighter.

Alex looked like he hadn't slept all night. His clothes were wrinkled, and his hair looked as though he'd been running his fingers through it repeatedly. He'd obviously not shaved. He looked so sexy in this mussed up state, she almost couldn't breathe. But it was more than that. More than just good looks and a confident swagger. She felt this insane connection that made her gravitate toward him...made her want to curl up in his lap and be the one to run fingers through that silky hair. At the same time, she staunchly told herself that those feelings were completely outlandish. Despite some time spent together, they really didn't know each other all that well. *And besides, he dropped me like a hot potato*, she thought with rising ire, ignoring the fact that he'd thought he was protecting her.

She guessed he'd decided to confront her about the previous night. "*Griffin, you better be out of range not to have warned me that he was coming,*" she mentally castigated her brother.

"Can I help you with something?" she asked as Alex stood there glowering.

"May I come in?" he asked gruffly.

“Oh!... uh... sure.” She couldn’t really say no without being rude or arousing his suspicions. Best to play along and act innocent.

She stood back so he could enter, and they made their way to the living room. He sat on the black leather couch while Ellie took a seat in the chair opposite him.

“You didn’t go running this morning,” he accused. He leaned forward propping his elbows on his knees and linking his hands together.

“How would you know?” she snapped back. “You haven’t been running with me in weeks.”

Alex’s jaw clenched. “Is your family here?” he asked, glancing around.

“Not right now.”

Although she and Griffin had the scenario of him as her guardian and older brother down pat with years of practice, they still found it much easier if people assumed they had parents somewhere.

Alex cocked his head. “Do you even have a family?” he demanded.

“Excuse me?” Ellie’s voice squeaked. She cleared her throat, annoyed with herself. “Of *course* I have a family.”

“But not here,” he insisted, indicating the house with a wave of his hand.

“They’re not home right now, no,” she replied, deliberately misunderstanding him.

“They don’t live here at all, even if they do exist.”

“What on Earth is this about, Alex?”

Ellie hopped up and walked across the room to some bookshelves that held several pictures. One of them was her with her parents. A doctored copy of course – Griffin had become a bit of a computer whiz. She presented the framed photograph to Alex with a flourish.

“My parents,” she said. “If they were here, I would introduce them.”

Alex stared at the photograph for a long time. “You’re hiding something,” he finally responded, running his fingers through his hair.

Ellie’s heart turned over. Temptation overwhelmed her. All she wanted was to walk into his arms and tell him everything. But her conversation with Griffin last night was still fresh in her mind. She was terrified she’d put him right in the path of the Vyusher, the last thing she wanted to do, despite his cutting her out of his life over the last weeks. Plus she’d promised Griffin.

A separate part of her mind remained grudgingly impressed with Alex’s powers of observation. Very few people looked closely enough at anyone to catch little nuances as he had with her. Usually they were too self-centered. But he’d called her out on her vagueness from day one. It had the effect of strengthening the connection she was resisting so desperately.

“What is it that you think I’m hiding, exactly?” Ellie asked, hands on her hips.

“You can’t be who you say you are.”

“I don’t say I’m anyone. I’m just me!” she exclaimed. “Who else would I be?”

He flashed her a dark look. “I *saw* you.”

“Saw me doing what?” Ellie’s confusion was feigned, but her exasperation was authentic.

“Standing in the woods outside my house.”

Ellie gave him a dumfounded look. “And when exactly was I supposed to be standing outside your house?”

“Late last night,” he snapped angrily.

“Yeah,” she scoffed, “that makes total sense. You really are full of yourself. You know that? You think that some little high school girl likes you so much that she’s just going to stand around your house in the cold, hoping for a glimpse?”

“I think you’re a damn good liar is what I think.” Alex clenched his fists. He looked like he wanted to shake her.

Ellie fumed. Forget that he was right. He didn’t know that for sure. And here he was calling her a liar to her face.

Her eye narrowed and her voice grew cold. “And what *exactly* am I supposed to be lying about?”

Alex’s mouth set in a grim line. “I can’t tell you that.”

Ellie arched an eyebrow. “So let me get this straight... After becoming, well, *friends* I guess, you suddenly start ignoring me.... We barely say two words to each other in six weeks, and then out of nowhere you kiss me. But based on...” She flung her arms out all akimbo. “...I don’t know *what* exactly... you come over here to tell me that I’m not who I say I am. That I’m apparently stalking you. And then you call me a liar. But you can’t tell me what you think I’m lying about. Could you be more insulting or more vague?”

“I guess that’s usually your role, isn’t it? Is anything you’ve ever said to me true?”

“Ah!” Frustration engulfed Ellie until she couldn’t speak. She just stood there, her hands on her hips, shaking her head and blinking.

She couldn’t do this, she suddenly realized. She didn’t want to lie to him. She didn’t want to fight with him. But she couldn’t tell him anything. And he was in the same predicament.

And, just like that, her anger with him turned in on herself and the situation. She started shaking. A violent tremble that signaled a loss of control... and the horrifying possibility of what she might become if she didn’t immediately rein it in. Anger and fear for Alex’s safety warred within her as she struggled to keep her human form.

Without another word she turned and headed for the back door, grabbing her keys off the kitchen counter. She had to get away from him and force herself to calm down before something terrible happened.

Alex, having followed her, grabbed her arm, whipping her around. “Where do you think you’re going?” he demanded.

“Away from you.” She jerked out of his grip and opened the door, gasping as the cold slapped her in the face. Snow blew everywhere. But she was too upset to care and pushed out into blinding storm, heading for her car, ignoring her bare feet and robe.

“Not in this weather you’re not.” He grabbed her wrist and started dragging her back toward the house. “You know you suck at driving in the snow.”

“Let... go... of... me...” Ellie gritted through her teeth as she tried to twist her wrist out of his hand. When he ignored her order and refused to let her go, she leaned over and bit his hand. Hard.

“Ow!” he howled, and immediately let go. Ellie took off, running for the car again, only this time she made it. She locked the doors as she got in.

Revving the engine, she put the car in drive and hit the gas, then immediately slammed on her brakes as Alex appeared directly in front of her.

She glared at him and charged the engine again in warning.

“Get out of the car, Ellie!” he yelled above the sound of the storm.

She shook her head *no* and pressed on the gas again. Alex jumped out of the way just in time. She hadn’t been too concerned that she’d hit him; she would’ve stopped if he hadn’t moved. While her fury at him consumed her at the moment, that didn’t negate the connection she felt with him.

Ellie gasped as realization tore through her. *Oh my God*, she thought, *he is my te’sorthene. How could I be so stupid?!?*

Ellie had often tried to imagine what it could be like, finding her *te’sorthene*. And now she knew. Tears blurred her eyes. Panicked by the gravity of her self-revelation, the need to escape increased. She headed down the long drive way to the road, skidding and slipping as she went. A small part of her felt shocked at her awful behavior. She was acting like a

total idiot. But at the same time she had never been so angry, and terrified, and worried, and so many other emotions all at once in all her life. And the shaking was getting worse. She had to leave *now*.

Between her anger, her tears, and the blizzard raging outside, she didn't see the tree in her way until it was too late and she plowed the car right into it, slamming her head on the steering wheel in a violent collision. Through a blur of pain and dizziness, Ellie felt the car rebound off the tree and start skidding backwards...and toward a cliff. Her last irrational thought was, *Griffin's going to kill me*, before she sank into blessed oblivion.

Chapter 18

“You little idiot,” Ellie heard Alex mutter, although his voice came from far away. She was snuggled up against something warm and solid, and yet she was floating.

“What were you thinking?” he continued, his voice more tender now and closer to her ear.

It suddenly occurred to Ellie that he was carrying her. Since being held in his arms so closely aligned with where she truly wished to be, Ellie decided not to open her eyes just yet. Some part of her recognized that he wasn't touching her skin.

As her consciousness returned in slow waves, Ellie reveled in the feeling of being exactly where she was supposed to be. Being held by him just felt too wonderful to pass up. She didn't want the moment to ever end.

Carefully, she reached up and wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders. Burying her face in the crook of his neck, she breathed him in. Alex smelled of clean soap, a subtle tangy aftershave, and something essentially him. She sighed as his arms tightened around her, pulling her in closer.

They made it back to the house too soon. Once inside, he laid her gently on the couch in the living room. Reluctantly, Ellie unwrapped her arms from around his neck, her eyes still closed. Alex gently smoothed the hair back from her face. Knowing she couldn't avoid reality any longer, she opened her eyes with a resigned sigh, looking directly into Alex's silver-blue gaze.

“You've got a pretty big bump on your head,” he observed.

With his words, pain finally broke through the fog in Ellie's head. She winced as she reached up and felt the egg-sized lump on her forehead. “Ow,” she groaned.

“I'd point out that you brought this on yourself, but you've been banged up enough for your trouble, in addition to giving me a heart attack, so I'll restrain myself. Just... please don't

ever do something like that again.” His gruff concern warmed her slowly from the inside out.

“How bad’s the car?” she asked with another groan.

“Probably totaled.” His face looked like a solemn mask. He sat back on his heels and ran his hand over his face.

Alex couldn’t share with Ellie his horror of watching her car hit the tree and then skid toward the treacherous cliff. If her car had gone over, she would never have survived the impact. He’d had to use his powers on her, and hadn’t even stopped to consider the potential consequences. If someone had seen him, they would’ve seen him lift his hands, and the next instant, the car frozen in place. Even the snow falling stopped in time. It’d been a stupid move. *I couldn’t just sit there and watch her die*, he thought.

“Griffin’s gonna kill me,” Ellie groaned.

Alex frowned. “Who exactly *is* Griffin?”

Ellie ignored the question. “He’ll be here any minute. And he’ll be furious with me.”

“He can get in line.” Alex looked sternly at her as she wiggled down on the couch to try to get more comfortable. “What on *Earth* were you thinking?”

She returned his look with a glare of her own. “I was thinking I had to get away from you.” She paused for a second, forcing herself to calm down. A repeat of the last few minutes was a really bad idea. “And you really should go,” she finally insisted.

Griffin was close. He was already telepathically communicating his wrath to her. He’d seen the crash in his mind, and now he was scolding her mentally before he could finish the job in person. Ellie put her hand to her head, which was now starting to ache for many reasons.

Alex noticed the gesture. Concerned, he reached out and gently touched the lump just above her eyes. Ellie flinched at the pain, although she was able to at least control the shocking sensation.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “You should go to the hospital.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Well, I should at least get you some ice for that,” he insisted. But he didn’t move. He just sat and looked at her for what seemed like an eternity. And Ellie couldn’t break the contact. Didn’t want to.

Alex reached out again, this time to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. He trailed his fingertips along the smooth skin of her jaw.

Ellie’s breath caught in her throat at the look in his eyes. A confession trembled on the tip of her tongue... to tell him who and what she was.

The sound of Griffin banging into the house had the two of them jumping guiltily apart.

Alex looked up as Griffin entered the room. His jaw clenched, and a pained look crossed his face. She didn’t need Griffin’s mind reading ability to know that Alex assumed that Griffin was her boyfriend. She was about to set him straight when she heard Griffin’s voice in her head.

“Let him think what he’s thinking.”

She gave her brother a confused glance.

“He’s too involved with you, Ellie. It’ll help keep him at a distance.”

Ellie battled with that thought. She didn’t want Alex at a distance. He was her *te’sorthene*, although Alex didn’t appear to have come to that conclusion yet. And while the thought scared the bejeezus out of her, she couldn’t ignore the instinctual pull to be with him. She reluctantly recognized that Griffin was right. It wasn’t time yet. Soon though.

She felt Griffin relax as she came to her decision.

“Ellie, what happened?” Griffin asked. He could be a master actor when he needed to be...he already knew *exactly* what happened. “I saw your car smashed against a tree out in the road.”

“I had a little accident. But I’ll be fine. This is Alex by the way.” She introduced them with a general wave in Alex’s direction.

The two boys nodded to each other silently. Each regarding the other somewhat coolly. Each sizing the other one up.

“I’ll be okay now, Alex,” Ellie said quietly, laying a hand on his arm. “Thanks for getting me back to the house.”

Alex regarded Ellie with a solemn face. His whole body practically buzzed with everything that had gone on in the last half hour or so.

He’d come here this morning in a furious state, intending to confront her. But that confrontation had gone all wrong. And then he’d watched as she had her horrifying accident...as frightening as if it were happening to him. And somehow the anger and resentment that had driven him here had faded into relief when he’d realized she wasn’t dead. He could even ignore the twinge of jealousy he felt toward Griffin now.

Ellie was alive. And she was okay. That was all that mattered.

“You should get her to a hospital,” he muttered as he stood up and headed towards the door.

“I will,” said Griffin.

Alex turned back to Ellie, regarding her with solemn eyes, and with a final nod he left.

“Close one,” Griffin said under his breath.

Ellie fell back on the couch with a thud. She snorted inelegantly. “Which part? The part where he clearly suspects I’m not who I claim to be? Or maybe the part where I could’ve killed him if I’d morphed? Or the part where I idiotically rammmed my car into a tree? Of course, there’s also the part

where I was this close,” she held up her hand with her finger and thumb millimeters apart, “to kissing him.” Ellie buried her face in the couch.

“Huh. You have been busy, haven’t you? You’re forgetting the part where you discovered that he’s your *te’sorthene*.” He watched her for her reaction.

Ellie blew out a long breath and then said softly, “I’m not ready to talk about that yet.”

Sitting down at the end of the couch, he nodded. “You’re also forgetting the part where he saved your life.”

Ellie frowned. “What’re you talking about?”

Silently he took her hand, their link always at its strongest when they were both able to access her ability to use others’ powers. Ellie watched Griffin’s view as Alex had run out of the house after her. He’d stood in front of the car, leaping aside as Ellie had gunned the engine. She saw the look of dawning horror on Alex’s face as he’d watched her slam into the tree. And then, the flash of panic as the car had started skidding toward the steep drop.

Alex had lifted his hands, grim determination etched in every line of his body. Without moving, he’d focused completely on her car as it started to tip over the edge. Suddenly, it had frozen in place. And then slowly, and with a horrible screeching sound of metal on rock, the car had inched back on to the pavement, gradually crossed the road, and ended up back on her property. Only when the car was safe and stable had Alex lowered his hands.

Ellie sucked in a breath through her teeth.

“How’s the head by the way?” Griffin asked as an afterthought.

She gave her brother an aggravated look. “I’ll survive.”

“I’ll get us some breakfast, and call a tow truck for the car,” he stood up, heading toward the kitchen.

“What happened to taking me to the hospital?” she grumbled.

“Do you really need it?”

She paused and pressed her lips together. “What do you think?”

“Hmmm... I think I’ll keep that to myself,” he teased.

“Just get the breakfast, Griff,” she mumbled, lying back on the couch and closing her eyes. Immediately her mind turned to Alex and everything that had just happened. Ellie hoped Griffin wasn’t listening. She was just too worn out to try to block his telepathy.

Ellie and Griffin spent the rest of the day hanging out at home. They discussed the wolves several times. It still wasn’t clear if the Vyusher were involved or not. But if they were, Ellie and Griffin worried about when to expect the attack...the question was *when*, not *if* it was coming. It felt too much like the last time.

Chapter 19

Later that night Ellie and Griffin agreed to split the patrols so they could get some rest between watches.

Ellie took the first shift, having recovered sufficiently from her accident that morning. “I’ll wake you up when I get back,” she said as she walked out the back door.

“You sure? How’s the head?”

“I’ll survive,” she replied stoically.

She quickly made for the woods. One of the things she and Griffin had decided today was not to go in and out of the house in their falcon forms. If Alex was suspicious, he might be watching. And if anyone was watching, even if it wasn’t Alex, a large bird shooting in and out would be too obvious to ignore. So Ellie headed into the cover of the trees, and once she felt safe, she transformed into a falcon and swiftly took flight.

Nighttime had already descended, and despite concentrating on looking for the wolves and watching over the Jenners and Pierces, Ellie was still able to revel in the feeling of soaring through the air. As a falcon she could dive and reach speeds faster than any other creature on the planet, the wind almost a physical presence holding her, moving with her, supporting her. And then, in the same breath, she could flare her wings and hover over the earth, the wind still her constant companion, and the sights surrounding her so incredible that words could never do them justice. Men risked their lives climbing mountains and jumping out of planes to have just a momentary glimpse of what Ellie could see any time she chose. The sight was truly stunning, and she never got over the simple enjoyment of this miraculous gift.

The Jenners and Pierces lived in two houses built side-by-side, well outside of town and far away from anyone else. Like her and Griffin, Lila, Adelaide, and Nate didn’t need much sleep to function and often spent much of the night together, frequently moving back and forth between the houses and

sometimes wandering in the woods. This routine was one of the things that worried Ellie the most. The Vyusher had to be aware of this nightly activity... a habit she felt the pack would likely exploit.

It didn't take much waiting before Ellie saw her three friends crossing the woods between their houses. They took their time, stopping to sit on the grass in a small clearing, and appeared to be practicing their powers. Nate, ultra strong and fast, was picking Adelaide up and lifting her effortlessly above his head. Ellie couldn't tell what the girls were doing.

Ellie found a perch on top of a high tree from which to keep watch over them. She tried hard not to spy, although she enjoyed observing them as they practiced their powers on each other. She remembered her own adolescence and honing her skills with Griffin and with her friends. However, she didn't want to intrude on these three. Besides, what she was watching for was not their activities, but for any kind of threat to them. She just couldn't shake the feeling that something terrible was coming soon. And with that gut feeling overwhelming her, she settled in and scanned the woods around them constantly.

Three hours later, it was almost time to go trade shifts with Griffin. With one last look, she took off and started to fly for home. In the middle of a swooping turn, a movement in the trees caught her attention. Focusing her highly-sensitive falcon's vision, she made out a shape in the forest moving swiftly and silently toward the clearing where her three friends were hanging out.

No!

Dread rushed through her as she arrowed her trajectory toward the movement. As she drew closer, Ellie made out the shape of a large wolf.

And then she noticed another wolf.

And another.

Vyusher: Ellie's worst fears were confirmed.

Doing a swift about face, Ellie flew as fast as she could toward Adelaide, Lila, and Nate. There were about half a

dozen wolves headed straight toward them. Wolves just like the ones that had attacked Ellie's clan.

Doing some quick mental arithmetic, Ellie worked through three important things as she flew. The first thought was Griffin was too far away for her to be able to tap into his powers. The second was that the rest of the family was too far away for her to get help before the wolves reached them. And the third was that between Nate, Adelaide, and Lila, only Nate had a remotely active and defensive power. From what Ellie could tell, Lila's and Adelaide's powers would not be useful in this fight.

She ran through her options in rapid succession. *I can't do this without Griffin!* The realization sank in and settled like a rock in the pit of her stomach.

As she neared the trio, she angled herself in a dive meant more for speed than prudence. She couldn't hear Griffin but prayed he'd be able to hear her. She gave a piercing falcon's cry, and her friends jerked their attention to her descent. Pulling up sharply as she reached them, she morphed into her human form.

"Ellie?" Adelaide gasped. The shock in her face turned to understanding faster than Ellie would've expected. "Well that explains a lot."

"I don't have time to go into details right now. There's a pack of wolves headed this way, and they're coming to kill you!"

"What're you talking about?" Nate demanded, his face still showing signs of shock at Ellie's dramatic entrance.

"You need to run as fast as you can to the closest house." She pointed in the opposite direction from the wolves. "Once you get there, tell the rest of your family. Together, there are enough of you to defend against them."

"What about you?" Adelaide asked urgently.

"I'm going to hold them off as long as I can. Nate, if they get past me before you get to the house, use your strength. You

might be able to give Adelaide and Lila a chance. You'll have to snap their necks. It'll be the only way you can stop them."

Nate nodded his understanding and grabbed Adelaide's hand, already pulling her in the direction Ellie had indicated.

"Go," Ellie urged them as Lila grabbed Adelaide's other hand.

"Ellie, will you be okay?" Adelaide asked, straining against Lila and Nate as they both tugged her in the direction of the home. They were all clearly frightened, but Adelaide's tender heart wouldn't let her go without her friend.

"Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself. Go."

Chapter 20

Ellie turned her attention to the woods, as the other three took off at a sprint in the opposite direction. She hoped she could buy them enough time, and she had to wait for them to be farther away before she took the next step in her plan. She didn't want to frighten them more than they already were, and she definitely did *not* want them to turn around to try to help her.

When she was sure they wouldn't hear her, she screamed, "Griffin! I need you!" Her cries were mental and physical, and she prayed her brother could get to her in time.

Ellie prepared to face her worst fears. She only had to wait a few minutes before she heard the wolves approaching. They'd heard both her falcon's cry and her scream for Griffin, and were no longer attempting to be silent.

Without access to Griffin's other power, his physical force-field which was his best weapon in a fight, Ellie quickly ran through her options. She had to keep the Vyusher occupied long enough to give her three friends time to get to the house. She'd have to actually fight the wolves to do that. Without hesitation, her body shimmered and quivered. Suddenly, a massive, ebony jaguar sleek as the night stood where a moment before had been a girl.

Ellie tried to form a plan. As a jaguar she had the advantage of size, strength, and weight over the wolves. She was outnumbered, however, which put her at a distinct *disadvantage*. She was going to need to use her brain and possibly her other powers. Knowing that the wolves were unaware they'd be attacking a jaguar rather than unsuspecting teenaged Svatura, Ellie decided to use the element of surprise to her advantage. She bounded high into a tree, her sharp claws digging in and holding her secure. Her sinewy body tensed, ready to pounce at a second's notice. If she could take down at least one of the wolves immediately, it would give her one less to fight. Maybe it would also give her enemies pause. Anything to buy time.

The attack came in a rush, and instinct kicked in for Ellie. Three of the six wolves burst into view in the clearing where she and her friends had been just moments before. Ellie's body tensed to spring. As the first wolf neared her position, she leapt into the air, landing on the large animal's back. Digging in her claws, she used her powerful jaws to snap his neck with one sharp jerk.

One down, she thought, as she jumped off the wolf mid-tumble. She immediately charged the next closest wolf, who stood stunned and frozen with shock. Having personally witnessed the Vyusher wolf pack's attack techniques once before when they'd decimated her own tribe, she knew if she waited too long, all of the remaining wolves would arrive, circle her, and overwhelm her. She didn't intend to give them enough time to coordinate.

Ellie slammed her huge paw, claws unsheathed, across the second wolf's face, likely breaking a good number of bones with the force of the blow. The wolf howled in agony but still managed to rally for a counterattack. He lunged at her, teeth bared. Ellie defensively stood up on her hind legs, but the wolf's momentum toppled her backwards. He landed on top of her, his huge paws on her shoulders. He went for the easy kill at the jugular, but Ellie was faster, getting her back paws under his belly and pushing with all her animalistic brute strength. The wolf went flying through the air, crashing into a tree with a pained yelp before dropping to the ground.

Ellie didn't wait to see if he had been knocked unconscious or just dazed. She knew one more wolf was in the clearing, and two more were out there somewhere, hopefully distracted by the fight rather than following the scent of her fleeing friends. She was just turning to locate the third wolf when she felt a searing pain in her hind leg. Letting out an anguished scream, she rounded on her attacker, trying her best to block out the throbbing agony.

He was close enough that she was able to surprise him. She lunged under his massive head and locked her strong jaws on his neck. She hadn't got the angle quite right though, and only had a hunk of skin and fur between her teeth. Even so,

she bit down and pulled back, ripping the wolf's hide in the process, only a flesh wound, but it gave her a chance to get out from under him and put a little distance between them.

She backed away from the wolf, trying hard not to limp from her injuries. She heard another growl just behind her, and with the excruciating throbbing in her hindquarters, she knew she wouldn't be able to defend against two fit wolves. Instinctively, Ellie jumped into the air and morphed into the falcon. She soared away, managing to just evade the wolves' snapping jaws. She thanked the powers that be that it was her back leg that had been injured and not her arms, which were now giving her the gift of escape.

Ellie swiftly flew to a height above the tree line so she could locate all the wolves. Unfortunately, she'd only stunned the wolf she'd thrown against the tree. Four of the wolves were still in or around the clearing where she'd just been fighting them. One, however, had not paused for the fight, continuing to track his intended prey.

She hastily searched the ground for Nate, Adelaide, and Lila. They were close to the house, but not quite near enough to gain the attention of the occupants inside. Ellie gained as much height as she could and then moved into a stoop, gaining speed as she descended toward the lone wolf. Flaring her wings at the last minute, she shifted back into a jaguar and crashed into it with all the force of her weight. She had the satisfaction of hearing the beast yelp in pain as both Ellie and the wolf rolled, finally coming to a stop at the edge of the field behind the house. The same field Alex had seen her in only the night before.

Using her keen jaguar hearing, she could tell that her three friends still needed more time to get to the house. They were just far enough away that they wouldn't be able to outrun the wolves in time.

Pushing to her feet, she faced the wolf and crouched into a defensive position with her ears laid flat back and her teeth bared. The wolf snarled in response, slowly stalking toward her, his ears pinned, hair raised on his broad back.

As she slowly maneuvered into the tall grass, keeping the wolf in her sight at all times, the other wolves emerged from the darkness, eyes gleaming, one of them limping.

Ellie kept her body between the wolves and their intended prey. She backed up, doing her best not to visibly hobble so as not to show sign of weakness. The wolves would coordinate and attack as a pack now. She knew what was coming... it was just a matter of how long. She'd fared better than she'd expected to so far, but much of that had been luck and the element of surprise. She had a sinking feeling that both of those things were no longer in her favor. The worst was coming any second.

Chapter 21

Griffin sped his motorcycle as fast as it would go as he mentally followed the *insane* fight his twin was engaged in.

Who the HELL takes on a pack of wolves single-handedly?

He shook his head, terrified he was too far away to be able to do anything about it, and squeezed the gas even harder. He'd been at home sleeping when he'd heard her scream. Ellie *never* called him like that. It could only mean that she'd run into serious trouble.

He was still too far away for them to be able to share their powers or for him to project his defensive shield around her. Cranking up the engine, he pushed the bike past its limits, and possibly past his ability. He didn't know if he was going to be able to get to her in time. Just a few more minutes, and he'd be close enough.

"Hold on, Ellie, I'm coming," he tried projecting to her, hoping that she'd hear him somehow.

As he hit the invisible boundary of distance needed in order to be able to access each other's powers, he leapt from the seat of the motorcycle and into the air. Now a falcon, Griffin quickly gained the height he needed and focused in on where the fight was taking place.

Alex heard the cacophony of a terrible struggle outside. As he headed downstairs to investigate, the girls and Nate burst through the back door.

"They're killing her!" yelled Lila. She was white with fear and panting heavily. "She's keeping them away from us and they're killing her!"

"Who's killing whom?" her father, Hugh, demanded. He dropped his book and jumped from his chair.

“Ellie!” Adelaide answered, her eyes seeking Alex’s as she said the name. She doubled over, panting hard. “There’s a pack of wolves...” She pointed to where they’d just come in.

When Alex realized who she meant, his heart stopped beating and bile rose in his throat. Without a second thought, he was out the back door and running toward the fray. As he sprinted across the clearing, all he could see was a furry blur and teeth. “I can’t see her!” he cried to Nate, who had followed him.

“She’s the black jaguar in the middle of it all!” Nate shouted.

Alex gave a brief nod, immediately accepting the bizarre explanation. He didn’t have time to devote thought to all of the implications, although a small part of his brain was thinking, *What the hell?!* He knew he’d have to deal with it later. Right now he just had to get her out of there.

Realizing that Dexter and Ramsey had followed them as well, he rapped out instructions. “I’m going to freeze them!” he yelled. “Once they’re still, get in there and get her clear. Then I’ll take care of her and release them for you to hit ‘em hard.”

Alex didn’t bother to see if the others had even heard him, let alone agreed. As soon as he got close enough, he stopped running, took a deep breath, and focused all his power. Instantly, the five wolves froze in mid-motion. Holding them there, he watched as Nate, Dexter, and Ramsey moved in. Nate, being the strongest, pulled the massive onyx cat out from under the wolves and over to where Alex stood. He didn’t flinch, his focus solely on the wolves. He had never tried to hold a metamorph still before, let alone five of them. Once Ellie was clear, he released the pack and turned his full attention to her, confident that Nate, Dexter, and Ramsey would handle the wolves. He would need his power to help Ellie.

Just moments before Alex froze the wolves, Griffin reached the clearing. From the air, he'd been able to see his jaguar-sister battling five huge timber wolves. But, unfortunately, he was still too far away to project his defensive shield around her. Diving toward the action, Griffin briefly considered calling to Ellie through their mental link but dismissed the idea, not wanting to distract her even for a second.

A sound of the mighty jaguar's scream had split the still night air, and Griffin had known a second of the blackest rage and utter despair. He was going to be too late. There was too much movement for Griffin to be able to make out exactly what was happening, but he knew one thing for certain... His sister was going to die and there was nothing he could do to save her.

But suddenly, the wolves had frozen in mid-fight as though they'd been turned to statues. He saw a tall, blond boy run into the midst of the solidified fray and pull Ellie out, leaving her with another male. Griffin recognized Alex, Ellie's *te'sorthene*.

Dropping down to his knees beside Ellie, Alex ignored the fight raging in front of him, trusting Nate, Dexter, and Ramsey to keep the wolves off them, and choosing instead to keep all of his skill focused on Ellie. He would've tried to hold the wolves still and let the guys kill them right then and there, but he needed every ounce of his power to help Ellie now.

Weakened from her injuries, Ellie shifted back to her human form. She was bleeding badly from the multitude of gruesome-looking gashes all over her body—the worst on the back of her leg. He could tell she had several broken bones, judging from the odd angles of two of her limbs.

But she was still breathing.

Alex used his power to staunch the blood pulsing out of the gash in her leg. But it was tricky. He had to try to stop the blood only on the surface of the vessel, making sure that the blood in her body continued to pump. If he was off even just a little, he could kill her.

Adding physical pressure to two of the bloodiest gashes, Alex waited for the fight with the wolves to be over. He needed Hugh, but he knew his adopted father had stayed behind to protect the rest of the family.

Ellie's eyelids flickered. "Alex?"

"It's me... You're okay now." He smoothed the blood-matted hair back from her face and bent to give her a quick kiss on her forehead.

"Lila, Adelaide, Nate?" she asked in a broken whisper.

"All safe. You just concentrate on not dying on me."

Realizing that he could talk to her now without distracting her, Griffin pulled slightly out of his dive and thought her name.

"I'm still here, Griffin," she answered him silently.

"I'm coming to you, Ellie."

"No!" she protested. *"Protect the family first. If you can get to her, tell Charlotte to come to me."* She knew that Griffin would understand exactly why she was asking for Charlotte.

Alex watched as Ellie closed her eyes again. She looked so pale and so much blood was seeping from her body. He raged inside at his utter helplessness. There had to be something else he could do.

“Ellie?” He tried to get her to talk, keep her with him until Hugh could get to her.

“Griffin...” she murmured. “No,” she said, a little louder. “Protect the family first.” She mumbled something else unintelligible. She wasn’t making any sense.

Alex’s anxiety level ratcheted up another few notches. Clearly Ellie was delirious. She was losing too much blood, and she needed Hugh *now*. Alex tried harder to stop the blood coming out of the gash in her leg, terrified he’d stop the wrong part of her body. Jaw clenched, sweat dripped down his face with the effort, he held on, praying she wouldn’t die.

Griffin landed between Ellie and the wolf pack and morphed back to a human. Starting with Ellie and Alex, he threw his defensive shield up around everyone but the wolves. This included the house, as he wasn’t sure who was where. This took a tremendous amount concentration and control, as he had to split his shield into several areas without allowing the wolves in.

With the small amount of concentration he could afford to devote elsewhere, he mentally called for Charlotte. He knew she had heard him as soon as he saw a small figure appear beside his sister’s prone form.

A deafening silence fell over everything. All Alex could hear was Ellie’s labored breathing—like she was inhaling liquid—and the thunder of his own heartbeat. Beside him, the sound of a *pop* announced Charlotte’s arrival.

“Can you get us back to the house?” he asked without looking up from Ellie.

“I don’t think I can,” Charlotte’s voice trembled.

Ellie fluttered her eyes open. “I can. Take my hand, both of you,” she instructed, so weak her voice was barely audible. “Griffin can’t hold this many shields for much longer.”

Sensing the urgency, Alex and Charlotte didn’t bother with questions and both took her hand. With a *pop* they were suddenly next to Dexter, Nate, and Ramsey. The three, who had been fighting off the wolves, were now standing and looking bewildered that the wolves didn’t seem to be able to touch them, even though nothing visible was preventing them from doing so.

“*Tell them to grab hold,*” Ellie’s voice sounded in Alex’s head.

Never taking his eyes from her face, although Alex could see she was getting noticeably more fragile every second, he shouted the instructions to the others. As soon as his brothers touched her, another *pop* sounded, and they were all inside the house with everyone else.

“Now, Griffin!” Ellie yelled, before slumping into Alex’s arms, slipping into unconsciousness.

A horrendous sound broke over the house, like a clap of thunder when lightning struck close.

And then silence.

Chapter 22

Griffin had held onto his shields with difficulty. By the time Charlotte had reached Ellie, he'd been physically shaking with the effort. As soon as he'd seen Ellie and the two people with her disappear, he had finally been able to drop the shield around them. He'd kept track of Ellie mentally as she'd appeared next to the group of three guys who'd been fighting the wolves. It had taken only a second for them to touch Ellie and then she'd disappeared again, allowing Griffin to drop the second shield. All of the remaining people in the field had been making their way quickly to the house where Griffin could feel Ellie had transported herself.

Griffin had backed up as he followed them. As he moved, Griffin had gradually manipulated his shield. While still keeping the wolves at bay, he had slid the shield, paper thin, under their unsuspecting paws, even slightly under the ground they were standing on just to avoid their suspecting his actions.

“Now, Griffin!” he'd heard Ellie scream from inside the house. *She must be too weak to use her powers to tell me mentally*, he'd realized.

With an incredible jerk, creating a sound like thunder, he'd slammed the shield up in the air like a giant catapult. The wolves had gone flying. Griffin, satisfied that the immediate threat was handled, had turned and ran into the house.

“Give me some space to work,” Alex heard Hugh quietly tell the others. He still hadn't lifted his eyes from Ellie's face. As Hugh knelt beside her, Alex held her limp hand between his own.

Come on, baby. You've got to keep fighting, he thought, trying to will her some of his own strength. *You're safe now.*

Just keep fighting to stay alive.

He was vaguely aware of someone taking her other hand. Glancing up, he saw it was Griffin, who looked almost as pale as Ellie. A stab of confusion pulsed through Alex, but he pushed it aside. Instead, he turned his attention back to the girl who'd somehow come to mean more to him than he'd ever realized.

What a time to figure out that you're in love with the girl, he thought with wry desperation.

Hugh continued to work beside him, his face set in determination. It usually only took a few minutes at most for Hugh to heal anything. That was his power...his gift. Ellie's injuries were extensive, so naturally it would take more time. Alex let go of her hand for a moment to cover her with a blanket. Everyone watched in total silence as Hugh poured his healing energy into Ellie's still form.

Though no one else could see it, Hugh saw a golden glow coming from Ellie's body. It shown brightest where she was the most injured. He moved his hands over that concentration of light and poured his power into that area until the light turned white. Then he would move on to the next brightest spot. Over and over and over he did this, healing Ellie's injuries one agonizing place at a time.

"Hugh?" Alex's voice broke through Hugh's concentration

"There's a lot to fix, Alex. She's still with us. Give me some time."

At Hugh's words Alex fell silent. The tension in his voice told Alex and the others what they needed to know, that Ellie

was in very bad shape. Helplessly he stared at the precious girl whose hand he still held. Alex leaned forward to whisper in her ear. He didn't know half of what he said to her. He talked mostly about how she needed to fight, that she couldn't leave him. Not now.

Ellie gradually regained consciousness. At first, all she was aware of was a warm, tingling sensation coursing through her body. As the lovely heat seeped through her, she heard Griffin's voice calling her name. Softly at first, and then louder and louder.

"Stop screaming at me, Griffin," she finally thought. That was when she became aware that Griffin was beside her, holding her hand. She felt a great tension leave his body when he heard her voice in his head.

"Welcome back," was his hushed response. For her reserved brother, the wealth of feeling in his voice said it all. Ellie still remained trapped in the warm darkness of semi-oblivion. She couldn't open her eyes or talk. She frowned in concentration. Clearly Griffin had been worried about something.

"What happened? Why can't I open my eyes?"

Griffin stayed silent so long that Ellie started to worry. A slight frown marred her brow. *"Don't force me to open my eyes and look at you, Griff,"* she attempted to tease.

"I see your sense of humor has survived intact," Griffin responded to his sister's thoughts aloud this time. He was relieved to see the slight curve to her lips indicating her amusement. After watching for the past hour as his usually vital, vibrant sister looked like a corpse, Griffin could forgive her anything at this moment. Beside them, Alex's head jerked up.

At the sound of Griffin's voice, Ellie became aware that Alex was also there, holding her other hand, and that he'd

been talking to her. And then she realized that she'd been listening to him talk for some time. Her frown deepened as she tried to remember his words. She had a feeling they were important.

“What do you mean?” Alex asked Griffin.

Ellie also became aware of the other voices in the room. They'd been there all along, but she only now realized that as they all went silent.

“I can hear her thoughts,” Griffin explained softly.

“Is she okay?” Adelaide asked.

Ellie waited impatiently for Griffin's response, as curious as the rest of the room.

“Answer the girl, Griff,” Ellie finally prodded him. Not wanting to be rude to the others in the room, she managed to say her question aloud this time. She heard someone choke back a laugh.

“I guess that answers that,” Griffin murmured, amused, giving her hand a squeeze.

“Well, I'm glad you're satisfied, but I still don't know what's going on. And my eyes still don't want to open,” Ellie replied in a sleepy huff. Her speech was slightly slurred and it felt like cotton wool was stuffed in her mouth.

“Feisty little thing, isn't she?” another voice in the room commented.

Just then, Ellie became aware that she could control the warmth flowing through her body. Concentrating on it, she forced it to become more intense. And then she felt the hands on either side of her face jerk and realized someone other than Griffin and Alex was touching her.

“What the heck was that?” asked a voice above her head. It was calm and the speaker didn't take his hands away, but it was evident that he was slightly apprehensive.

“What?” Alex and Griffin asked in unison.

“A tingly feeling, similar to an electric shock, but sort of being pulled out of me,” answered the detached voice.

“Ah,” Griffin relaxed beside her. “She’s definitely healing if you’re feeling that,” he said to Hugh. “One of Ellie’s gifts is the ability to use other people’s powers when she’s touching them,” Griffin explained. “That tingly feeling is her accessing your powers.”

“Just helping you along a little,” Ellie piped up.

Ellie guessed the unfamiliar voice must belong to Hugh, Lila and Adelaide’s father. Based on the little she knew of him, and given the current situation, she had an idea that his power was the ability to heal. She really was feeling so much better. Her thoughts were getting much clearer as that warm, tingly feeling continued to move and flow through her body. She now became fully aware of all the people in the room. Tapping into Griffin’s power to read minds, she discovered that the whole family was there.

“Just a few more minutes,” Hugh murmured.

The room fell silent for those few remaining moments it took the two of them to work in tandem, healing the last of the wounds she’d sustained in her fight with the wolf pack.

Wolf pack? Ellie thought. Why does that sound like something important...?

And in an instant, everything came rushing back to her.

A small gasp escaped her lips, and she struggled to open her eyes until she heard Griffin reassure her, “It’s alright. Everyone is safe and the Vyusher are gone, Ellie.”

“What’s wrong?” she heard Alex ask.

“She just remembered everything that happened.” Griffin’s calm explanation soothed the room in general. To Ellie, he added, “We’ll go over everything once Hugh is done fixing you.”

“That just about does it,” Hugh finally pronounced, satisfied though weary. The room stayed silent, and Ellie guessed they were all waiting for her to react in some way. But

she preferred to just lie here and not have to face everything. She didn't want to relive the fight. Nor did she particularly want to discuss with these people who she and Griffin were, as well as the reason for the wolves' attack.

"Come on, lazy bones," Griffin gave her a mental prod, clearly amused at her thought process.

"Get out of my head, Griff," she responded.

With a resigned sigh, Ellie opened her eyes and sat up gingerly. The first person she looked at was Griffin, and the nightmare of what she'd just been through rushed over her in waves. Griffin obviously followed her thoughts because she found herself suddenly engulfed in a bear hug. "Don't you ever do anything like that again," he ordered gruffly. *"I almost lost you there,"* he added silently.

She hugged him back. *"Love you, too."*

Alex was unsure what to make of the scene unfolding before him. Clearly Ellie and Griffin had a close relationship, though just what the relationship was remained unclear. Alex felt conflicted – on one hand, he was relieved Ellie was better. But on the other, she was in the arms of another guy.

Who is this guy? Alex thought, as he realized that Ellie was still holding his own hand tightly. *What is going on here?*

Ellie moved from Griffin's embrace. Still holding Alex's hand, she pulled him up off the floor and onto the couch beside her, cradling their linked hands in her lap. Griffin moved around from the back of the couch and took a seat on her other side. She silently assessed her surroundings. They were in a large living room. A great stone fireplace took up

one wall, with a large flat-screened TV mounted beside it. The furniture was comfortable and laid out in a way that encouraged social gatherings. The other wall was entirely windows, facing out into the clearing behind the house. A lovely, homey room.

Then she glanced around at the group of Svatura that she and Griffin had been watching from afar. Nate sat beside Adelaide on the floor, cradling her slightly as she leaned back against him. Lila sat beside her sister. Despite the anxious expressions of every single person in the room, Adelaide seemed very pleased about something. Ellie made a mental note to ask her later.

Hugh had moved across the room to sit with his wife on the loveseat. He had light brown hair and kind brown eyes....what one would consider conventionally handsome. And now Ellie knew that his power was the ability to heal. Judging by the extent of her wounds, and the relatively short amount of time it had taken him to fix her, he had to be very powerful.

Looking at Lucinda, or Lucy, as they all called her, Ellie saw where Adelaide and Lila got their looks. She had long, honey-blonde hair, wide green eyes and an open, welcoming demeanor. Thanks to Griffin, Ellie already knew of Lucy's ability to see people's intentions, as well as the essence of who they were.

Ellie looked at the other three people in the room. She was aware of their names but knew little else about them. Dexter and Charlotte, the other married couple, sat together in the corner of the room. They were younger than Hugh and Lucy, but still appeared old enough to be Nate and Ramsey's parents. They both had dark brown hair and eyes. But where Charlotte was tall and willowy, Dexter was stocky and solidly built. Both regarded her with somewhat wary and perplexed expressions.

Ramsey sat at Charlotte and Dexter's feet, so determining his height was difficult. He had dark red hair and bottle green eyes. While he shared his adopted parents' wariness, anger

also burned in his eyes. Ellie, unsure who the anger was directed at, glanced at Griffin.

“He’s not mad at us,” Griffin answered her silently. *“Yet.”*

Ellie wrinkled her mental nose at her brother, receiving a quiet chuckle in return. She’d been so curious about these people for so long now. Keeping what she and Griffin really were from them had been incredibly difficult. Too tempting to join their fun, their togetherness. How would they react now? She truly hoped that this family, this group of people just like them, would give her and Griffin the benefit of the doubt and welcome them as one of their own.

She looked at her twin and shrugged. “I don’t know where to begin.”

“Good luck with that,” was Griffin’s less than helpful response. He leaned back, casually draping his arms across the top of the couch.

“Where to begin? So are you planning on telling us what this is all about?” Hugh asked, seeming amused by Ellie and Griffin’s banter.

“The beginning is a very long time ago,” Ellie replied softly. “It would take too long to go back that far.” She looked up at him with candid eyes. “I’m not trying to be difficult. It’s just that it’s a fairly long story.”

“So you’re like us?” Adelaide asked. She folded her legs daintily beneath her as she sat on the floor beside her twin.

Ellie nodded. “Adelaide, Lila, and Nate already know me. So does Alex.” She glanced at him fleetingly. “For the rest of you, my name is Ellie Aubrey. This is my twin brother, Griffin.”

Ellie felt Alex’s hand clench slightly in her grasp. She shot him another glance, catching what she suspected was a relieved smile. Still holding his hand she looked away. Alex and their relationship was something she would have to deal with later. She was content for now that he remained sitting beside her. First, he and the rest of the people in the room deserved an explanation.

She glanced at Griffin and their eyes locked. He nodded slowly in reply to her silent question. Ellie cleared her throat.

“It would actually be easiest to show you our story rather than tell you.”

Chapter 23

“Show us?” A slight frown marred Hugh’s brow, showing his bewilderment.

“Yes. Like you, my brother and I have gifts... powers.”

“That became pretty obvious when we all saw a jaguar turn back into you,” Alex muttered beside her. She guessed forgiveness for her long deception would not be quick in coming. Especially because he’d asked her directly. Had that only been this morning?

“Griffin has the ability to read minds,” Ellie said, ignoring Alex. “He’s still learning all the facets of his gift. Eventually he’ll have the ability to control people’s thoughts. He’s not quite there yet though, and he’s only just starting to be able to project his thoughts into other people’s minds.” She gave Griffin a cheeky wink and received a faint smile in return.

“I don’t understand,” said Hugh. “If he doesn’t have the ability to use those aspects of his power yet, then how would you show us?”

Griffin smirked. “Because Ellie *does* have the ability, in a roundabout way.”

Seeing nine pairs of very baffled eyes, Ellie hurried to enlighten them. “One of my gifts is the ability to manipulate others’ powers if I’m physically touching them. But I quickly become an expert, almost like I’ve had it for years, and so I’m able to use it to its fullest potential.”

“Awesome!” Nate said.

“Well... not being an expert at my own power yet, I do miss things here and there,” she confessed with a small shrug. “And it’s dependent on the type of interaction. The longer I spend in physical contact with someone, the more I learn their powers.”

“Should I be worried?” Alex asked dryly beside her, looking at their linked hands. Ellie took it as a good sign that he was joking with her. He couldn’t be that angry.

She flicked him a playful look. “I usually ask permission first.” She turned to the others. “So, with your permission, I can use Griffin’s power to show you.”

Everyone in the room immediately turned toward Lucy. She was already smiling. “She has good intentions. If anything, she’s been trying to protect us,” Lucy said.

“I would never hurt any of you,” Ellie swore.

“Nor would I,” Griffin quietly added, leaning forward to emphasize his point.

“They’re telling the truth,” Lila assured the room, shifting positions to pull her knees up to her chest.

Ellie blinked in surprise. She’d had the hardest time connecting with Lila. The other girl treated her with friendly camaraderie, but always with a slightly distant air. As a result, she hadn’t been able to figure out Lila’s power yet. It seemed she had the ability to see if people were telling the truth... a variation on her mother’s powers. Ellie gave a small nod of appreciation for Lila’s show of support.

“We can trust them,” Adelaide said.

“Why do you say that, Delia?” Hugh asked, turning to look at her.

“Because they will be part of our family.” Her eyes lost focus and she touched the air with her fingers like she was plucking the strings of a guitar. Ellie could tell that Adelaide was touching the shimmering lines that she alone could see. Adelaide continued, “I’ve seen it since the day I met Ellie. And it just continues to grow in strength every day. Tonight it solidified.”

Ellie gasped in shock. Silently, so did Griffin, because the girl had said “they.” Everyone else erupted into a bit of a ruckus...only Alex remained silent among all the noise. But he didn’t let go of her hand.

Eventually, the room quieted enough for Hugh to ask his daughter, “Why didn’t you say something earlier?”

“You know I don’t like to influence people with what I can see, Dad. And two additions to our family is a huge deal.” Adelaide’s answer soothed most of the ruffled feelings in the room. “I’m telling you now because it helps us all to trust one another, us to trust them, and vice versa.” Nate wrapped his arms around Adelaide, offering her his silent support.

“Was that why you approached me in the lunch room on my first day of school?” Ellie asked her friend.

Adelaide smiled gently. “Yes.”

Ellie wanted to ask more questions. She was thinking about the first time she’d met Alex and had accidentally seen Adelaide’s power at work. She hadn’t understood it at the time, and wondered what exactly she’d seen. But now wasn’t the time. One more thing to put on the back burner while she dealt with the immediate situation.

Looking around the room, Ellie could tell some doubt still lingered. “If you need to discuss this without us, Griffin and I can step outside.”

She tried to stand up but immediately collapsed. Alex reached out as she fell, and she landed right on his lap in the protective circle of his arms.

“You’re not going anywhere young lady,” Hugh said as Alex’s grip tightened. “All your wounds may be closed and fixed, but your body still has to go through a period of true healing on its own. You’ll be weak for several days at least.”

“Oh,” Ellie huffed her frustration. Definitely not convenient to be less than a hundred percent right now. Of course, she should just be grateful she was still alive. Still, she didn’t relish playing the role of an invalid.

She attempted to shift back to her previous seat on the couch beside him, but Alex’s arms remained firm, refusing to let her move away. Looking into his eyes, she murmured, “Are you going to let me go?”

He answered in a husky voice, “Not in this lifetime.”

Ellie’s heart paused and then resumed beating at a faster cadence. *Has he realized we are te’sorthene?* Her breath

caught in her throat at the expression in his eyes. He settled her a little more comfortably on his lap. Without taking his eyes off hers, he said a bit louder, “I think we’re ready for you to show us your story.”

It took a pathetically large amount of will power to look away from him. She could think a little more clearly when she wasn’t trapped in his gaze. She glanced at Griffin.

“Not one word”, she ordered.

His lips twitched in a smile. He reached out and took her hand, giving it a little squeeze. Turning to the room he said, “You’ll all need to move in close and be touching one of us.”

“I’ve never tried projecting Griffin’s gift into more than one mind before,” she warned as they shifted positions.

Once they were all settled and waiting, Ellie gave an imperceptible nod, as if she was telling herself to proceed. With a deep breath, she allowed her power to flow through her in tingling waves. Behind her closed eyes she saw Griffin’s power within him, almost like a glowing golden beacon of light. Reaching out mentally, she touched the light and drew it inside herself. Once she had control of it, she concentrated on locating each mind in the room, one at a time, until she saw all ten. And then she focused very hard on an image, that of a magnificently terrible black wolf.

“Wow,” Alex said under his breath.

“Cool!” Nate exclaimed beside her.

Once Ellie felt sure everyone could see what she saw, she started playing through the scenes in her head, allowing everyone else to witness the pictures in her mind, organizing her thoughts into a cohesive story of what had led her and Griffin here.

Ellie’s memories almost overwhelmed her as she worked through them. She started with some of her earlier recollections of life...she thought of her people, their life, and stories. To the outside world they appeared to be just a band of gypsies. But in reality, they were the largest gathering of people with extraordinary abilities in the world. They called

themselves the *Darane Svatura*, choosing to embody a gypsy term referring to magic and mythology.

In a way, they were the royals of their kind. Both Ellie and Griffin's great-grandfathers were the original *Phuro*, or elders. There had been more before them, but in very small numbers. Powers were passed down from generation to generation.

As young men, her great-grandfathers had befriended each other. They both married gypsy women...princesses from two different tribes. At that time in the world, gypsies had a greater tolerance of people who were unusual or different. Certainly more tolerance than the people who'd killed Svatura for suspected witchcraft. As their great-grandfathers married and had children, they'd gathered more of their kind together.

Her parents were the descendants of the original patriarchs. By the time Griffin and Ellie had been born, their Svatura clan numbered in the hundreds. It had eventually broken into smaller groups, travelling far away from the original main group. But they continued to return to the larger community and her great-grandfathers for advice, for protection, for help, and sometimes for judgment or rulings.

When Ellie had been only a young child, the killings started. First, with the smaller of the families who had moved away. Just one or two would survive and make their way back to the main tribe, bringing with them stories of giant metamorphs who all turned into wolves and had decimated all their people. But no matter how they tried, the Svatura had been unable to track down the wolves responsible. They called them the *Vyusher*, which meant wolf in Romani, the language of their gypsy allies and ancestors. As far as anyone could tell, the Vyusher were gifted people like the Svatura. The biggest difference between the two clans was that the Vyusher were all wolf metamorphs, which seemed impossible given how few metamorphs roamed the planet.

By the time Ellie and Griffin were in their early adolescence and coming into their powers, the worldwide community that had once numbered in the hundreds had been

whittled down to only about fifty. They had all banded together for support and protection.

Ellie remembered the heavy feeling of fear that had permeated this time in her life. People with extraordinary gifts—gifts that should have protected them and their families, should have allowed them to fight back—these people had been killed in the attacks. No one knew when or how the attacks came. The survivors were most often younger and weaker or had only just come into their powers. For some reason, they seemed to go undetected by the wolves.

The attack on the one remaining tribe had come eventually. Even her great-grandfather, a metamorph of incredible size and strength, hadn't been able to prevent it...or survive it. The wolves had attacked him first, along with the other strongest members. And somehow he hadn't been able to morph in time. The Vyusher seemed to know what powers each Svatura possessed. It had been coordinated and strategic. And deadly.

This part Ellie showed in patches, like she remembered it. She also tried her best to not really think about what she was showing. Emotional transfer tended to be a part of the ability to show people memories, or at least it had been when she'd practiced this on Griffin. This was the worst moment of her life, and she didn't want anyone else to experience that pain if they didn't have to.

Ellie and Griffin had been the only survivors. Ellie suspected two reasons behind their supposed luck. As adolescents their powers were still new and underdeveloped. So they would have been left for last, possibly even overlooked if they'd tried to hide. They hadn't, though. They had done their best to try to help protect their family. But to no avail.

In the end they'd survived because of their combined powers. They had each discovered new powers that night, which is why Ellie suspected the wolves hadn't been prepared for what happened.

Toward the end of the attack, after most everyone else was dead, Ellie and Griffin had been surrounded. Ellie had already

discovered her ability to morph into her falcon form. But that night she'd discovered something new – usually, when she used other people's abilities, the second she lost physical contact with them, she lost the access to that power. That night she learned that once she touched another metamorph she would *always* have access to that form, as if it were her own, even after the physical contact had been broken.

A huge black wolf had been circling them. As it lunged for Ellie, she'd held up her hands and touched it, immediately morphing into a wolf. The attacking creature had stumbled back in bewilderment. In the wolf form, Ellie had been able to hear all of the wolves, their thoughts, their memories. They truly were a pack, including their minds.

What she hadn't realized was that the pull of that hive-like mind would immediately start to affect her. Metamorphs tended to take on some of the aspects of their morphic form. Consequently, some of the more predatory animals were harder to control as the metamorph battled between their humanity and their animalistic instincts. The wolf form, at least with the Vyusher, could start to completely take over. Ellie, still linked to the pack, had seen that some of the wolves hadn't been in their human form in many, many years.

The large wolf had beckoned her to join them, and she'd started moving to comply. Griffin had saved her...and that moment was also when he learned he could project his defensive shield. He'd thrown it over both of them, keeping the wolves from getting anywhere near. Then he'd touched her, linking her to him, allowing her to use his power.

Ellie's power manipulation at that time was so untutored that she couldn't control it. The second she touched someone she was linked to them, tuned in to their power. Griffin had counted on that fact. She instantly started using his mind reading ability, and he had screamed her name. As if she was coming out of a fog, Ellie had pulled out of the wolf form.

In tandem, each reading the other's minds, they'd both morphed into the falcon. Griffin kept the defensive shield around them as they escaped... flew as far away as they could

before becoming physically exhausted. They'd been alone ever since.

Because of Ellie's brief connection with the Vyusher community mind, she'd learned they only attacked large gatherings of people with powers. So she and Griffin had deliberately avoided others of their kind after that. As long as it was just the two of them, they wouldn't be a target for the wolves. It'd stayed that way until Ellie had had her dream about the Jenners and Pierces.

Now she and Griffin were here with the people she'd seen in her dream. It seemed like forever ago. And the Vyusher were once again threatening their lives. If their incredibly powerful ancestors hadn't been able to survive, how could just the two of them stand a chance of helping this family?

Feeling the mood shift uncomfortably around her, Ellie turned her focus away from her fears and to the last few months. Meeting the Jenners. Befriending them. Protecting them.

With a deep breath and mentally poking at Griffin to check that she hadn't left out anything important, Ellie stopped projecting her thoughts into the other's minds. She released Griffin's hand before sinking into Alex's arms. She shivered both from exertion and emotional upheaval.

No one spoke, trying to simply absorb and assimilate what Ellie had revealed.

"So let me get this straight..." Nate finally broke the silence. "You're a gypsy princess?"

The incredulity in his expression made Ellie laugh and had everyone else chuckling with her as they all moved back to their original seats. Even Griffin. She suspected Nate had done it on purpose to lighten the mood, and it had worked.

"Out of all of that, that's what you decided to focus on?" She raised her head from Alex's shoulder to tease in return.

"We have to leave," Lucy said, fear evident as she wrung her hands.

Griffin shook his head. “They’ll expect that and follow you.” Suddenly, he swung his head sharply to look at Ellie as she mentally sent an idea his way. “*Really?*” he asked, also using his telepathy.

She nodded in response. “*They won’t be able to know.*” She paused and thought for a second. “*I think we could...*” She paused again thinking through her plan, letting him follow along with her mental process.

Everyone else in the room sat forward, glancing at each other with baffled expressions.

“Can you do that?” Griffin asked her aloud, having noticed the confusion in the room.

“If I have enough time to heal and then to practice, I think so,” Ellie answered, aloud as well, sitting up.

“You’ve never tried.” He popped up from the sofa to pace the room.

“I’ve never had the chance to try the first part,” she reminded him quietly. “And the other part, well you’re powerful enough now to contain me if I can’t control it.”

Griffin stood at the window staring outside as he thought. Finally he turned to look at her and then nodded. Ellie relaxed slightly. Her reluctant brother had agreed to help her protect this family.

“Would you care to clue the rest of us in?” Alex murmured in her ear. He slid his hand under her hair to rest lightly at the nape of her neck. He was the only one who seemed amused by the interchange between the twins, as everyone else appeared equal parts confused and frustrated. Ellie felt secretly relieved by his behavior, wondering why he was taking all of this so well. But she didn’t want to press it.

“That was about a couple of different things. First, during my fight with the pack today, I touched several of them. I learned a few things, although in flashes only.” She paused, remembering.

“That black wolf wasn’t there tonight,” she continued, plucking at a loose thread in her sweatshirt. “Although he did

give the orders for the attack. He's the king of the Vyusher, as far as we can tell. His name is Gideon. All of the Vyusher are wolf metamorphs, but like Griffin and me, some have additional skills. Someone in the pack—it's hard for me to tell who, but it seems like it might be Gideon—has the ability to see anyone with powers, what those powers are, and how the person uses those powers. Past, present, and future. But it's easier for them to zero in on large groups. They have a hard time when it's only a couple of us."

She turned to Griffin as he resumed his seat beside her. "That seems to be part of how they were so effective at decimating our clan. They knew *exactly* what our powers were. They prepared a plan around each of us, and in what order to attack. And they always attacked the strongest first, although there seems to be more to it than that." Ellie's brow furrowed, frustrated with the gaps in her vision.

"Is there a way around Gideon's power?" Hugh asked. He steepled his fingers as he contemplated the brother and sister.

"There is for your family. Apparently, someone in this group is able to block their ability to see and understand your gifts. They can tell that you have them but not what they are. It seems like Griffin and I were also protected under this power. Based on what I could see in the pack collective mind, that small attack had been more recon than anything—they don't know how many of us there are, or what powers we have. It gives us an advantage." Ellie paused for a second and then added quietly, "Unless you want to scatter and live apart the rest of your lives. And even then, you'd be in constant danger. We're going to have to fight them. And defeat them. There's no other option."

Chapter 24

Everyone silently pondered this bleak news. Regardless of the advantage, none of them had ever had to fight before... especially not for their *lives*. The room seemed to take a collective breath, everyone changing position. Ramsey moved restlessly to stare out the window. Ellie caught Lila's surreptitious but concerned glance at the red-haired boy.

"You said 'first'," Lucy reminded her, reclaiming her attention. "Is there a second?"

Ellie nodded slowly as she pulled her legs up to sit cross-legged on the couch. Alex adjusted his position to accommodate her. "I have two other ideas, and both of them have to do with my gifts." She looked each person in the eyes, gauging their possible reactions. "But you'd really have to trust me."

No one said anything, so she continued. "My first idea is to use my ability to tap into to your powers. But I want to try to use it with all of you at once."

"What do you mean all of us?" Adelaide asked, tilting her head.

"I've never tried this before since my power didn't develop until... well... you all saw. I've only ever had Griffin to practice on." She gave Griffin a little nudge with her knee.

"But I think that if we're all touching at once, maybe by holding hands, I can channel all our powers. Try to coordinate us somehow. I can at least protect us using Griffin's defensive shield. I can move us around using Charlotte's teleporting, and so forth. Between Lucy's ability to see intentions and Griffin's mind reading, I should be able to stay a step ahead of the wolves."

Alex frowned. "You said you've never done it before."

"Like I said... only Griffin to practice on, and he only let me do so much." She gave a little apologetic shrug. "We'd have to try it out."

“What’s your other idea?” Alex was still frowning.

“This is the biggest question mark in my mind.” Ellie grimaced. “I’m fairly sure I can do the first part, and we’ll be able to confirm that soon enough, but this other idea is much harder.”

Ellie paused. She wasn’t quite sure how to go about explaining this. One had to see it to believe it.

Sensing her hesitation, feeling the tension in her body, Alex said dryly, “I’m guessing it’s not something you’re entirely comfortable with.”

Ellie took a deep breath. *It’s now or never...* “You know that one of my gifts is the ability to morph. I have four different forms.”

“But wouldn’t that be multiple gifts?” Adelaide asked, wrinkling her brow.

“It’s a facet of my two gifts combined. Two of my forms were inherited. Two other forms I... ummmm *absorbed* is the best description, I guess. I showed you how I got my wolf form on the night my family...” She trailed off.

“What shapes?” Nate prodded, clearly fascinated.

“You’ve seen the falcon, which is my strongest and inherited through my grandmother. The jaguar I pulled from someone in my tribe, although I didn’t know it at the time. I hadn’t yet realized I’d come into that power. You saw that I have the wolf, but I never use it. The pack mind is too powerful...it’s too dangerous.” She paused.

“That’s only three,” Alex said, and felt her body tense.

“My fourth form I’ve only ever tried once, when I was very young. The attempt was a...” Ellie searched for the right word.

“A disaster,” Griffin supplied quietly.

“Is this what your plan is about?” Hugh asked.

With a nod, Ellie continued. “From my great-grandfather, I inherited the ability to change into a...well, a... dragon.”

Total silence greeted this declaration. And then Alex let out a loud exhale.

“Did I say *whoa* earlier?” Nate asked, his eyes the size of saucers. “That really doesn’t quite cover it...I mean Holy mother of all that’s crazy *WHOA!*”

“That is so cool!” Lila added, practically clapping her hands in excitement.

Ellie shot her a stilted smile. “Thanks.”

“So why was it so disastrous?” Charlotte asked.

“The problem is that when you morph into a form, part of that form’s inherent traits takes over. You can lose your humanity. It’s the same danger as being a wolf. I’ve learned to control it in the jaguar. But the dragon...” Ellie shuddered. “The one time I tried it, it completely took over. My great-grandfather, who could eventually control himself as a dragon, pretty much had to take me out.”

She looked at Griffin to finish the story.

“It took all of our clan to force her out of the morph,” Griffin added, a grim set to his mouth. “It’s possible for the dragon to take over so completely that she can’t get back. But it’s also dangerous for everyone around her. According to our great-grandfather, everything you’ve read about dragons, though just folklore and mythology, is based on people with the ability to morph into one. And they all decimated villages and killed many people before they were killed themselves. As far as we know, only our great-grandfather ever had the ability to control the dragon.”

Alex’s grip on her hand tightened to an almost painful point. “No,” he said under his breath.

Ellie turned to look at him and said quietly, “But it’s the only thing the Vyusher won’t ever be able to defeat.”

“They defeated your great-grandfather, right?” he demanded harshly.

“Not as a dragon,” Griffin leaned around her to answer. “They killed him before he ever morphed.”

Brother and sister glanced at each other, keeping silent about the fact that it had seemed like their grandfather couldn't morph that night. Having discussed it many times through the years, neither Ellie nor Griffin were sure of what they were seeing at the time.

Alex was getting angry. Very angry. She could feel it in his grip, sense it in the tense set of his shoulders. It surprised Ellie that her idea was what finally triggered his anger. He had so many other things to get upset with her over. This plan, at least, had noble intentions driving it.

"We can't allow you to try it, Ellie," Hugh said.

"It's... safer... for me to try it now than back then. I'm older, more experienced. I've been able to learn to control other aggressive morphic forms. And there's Griffin..." She felt the attention in the room turn to her brother.

He shifted in his seat. "I can contain her now, with a defensive shield. My other gift. I wasn't strong enough last time. The power is inherited, but I'm the only one in our clan to have it in the form of a physical force field. So this... backup plan, I guess you could call it... wasn't available when she tried last time."

Ellie rushed on, "We're hoping that if I do get out of control... although I think I can control it... But if I *can't* control it, then Griffin can contain me in his shield. He'll be able to use our connection and our combined gifts to bring me back."

Hugh was up from his chair and already shaking his head before she'd even finished. "No, I think it best not to attempt it. It sounds too risky. Your trying the dragon could be as much of a danger to us as to the Vyusher. Possibly more so. Just not worth it. But the other idea you had seem viable."

Ellie slumped back in defeat. Something in her knew the dragon had to be the key to winning this fight. But Hugh made sense, and she recognized that. She nodded, and felt the tension release from Alex, who ran his hands over his face and muttered, "Finally she listens to reason."

She shot him a glare.

She also saw Griffin give a little sigh of relief. He hadn't been happy about this idea in the first place. What they hadn't told the others was that if she *couldn't* control it and he *couldn't* bring her back... then he would have to kill her. And that would probably kill him too.

Now that everything was explained, Ellie felt exhaustion wash over her in waves. Alex must have felt her fading, because he said to no one in particular, "Ellie really needs to get some rest."

Closing her eyes, Ellie flashed a thought at Griffin.

In response he said aloud, "The Vyusher are less likely to attack if we're closer to town. At least that's what we think. They seem to attack only when they can hide their actions from the world. And that was before the advent of social media. The house Ellie and I have can accommodate all of us... barely. But it's located in a more populated area, so it's safer for the time being."

"Is it safe for us to travel tonight?" Hugh asked.

"Probably not," Griffin replied. "But Ellie says she can move us all at once if Charlotte will allow her to use her teleportation."

Alex glared at Griffin. "She's falling asleep in my arms. She doesn't even have the energy to speak her thoughts out loud as it is. Is that really such a good idea?"

Griffin allowed a rare grin to break across his face. "I've been dealing with her stubborn streak for years now. Good luck convincing her otherwise."

"Hugh," Alex appealed to his adopted father. "She seems to listen to you."

Hugh walked over to Ellie and laid his hands on her, assessing her physical state. "She can handle it," he finally said. "But when we get there, young lady, you *will* rest for several days."

Griffin chuckled. “She agrees,” he translated. “But she says that means she’ll miss school and I’ll have to write her a note.” Seeing confusion around him, he explained, “Any time she’s in high school I take on the role of her older brother and guardian. I look too old for high school these days, but she’s so tiny she can pull it off still.”

“Let’s get going,” Ellie said. She felt anxious to get home and allow herself to fall into the blessed oblivion of sleep for a long while.

With a nod from Hugh, Alex picked Ellie up and stood in the middle of the room. Once she could feel each of them touching her, she searched for Charlotte’s power. As she had with Griffin earlier, she reached out mentally and touched the source of light inside Charlotte and pulled it into herself. Then she concentrated on each of the people touching her, extending the glow to surround each of them. And then she concentrated on the image of her living room.

“*Don’t let go!*” she thought, and heard Griffin repeat her instructions.

Instantly, they were all standing in her living room.

“Usually there’s a popping sound when I do it,” Charlotte complained.

“She can show you how to control that if you’re interested,” Griffin voiced Ellie’s thoughts. Then he turned to Charlotte with a commiserating smile. “Don’t take it personally. She’s constantly telling me how to control my own powers or do something new with them. You get used to it...” He grinned at his sister. “And eventually you learn to just ignore her completely.”

Ellie stuck her tongue out at her brother. Still held in Alex’s arms, she laid her head on his shoulder, completely wiped out.

“Time for this one to go to sleep I think,” Alex murmured.

Griffin led the way up to her bedroom. Once there, Alex very gently laid her on the bed. Griffin got out some clean PJs. Ellie’s clothes were ripped to shreds anyway.

Shooing the boys out of the room, Lucy helped her get dressed. It had been so long since Ellie had had a mother to take care of her that tears inadvertently filled her eyes.

“Thanks,” she said, her voice cracking a little.

Lucy tucked her in and smoothed back her hair from her forehead. “Thank you for saving my family tonight,” she whispered like a loving mother. “You rest now. You’ve earned it.”

Turning off the light, she left the room and closed the door with a quiet *click*. Ellie fell asleep before the door was even fully closed.

Chapter 25

The next three days passed in a blur. Hugh hadn't been kidding when he told Ellie it would take some time for her to recover. Her body felt like lead, and when she shifted position, every single part of her screamed in agony. She spent most of the time drifting in and out of consciousness. From her few lucid moments, she gathered Griffin had helped move everyone into their house. Hugh and Lucy were staying in Griffin's room, and he was sleeping in Ellie's spare bed.

Lila, Adelaide, and Nate had continued to attend school as usual, but they made excuses for Ellie. *Bronchitis*, they said. No one questioned it. In fact, no one in the outside world noticed anything different about their lives at all...

When Ellie managed to open her eyes, even if only for a few minutes, Alex was always right there beside her. Sometimes he'd be sleeping in the chair next to her bed. Sometimes he'd be reading a book. Every so often she'd open her eyes to find him just looking at her. And each time she woke up, he immediately seemed to know. He'd come over and brush her hair back from her face and give her a tender smile, asking, "Hi, angel, how are you feeling?"

More often than not, she'd drift back to sleep without answering, unaware of the small smile which always graced her lips. Finally, after three straight days of deep sleep, she woke up feeling completely refreshed and rejuvenated.

Alex opened his eyes as she sat up. He unfolded his body, lowering his propped up feet to the floor and uncrossing his arms to lean forward.

"Finally awake, Sleeping Beauty?" he teased.

"Mmmm..." Ellie yawned and stretched her arms above her head. "How long have I been out?" she asked, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

"Three days."

"Wow! Really?"

“Really. I have a crick in my neck to show for it.” He massaged the back of shoulders to prove his point and then gave her a wink.

Ellie played with the tasseled edges of the blanket, unable to meet his questioning gaze. A lot had happened between them over the last few days, not the least of which was her discovery that they were *te'sorthene*. But they hadn't talked about any of it yet. And while *she* knew what they were—every instinct inside her screamed this undeniable truth—she had no idea if *he* realized it yet. He seemed to care, but he could've been waiting all this time for her to wake up so that he could yell at her about all her lies.

“Hey,” he whispered as he reached out and tipped her chin toward him. “What're you thinking about?”

Ellie gave him a candid look. “Why aren't you mad at me?”

Alex's mouth twisted into something between a grin and a grimace. “I'm *furious* with you, Ellie. I asked you point blank, and you looked me straight in the eyes and lied about who you were.”

“I didn't lie. I just didn't tell you *everything*,” she insisted. A fine line, but an important one in her mind. She bit her lip, hiding the fact that her eyes had filled up with tears.

“Hmmm... Well, I wish that you would have just trusted me,” he continued.

Ellie nodded, still not looking at him.

“But you showed me why you did what you did. And your reasons were good ones.”

Ellie nodded faster.

“In fact, they were the same reasons I had when I suddenly stopped running with you,” he told her quietly.

Ellie glanced up, surprised. “I thought you...” She trailed off, unable to continue.

“You thought that I no longer wanted to be friends? That I didn't care?”

Ellie shrugged and bit her lip.

Alex gazed deeply into her eyes, as if he could communicate with her soul. Running one finger softly down the side of her face, he murmured, “*Te’sorthene*.”

His voice was so tender, so quiet, she almost didn’t hear him. But she did, and her heart felt like it stopped beating and exploded into a crazy rhythm all at once. She gasped.

Alex gave her a small smile. “You know this word?”

Ellie licked her lips, stopping when she saw how his eyes were drawn to the motion. “I thought only people from my clan knew that word.”

“I don’t know where it originated, but I know what it stands for.” He picked up her hand in his and started drawing concentric circles on her palm with the tip of his finger. “I know, for instance, that it refers to a fated bond between two people like us—”

“Svatura,” Ellie murmured.

He glanced up, stopping the hypnotic motions with her hand. “Yeah... I know that it’s supposed to be rare. And that every... Svatura... seeks the other half of their *te’sorthene* bond.”

Ellie cleared her throat. “It happened a lot in my clan because there were so many of us.”

“So you’ve witnessed it firsthand?”

“Yes. My grandparents, my parents, among others.”

“I’ve also seen it. My grandparents, too... and of course several couples in my new family. Which is why I can’t believe that I didn’t recognize it when I saw it again... with us.” Alex searched Ellie’s eyes. “We’ve had so much unsaid between us, so I want to be very clear now. We are *te’sorthene*, Ellie.”

Ellie gave Alex a sparkling smile, almost glowing with her delight. “I know.” Happiness burst through her, but she forced herself to remain calm, composed. Although inside she felt anything *but* calm and composed.

Alex released a rush of breath, his hand tightening on hers. “You know?”

“Uh-huh. I knew when I crashed my car. And I couldn’t believe I hadn’t figured it out sooner... I knew I felt a connection between us. And, unlike you, I knew we were both Svatura.” Ellie shook her head at her ignorance. Licking her bottom lip again in her nervousness, she glanced back up to catch him staring at the small movement. “How...” she cleared her throat again. “How do you feel about it?”

Alex seemed to have to drag his eyes away from her mouth. “How do I feel? I’m over the moon, you crazy girl! And I should also warn you that if you keep licking those delectable lips, I’m going to have to kiss them. Right now.”

Ellie gulped as her breath caught in her throat. She glanced away and shook her head. Obviously she wasn’t totally healed because now she was hallucinating...she *had* to be.

“I know we barely know each other, and this isn’t exactly the most romantic setting, and we still have a lot of getting to know each other to do,” Alex continued. “But I should’ve known exactly what we were the first time we met. Like you, I felt that connection. An undeniable pull to be with you. And heaven knows I fought it. You were supposed to be a *normal* girl. Too young... too... well, let’s just say too *a lot of things*. And then I didn’t know who or what you were, or if I could trust you.”

Ellie closed her eyes, trying to block out his painful words.

“...But you kept showing me your heart, over and over. I discovered that you are a kind, loyal, generous, and brave. You are so damned incredible.” He shrugged and his voice cracked. “When I saw you risking your life to save my family... and you went down under those wolves...I realized that if I lost you, there’d be nothing left for me. And that’s when I knew.”

He cupped her face in his hands. “*Te’sorthene.*”

A smile lit up Ellie’s face. She threw her arms around his neck, laughter bubbling up and bursting out of her in a gloriously exultant sound. She took his face in her hands.

“I’ve been fighting it like crazy, too! And have been completely miserable without you the last several weeks. I didn’t know that someone could become the center of my world like that so fast.”

The look of elation in Alex’s eyes took Ellie’s breath away. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against hers. After a moment he gathered her into his arms and very gently laid his lips on hers in a kiss so achingly sweet, Ellie thought she might cry.

“You’re mine now, Ellie Aubrey,” he whispered in her ear as he ended the kiss and pulled her into a tight embrace. “Just as I am yours.”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way,” she whispered back.

Chapter 26

“Can I come in now?” Griffin called loudly from outside the door.

Their blissful reverie interrupted, Ellie moved to get off Alex’s lap, but he just tightened his grip. “Come on in,” Alex called, his arms firmly around Ellie’s waist.

The door swung open and Griffin walked in, eyebrows raised. “I guess you’re feeling better?” he teased. He’d never seen his sister look so happy, practically glowing. And although he felt the slight pinch of his own loss, knowing their relationship would have to change in some ways, he loved her too much to begrudge her this happiness.

“Much,” Ellie answered. “What time is it anyway?”

Griffin checked his watch. “About six a.m. on Wednesday morning.”

“I’d better get ready for school then.” She hopped off of Alex’s lap and started opening drawers.

“Wait,” Alex said, looking incredulous, “You’re going to *school*?”

“Of course!” she answered as she pulled out a pair of jeans. “I am a high school student for the time being. I have to keep up that appearance.”

They all understood that if they survived this, they’d eventually need to continue their lives as they had been before. None of them felt like uprooting and starting over just yet, and so, to the rest of the world, they needed to continue to act like normal human beings.

“Yes, but...”

“Aren’t Nate, Lila, and Adelaide all still attending school?” Ellie paused from searching through drawers to face him, her hands on her hips.

“Yes,” he admitted.

“Then I should too. Putting aside the need to keep up appearance, I can protect them better if I’m right there with them,” she asserted, her chin assuming a stubborn tilt.

“But they didn’t just spend three days passed out in bed healing from major injuries,” he pointed out. Alex levered himself off the bed and crossed the room to where she stood to frame her face with his hands.

“That’s true,” Ellie conceded. “But I’m better now, so there’s really no excuse.”

Alex ground his teeth in frustration, pushing away to return to the bed and sit down. He glanced at Griffin, who was lounging in the doorway watching the exchange with interest. Griffin gave a resigned shrug, his expression clearly saying, *Good luck, dude.*

“Then I’m driving you to school,” Alex insisted.

But Ellie was already shaking her head. “As much as I’d love that, it doesn’t fit with our story,” she reminded him. In an exaggerated southern accent she said, “You ah just too old for little ol’ me, Mr. Jenn-ah. It is positively indecent.” She batted her eyes at him dramatically.

Alex merely grunted in return, looking highly irritated.

“She’s always like this,” Griffin confided. “I can’t say that I’m sorry that you get to deal with it now. I’ve had to put up with her on my own for years.”

Ellie gave her brother an affectionate slug on the arm.

Seeing that Alex still wasn’t pleased, she crossed the room and placed a quick kiss on his lips, feeling a thrill of excitement. She still couldn’t quite believe that he was her *te’sorthene*, and she his, and that she could kiss him like this freely. It would take some getting used to.

“I can access Griffin’s defensive shield from the school if it makes you feel any better,” Ellie said, attempting to sooth his obvious concern.

“I’d rather he drive you to school himself. You’re still pretty weak,” Alex replied. “It’s pretty obvious, Ellie.”

That would also take some getting used to, this ability of his to read every emotion and thought without the advantage of a power that allowed him to do so. It was more like he knew her as well as he knew himself.

Suddenly, Ellie frowned. “What exactly is your power anyway, Alex?”

His eyebrows shot up. “You mean you don’t already know?”

She shook her head. “Not really. It has something to do with freezing stuff, maybe. You’re very good at hiding what you can do. So what is it?”

“Nope,” he said with a grin, “I’m not telling you yet. And you’re not allowed to use your power on me to figure it out.”

“Why won’t you tell me?” Ellie was perplexed.

“You kept who you were from me all this time. Put me through hell, I can tell you, fighting what I felt for you. This is my turn for a little payback...” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively at her as he rubbed his hands together, anticipating the different ways he could torment her.

Ellie rolled her eyes. “I’m going to have to find out pretty soon,” she reminded him. “I really should start practicing if I’m going to master using all these skills at once. In fact, now that I’m thinking about it, we should get started on that tonight after school.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t put us in danger making you wait.”

“Huh.” With that, she headed for the bathroom. She took a long, hot shower, which felt ridiculously wonderful, and then got dressed for school.

“The kids are just getting their gear and are about to head off,” Lucy said as Ellie made her way to the kitchen. Everyone else was already eating breakfast. “It’s good to see you up and about,” she added as she came around the table to give Ellie a hug.

Hugh stood beside her. “Do you mind?” he asked Ellie, indicating his desire to use his power on her. Ellie held out her

hand with a smile. Hugh concentrated silently for a few moments and then smiled. “All better I see.”

“Thanks to you.” She grinned back and snagged a piece of toast off the table. “I’d better get going or I’ll be late for school.”

“Hey...” Alex caught her wrist, tugging her to a halt. “At least take Griffin with you.”

“I can’t,” she said with a shake of her head. “If he comes with me, he can’t protect you here at the house.”

Alex frowned. “But he’s been at the school the last two days protecting the others,” he protested.

“Only because he knew that I could tap in to his power to protect the house if I had to,” she explained.

“And how would he know that? You were out cold.”

Ellie looked at him patiently. She knew he’d already figured it out. Alex turned a glare on Griffin, who just shrugged. “You didn’t think I’d leave my sister undefended did you?”

“I was here,” Alex insisted. “So were the rest of us. But I guess I should have figured.” He turned his attention back to the girl standing beside him. Not that he’d admit it to her yet, but she really was adorably sassy in her confidence in her powers and her brother’s. “This twin thing is going to take some getting used to,” he muttered under his breath.

Ellie threaded her fingers through his and brought their hands up to her lips. She kissed them softly. He knew she was wordlessly telling him that Griffin would always be her twin brother, and they would always have their connection, both as siblings and through their powers. But she was Alex’s *te’sorthene* now. A bond greater than any other for a Svatura. That’s where her heart lived now and forever.

Lila, Adelaide, and Nate chose that moment to appear. “Hey, Ellie!” Nate greeted jovially, giving her a thumbs up. Lila also grinned.

Adelaide crossed the room to give her friend a big hug. “So now you’ll truly be my sister!”

Ellie and Alex looked only slightly less surprised than everyone else at this statement.

“You’re *te’sorthene*. You have a connection that I’ve only seen a few times, and most of those are in this group. I assume you’ll eventually get married, right?”

“Oh!” Ellie and Alex gasped in unison.

“You didn’t know?” Adelaide asked, confused. She knew what she saw between them, and it was undeniable.

“It’s still new to us, munchkin.” Alex lovingly mussed his adoptive sister’s hair. “We just had our first official kiss...we hadn’t gotten as far as discussing marriage just yet.”

Ellie didn’t say anything. She still felt a little shell-shocked. She’d never had a serious romantic relationship – dates yes, serious no. She’d been so young when her people were destroyed there’d been no opportunity, and then moving around so frequently and never meeting her own kind, serious just hadn’t been on the agenda. So having this brand new one so publically declared and categorized was a little overwhelming.

Alex gently nudged her and wrapped his hand around hers again. “You’re not embarrassed about me already?”

“No!” Ellie didn’t want him even thinking that, even as a joke. “I’m just new at this.”

“I’m so sorry!” Adelaide apologized, covering her mouth with her hands. “I assumed you knew. The relationship is so clear to me.”

Ellie shook her head. “Don’t worry, Adelaide. You’re not wrong. It’s just we haven’t had much time to talk about it yet.” She paused. “I’d love to see how you interpret what you see,” she added.

Adelaide grinned.

“Time to get going,” Nate reminded everyone, handing Adelaide’s bag to her.

With a quick hug for Griffin, Ellie grabbed her stuff and followed the others out the door. Alex walked with her to her car. Before she got in, he gave her a concerned look. “Please be very careful,” he implored. “I only just found you. I can’t lose you, not now.”

“That goes ditto for you, you know,” she replied.

He gave her a brief kiss, not caring that the others were standing right there. As he watched her drive away, a small smile played around his lips, despite the fact that he couldn’t quite breathe right when she was away from him.

Chapter 27

Ellie had a horrible time concentrating at school. *How am I supposed to focus on mundane details like French verb conjugation when I have Alex at home waiting for me, friends to protect, and this horrible constant fear of losing my new family?*

The hands of the clock seemed stuck in time. Lunch was especially difficult. All she wanted to do was talk with Adelaide, Lila, and Nate. But of course they had to act normal for their friends. So instead, Ellie sat next to Brian and Juliette.

“Hey, Jules, anything new at the theater?” Ellie asked. The two girls shared a mutual love of movies, and Juliette knew almost as many old films as Ellie did. Of course, Ellie never mentioned that she’d watched most of those old movies at the time they were first released.

Juliette grinned. “The latest Zach Efron movie is out now,” she said. “It’s great. Two thumbs up.” She mimicked her words by sticking her thumbs up into the air.

Ellie laughed. “Are you sure it’s that good?” she teased. “Or were you just busy watching a certain hunky actor?”

Juliette sighed in exaggerated appreciation. “He’s definitely yummy.”

“I’m sitting right here you know,” Brian grumbled good-naturedly.

Juliette and Ellie giggled. They spent the rest of the lunch period talking about the recent releases and debating the talent of the latest crop of teen actors.

As soon as the final bell for school rang, Ellie made her way outside and to her car. Lila, Adelaide, and Nate were not too far behind. Ellie hid her initial surprise at finding Alex waiting at Adelaide and Lila’s car. Still acting as normal as possible, Ellie sent him a friendly wave. She received a slow,

sexy look in return, and her heart danced a little jig inside her chest.

Hopping in her car, she was aware of Alex and the others following behind her all the way home. Once they reached the house, she was headed inside when she felt Alex grab her hand.

She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck, receiving an achingly sweet kiss.

“I missed you,” Alex whispered. He buried his face in her hair, inhaling deeply.

“It was only a few hours,” she teased, snuggling deeper into his embrace.

“There’s a pack of murderous Vyusher wolves trying to kill all of us. Give me a bit of a break here. I don’t feel right with you out of my sight. Especially given your tendency to gravitate to near-death experiences.”

“I know the feeling,” she agreed, ignoring his last comment.

With a resigned sigh, they mutually pulled apart. “Better go in,” Alex said.

As they entered through the kitchen and then walked out into the living room, Ellie saw the whole family had gathered and stood waiting for her.

Hugh spoke first. “We’ve discussed everything you suggested and agree that your ideas seem to be our best option.”

Ellie glanced at Alex, who frowned. “You don’t agree?” she asked quietly.

He shook his head and pressed his lips together as he shifted his weight from foot to foot. “I know you’re amazing. But the only time I’ve witnessed your powers is when you were under a pack of wolves being torn to pieces. I just worry about your being at the center of the fight. That’s all.” He shrugged helplessly.

Nodding, Ellie turned back to the room.

“How do you want to start?” Hugh asked.

Ellie had thought about little else all day... just one of the reasons she'd had such a difficult time getting through her classes, and already she had a plan in mind.

“Well... I still don't know all of your powers, so I'd like to start by finding that out. Then I'd like to spend a little time with each of you individually over the next few days so that I can learn your abilities and try them out a little bit. We'll see where that gets us.”

“Whose powers don't you know yet?” Lucy asked quietly.

Ellie took her time answering as she went into the dining room to retrieve a chair. “Here's what I know,” she began as she sat down. “I know Adelaide sees relationships. Lila sees if people are being truthful. Lucy sees people's intentions. And Hugh has the ability to heal. I'm guessing the girls got their powers from you, Lucy. Did they inherit anything from Hugh?”

She looked to everyone questioningly. Hugh smiled. Actually, all of them smiled, seeming amused. “We're not sure yet,” Hugh answered. “Maybe you'll be able to tell us.”

Ellie nodded. It took years to discover what powers could do, and sometimes centuries to master them.

“Charlotte is a teleporter. Nate is extremely strong...” she continued.

“I'm pretty much indestructible and frickin' fast.” Nate flexed his bicep and gave it a kiss. Everyone laughed.

“So I guess the only people I don't know are Alex, who I think can either freeze things or stop time. He refuses to tell me which...” She wrinkled her nose at him. “And Dexter and Ramsey.”

“I'm able to turn my body into metal,” Dexter explained. “Any kind of metal. And I'm developing the ability to turn things I touch into metal. But that's still a work in progress.”

Ellie nodded, her mind already spinning with ideas for that skill. But she held back her multitude of detail-related

questions until she could touch Dexter and find out for herself. She looked to Ramsey. So far, Ramsey was the quietest one of the bunch. The red-haired boy seemed to be extremely intense and generally unsmiling, although Ellie got the impression that he loved all of his family very much.

Ramsey suddenly grinned, transforming his face from good-looking to wickedly handsome. She saw everyone shift position. Ellie glanced toward Griffin.

“Smiles from Ramsey are rare,” he relayed to her telepathically.

Her attention returned to Ramsey as he snapped his fingers, and flames instantly appeared in the palm of his hand.

“Wow!” Griffin exclaimed, sitting forward. “Firestarters are supposed to be extremely rare. My great-grandfather told me about them once.”

“Did he tell you why they’re so rare?” Ramsey’s grin hid behind his intense expression again, as if the sun had disappeared behind the clouds.

Griffin grimaced. “I remember something about it being a dangerous ability that is extremely difficult to control. And it also goes along with volatile personalities, which doesn’t help the control part all that much.”

Ramsey gave a sharp nod. “Got it in one,” he said. A bleak expression momentarily flitted across his face.

“Actually, it’s dangerous for me to even be around my family.” Ramsey glanced around the room. “If I lose control, I could kill them. So I try to stay fairly separate from them and not use the fire. It’s why I’m not in school.”

Ramsey darted a look at Lila, who lowered her eyes and turned her head away subtly. Ellie wasn’t sure if anyone else caught that interaction, but she suspected there was something going on there.

“He finds it easier to control it when he’s with us though,” Dexter added.

Ellie made a snap decision. “Let’s start with you then, Ramsey.”

“No!” Alex and Griffin both shouted.

Ellie frowned. “I have to start somewhere—”

“Then start with a less dangerous skill, Ellie,” Griffin interrupted. “You just finished healing from potentially life-ending injuries... *today*.”

The frustrated look he leveled on her couldn’t have been clearer. He thought her decision was rash. Then he heard what she was thinking, crossed his arms over his chest and grumbled, “Fine!”

“Nothing’s *fine*,” Alex said, glancing back and forth between the twins.

“You’ll soon learn that my sister has the ability to reason away every decision she makes,” Griffin said, and glared in Ellie’s direction. “And most of the time you can’t argue with her logic... It’s *very* exasperating.”

Ellie shot him a superior look. “How many good reasons do you need, exactly?” She then ticked off her reasons to the rest of the room, holding up a finger for each. “I’m done healing. We’re short on time. This skill would be extremely useful in a fight. If it’s hard to control, I’ll need to practice with him longer than anyone else. I might be able to help him learn to control it.” She paused and glanced around the room. “Any other arguments?” she asked sweetly.

“You’re right, Griffin.” Alex obviously felt unhappy about this decision but was just as obviously resigned to it. “That is very frustrating.” He softened the comment with a squeeze of her hand.

“Okay, for this one, I think we take the practice outside.” Ellie hopped up. “There’s a clearing about five miles from here that would be perfect.”

Chapter 28

Ellie turned to Charlotte. “Do you mind?” she asked, indicating the need to use her teleportation.

Charlotte shook her head, holding out her hand.

“I’d like to try something,” Ellie began. “I want to see if I can use my power, but not necessarily with you all touching me. I’m hoping it’ll work the same if we’re linked together just holding hands.”

Once Ellie saw everyone was connected, she closed her eyes, pulled Charlotte’s power into herself, and suddenly they were in the clearing. All of them.

“You really need to show me how to do that without noise,” Charlotte murmured, impressed.

“You got it,” Ellie assured her.

“That would be a very handy skill to use in the fight,” she heard Griffin think.

“Agreed,” she thought back. *“Stay close while I’m working with Ramsey. If he or I get out of control, you’ll need to try to contain it.”*

After receiving his nod of assent, to the others she said, “Griffin’s on standby in case I need help. You guys might want to hang back, though.”

Ellie led Ramsey to the middle of the clearing and then turned to face him. The solemn boy was nervous, although he hid it well. She gave him a reassuring smile. “This won’t hurt.”

She held out her hands. After a miniscule pause, he grasped her hands in his, and Ellie closed her eyes. The glow inside Ramsey appeared as a deep red light. She reached out with her mind and pulled it into herself.

With a gasp Ellie felt the power surge through her wildly. She and Ramsey both literally went up in flames. But they weren’t harmed by the fire.

Ellie felt Griffin tense to use his shield. “*No,*” she thought at him. “*Give me a minute...*”

He backed off.

Ellie relaxed into the power. She could immediately feel why firestarters had such a hard time. Volatile emotions of hate, anger, fury, and rage threatened to consume her wholly, and Ellie concentrated on controlling her newly wild and foreign feelings. She felt her control slipping further and further away, and her fear deepened as her emotions grew more intense.

Suddenly, an overwhelming sense of serenity pulsed through her. It felt almost like being washed in cool water on a scorching hot day... exhilarating and peaceful all at the same time. And exactly what she needed.

“Do you feel that?” she asked Ramsey.

“Yeah,” he breathed. “Are you doing that?”

Ellie shook her head. “It’s not me.”

A suspicion formed in Ellie’s mind about where that feeling of peace had come from, but she’d have to deal with that later. Right now she needed to focus on mastering this power.

“Okay, Ramsey. I think I’ve got control at least,” she finally murmured. “Give me a little time to see what you can do.”

To the others who were watching from afar, she appeared to simply stand, unmoving, eyes closed, and engulfed in flames. After about twenty minutes of working through things, Ellie smiled and opened her eyes. She also felt Ramsey starting to shake as his control threatened to slip out of his grasp.

“Okay, Ramsey, I’m going to take over completely now. You ready?”

At his nod she pulled the glow completely into herself. The flames moved off Ramsey and solely onto her. Not even the hands still linked with hers were touched by the fire.

As soon as she had full control, Ellie started playing. First she extinguished the fire completely. She heard Ramsey's small intake of breath and felt him relax for the first time since they'd begun the exercise.

"Don't worry," she assured him as her face took on a mischievous look. "I'll show you how after I'm done."

"Oh, jeez," Griffin muttered. Then he added louder, "Watch out. She's about to get feisty with it."

Ellie gave the onlookers a sassy wink. "You ready for this?" she asked Ramsey.

"I guess," was his less-than-enthusiastic response. Ellie grinned at his doubtful expression.

"Here we go!" Still holding one of Ramsey's hands, Ellie let go with the other and extended her palm up, where a small flame appeared. "Eventually, as you master the skill, you'll have very specific control." She shrunk it to a small ember. She then grew it so that it danced about six inches above her hand.

"You can pick what you are burning quite precisely." She changed the color of the fire to green, then purple, then white, as she forced it to burn minute amounts of copper, potassium, and then magnesium from the air.

"I guess you actually paid attention in chemistry!" Griffin called across the field. She stuck her tongue out at her brother and then continued unfazed.

"You're also pretty unlimited in the size you can expand the fire to." It shot up into the air about a hundred feet in a long skinny column of dancing color. "I'd go higher, but I'm afraid it would be seen."

She brought the flame back down. "And you can control the shape and placement of it." She shot the fire out to circle the clearing several times until it spiraled around them. Then she pulled the spiral in so that it crackled within inches of the two of them.

She doused it.

“You can control it away from your body.”

A small tree about 30 feet away burst into flame, popping and crackling. Then, just as suddenly, the blaze was gone.

Ellie looked at Ramsey. “You’ll be able to do that for anything, any size, in about a hundred mile radius eventually.”

Ramsey’s face broke into a huge grin. “That is awesome! Can you teach me all of that?”

Ellie shook her head. “Not all of it immediately. You’ll still have to learn things at your own pace, but I can help you along. What I can teach you right now is how to control it so that it can’t overwhelm you or hurt anyone.”

“Show me,” Ramsey breathed, his wide eyes impressed.

“You bet.” She glanced at Griffin, sending him a telepathic request. He sent her a surprised look, but immediately turned and talked quietly with the family watching from their distant spot across the clearing.

“We’ll need Lila,” Ellie said.

Chapter 29

Ramsey cocked his head. “Why is that exactly?”

“I’m pretty sure she’s the reason you’ve been able to hang on to your control as well and as long as you have, especially around your family.”

Ramsey shook his head vehemently. “I don’t want her anywhere near me!”

Lila, crossing over to them, heard his statement. A devastated look passed over the poor girl’s face before she managed to control it.

“Too late,” Ellie murmured to Ramsey. He turned and saw Lila right behind him. Silently, he returned his attention to Ellie, his expression grim.

Lila took a deep breath, trying to collect herself. “You wanted me to come over?” she asked Ellie, refusing to even look at Ramsey.

“Lila, I think you may have an untapped power,” Ellie stated.

Lila looked mildly surprised, but nodded. “Does it have something to do with my Dad’s healing ability?”

“Good guess. I think you have the ability to heal people’s emotions.”

Ellie felt Ramsey stiffen at this announcement. Softly, just to Ellie, he asked, “Do you think that’s why I have better control around them than by myself?”

“Yes. I think once Lila masters her skill, she can help you learn to master your emotions. Eventually, you won’t need her help. But to start with, she can at least unconsciously help you until she can deliberately control her powers.”

She looked directly at Lila. “I’d like to try something just with you for a second, and if my guess is right, then we can work with Ramsey together.”

“Sure.” Lila immediately held out her hand to Ellie.

“Don’t go away,” Ellie directed Ramsey, and then let go of his hands to take Lila’s.

She pulled Lila’s light into herself, ice blue this time, and explored for a few minutes. There were definitely two separate abilities, both very subtle with lots of potential uses and applications.

“Woo! Lila, you will have some fun mastering these skills,” Ellie assured her friend with a conspiratorial grin. Ellie concentrated on the one part that she was most interested in at the moment.

“Oh!” She suddenly realized that she and Griffin together would be more effective showing anyone how to use their power. She could tap in, and Griffin could show them what he saw her doing with it, a much more effective method.

Griffin was already walking toward her when she looked up to call him over. Everyone else had apparently decided to join him.

“It seemed like everyone was coming over, so we figured we might as well get front row seats,” Hugh said.

“That was quite an impressive display,” Lucy added, giving Ramsey a hug.

Alex moved to stand beside her. He leaned down and whispered in her ear. “Did I say amazing? You are so incredible you take my breath away, Miss Aubrey.”

Ellie shivered with pleasure at his words and the nearness of his body.

Griffin moved and took both her and Lila’s hands, making a little circle. Between the two of them, they showed Lila how to start manipulating her ability to heal people’s emotions. In Ramsey’s case, she could help him find the peace that would take away his anger and his anxiety, giving him the control he required. The peace already resided there inside him. She just directed him to it to help it grow and overpower the anger and fear.

It would take a long time before Lila would master it. But today, at least, they could help her learn enough of it to help

Ramsey.

Lila was glowing with her newly discovered abilities by the time they were done.

“Sensing other people’s emotions always came in handy, but not in any active way,” she enthused. “It’s going to be awesome to be able to *do* something.”

Ellie shared her pride. “Don’t discount your other gift,” she encouraged. “There’s a lot more to it than you even realize yet. We can work more on it later if you want.” Looking to Ramsey, she added, “You ready?”

Ramsey shot an indecipherable look at Lila and then nodded.

Ellie and Griffin took Ramsey’s hands, while Lila took Ellie’s other hand just in case she needed her help.

Coordinating every one of their four powers in such a way that allowed Ellie to teach Ramsey was quite a test. He started off slowly.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed as what was supposed to be a six inch flame leapt six feet up into the air.

Ellie touched the red glow inside him. “Feel that?” she asked, as she controlled the flame, keeping it from going higher.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, hold onto that. It’s almost like you’re instructing the flame on what to do.”

“Uh-huh,” Ramsey grunted.

“Okay, I’m giving you back control. Got it?”

“Got it...” Ellie could practically feel the excitement explode through Ramsey, his grip tightening almost painfully. “Oh my God! I do! I have it.” The flame shrank down to six inches and then seemed to do a little dance.

“Excellent!” Ellie enthused. “Now let’s try projecting it...”

At the end of about an hour of concentrated effort, Ramsey could regulate his emotions, though still with Lila's help, and bring out a small flame in his hand for an extended period of time without its going wild.

"It's going to take a lot more work to expand your control and make it a mastered skill," Ellie warned Ramsey at the end of the session.

Ramsey nodded his understanding.

"I also suspect that you'll need Lila close by for several more years before being able to master the emotional side of your ability on your own," Ellie added.

Ramsey appeared visibly pleased, and certainly more relaxed than Ellie had ever seen him. Griffin mentally told her, *"Until today, he'd thought his gift would consume him and possibly someone he loved. He thought he might have to stay away from people for the rest of his life. That he might have to leave his family if he didn't get a grip sometime soon. And now, all of that had changed in the space of an evening."* It explained a lot about Ramsey's personality.

Exhaustion washed over Ellie, but she powered through. With Griffin's help, she showed Charlotte how to teleport without the popping sound. Ellie would've gone on to work on teleporting groups of people with Charlotte, but Alex shook his head at her.

"I think that's enough for tonight," he told her privately. Ellie agreed.

As soon as they got home, Alex murmured something to Lucy, who then shooed them all out of the kitchen as she started on dinner.

Alex grabbed Ellie's hand and led her up to her bedroom. Once he got her there, he said, "You're dead on your feet." He pulled her onto the bed and tried to get her to lie down. She pulled away slightly and shot him a half-impressed, half-irritated look.

"I'm going to have to get used to how well you seem to read me," she grumbled good-naturedly. "Usually only Griffin

can figure me out, and he's cheating," she smiled as she tapped her temple.

"Mmmm..." He tugged her down to snuggle with him. "It seems like we both have a lot to get used to." He placed a tender kiss to the back of her neck. "You can work on being harder to read later. For now, let's sleep until dinner. I've wanted to hold you in my arms for a long time you know," he whispered.

"Mmmm... feels better than I dreamt," Ellie breathed as she slipped into blissful sleep.

"Me too, baby." Alex closed his eyes.

After dinner, Alex moved Ramsey into Ellie's bedroom with Griffin and brought her into his room. Both were still somewhat old-fashioned from their upbringing, and by unspoken mutual agreement, knew that they would spend the time in the room simply getting to know one another and growing their relationship.

"Tell me about yourself." Ellie prompted, as she finished stuffing the last of her clothes into a dresser drawer.

Alex chuckled. "What do you want to know?" he asked, watching her from the bed as she flitted around the room like a little pixie.

Ellie bounced over beside him. Sitting cross-legged, she took his hand, unable to resist touching him. "Let's start with where you come from."

"I was born in Louisiana in the late 1800s, shortly after the Civil War ended," Alex said.

"You don't have an accent though!" Ellie exclaimed.

Alex laughed. "It's been a long time since I've spoken with any discernible accent," he drawled in a thick southern twang. "Or if you prefer, I can bring out my bayou roots, chere," he continued in an even thicker Cajun drawl.

Ellie giggled. "That one's kinda sexy," she teased. "Who were your parents?"

Alex gathered his memories for a second before speaking. “My mother was the daughter of a wealthy plantation owner. My father was a poor sharecropper who rented land from her family. I never knew my father. He was killed, not in battle, but by a band of thieves as he was making his way home after fighting bravely for the South.”

“I’m sorry,” Ellie said softly.

Alex shrugged. Turning her hand over in his, he started tracing the delicate veins in her wrists. “Like I said, I never knew him.” He looked up into her eyes. He hadn’t shared this part of himself with anyone in a very long time. His new adoptive family knew bits and pieces, but he rarely talked about his early life.

“I was raised by my mother and her parents until I was ten,” he continued.

Ellie tipped her head to the side, considering his last statement. “Until you started coming into your powers?”

Alex nodded. “I couldn’t control them at first. And it scared her. Scared them all. So one day my mother packed a bag and took me to my grandfather. My father’s dad, who was still a sharecropper on a plantation a few counties over.”

“She just dumped you on someone else?” Ellie was shocked. Nothing but death could ever have separated her own mother from her children. She couldn’t understand any woman doing something like that.

Alex shrugged, solemn. “Don’t be too hard on her, Ellie. She was heartbroken about it. I was very young, but I still remember that. But she was just a normal person. My power must have been terrifying to her.”

Ellie just shook her head.

Alex continued, “In hindsight, it was the best thing she ever could’ve done for me. I had inherited my powers through Grandfather, although my mother hadn’t been aware of that when she took me there. Sharecropping was a very difficult life. Although my mother left me her inheritance when she died many years later, we didn’t benefit from that for quite

some time. But I had Grandfather, who taught me everything I know about my power, tutored me in it. He was a wonderful man, strong, dependable, and very funny. He died fighting in World War I. I'm very proud to have known him, to have been related to him."

Ellie's heart swelled. Alex had been loved, just like her. And just like her he had lost all of his family. But maybe even worse, since she'd had Griffin at least. Alex had been alone.

"That must've been so hard. When did Lucy find you?" she asked.

Alex grinned. "You know about that habit of hers, huh?"

It was Ellie's turn to shrug. "Yeah, Griffin heard about it one night when we were just keeping tabs on you all from a distance."

"Mmmm, well, Lucy found me not long after I returned to Louisiana after the Great War." Alex paused for a second, a small half smile on his lips. He brushed a stray hair back from her face. "I'm lucky to have had three families in my lifetime."

"But your mother deserted you," Ellie said, confused.

"Yes, but I was very loved and happy those first ten years of my life. And I've long since forgiven her for her fear and ignorance."

Ellie leaned forward, wrapping her arms around Alex in a tight hug. "How did I get so lucky to find you?" she murmured.

Ellie squeaked as Alex tumbled her onto her back. Leaning over her, he placed a sweet kiss on her mouth. "Not nearly as much as I am to have found you," he breathed against her softly parted lips.

They spent the rest of the night talking, getting to know their other halves, their *te'sorthene*, and eventually falling asleep in each other's arms until morning. Both feeling blessed by what they had discovered together.

Chapter 30

Ellie awoke to the sensation of a sweet, lingering kiss. She opened her eyes to Alex's smoldering gaze.

"Hi, sleepyhead," he greeted her with a tender smile. He softly cupped her face with one hand.

"Hi." She returned a shy smile and leaned into his caress. As consciousness returned, she sat up with a gasp.

Alex put a finger to her lips. "Everything's fine... I have a surprise for you. Come on. Get dressed. I have something I want to show you."

She tipped her head to the side. He looked so pleased with himself. It would've been cute, if he hadn't been so ruggedly handsome. Cute just wasn't a word you'd readily apply to Alex... more like drop dead, gobsmackingly, hunkalicious...

"I'll wait for you downstairs. Dress warmly," he instructed and left the room, softly closing the door behind him.

Ellie hurriedly got dressed, brushed her teeth and hair, and headed downstairs.

"What's up?" she whispered as she met Alex in the living room.

He gave her a fast, hard kiss and handed her a jacket. Taking her hand, he led her outside.

"It's snowing!" Ellie exclaimed. It seemed way too late in the season for it to still be snowing. Smiling, Alex led her into the woods and up to the middle of the clearing where they had practiced earlier. Facing her, he took both her hands in his.

"You're not using your power on me, right?" he asked.

"I told you I don't do that to friends without asking permission first," she confirmed, head tilted slightly sideways, still trying to figure out what he was up to.

"Then close your eyes."

Ellie raised her eyebrows but complied. She felt him lean in and brush her lips with a feather-light kiss. The cold no longer bothered Ellie as lovely warmth washed over her.

“Now open them,” Alex said.

Ellie opened her eyes and let out an astonished gasp. All of the falling snow around them was frozen in place, mid-fall. It looked exquisite...magical...miraculous. Like glitter hanging on invisible strings all around her. She threw her head back and laughed with delight as she reached out to touch one of the snowflakes. Then, like a child, she put her arms out and twirled, her hair and clothes, catching bits and pieces of snow as she did. Alex chuckled beside her and she stilled, came back to him and linked her arms around his neck. She pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

“May I?”

“Be my guest.” He clasped his arms behind her waist, pulling her in closer.

Ellie laid her hand on his cheek. Closing her eyes, she concentrated. There it was... that light glowing inside Alex, a bright golden light. She could almost feel its warmth. She pulled it inside her, under her control.

She opened her eyes, a soft smile playing around her lips. “Wow! So you can freeze anything you want with your mind?”

“With a few limitations, yes.” He frowned. “I struggled with slowing the bleeding in your leg without blocking the blood flow that night. And apparently, holding a pack of metamorph wolves still in mid-fight might take some more practice. And I can’t reverse a course of events usually. Every once in a while, like when you drove into that tree...” he gave her a hard look, “I can nudge things in a different direction.”

“Hmmm...” she murmured, fascinated. “Let’s see... you don’t seem to have limits of size. It looks as though you could freeze everything on an entire mountain if you wanted to. And you could freeze things down to tiny increments. Cells within

bodies. You could be very dangerous if you weren't such a good person," she teased.

"Anything else?" He was clearly amused at her clinical assessment of his skills.

"Looking..." She concentrated harder. "You can pick and choose what you freeze. Like the snow and wind but not us. And..." She grimaced and snapped open her eyes. "You said you were born shortly after the Civil War, right?"

Alex looked vaguely confused. "Right. I'm not that much younger than you. Closing in on a century and a half. Why?"

Ellie's frown deepened. "You said your grandfather taught you to use your skill. Did he spend much time working with you on it?"

"Yes," he said. "My power's pretty much an exact clone of his. We spent most evenings practicing. How'd you know?"

"It seems like you've mastered your abilities to the fullest extent of the possibilities, at least the ones I can see...I'm impressed!"

"Is there something strange about that?"

Ellie rolled her eyes. "Ego-alert, darlin'," she drawled. "Only you would be *unimpressed* with this." She looked at him with loving amusement.

"You know that when I touch Svatura, I can see the full extent of their capabilities. You've seen me do it, right? And because I'm still learning and perfecting my own abilities, I still miss things sometimes. Or, a better way to put that is that I still discover the uses and extent to others' powers in stages, like they would, but it's speeded up a bit."

He nodded.

"You are the only person, and granted my experience with this is limited, but you're the only one ever who's mastered the nuances by your age."

Alex took a moment to think about this. Looking at her with stunned eyes, he pulled a hand from behind her back to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. Shrugging casually, he

said, “What can I tell you? I’m sure it’s because of my grandfather’s tutelage.”

Ellie felt almost irritated by his seemingly casual acceptance of what, to her, seemed inconceivable.

“I don’t think you’re getting exactly what a big deal this is,” she insisted. “I haven’t even mastered my skills yet, although I can see what the potential is. Which, by the way, is highly frustrating for me.”

Alex looked down into her earnest expression. Wrapping his arms around her, he gave her a gentle hug. “I can’t explain it, baby. But maybe I’ll be able to pass it on to our children one day.”

Ellie froze. Everything. Her breath, her thoughts, her heart. All frozen. And not due to Alex manipulating her. This feeling was just her reaction to his statement. Alex pulled back and looked down into her eyes, slightly worried by her lack of any reaction or movement.

“Children?” she finally croaked, a little shell-shocked.

Alex nodded. And then, with a heart-wrenchingly earnest expression he said, “I love you, Ellie. You are my *te’sorthene*. You are the center of my life now. We can take things slow. We have all the time in the world. But you should know all of this.” He watched her reaction closely, and breathed a huge sigh of relief as she started to smile and then caught it again as that smile became so beautiful it was breathtaking.

Her smile turned mischievous. “I hope you’re planning on making an honest woman of me *before* the kiddos come along.”

“Mmmm... that would be the plan,” he agreed.

Ellie looked deep into his eyes. “I love you with everything I have in me. My life is wherever you are from now on.”

Almost before she’d even finished speaking, Alex’s mouth covered hers, stealing her breath. His arms pulled her tight against the length of his body. The world melted away in the heat of the kiss. As his tongue snaked out and touched the

seam of her lips, Ellie willingly parted them, allowing him more intimate access. Alex released a groan as their tongues intertwined.

Suddenly he moved, and Ellie found herself lying on a pile of soft snow, Alex's length covering hers. He pinned her beneath him, and Ellie reveled in the feel of his hard body above her. Kissing his way down the column of her throat, Alex nibbled back up to her ear, taking the lobe between his teeth and tugging gently. Shivers of ecstasy raced through her body.

Ellie strained to get closer as he took her mouth with his again. Alex suddenly broke off the kiss, eliciting a whimper of protest from Ellie. Burying his face in her neck, he lay there motionless for a time, waiting for his body to calm.

"Too much, too soon. I know, baby. Sorry, but you are just too damn tempting, Ellie Aubrey." They gazed into each other's eyes, content for now to just lie there together.

Only when Ellie shivered from lying in the snow so long did Alex finally let her up.

"Come on." He tugged on her hand, leading her back home. "Let's get you warm."

If only he knew how hot he'd made her already...

"Hey...you are planning on letting me finish high school... and maybe even college... before marriage and kids? Right?"

Alex shrugged and gave her hand a small squeeze. "I guess there's no rush while you're in high school," he agreed. "Although I would like to get a ring on that finger that scares off all those over-eager college guys. You still sure you want to go?"

Ellie rolled her eyes, secretly enjoying his small display of possessiveness. She knew he was confident enough in himself and their love. "You want to finish your degree right? Well, where you go, I go. Besides, I haven't tried college before. I like the idea of getting a degree. It's only in the last century or

so that it's become acceptable for women to receive a higher education.”

“Have you decided on a major yet?”

“Ummm... there's too many to choose from. I don't need a degree for a living like most people since we have so much money—“

“And we have Dexter.”

“Huh?” Ellie tripped over her feet as she turned to look at Alex.

“He can turn anything into metal,” he steadied her with a hand at her elbow.

“So?”

“Gold and silver are metals... he can turn anything into gold. That's one of the ways we make money. Although he's still mastering the skill.”

“Oh!” Ellie almost slapped her forehead as a thought occurred to her. *I'll have to talk to Dexter later*, she thought to herself.

They paused outside the back door, snatching one last kiss, one last moment of privacy, before joining the chaos of their family.

Everyone else had woken and started breakfast during their absence. As they walked into the kitchen, Adelaide, sitting at the bar in the dining room, grinned the second she saw them together.

They just smiled back but didn't say anything and knew that Adelaide wouldn't either. They had lots of time.

Chapter 31

The next few weeks fell into a pattern. In the mornings, Ellie, Adelaide, Lila, and Nate went to school. Evenings were reserved for training and preparing for the coming battle. Tonight they were fighting guys against girls. Alex stood off to the side watching. Sometimes they took one of them out of the equation so they could practice working together when they didn't have all powers in play, and it was Alex's turn to referee.

"Everyone have their instructions?" Ellie asked the girls. Heads nodded in unison. "Charlotte, you know what to do. Okay then, let's go!" The ladies and the men all disbursed and headed into the woods, practicing being scattered when the attack came. Ellie thought through their plan. Charlotte was the key to gathering them all together.

"Go!" Alex's voice boomed from the clearing.

Ellie instantly transformed into the falcon and swiftly gained altitude, making sure to block Griffin's mind reading. She found Charlotte, who had already located Lucy. With further inspection, Ellie located where Lila and Adelaide were in the woods.

Silently, to keep their location secret from the men, she dove toward Charlotte, transforming back to human as soon as she was on the ground. In silence, she and Lucy both held hands with Charlotte. Then Ellie tapped into Charlotte's power to first transport them to Adelaide, and then to Lila, and finally to the field where Alex was waiting.

The guys were a little slower to make it to the clearing without Charlotte's help. But eventually the girls were surrounded.

Nate and Dexter lunged simultaneously. Using Lucy's precognition, Ellie had seen it coming, and using Charlotte's teleportation, she had moved them out of the way, popping back up behind where the guys stood. Nate and Dexter landed in empty space and rolled.

With just the girls, Ellie was limited in what she could do. She didn't have any defensive skills. She could keep the girls away from the guys like this indefinitely, but she needed a way to finish things, too. So she decided to cheat a little bit. Seeing Ramsey wind up to deliver a fireball straight at them, she tapped into Griffin's defensive shield. As a result, Ramsey's fire hit an invisible wall and was repelled straight back at where the guys stood. Ramsey immediately doused the flame before it touched any of them.

"No fair!" Griffin called out. "You can only use the girls' powers."

Ellie grinned. She moved the girls out of Nate's way as he tried running directly at them.

"What if the Vyusher have a power I can tap into, since I am technically a wolf too?" she asked.

"You wouldn't be able to without touching them," Griffin insisted. Just as he finished talking, Ellie felt the ground shift slightly beneath her feet and knew it was his shield. She immediately transported the girls to a new spot. Just in time too, as Griffin jerked the shield up, barely missing them.

"Nice try!" Ellie laughed. With Griffin's abilities out, Ellie worked another tack –something she'd been thinking of for a few days now. She pulled on Lila's ability to heal emotions and decided to see if the reverse of that might be possible. She concentrated on the dark areas in her attackers that represented the lower emotions. Deep within that darkness, she could feel small parts of fear and confusion. She worked on making those parts grow, specifically confusion, though she took every care with how she let it affect Ramsey.

It worked beautifully. Ellie grinned as all the men stopped their attack and stood silently with increasingly bewildered expressions.

"What's going on with them?" Lucy asked.

"I'm using Lila's skill to force confusion on them."

Lila giggled beside her.

“I’ll definitely have to teach you this,” Ellie whispered to her. “It’ll be a good defense for you.”

With a delighted laugh, Ellie let up on the guys. “I think that does it for the day,” she announced. The boys groaned at having lost. They were sure they’d win today since they had all the active skills. They gave in good-naturedly, though, and together everyone headed home for some well-deserved rest and relaxation.

“Who’s down for a game?” Nate called as they all trooped into the house. Lucy headed to the kitchen to start dinner and Hugh to the dining room table to get some work done while the rest of the family pulled out Trivial Pursuit. Playing games was an almost nightly tradition.

They played until dinner, paused to eat, and then returned to the game. It didn’t take long for Ellie to clean house. This was her favorite game.

“Ellie Aubrey, you cheater!” Nate pointed an accusing finger her way. “You totally used Griffin’s mind reading.”

“I did not!” she responded indignantly. “You just can’t handle the fact that I kicked your ass at Trivial Pursuit.”

“There’s no way you knew the answer to that question.”

“I’ve been living a lot longer than you, kiddo,” Ellie popped a piece of candy in her mouth and grinned as she chewed, well aware that being called kiddo drove Nate nuts.

“And besides, we knew him,” Griffin added.

“Hold up,” Alex froze in the process of picking up the game pieces, his expression incredulous. “You knew Abraham Lincoln?”

“Uh-huh. He was Svatura,” Ellie confirmed.

“*No way!* What was his power?” Nate asked.

Griffin leaned back linking his hands behind his head and answered, “A really subtle power of persuasion. He just had to speak, and you could listen to him for hours and do anything

he asked willingly. Our tribe wasn't thrilled that he went so public, but ultimately that was his choice."

Everyone sat for a moment in stunned silence, just staring at them. "Well on that note..." Alex stood and offered Ellie his hand. He pulled her up from her seat on the couch and they headed toward their bedroom.

"Night everyone," Ellie called out from the stairs, receiving a chorus of *goodnights* in return.

Ellie and Alex spent as much time as they could together. Even though they were *te'sorthene*, they still had so much to discover about each other. The more Ellie learned about Alex, the more she felt for him. She knew she was falling in love with him and he with her. Their bond grew stronger day by day.

As they entered their room, Alex spun Ellie around so that she stood with her back against the closed bedroom door. He placed his hands on either side of her, bodily caging her in.

"Don't go tonight," his deep voice washed over her, his sensual lips capturing hers. Ellie groaned into his mouth. His voice and that kiss almost knocked her response out of her mind... almost.

Pulling away to catch her breath she said, "You know I have to."

"Ummm... I know," he murmured.

Alex leaned back in, kissing his way across her shoulder and up her neck to nibble on her earlobe. Ellie tipped her head back to grant him further access. With another groan, Ellie sought his mouth with her own and reveled in the sensation of his tongue running along the seam of her lips. Opening her mouth she matched him move for move. Never breaking the hot kiss, Alex reached down and bodily lifted her, wrapping her legs around his waist. He walked them over to the bed and, still not breaking the contact of their mouths, laid Ellie down on it, following to cover her body with his own.

Only the sound of Griffin's voice breaking into her thoughts could have stopped Ellie. "*Your turn first, Elle.*"

Feeling the shift in her concentration, Alex stopped the kiss pulling back to look her in the eyes.

“Great timing. I’ll be out in a sec,” Ellie answered Griffin. “It’s time,” she said to Alex.

He puffed out a breath and buried his face in her neck, inhaling deeply. “Okay,” he accepted. Levering himself off the bed, he pulled her up with him. “You take care of yourself out there, baby.” He tenderly brushed a strand of hair out of her face.

“Always do.” She stood on tiptoe to give him one last lingering kiss and then shifted into the falcon before him.

Alex walked over to their window to open it for her, and she flew out into the night. Ellie usually took the first patrol, with Alex’s apprehension following her out the window every time. She’d return home in the early hours of the morning to get some rest and would find him waiting up for her. He insisted that he couldn’t sleep until he knew she was home safely. Then he’d tuck her up in bed with him, snuggling her into his warm embrace.

Ellie grumbled good-naturedly every single time he waited up for her, but of course she secretly loved it. Alex managed to give her the space and the respect to make her own decisions. If anything, the way he was handling the entire situation not only made her feel loved and protected, but also valued and significant.

Chapter 32

A few weeks later, after school let out for the day, Ellie and Lila were headed to the parking lot.

Lila was in the middle of a story about her first date experience. "...So we got to the ice skating rink and I strapped on Mom's gorgeous old-fashioned skates. And after about two laps, my feet started cramping up."

Ellie giggled. "No way. Were the skates too small or something?"

"Yeah. We had to stop. And that poor guy hadn't really wanted to go ice skating anyway—"

Lila cut off her next comment when, out of nowhere, a tall man appeared before them. Dressed all in black, with ebony hair and onyx eyes, his face could be described as almost beautiful with high, sharp cheek bones and a sensuous mouth. Extremely handsome... but in a sinister way. He stood directly in front of the two girls blocking their way.

Ellie came to an abrupt halt. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lila tense and glance nervously at her. *Nothing* scared Ellie. She knew she was probably giving her friend a heart attack when she subtly repositioned her body protectively between Lila and the creepy stranger.

"I'm honored that you would come in person, Gideon," Ellie finally said, bitterness lacing her words. She felt Lila flinch at the name. She reached back for Lila's hand, giving her a reassuring squeeze.

"You know me?" the dark man asked.

"Yes."

"Then you know why I'm here..."

Ellie heard the smug self-satisfaction. "Not entirely." Of course Ellie had tapped into Griffin's mind reading power the second she'd seen Gideon, but she heard absolutely nothing.

Perhaps that'd been the reason why her ancestors hadn't been able to prepare for the attack that decimated their entire clan.

"Are you trying to listen to my thoughts, Ellinore?" his voice rasped in her mind.

Her eyes widened slightly, but other than that she gave nothing away with her expression or body language.

"I thought so," the voice continued. *"But don't worry. We're blocking your very talented brother from listening. As well as any communication you may be trying to send him."*

Ellie didn't respond.

"Have you guessed yet?"

Ellie remained silent and still. Lila, unable to hear the mental conversation and taking her cues from Ellie, assumed the same stance.

"It's you, Ellinore. You are why I'm here. You are destined to be one of our pack. I've seen you shift myself. You should be with others like you."

Ellie didn't betray the frenzied thoughts in her head by so much as a twitch and returned his gaze with feigned serenity.

"You have nothing to say about this?"

Ellie simply shrugged, catching Lila's glance at the movement. She deliberately used a technique that often got Griffin to talk more than he would in most circumstances. She said nothing when he clearly wanted a conversation. Worked like a charm every time. She also tapped into Lila's emotional manipulation abilities, attempting to rile Gideon... make him feel frustrated.

"You would've joined us sooner, if it weren't for your brother," Gideon continued, growing agitated. *"I've been looking for you since our first meeting. But your brother is somehow able to block my view of you. Of any of you."* He frowned, betraying his irritation. *"I've come to offer you a deal."*

Ellie arched an eyebrow but still said nothing. She was more concerned with Lila's safety at the moment than she was

in some arrogant, blowhard shape-shifter.

“You come with me,” Gideon said. *“Just you. Join our pack. And I will guarantee the rest of the family safety. We will not harm them as long as you are with us.”*

Ellie, using Lila’s power to see the truth, could tell that he was being sincere and was relieved her friend couldn’t hear them right now. *“Why do you want me so much?”*

“You are a wolf,” he answered simply. *“You belong with the Vyusher.”*

Her face a blank mask, Ellie thought quickly. It seemed like something about Griffin’s powers could be blocking Gideon from knowing the abilities possessed by the Jenners or Pierces. She wasn’t sure why, but regardless of the reason, she felt grateful for it at that moment. He knew about Griffin’s mind reading and her sharing powers, but what else? If he really couldn’t see which skills they possessed, perhaps she could use her own ability on him.

“I have to think about this,” she said aloud. “May I have your word that you and your wolves will not come near any of my family until I’ve had time to make my decision?”

“You have one week. We will not approach any of you during that time,” he conceded.

“Shake on it?” she asked innocently. Gideon hesitated then lifted his arm.

Letting go of Lila, Ellie moved forward and grasped Gideon’s hand, taking care that he didn’t feel the electric zap of her power at work. She focused all her energy to absorb as much about him as she could in that brief amount of time.

Releasing her grip, Gideon stepped back. Still only speaking through their thoughts, he said, *“I will see you in the woods outside the Jenner’s house, the place where you defeated a handful of my pack. Midnight, one week from tonight.”*

With that he disappeared. No sound. No warning. Just... gone. As if he’d never been standing there.

Ellie stood silently for a second, her mind spinning.

“Will you please tell me what just happened?” Lila’s trembling voice broke in.

“*That* was Gideon.” Ellie tapped her fingernail against her teeth, thinking.

“Well, I figured that much out for myself. Thanks.” Lila’s hands shook as she ran her hands through her hair.

“He wanted to meet me face to face.”

“What?... *Why?*”

Ellie sighed and resumed walking to the parking lot. “Apparently something about Griffin’s shield has some hidden facet that works to block Gideon’s tracker. At least, I *think* he has a tracker.” She glanced at Lila, who’d fallen into step beside her. “It seems like Gideon has someone in his pack, I don’t think it’s him, who can see anyone with our powers. Anywhere in the world. Although they see us better when we’re gathered in groups. The larger the group, the easier it is to hone in on us. But as soon as Griffin and I arrived in town, the Vyusher tracker could no longer see any of us. It forced them to recon in person to try to figure out how many of us there are, what our powers are, that kind of thing. Gideon eventually decided to come in person. I tried to get a read on Gideon’s power, but something odd seemed to be preventing me. I could see bits and pieces, but none of them seemed like his actual ability.” Ellie pursed her lips, frustrated.

“I can see that you’re holding something back, Ellie,” Lila said with a knowing look. “But I assume you have good reasons.”

“I do,” Ellie replied. “Let’s get to the car and get home. We all need to talk through this together.”

As they rounded the corner of the building, Ellie could see Alex practically pacing in the parking lot with Nate and Adelaide watching him apprehensively. As soon as they approached him, he said, “Where have you been? Griffin sent me a mental message that he suddenly couldn’t access your thoughts.” Alex clearly attempted to control his apprehension.

Lila and Ellie glanced at each other.

“Let’s get home first, and then we’ll tell you all about it,”
Ellie suggested.

Alex looked ready to argue with her.

“Go with your sisters, Alex,” Ellie gently urged him. “I’ll
be right in front of you.”

Finally he nodded his agreement and hustled his sisters and
Nate into the car.

Chapter 33

As soon as they arrived home, Lila told the others about their encounter with Gideon.

Griffin looked both stunned and worried. “*Why couldn’t I hear him?*” Ellie heard him wonder.

Aloud she explained to him, “He seemed to be blocking your power, Griffin. Or someone in his pack was.”

“And how do you know that exactly?” Alex’s asked.

“He told me. When I tried to read his mind.”

“She also shook his hand,” Lila piped up.

Ellie shot her friend a look.

“Ellie, I suggest you explain before Alex and Griffin both have a conniption,” Hugh advised calmly.

She walked over to Alex and wrapped her arms around his neck. He didn’t hesitate to pull her in closer and bury his face in her hair.

“I’m fine. I’m still here,” she whispered in his ear.

He gave her a tender squeeze. “You take too many chances.”

“It wasn’t my choice to confront Gideon. He found *us*. I just did what I could with the opportunity.” Pulling back, she took his face between her hands and gave him a gentle kiss. She turned to the others. “Gideon wants me to join his pack.”

Everyone started talking at once, and Alex laughed, though it was a bitter sound. “Well, he can go to hell and get bent on his way down!”

“He gave me an offer,” Ellie continued calmly. “If I go with him willingly, he promises safety for the rest of you... forever.”

Dead silence.

“I’m confident in his sincerity in this offer,” Ellie added, scrutinizing each of their faces.

They all looked to Lila for confirmation, who just shrugged. “The conversation was mostly telepathic. I didn’t really hear much. He didn’t lie once during the discussion though,” Lila confirmed somewhat reluctantly.

“You weren’t intending to tell us?” Griffin half-asked, half-accused.

“No,” Ellie admitted, shifting uneasily on her feet.

“What changed your mind?”

“All of you.” Ellie nodded her head around the room. “I wasn’t going to tell you. I was planning to go with him to protect you. But I realized that you’re my family now, and I couldn’t do that to you. You all deserve a choice in this.”

“If you think we’re letting you go, you’re quite mistaken,” Dexter declared. Ellie gave him a surprised look. Of everyone there, he’d remained the most distant. Even Ramsey had warmed up to her after she’d opened up the potential of his powers to him. Dexter participated, he joined in...but he always acted slightly reserved. Ellie hadn’t been sure of her position with him, so this show of support from him now meant a lot.

“I second that sentiment,” Hugh added.

“Just so we’re clear... I go with them, and we’re all safe. I stay and it’s a guaranteed battle. Some or all of us could die. Are you willing to risk that?” Ellie moved to Griffin’s side, taking his hand.

“Losing one of us is just as bad as losing all of us,” Lucy insisted, a fierce look on her normally mild face. Everyone else nodded their agreement.

Ellie’s eyes welled. For the first time, it truly sank in that she had a family again. And knowing they loved her enough to put their own lives in danger was beyond moving—it was heart wrenching. Glancing at Griffin, she saw her tears reflected in his own eyes.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Alex put his arms around her from behind, enfolding her in a strong and comforting embrace.

Suddenly he stood up straight. Ellie turned her head to look up at him. “How were you going to join the wolves when you left us?” he asked.

She explained Gideon’s directions of where and when to meet, and a slow grin spread over Alex’s face. Griffin smirked as well. Looking at each other, the two boys started to nod, obviously enjoying some secret, silent communication.

Ellie did her best to stay out of Alex’s head, partly out of respect and partly on the assumption that he’d tell her anything important. She and the others looked back and forth, like at a tennis match, totally lost.

“That’s a lot more annoying from the outside than I realized,” Ellie burst out, arms akimbo.

Alex raised his eyebrows and smiled. “Shoe’s on the other foot, huh? Now you know how the rest of us feel... but I think I have an idea that might work,” he added smugly.

“Please feel free to let the rest of us in on it,” Hugh said.

“We’re all aware that our biggest weakness is centered on their attacking when we’re scattered. Until Charlotte can gather us all together, we’re all at risk, right?”

Everyone nodded.

“What if we attack them first? I think it could give us an edge. Especially if we attack Gideon first.” Alex grew excited. “Based on what Ellie’s said, he seems to be their leader and motivator. If we take him out first, maybe they won’t want to keep fighting.”

Hugh slowly nodded, his expression thoughtful. “I see where you’re going with this.”

“Explain it to those of us who are a little slower,” Charlotte murmured as she tucked her hair behind her ear.

“I suggest Ellie goes to her meeting with Gideon...” He paused, looking from face to face. “She’ll just happen to bring

all of us along with her.”

Ellie worked through this scenario in her mind. “What if it’s a trap and they’re already waiting for us?”

“You said that Griffin can block Gideon’s power of sight, right?” Alex asked.

“Yeah.”

“So he won’t know about Griffin’s defensive shield, first of all.”

Griffin joined in. “Maybe. He knows about my telepathy. But even if it is a trap, if we arrive with my shield up, they won’t be able to do anything. That should give you enough time to organize, Ellie.”

“It’s better that we do this on our time, on our terms,” Alex insisted.

“And on our own ground,” Hugh added. “Gideon picked our home for you to meet at, you said?”

She nodded. Everyone remained quiet for a while, each caught up in their own thoughts.

Ellie tapped a fingernail on her teeth, a bad habit when she was thinking. “We should try to appear as we normally would had I not told you about this. Any ideas?”

Alex dragged his hand through his hair. “We should keep to our routine like usual,” he decided. Lucy, who had been making coffee in the kitchen, brought out a tray and offered him a cup. With a grateful glance, he readily accepted.

Griffin nodded his agreement and also grabbed a steaming mug, “But we should take more precautions since Lila would’ve told us about your talking with Gideon at the very least.”

“So let’s only work on the things we have been while outside. Once indoors, we can discuss a more specific plan,” Alex said.

Agreements given by all, they decided to go ahead and train for a little while. They also decided to teleport into the

clearing with Griffin's shield up just in case the wolves thought to ambush them there.

But no attack happened that night or any other night that week. They practiced just like normal. They went to school like normal. They ate dinner and did homework and played games like normal. Late at night, they orchestrated their plans for the impending attack.

Ellie's tension level grew exponentially as the agreed on date and time grew closer. She and Griffin had just found their new family. What if they lost them again? What if she lost Alex? Every night she fell asleep in his arms thinking about this, knowing that she couldn't live with herself if anything happened to any of them.

Finally the day arrived. It seemed so strange because at first glance the day appeared just like any other, and like no other at the same time. Ellie went to school. She chatted with friends. She took notes in class. She ate lunch. She drove home. They practiced in the clearing as usual. But it all seemed to go in slow motion, in sort of a numb haze. Today she would meet her fate, once and for all. Today, she might die.

And then the time had arrived.

They gathered in the living room. Lucy and Hugh grabbed Lila and Adelaide up in a giant bear hug. "We love you girls," Lucy choked out.

Their action started a long round of hugging. Ellie moved from person to person. Her heart felt like it got more and more full with every hug. "We will always be grateful for your joining our family," Hugh told her quietly when she came to him. Holding back her tears, Ellie threw her arms around his neck, squeezing tight.

Releasing Hugh, she turned to Nate, Lila, and Adelaide. Nate chuckled her on the arm. "Who knew that the new girl in

school would end up here?” he teased gently.

“And I for one couldn’t be happier to have you as my soon-to-be sister,” Adelaide added. The four friends shared a group hug.

Ellie turned toward Griffin. They wrapped their arms tightly around one another. They spent some time walking through memories of childhood and their life together thus far in their minds. Not talking, no words, just the images and understanding each other perfectly.

Finally she turned to Alex, who pulled her onto his lap while he sat on the couch. Placing her forehead against his, they sat there. Not speaking. Just absorbing each other. They’d only just begun to explore their love for each other. Now potentially losing each other was happening too fast, too soon. Ellie lifted her head and just looked at him, at this man who had become as essential to her existence as breathing.

“Alex...” Ellie gave a deep sigh, unable to express the depth of her feelings with mere words.

He gave her that sexy half smile she adored so much and cupped her chin in his hand. “I know, baby.”

With a long, lingering kiss, they sat wrapped in each other’s arms, neither wanting to ever let the other go. With one last kiss and a deep breath, in unison they stood.

Everyone else took this as a signal. Without talking, they gathered in a formation resembling a wagon wheel with those with active powers on the outside, and those with more passive powers on the inside. Each person on the inside of the circle stood slightly sideways, hands linked, forming the spokes of the wheel.

The idea was for Griffin to shield all of them as they made their appearance in the clearing. Then, when the time seemed right, he would move his shield to the inner circle, leaving those on the outer circle free to fight without having to remove his protection entirely. He would expand the shield around individuals in the outer circle as necessary, and Ellie would tap into all the skills available to her as needed.

“Ready?” she asked.

With general murmurs all around which she took as “yes,” she tapped into Charlotte’s teleportation. Instantly, they were all standing in the clearing where Ellie had had her fight with the Vyusher wolves.

Chapter 34

Empty? Ellie felt herself deflate a little. She wasn't quite sure what she'd been expecting. At best, she'd thought Gideon would be standing there waiting for her. At worst, she'd thought she'd appear in the midst of a pack of wolves prepared to attack immediately.

Not dropping their guard, they all stood still and listened intently. Each person scanned the surrounding area, and Ellie's gaze swiftly darted towards the woods. Darkness had settled in, but a glorious full moon beamed its bright, white light down upon them, illuminating the clearing with an eerie glow. The surrounding woods, however, were another matter. If anything or anyone hid among the trees, Ellie certainly couldn't see them.

Should I morph into the falcon? Ellie briefly considered, but just as quickly she discarded the idea. *Can't, need to stay connected to everyone.* She was the key to their plan, but the disadvantages were far outweighed by the advantages. Their training and sparring night after night had proved that to her.

Ellie moved her focus from what she couldn't see — and therefore couldn't know — to what she *could* know. Using Griffin's telepathy, she started to catalog what all of the others were sensing. She took only a split second to check on Hugh, Ramsey, Nate, Dexter, Charlotte, and Lila. Each had a power that wouldn't lend toward sensing the wolves. Ellie spent a little more time checking on the others, although she limited herself to only their thoughts, not yet accessing their powers herself.

Alex, who might be able to sense beings that he could freeze, felt nothing. Lucy, who potentially could sense the Vyushers' intentions, picked up nothing from the surrounding area. Adelaide, who might be able to see the relationships between the wolves despite not being able to see the wolves themselves, saw only blackness in the trees. Finally, Ellie checked on Griffin.

Silence. He's definitely searching, but not a sound. Ellie could practically feel Griffin's frustration. She tapped into his thoughts to see what was bothering him and realized that he also couldn't hear anything. *Nothing.* Not even the natural sounds of the forest around them. It was dead silent.

Tension seized Ellie's body. Her fists clenched so tightly that Alex gave her hand a little shake.

"They're here." She spoke only through thought and the connection of their hands to everyone in the circle. *"Get ready..."*

"I'm not often surprised," Gideon's deep voice broke the silence. The direction he spoke from was not immediately apparent, although they all heard him clearly.

"...But I am disappointed, Ellie. A bride should willingly come to her new family."

Ellie gasped. Gideon had never said anything about marriage as part of his offer. Beside her, Alex clenched his jaw. "She has a family already. And you are looking at her *te'sorthene.*"

Ellie was impressed that Alex sounded so calm. If some other chick had claimed Alex as her future husband that way, Ellie would have set her straight in no uncertain terms. And maybe even with some pulled hair or a black eye.

A brief silence descended, and then Gideon appeared before them at the edge of the clearing. He had assumed the form of a giant black wolf, massive and intimidating and gave what appeared to be a grin. Beside him stood a smaller brown wolf. His voice sounded again, although his mouth did not move. The sound seemed to come from the animal at his side. A tiny, distracted part of Ellie's mind decided that the brown wolf must be able to project the pack's thoughts into sound. Then his words registered... "You really think that you can fight us... let alone win?"

As he spoke, the bright gleam of eyes appeared in the blackness of the trees. First she could only see a few, golden and glowing, though Ellie couldn't see the forms of the wolves

themselves. But looking through everyone's eyes, she could see that they were outnumbered about ten-to-one and that they were completely surrounded.

A low growl sounded in unison from the pack.

For some strange reason, the noise reminded Ellie of the rebel yell. During the Civil War, the Confederate troops used to scream in battle in unison, and it'd been a very effective means of instilling fear in the hearts of the enemy. The pack's growl was like that. Such a sinister sound, Ellie felt it crawl over her skin and into her mind. She determinedly squashed the fear that welled up inside her. *Focus, Ellie*, she instructed herself. *Keep your family safe.*

"I think perhaps you underestimate us," Alex called out, his confidence absolute.

"I doubt it." Gideon's amusement was obvious.

A rumble of agreement sounded from the surrounding pack, almost like they were *laughing* with their leader. Ellie felt the circle shift, fear running through them all.

"It's your pack that is at risk here," Alex maintained, "not us."

"You insist on fighting? Knowing what we did to Ellie's very powerful tribe?"

"Well, if you're that worried, we will happily negotiate a truce," Alex offered with a cocky smirk.

"What are you doing?" Ellie thought at him.

"Trust me," he thought back.

She simply nodded and used the time he was buying her to furiously search through her options.

"You have two choices..." Gideon appeared to be growing bored with the back and forth banter. She guessed that the Vyusher had never paused to negotiate with their intended victims before. "...Ellie can leave your family and join us as my wife and queen. Or you can all die here tonight."

Griffin flashed a thought into Ellie's mind. Whatever had been blocking him had pulled back. He continued to have trouble accessing the wolves' thoughts because of the dynamic of the pack mind, but he was starting to pick up bits and pieces.

"The entire clan of Vyusher is here. Every single one of them," he told her. Using Griffin's power, she passed this observation on to everyone else in the circle.

Alex squeezed her hand, letting her know he'd received the message. She watched as he broadened his grin, seeming to deliberately taunt the Vyusher leader.

"I have an offer for you..." he called out. "If we defeat you tonight, you will never attack anyone *ever* again... Svatura, or humans without powers. You may, of course, live peacefully within the territory you have now."

"An interesting offer..." Gideon gave a dark chuckle. "And if we refuse?"

"Discover the consequences at your peril." Alex's voice suddenly sounded as lethal as the wolves' growls.

The pack seemed to back down, if only for a moment. Ellie felt Lila using her power to heighten emotion, building on the fear and paranoia that seemed to be inherent within the Vyusher, despite their superior numbers and fighting experience. And despite their confident bluster, now dread ran rampant and unchecked among them.

"Fear," she heard Gideon muse thoughtfully. It took her a moment to realize that she was hearing his thoughts and that the wolf pack was hearing it along with her. *"Very clever."*

It was almost like he was a connoisseur of gifts, so detached was he in his appreciation. The wolves seemed to laugh as they collectively shrugged off that feeling of fear. Ellie felt Lila's sudden confusion and heard Griffin passing on Lila's thoughts to them all.

Lila shook her head *"It's not that they are forcing me out. It's more like my power isn't working anymore."*

Ellie and Griffin both scowled and turned their attention back to the wolves. Gideon bowed his head in a patronizing manner. “Very well,” he agreed. “We will take our chances. See if you can defeat us this night.”

Chapter 35

An invisible signal must have passed through the pack. But it was a cue that not even Griffin had picked up on. As one, the wolves sprang out of the trees and rushed their small group. There were hundreds of them, all different colors and sizes, fur raised high on their massive backs, lips curling up to expose their sharp teeth. Only Gideon remained motionless, grinning maniacally in his wolf form.

Ellie and the others in the circle braced themselves as the wolves bore down on them. Ellie flashed their next step to them and then together they waited for her signal. To Ellie it felt like time slowed down and sped up in the same instant. She had to wait for just the right moment before springing her trap. But under the onslaught of the wolves, she weathered an internal struggle of immense proportions. Griffin and Alex gripped her hands tightly, both feeling the same terror she did.

“Not yet,” she thought to the members of the circle. *“Just a little closer...”*

When she could almost feel the hot breath of the wolf closest to her on her face, Ellie signaled Ramsey. Immediately, Ramsey sent up a wall of fire surrounding their small circle, cutting off the wolves' charge. As soon as the flames appeared, Ellie heard the anguished howls of the Vyusher caught in the blaze. The other wolves hastily retreated, and Ramsey moved quickly to take advantage of their hesitation. He shot the wall of fire outward from its position around their circle. But just as the flames were about to reach more of the wolves, the magical inferno went out completely, as if it had never been there to begin with.

“I didn't do that!” Ramsey exclaimed. In his astonishment he'd forgotten to communicate through only his thoughts.

The wolves didn't immediately resume their charge, apparently awaiting new instructions from their leader. Ellie tried to use Griffin's mind reading ability, but only silence greeted her.

“*Griffin?*” she thought. “*Griffin?!*” She mentally shouted for him.

Nothing.

She looked at him, a panicked question in her eyes. He just shook his head. He couldn’t hear anything either, not just the wolves, but *everything*. Suddenly it dawned on Ellie that someone in the Vyusher had the ability to stop any power they became aware of, possibly once in use. Ellie’s best guess was that Gideon was controlling them, but she couldn’t be sure.

She decided to test her theory. “Charlotte,” she yelled, “are you able to move us?”

Nothing happened.

“No!” Charlotte replied, panicked.

“Do *not* use your powers!” Ellie shouted. “The second they know a power exists, they can disable it somehow.”

Since wolves had excellent hearing, it would be especially difficult to coordinate.

“Griff?”

“It’s still there,” he confirmed cryptically, knowing what she was asking him. The defensive shield was still up. Not visible or obvious, so the wolves weren’t aware of its existence... yet.

Ellie thought fast.

“You all need to trust me!” she yelled, and turned to her twin. “Griffin... Turn it off for a second and do *not* attack.”

He nodded his understanding. They would use his shield as long as it wasn’t obvious.

Ellie tapped into Lucy’s ability to sense intentions. The pack’s new plan was to regroup and charge again, plowing right into her family and ripping them to shreds. The wolves, almost as one, wheeled like a flock of birds in flight and resumed their attack. The incredible roar of their fury for their burned members filled the night air.

Ellie waited until the last possible second. Then, as the first wave of wolves leapt, teeth bared, vicious snarls ripping from deep in their throats, Ellie tapped into Dexter's power and turned their human wagon wheel into indestructible metal.

Wolves slammed into them, emitting howls of pain, some knocked unconscious, some limping to safety, others landing yards away, stunned. Ellie could actually see as Dexter's power was turned off, the gun-metal grey glow extinguished, almost like a light switch being flipped off. The metal form they'd taken instantly vanished, leaving them vulnerably human again. The pack paused only for a moment. Then the next wave continued their onslaught.

"On my signal, everyone jump in Gideon's direction!" Ellie yelled, once again hoping her meaning was clear. She tapped into Nate's strength and speed and then spread that power through the circle.

"Now!"

As a coordinated unit, the circle sprang. With their amplified strength, they were propelled into the air above the wolves. They were almost back to the ground. Ellie could feel them each bracing to land when Nate's power was doused. They slammed back onto the ground, the circle breaking apart as the force of the impact caused them all to release their holds on each other. They all somehow managed to come quickly back together. The pack wheeled and then paused in unison.

"I see that you have more gifts than I gave you credit for," Gideon called. The pack rumbled. Ellie couldn't tell if the sound was agreement or some other feeling they were sharing.

A wild idea occurred to Ellie. Gideon took away every power that they could use against the wolves, and they really only had three active powers remaining: Alex's power, the most effective offensively; Griffin's shield, which they needed to protect themselves; and her power to shift. Ellie knew, deep in her bones, she had to end this quickly. A swift closure was their only hope of survival.

If Gideon is the one responsible for taking away our powers, if I take him out, we'll get our powers back, Ellie

thought. Then they could defeat the rest of the wolves. Without their leader perhaps the pack would be lost and just give up.

Ellie gave Alex's hand a gentle squeeze. "I love you."

"I love you, too," was his immediate response.

His words skated along her skin and sank in to her heart and soul. She felt peace. And she knew what she was about to do was right.

"Then trust me," she whispered.

He turned his head to look at her. "With everything I have in me," he assured her.

Ellie calmly stepped out of the circle, joining Griffin's and Alex's hands behind her back. She walked slowly toward Gideon, gathering her courage as she went.

Alex felt all the air leave his body in one punchy breath. The girl he loved... his *te'sorthene*, whom he had just found... was walking away from him, directly into danger. He looked at Griffin, who just shook his head, his mind reading abilities still not working. The only thing that kept Alex from going after her was what she'd just said to him.

She's not going to join Gideon. She's not giving in. She asked me to trust her, and I do, he reassured himself. But how did he reconcile the part of him deep within that wanted to protect her, to keep her safe? Alex took a deep breath. He forced himself to remain calm and to concentrate on Ellie. She might need him with only a moment's notice, and he needed to be ready.

Then he saw her body start to tremble violently. It reminded him vaguely of the time he'd confronted her at her house, before he'd known who and what she was. She'd started shaking just before she had run out of the house and crashed her car into a tree.

“Oh, jeez,” Griffin muttered.

Chapter 36

Gideon tipped his head to the side with a grim smile.
“Have you decided to give yourself to us?”

Ellie barely heard him; she certainly didn't acknowledge his jibe. She was concentrating. *Hard*. She'd been thinking about everything this man and his pack had done to Griffin and her. The beloved family they'd lost. The pain. The fear. The loneliness and isolation. Ellie allowed her hatred for Gideon and his Vyusher to wash through her. She stoked the anger up inside her like a fire, centering all of her rage and despair on Gideon. A deep trembling shook her body. She just barely held on to her last vestige of control.

“Alex! Freeze them all *now!*” she screamed. Knowing Alex would act immediately, she waited only a second. And then, she knelt to the ground.

Her form appeared to shimmer in mirage-like waves, wavering as if the air around her was distorting. In the span of moments, she shifted, so fast that it was difficult to make out more than just flashes... scales replaced skin, a tail whipped through the air with a massive crack of the air, claws each the size of the largest wolf gouged the earth, powerful jaws snapped, the shadow of massive wings unfurling blanketed the clearing in an eerie kind of shadow, and a deeply ominous snarl reverberated through the forest. In an instant the girl no longer stood before them, replaced by a form that was midnight black and shimmering, obsidian scales gleaming, and violet blue eyes blazing.

“Oh shit, she did it!” Nate found his voice first, as they collectively backed away from her.

“Oh... my... god!” Lila and Adelaide exclaimed together.

“Whoa! She really wasn't kidding about the whole dragon thing, was she?” Alex muttered to Griffin who stood beside him.

“And you thought your sisters could cause trouble,” Griffin muttered back, a grim set to his mouth. He couldn't

hear his sister's thoughts.

She unleashed all of the rage and hatred built up inside her on Gideon, who was suddenly frozen in place, his face still a comical mask of arrogance. Gideon had just started to unfreeze, fighting Alex's hold on him, when she attacked. She used her great jaws to crush the enormous black wolf, killing him instantly. In a display of years of rage and pain being unleashed on the perpetrator, she dropped his limp form to the ground. Using her talons to pin him there, she ripped his body to shreds, flinging each rag-like piece at the pack that he'd led in such sinister and villainous acts. With an intense roar more terrifying than anything the measly wolves could produce, Ellie took to the air.

The human part of Ellie registered that her family'd instantly regained their powers and stood ready to defend themselves. The wolves didn't move, still frozen in place by Alex's mental commands. But the rage of the dragon overrode her humanity, and she bore down on the pack, ignoring the fact that she was also bearing down on her own family.

Violet blue fire the color of her eyes erupted from her jaws. However, none touched the wolves or people on the ground, hitting an invisible barrier above them. Griffin was shielding them all from her. Then the flame went out completely. Some part of Ellie realized that Ramsey was using his powers on her and she roared her mighty wrath, consumed with rage. The dragon remained in control now and would show no mercy to anyone or anything.

"*Ellie,*" she heard a whisper. She shook her massive head.

As she made to dive again, she felt a sudden force stop her. Alex had frozen her in mid-flight. Showing incredible strength, he slowly lowered her to the ground, pinning her there. The wolves also remained like statues.

Furious, Ellie tested the strength of Alex's hold on her and found that he was struggling to control the fire inside her. She gathered the fire deep in her belly and unleashed it at the humans standing before her. The deep blue flames hit an invisible wall and bounced back on her. Griffin was obviously

using his shield, but now it surrounded *her*. Then she felt the inferno in her go out, like cold water had been poured down her throat. The small human part of her applauded Ramsey. That couldn't have been easy for him.

But the dragon in her still ruled. Her massive body heaved with loathing and unfulfilled purpose. Ellie vaguely registered the form of a small girl approaching her. Lila laid her hands on Ellie's side, and a feeling of total peace engulfed her. She felt the embers of rage and hatred slowly extinguish.

With a nod from Lila, Alex and Griffin came over to her. They bravely moved directly to her head where it lay immobile on the ground.

Ellie could see Alex shaking from the effort. As they lay their hands on her, Ellie heard Alex's voice in her mind. "*Come back to us, Ellie.*"

She snorted, the dragon part of her still very much in control.

"Come back to me, my love".

The dragon snorted again.

"Te'sorthene. Please."

Something inside Ellie collapsed, like a breaking dam. Her humanity came rushing forward, overpowering the fierceness, the hatred, the fury. She stayed in monster form, but Ellie was the one in control now.

Love, she thought incredulously. *Love is the answer. If I hold on to my love, I hold on to my humanity.*

She felt Griffin's relief as he heard her thoughts. "*I'm in control now,*" she clarified.

Griffin relayed the message to Alex, who furrowed his brow dubiously. But Griffin grinned from ear to ear. Her brother let out a loud, uncharacteristic *whoop*. "She's got it," he assured Alex. "We can let her up now."

Alex glanced back at the enormous dragon beside him, the images of the great beast in full and dreadful glory still fresh in his mind. But he nodded.

Ellie felt the forces on her release. Free to move, she shifted into a stand, folding her immense wings into a resting position on her massive back. The overwhelming peace left her, but she held on to the love that was so much stronger than the rage, and she no longer needed any help to feel the peace. She truly had control. She even felt the fire reignite inside her belly but kept it in check easily.

She leaned forward and very gently nuzzled Alex.

He flashed a cheeky grin her way, relief clearly evident on his handsome face, in the set of his shoulders. He turned back to the wolves still pinned in place, and Ellie took a moment to appreciate the extent of Alex's powers. To be able to keep control of the entire wolf pack, while also taming her, must've taken immense strength. He'd told her how difficult containing just four attacking wolves had been.

Alex turned to address the wolves. "You are defeated," he declared loudly enough for all of them to hear. "You have to accept this. Your leader and your greatest asset in battle is dead. You will leave here and never return. You will never attack another being. If we hear of any wolf attacking a human, we will hunt you down and kill you!"

He glared at each of them, and an unhappy whimper erupted from the pack.

"Silence!" a female voice suddenly called out from the woods. A pure white wolf, gloriously beautiful, appeared at the edge of the clearing, the small brown wolf standing at her side, like it had been at Gideon's.

Ellie bristled, but stopped as the wolf morphed into human form. Before them stood a lovely girl, with blonde hair so pale it looked like moonlight streaming down her back. Ellie heard Griffin's indrawn breath.

The girl held up a hand, almost like a peace offering.

"As my brother's sister, I speak for our pack," she said. "We will abide by the terms that my brother agreed to."

Adelaide quietly confirmed, "Gideon is... was her brother."

She glanced at Griffin and opened her mouth as if to expand on something but then closed it again. Griffin shot her a look of disgust, and she shrugged her shoulders in return. Ellie stayed out of the mental conversation going on between Adelaide and Griffin, keeping her sole focus on the girl in front of her.

“If you let us leave in peace now,” the ethereal figure continued, “you will not need to fear us again. Nor will any other living being. I swear it.”

Lucy and Lila both spoke at once—

“Her intensions are true.”

“She’s sincere. We can trust her.”

“Griffin?” Alex glanced at him.

Griffin shook his head. “Only silence.” He clenched his hands at his sides. “I can’t hear anything.”

Alex looked up at Ellie. A moment later, she shifted back into her human form and walked over to the girl.

“What is your name?”

“Selene.”

“May I take your hand?” Ellie asked softly. “I need to know what your powers are before we make a decision.”

With only a slight hesitation, Selene offered an elegant wrist.

Ellie closed her eyes and concentrated. Satisfied, she returned to her family.

“We can trust her, I think,” she murmured to them.

Looking from person to person, Alex received nods from each in turn.

“You have our permission to go,” he said. As he released them from his hold, the pack heaved a collective breath and then all disappeared into the woods.

Selene watched the retreat. As the last wolf disappeared, she said, “I wish you well—”

The last word cut off as Griffin moved to stand in front of her. They stared at each other intently for a long moment. Finally, Selene reluctantly turned away and disappeared into the woods.

Ellie had only just registered the fact that Griffin still stood staring after the girl when Alex grabbed her, spun her to face him, and then roughly pulled her into his embrace. “Don’t you ever do anything so rash again. Do you hear me?” He buried his face in her hair and squeezed her waist tight.

Ellie smiled, wrapped her arms around his neck, and gave him a lingering kiss. She pulled back and grinned at him. “You don’t have to worry anymore. They’re gone. And we’re all safe and alive.”

“I thought you were going to kill us all, Ellie, and not just the wolves...” He pulled her back close, his expression pained. “What if I’d had to kill you? What if Griffin would’ve had to help me?”

Ellie shook her head. “We were *all* going to die unless I did something drastic,” she insisted. “And nothing bad happened to us. You and Griffin... you saved me from myself. And now I can control it.” Her excitement about this new ability was clear.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

Alex looked deeply in her eyes for another heartbeat. And then, blowing out any remaining fear he’d held inside him in a long breath, he grinned.

“You were pretty bad ass,” he said. “I mean, how many guys can say their girlfriend turns into a frickin’ fire-breathing dragon?”

“Yeah?” Ellie asked. She’d been a little worried about what they would all think of her in that form. The dragon was slightly terrifying after all.

Alex’s eyes glowed with a desire that pulsed through her, letting her see exactly how much he was okay with this part of her. Speaking so only she could hear, he murmured, “It’s

seriously sexy, if you really want to know. Jeez, baby, you are so damned incredible. You take my breath away.”

Ellie breathed a ragged sigh of relief, laughing a little. “Oh really?” she practically purred. “I think we might have to explore this a little further when we get home.”

She received a sweet kiss in response.

They turned their attention to the rest of the family, who gathered around hugging one another and laughing. Ellie looked for Griffin but didn't see him. Looking over her shoulder, she finally found him still standing at the edge of the clearing, still staring off into the woods. Adelaide came to stand beside her, watching Griffin with a concerned expression.

“What did you see, Delia?”

She shook her head. “I don't usually share the relationships I see unless they're pretty well solidified. But this time...” She shook her head again and sighed. “Honestly, I'm not entirely sure *what* I saw. Definitely something I've never seen before. There's definitely a connection there. But it's all mixed up. Multiple colors fighting for dominance. Lovers. Friends. Enemies.” She looked at Ellie with a helpless shrug. “It's all jumbled up.”

“Thank you for telling me, Adelaide,” Ellie said quietly.

Ellie walked over to Griffin and silently took his hand.

“She *can't* be evil, Ellie,” he murmured.

“I know,” she agreed quietly. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his head turn.

“What did you see?” he asked, frustrated. “Something was blocking me. I couldn't follow along.”

“I saw that *she* was the one removing our powers, not Gideon. His power was the ability to control anyone, make them do exactly what he wanted. Sort of like what I do, only he controlled their minds, forcing them to think they'd made the decision themselves. He was controlling all of the Vyusher...including her. But *she* was the one in the pack with

the ability to turn off a power. As soon as someone uses theirs in her presence, she hones in and takes it away. But she never wanted to. Gideon was forcing her... forcing all of them, all along.”

Ellie felt Griffin’s despair building. “So now she’s left to clean up after her bastard of a brother?” he asked, a bitter edge tainting his words.

Ellie squeezed his hand and made a conscious effort to stay out of his head. Whatever her brother was thinking and feeling right now was private. She wouldn’t violate his trust that way.

“Come on...” She gave his arm a gentle tug. “Let’s go home.”

Griffin seemed to physically shake himself out of his thoughts. Turning to his sister, he was suddenly struck by happiness that they’d managed to survive this ordeal. Together.

Sensing his sentiment, Ellie laughed and flung her arms around his neck in a playful hug. “Me too...” Then more serious, “Thanks for saving me, Griffin.”

“Again,” he reminded her with a wink.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

They joined the rest of the family exchanging more happy embraces. Joining hands, Charlotte teleported them home.

Chapter 37

Ellie was shocked at how quickly life returned to normal. She, Lila, Adelaide, and Nate all returned to school. They spent time with their friends, going to movies and studying in the library. Alex had taken off the full semester of college and continued to work for Hugh in his law firm. Ellie, Adelaide, and Nate would be graduating soon, but Lila still had one more year left.

The Jenners and Pierces moved back into their homes, except for Alex. Her house had never felt so empty. They really didn't spend much time there anymore. They preferred instead to fly over to the others in the evenings, only returning to their home to sleep and dress. Alex went where Ellie went and vice versa.

In the evenings they would often discuss their plans for the future. Ramsey had decided that with his power now under control, he wanted to try going to school. They decided the best option was for him to start as a senior in high school in the fall, joining Lila. Alex planned to go to college but was considering transferring, and Ellie decided to join him wherever he went.

Griffin seemed to be the only one who didn't seem to care about making plans. Ellie surreptitiously watched her brother with growing concern. He continually blocked his thoughts from her, which wasn't like him. Although he tried to behave normally, Ellie could tell something was up. No one else had noticed. They just didn't know Griffin as well as she did. When questioned about his future, he said simply that he would be quite happy to just stay with Hugh and Lucy since Alex and Ellie would both be away at school.

So Ellie kept her worries to herself. Griffin would talk to her when he was ready.

"Ellie," Lucy called up the stairs. "Are you ready to go? We don't want to be late!"

“Coming!”

Taking one last look in the mirror, she patted her hair into place. She grabbed her mortarboard off the vanity and rushed down the stairs, her face aglow.

Today was her high school graduation. She had a role to play for the rest of the world so that she and her Svatura family didn't have to live as outcasts but could be a part of society. She'd never been through a graduation ceremony before.

They were all waiting down by the living room, and Ellie struck a pose as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Oh, very fashionable,” Adelaide said, tongue-in-cheek. They all laughed.

They piled into their cars and headed for the football stadium where the ceremony would be held. The weather dawned clear and bright and glorious for the occasion. Crisp blue skies and the warmth of the sun shining down on them, despite the chill in the air.

Ellie, sitting alphabetically with the other graduates, tried to soak in every part of the event. As she crossed the field to accept her diploma, her family all cheered for her, Griffin and Alex cheering the loudest. And then cheered herself as Adelaide and then Nate received their own diplomas.

Her eyes filled with tears with the love that swelled up in her. And then she whooped wildly with the rest of the students as they all threw their caps into the air. She went around hugging her friends, people she would most likely not see again. She gave especially big hugs to Jill and Brian and Juliette. She'd never had “normal” friends before, but thanks to them she did.

After the ceremony concluded, she rode with Griffin and Alex back to the Jenners' house, still amped up from her day. They'd decided to have a private celebratory dinner together at home.

As she got out of the car, Alex held her back. “I just wanted one second alone with you because I know we won't

get another chance for the rest of the night.”

She smiled and wrapped her arms up around his neck. Standing on tip toe, she placed a lingering kiss on his mouth.

“I’m so proud of you,” he said when they came up for air.

“For graduating from high school?” she teased.

“For so many things. But tonight, yes, for graduating from high school. You managed to do it while saving my family from a force that should have terrified you. And you saved them bravely and unwaveringly.”

Ellie’s eyes filled with tears. “I did it for love,” she whispered.

Giving her another soft kiss, he grabbed her hand and turned them toward the door. “Come on, graduate. They’re waiting for us.”

Ellie walked in, Alex right behind her. All the lights were off. Frowning slightly, she took a few more tentative steps. She saw hundreds of candles lining the hallway, illuminating a blanket of rose petals scattered along the floor. Simply beautiful.

She glanced uncertainly over her shoulder at Alex, who just shrugged. “Let’s keep going and see what they’re up to,” he said vaguely.

She followed the trail of candles and petals, past the kitchen and dining room and into the living room to the scenic windows. The room was covered in candles and rose petals.

Everyone stood there smiling.

“What’s this all about?”

“Why don’t you turn around and find out,” Griffin suggested, a wide grin breaking across his face.

She turned to see Alex down on one knee before her, a gorgeous diamond ring held in his hand, sparkling in the candlelight.

Ellie gasped, tears rushing to her eyes.

“We are *te'sorthene*. You are the other half of my soul. I've waited more than a century for you and find that I cannot wait another moment longer. Would you do me the great honor of marrying me?” Alex said simply. He might have said more, but he was clearly choking up.

Ellie flung herself into his arms, nearly toppling them both over as she cried, “Yes, of course I will marry you!” She was rewarded with a deep kiss.

Alex slipped the ring over her finger and helped her to stand up. He pulled her back into his arms, expelling a pent up breath.

She gazed at him, love shining clearly in her eyes.

“Were you worried about my answer?” she teased. She pulled back to take both his hands in hers.

“I was only worried that you would think the timing was too soon.” He grinned, letting go of one of her hands to rub the back of his neck.

“It may appear that way to the rest of the world,” she told him softly, recapturing his fingers and then bringing both his hands up to her lips where she lightly kissed them. “But you and I know how long we've been in this world. And how rare a thing our finding each other truly is. Why would I want to wait? How could I?”

Alex laughed, utter joy in the sound. He picked her up and spun her around the room. And then they were surrounded by their family, kissing them, congratulating them. Even Griffin looked thrilled, which made Ellie very happy. They'd had only each other for so long.

“Will you give me away?” she asked him softly.

“I wouldn't have it any other way. Do you even have to ask?” he whispered as a tear gathered in the corner of his eye. He glanced down, blinking.

After enjoying a lovely dinner, they all retreated to the living room to talk and start planning the wedding. Ellie stood back observing the scene. In just a few short months, her entire world had changed in ways she could never have imagined.

She felt Alex's arms steal around her from behind. "Happy, baby?" he murmured in her ear.

She gave a contentedly blissful sigh. "Happier than I've ever been....ever thought I could be. I'm so lucky."

She turned in his arms and gave him a kiss that spoke of her love, and her happiness, and her hope for their future.

Griffin watched his twin. She glowed with a radiant delight that lit her up from within. And he couldn't have been more overjoyed for her. At the same time, though, he'd never felt more completely alone than in this moment. Ellie had found her *te'sorthene*. But what she didn't know, what none of them knew, was that Griffin had found his as well. A silver-haired angel who'd appeared to him in so many dreams he'd lost count. A Vyusher. One of the Vyusher responsible for killing almost everyone he'd ever loved. And he could never have her. Fate apparently had it in for him. To make the potential source of his greatest happiness also the source of the worst event of his life was just cruel. Bitterness seeped into his being, and darkness threatened to crush his very soul.

Griffin turned away from his tormented thoughts and joined in the celebration, refusing to contemplate the future further. It held no promise for him now.

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for trying out a self-published author. I loved every second of writing this book, and I hope you enjoyed exploring this little world I created that has been floating around in my head for years. I have many more books and ideas in me and plan to continue to put them out there as fast as I can write them down. If you enjoyed this book, please look for the next installment of this series out in early 2013. If you would like to contact me, feel free to go to any of my author sites. Thanks again!

Sincerely,

Abigail Owen, Author

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Excerpt from Hyacinth - Book #2 of the Svatura Series

Note from the Author: Hyacinth is still a work in progress. I am only on my first draft and have not done any editing yet. Enjoy!

“There’s something else isn’t there?” Ellie asked.

“Together, your families were my best hope of ending Gideon’s power over my family,” Selene said quietly. She looked up with an apology in her eyes. “I have so much to apologize to you for, I don’t even know where to begin,” she continued quietly, “I put you in danger after hiding you all these years. But it was my only option. Or at least the only way I could find.”

Ellie sat quietly for a while, thinking.

“Were you a part of what happened to my family?” she finally asked in a husky voice.

Selene closed her eyes. The question she had dreaded had been asked. “Yes,” she answered honestly. “I wasn’t as controlled in my powers then. I could only stop one person’s powers at a time, not all of them like I can now. Gideon would determine who I should stop, and then force me to stop them. He never fought himself. Just coordinated and controlled all of the rest of us. I never... we, none of us, ever had a choice.”

She didn’t tell Ellie that she was the only one of the pack under Gideon’s control who was aware of it. She suspected because of her specific combination of abilities. Everyone else accepted Gideon’s thoughts and directives as their own. But the pain of living with that knowledge, of knowing the evil they were doing, and her part in that, however unwilling, was something Selene wouldn’t make anyone else live with. Not if she could help it.

She looked up, directly into Ellie’s sober eyes. “I’m so sorry, Ellie.”

Ellie was quiet for a long time. Thinking.

“She’s telling the truth,” Addison’s voice sounded from the back of the room by the entrance to the kitchen.

“I’m sorry for eavesdropping,” Addison said as she came further into the room, “but this does involve me too, in some ways.” She turned to Ellie, taking her hand, letting Ellie take over her power, saying “You can see the truth in her words, but also in her emotions Elle.” Glancing at Selene, Addison prompted her, “Say it again. The end of it.”

Selene repeated her story, and her apology, willing to do or say anything if it helped Ellie.

When she stopped, tears were running down her cheeks. Looking up, she could see that Ellie and Addison were both crying as well.

Ellie stood up, walked over and pulled Selene out of her chair, and then wrapped her arms around her in a tight embrace. “I forgive you,” she whispered.

“What is she doing here?” the bitter cold rage in Griffin’s voice rolled over the three ladies, and caused Selene’s heart to sink into her stomach.

Ellie responded first, giving Selene a chance to gather herself. Composed, and with all her guards back up, she turned to face him. No one watching, especially Griffin, would ever guess that her heart was pounding in her chest. Or that she was desperate for him to accept her.

“She’s not dangerous Griffin,” Ellie argued.

“You don’t know that Elle,” he growled, never taking his eyes off Selene, glaring at her as he moved further into the room to stand beside his sister.

“I do,” Ellie replied stubbornly. “Look.” She reached to take his hand, but Griffin twitched out of her grasp.

“Anything you’re seeing about her is probably a lie, Ellie,” Griffin insisted. “Her family killed ours. And she was part of that.” At that point Griffin stopped talking, took his eyes from Selene and stared intently at his sister. Selene could tell that they were using their powers to speak to each other telepathically. After a few minutes of tense silence, Ellie

shook her head, with a sigh. Turning to Selene she opened her mouth to speak, but Selene stopped her, raising her hand.

“I think I can see how things are, Ellie,” she spoke softly, taking care not to look at Griffin. “I don’t want to make any trouble in your family. I’ll go now.” Selene dropped her shield just for Ellie, saying into her thoughts, “Griffin can’t hear me Ellie. I’ll let you tell him about where I’m attending college. He seems to need some time to cool down first. And you don’t have to worry. If I see any of you on campus I’ll walk the other way.”

Ellie shook her head vehemently. But Selene couldn’t hear her thoughts. That wasn’t one of her abilities. Gathering her purse, Selene headed out the door. Ellie tried to follow her but was held back by Griffin.