



CROSSED

WINGED BOOK 1

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LYNN RUSH

PRAISE FOR CROSSED

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CROSSED

LYNN RUSH

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author



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Copy Edited by Nancy Cantor

Cover Design by Emily Wittig

PRINT ISBN: 979-8-9855601-0-7

To God, from whom all blessings flow.

THANK YOU!

Awesome reader. You are the first one I want to thank. I'm blown away by the support you have sent my way. I'm so honored you picked up this book and have gone on this journey with me.

My sweet hubby. Thank you for all your support. I love you more than words can say.

Thank you, beta readers: Chelsey T, Chey W, and Beth C. There were more who didn't want to be named. I'm thankful for you all.

Brynna, you are an amazing person, and I thank you for all the support you've shown me and my books over the years.

Nancy. You are a superstar copy editor. Very thankful to have worked with you on many projects, and I'm looking forward to working on many more!

To my proofreaders, Chip & Beth. Thank you for your keen eye!

Thank you again, readers, for choosing this book. I'm so blessed by you!

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ONE

I DIDN'T REMEMBER BEING born, but I imagine it was painful, a little dark, and cold. Just like I felt as I slipped through the slice in reality my cousin, August, had created.

Although he had shared all of his knowledge of Earth with me to help me assimilate once I landed, he never prepared me for the depth of the darkness that would encapsulate me on the journey.

Then again, he might not have known, considering we were working with limited knowledge of these portals.

And it was totally illegal to use them.

The cave's cool, sandy ground vanished from beneath me. I tumbled into a free fall of epic proportions. I'd free-fallen hundreds of times—what Wind Traveler hadn't? The only difference with this one was I couldn't extend my wings.

August's threat of burning feathers rang like a gong in my head.

I hated leaving August and my parents, but I couldn't stay and face a life mated to Bastian. I was lucky August knew the

incantation to send me away.

To save me.

A picture of my cousin's sweet face shone through the darkness. He rarely smiled because his front tooth was missing. I'd accidentally knocked it out while wrestling with him when we were kids.

His flaming burnt orange eyes flared as my memory of him intensified. But suddenly, his face faded. Dissolved into nothingness like paper ravaged by fire.

"August," I screamed, but the thundering noise of my free fall into the portal drowned out my voice.

Wait, who was I thinking of? A guy. No, it was—

The sound of metal ringing against metal exploded around me. I slapped my hands over my ears. Through the thick darkness I saw nothing. It was as if I'd fallen into a complete void.

Wind morphed strands of my hair into whips lashing my cheeks.

More groaning metal.

A deep, resonating voice trickled through the hands pressed over my ears, but I couldn't understand the words. Maybe it was the person I was just thinking of. My feet met cold ground. Searing pain jolted up my spine to the base of my skull and pounded like someone hammered a pick into my brain stem.

I lurched forward, and my foot met something wet. Where were my shoes? Wait, where was I going again?

Blinking did nothing to break through the darkness blanketing my vision. My heart thrashed, and I tasted something metallic in my mouth. The scent of burning leaves and hair stung my nostrils. Liquid sloshed over my bare feet.

“Get out of the street, you moron!” someone yelled.

Moron? I didn’t know that word. Maybe a cloth of some sort covered my eyes, preventing me from seeing. I didn’t feel anything over my face, and my fingers confirmed as much when my nail scraped my eye.

Pain zinged straight to my temple. Tears streamed. So, my eyes *were* open. But I couldn’t see anything. My tongue swelled, and my throat thickened.

“Hello?” My voice cracked and quickly morphed into a panicked yelp. “Where am I?”

I didn’t recognize the sound coming from my mouth. It was like the first time I’d ever heard it. But how did I know how to talk if I’d never spoken? I gripped my temples, but the throbbing was relentless.

My body swayed, and I told my foot to move forward to catch my fall, but it didn’t listen. Come to think of it, I didn’t feel my legs anymore or the surface beneath my feet.

“Whoa. Hold on.” Two sizzling hot hands grabbed my shoulders. “I’ve got you.”

I turned toward the baritone voice. Musk-tainted air tickled my nose. Along with it, a strong, foul odor I couldn't place. Its stench triggered my gag reflex.

"This way." From behind me, the hands guided me to my left.

I reached out, scared I'd knock into something. The cool sensation beneath my feet returned, but in addition to the frigidity, little prickles sliced into the soles.

Gravel? Rocky sand? The chill crept into my legs and sent a body-thrashing shiver up my spine.

Crackling to my right and a wave of warmth drew my attention.

Warmth I liked very much. I leaned in that direction, reaching for it. Needing it. Heat tickled the tips of my fingers. Yes. This would chase away the cold dragging me under.

"Wanna share my fire, honey?" A wave of gut-wrenching stench flooded my senses. Dirt, fire, rotten food, and a sugary scent all rolled into one nauseating odor churned my insides.

I leaned forward, my stomach constricting and spasming. One of the hands that had been clasped around my shoulders moved to my waist and pulled me against a warm body.

"No, thank you, ma'am," the baritone voice sang, and the man jerked me away from the warmth.

A whimper leaked through my lips as a shiver raked down my back. Why would he take me away from the warmth?

“What the heck are you doing?” The voice was quiet but held a harsh, threatening tone. Warm breath brushed my ear as the person guided me forward. “Just keep moving.”

“I—” *Cough*. My throat constricted, cutting off any efforts to speak. Where was this man taking me? Why couldn't I see anything?

His coarse shirt rubbed against my bare arm. Come to think of it, I felt his rough clothes against my leg, too.

Was I naked?

TWO

“LOOK. I COULDN’T JUST leave her. She’s obviously confused.” I recognized my rescuer’s voice.

It was the only thing I knew, though. The man who was helping me. Yes, he stood nearby, talking to someone. I’d not heard anyone else approach.

“What’d you want me to do, then?” he asked.

I sagged against the cushioned seat the stranger had guided me to. My bare feet rested on a smooth surface, but it was soft, like a patch of cotton. A breeze rustled my hair, but I noticed a distinct barrier between it and my flesh. I touched my arms, and my fingers brushed over smooth skin. My hands grazed down the front of me, and I met warm cotton. I did have clothing on after all.

Just not much it seemed.

I rubbed my eyes one more time with my shaky fingers, hoping to pry loose the horrible blackness. Or maybe I’d always been unable to see.

My throbbing headache eased a little, so that was a relief.

Still no memory, though.

Crackling sounded to my right, and I turned. A gentle sigh followed, and it was close. The man must be standing near me. Whoever he was talking with must have gone.

The headache pulsed back to life.

“Look, um—here’s a bottle of water.” A cold object touched my hand, and I jerked away. “No. It’s okay, it’s for you to drink.”

Drink? That would be good. And from the feel of the object, it would be cold and refreshing. I tightened my grip around the cool surface. His warm hand covered mine, guiding the strange container to my mouth.

Something rigid pressed against my bottom lip, and I flinched, wanting to push it away, but a dribble of cool, refreshing fluid trickled into my mouth.

I pulled the bottle close and more liquid burst onto my tongue, then down my parched throat, instantly soothing the arid sting. Soon the water overflowed down the sides of my mouth. Drops of frigid moisture dribbled onto my shirt, leaking through the clothing and streaming down my chest.

“Whoa, hold on, not so fast.” Something clanked, like metal on metal, and my hand jiggled. “Oh, sorry.”

The bottle was pulled away from my mouth. I wanted more. I needed more. I reached into space, groping for the treasure. Another clank sounded. It felt like someone held my wrist, yet I couldn’t feel a hand around me.

I jerked away. The grip remained. My heart thrashed. A burning sensation bubbled in my stomach and coiled around my spine.

What was happening to me?

Was the man stabbing me between my shoulder blades?

No, I was sitting with my back against the chair, yet it burned. I leaned forward and craned my neck to look, but of course, saw nothing. Prickles stung, like pins bursting through my skin. Something clawed to get out.

“Look, miss. I’m not going to hurt you. Just drink slowly.” I faced the direction of his voice and instantly relaxed. The burning and prickling stopped. My thrashing heart calmed.

“That’s better. So, you can’t talk? And you can’t see, right? Nod at me if that’s correct.”

Of course, I could talk. I knew what I wanted to say, but my dry throat scratched too much. I smacked my lips, searching for every drop of moisture from my brief drink of water and swallowed hard. “I talk.”

The sound came out from my throat and mouth, but it stung like it was coated with thorns.

“Okay. Good. What’s your name?” the man asked.

“Water,” I said.

“Your name is Water?”

I shook my head and reached into the blackness.

“Oh, you want some water.” The cold object returned to my grasp. “Slowly.”

I pressed my finger around the nozzle of the contraption he called a bottle. Ridges at the top of the narrow opening, then smooth but flexible glass until it curved at the bottom. I squeezed, and the object collapsed. Frigid liquid saturated my bare legs.

“Whoa. Don’t squeeze it so hard.”

I loosened my grip and brought the contraption to my mouth. It brushed my chin instead.

The man’s able hands covered mine and guided the water to my lips. “Slowly.”

Balls of light flickered in the corners of my vision. This must be healing water. I drank until there wasn’t another drop.

“Here, I’ll take that. There’s another in the back seat if you need more.” He removed the treasured bottle from my hands. “So, what’s your name?”

That was a great question. My mind whirled, but nothing came forward. I touched my face and felt soft skin. I combed my fingers through my hair and met resistance. Tangled, but the ends tickled my shoulders, so it must be long.

But what color was it?

More iridescent lights flickered in my vision as if fighting to breach the darkness. I reached out. “Where are you?” My voice crackled less this time.

Healing water, indeed.

“Whoa, hold on.” That clanking sound happened again, and my hand was diverted from landing on anything.

“What is that sound?”

“You’ve got this metal thing around your wrist. My ring hit it. Don’t worry. I didn’t damage the—um—bracelet.”

“Bracelet.” I didn’t know that word.

“Shit,” the man’s voice went soft, but I still heard that word.

“Shit? Is that my name?”

“No. No. I—well—you’ve never heard that word before?”

The man sighed again, his warm breath feathering my cheek. He really was close to me. A hint of berries tickled my nose. Like he’d eaten them recently. Strawberries maybe.

I reached for him, and my fingers found soft, warm skin. They followed a curve upward and met a sharp dip then a mound of wetness. He flinched beneath my touch.

“That’s my eye.” He cleared his throat. “So, you—um—you must be blind then. I’ve seen that before—um—how blind people see with their hands.”

“Blind,” I said. I didn’t know that word. Seeing with my hands must have meant my eyes didn’t work.

But what were those white lights flickering?

I blinked several times and squinted. I wanted to see the man talking to me. His smooth skin felt like fine silk beneath my fingers. Bubbles of warmth simmered beneath my

fingertips and pulsed up my wrist and forearm. I must see the source of such bliss.

“You don’t know your name?” he asked. “How ’bout where you’re from?”

I sagged against my chair. “Nothing.”

“Here, let me check your bracelet.” His fingers caressed my forearm then disappeared, but a cool object moved against my skin instead. His touch returned, but farther down, to the back of my hand. “It’s gold. Really wide. There’s a *B* on it. Never seen anything like it before. Well, except when watching *Wonder Woman*.”

“*Wonder Woman*?”

He coughed. “Um—never mind—here, let me see the other side.” He gently turned my arm. His fingers traced my skin to the metal. “Something’s etched here. I can’t make it out, though. Hold on.”

He grunted slightly, brushed against my leg then across the front of me. A wave of his spiced scent filled my nose. I stiffened in my seat.

“Let me get this dome light on.”

Something clicked. A dull hue of gray settled in, which was better than the solid black I’d been seeing. Even more interesting was the faint outline of something close.

Like gray chalk on a black canvas, I saw a shape kneeling before me. Round at the top. Wisps above what looked like an ear. *Hair*. The lines curved forward, but yet, sharpened in an

angle. *A chin*. It dipped and two full lips created a deep valley. His straight nose curved into a full profile of the side of his face.

He pulled my arm close to him.

“Something’s carved into the gold at the base here.”

“I see you,” I whispered.

He jerked his head up. Although they were gray, I still saw how big his eyes were. Wide and shaded by long lashes.

“You do?”

I reached out, and my finger landed right where I wanted it to—his chin, just below the plump lips that drew my attention. “Outlines, like in a drawing of your face. Gray chalk on a black canvas.”

The skin around his lips crinkled. “Well, that’s funny you should say that.”

“Funny?” I pulled my finger from his face. None of this was funny. I was blind. I had no memory of who I was. “I don’t think this is—”

“No. Just that—um—well, you said drawing. And I’m an artist. So, it—” He looked down. “Nothing. Um, here, I see something. It’s in weird writing. Cursive, but really fancy.” He pulled my wrist closer then angled it to the side. “This first letter is a *T*, I think. Yeah. A big, fancy *T. R. I. N*—oh, okay, I think this says Trinity.”

A wave of familiarity soothed my tense spine. “Trinity.” When I spoke the word, it felt even more familiar. I didn’t remember learning how to talk, but I knew how. I felt the same about that name. “Yes. I am Trinity.”

“You remember?”

“No. I just know.”

His charcoal eyebrows pulled together, crinkling his forehead. “But you don’t know where you live?”

“Nothing.”

He held my gaze for several long breaths. I brushed my fingertip along the curve of his cheek to his lips and stroked my thumb along the bottom. Warmth bubbled deep in my stomach. Soothing. Peaceful. My heart pulsed into a rapid strumming.

He shifted to the side, severing our connection, and coughed. “Okay, then. Let’s go. I need to figure out what to do with you.”

THREE

I SCRUBBED MY EYES for the fifteenth time as my hero maneuvered what he called a car.

The swaying motion it created sent my water-filled stomach sloshing. A humming rattle vibrated up from the seat into my spine. Thankfully my sight improved with each passing moment, but thick hues of gray still clouded everything.

“May I ask your name?”

“Jayden. Um—Jayden Brown.” His silver-tinted face turned toward me but then forward again.

Outlines of tall, spotted rectangles flew at me, and I thrust my hands over my face. But nothing ever hit me. No depth perception, evidently, when everything resembled a charcoal drawing. We zoomed by towering objects Jayden called buildings. People loitered the streets, standing near or leaning against poles with lights attached to the tops of them.

Those I saw very well. They made things more silver instead of the muted gray. As much as the thick cloth strap pressed against my chest and lap allowed, I leaned forward.

Jayden had clicked the end into a small object to the side of me. It held me in place and was most cumbersome.

I felt...trapped.

“You call this a seat belt?” I pulled it away from my chest. I didn’t like the way it went between my breasts. And wearing someone else’s shirt made me feel so exposed. Though I enjoyed the musky scent clinging to the fabric.

“Yep. And this is a car and we’re going to my apartment—er—studio. It’s really my art studio, but—well—that’s where I live, too.”

“You are taking me to where you lay your head?”

“Sure.”

I was a stranger to him, a stranger to myself, even, yet he intended to take me to his home. I should probably be frightened by that, but I wasn’t. He seemed so kind, explaining everything with enviable patience.

Nothing rang familiar so far other than my name, but it felt like there was a task I needed to do or somewhere I should be. How could I have suddenly appeared, land on an unfamiliar cold surface, then stumble into the arms of this nice man named Jayden?

I rested my head back and turned it to the side. Through my veiled vision, a strain of color—strawberry, but lighter—trickled through as his hair shifted. It feathered over his ears and against his forehead but was no longer a sickly gray.

He glanced at me then forward again. “Are you okay?”

“I see some red in your hair. And yellow but mixed together. Is that—”

“The gal who cuts my hair tells me it’s strawberry blond.”

“That’s it. I see color.”

“It’s coming back. Maybe your memory will, too.” His hands gripped the wheel and turned it, one hand over the other. The car jostled.

A black square came into sight up ahead, and Jayden steered the vehicle toward it. My stomach dropped. I didn’t want to go into more darkness.

“No.” I reached to the side, grabbing for the door but couldn’t figure out how to make this contraption open. “Out.”

The tip of the car pointed downward, and my stomach rolled. We descended into the void. Fear rippled down my back. That familiar stinging sensation pricked at my spine again. Between the shoulder blades. It did that when I was scared before, too. What did that mean?

“Out. Out.”

“It’s okay. It’s only a parking garage,” Jayden said. “Then we take the elevator up to my studio.”

I sucked in a breath, but it didn’t fill my starving lungs. My heart ricocheted into my throat.

“Have to get out.” My lungs couldn’t keep enough air in them to finish the whole sentence. They burned.

“Just wait, light’s coming.” He rested his hand on mine, which was about to dent the center console I clutched. “There, see it?”

Ahead, a faint gray glow cut through the ebony blanket settled over my vision. “Yes.” I released the breath I’d held captive, and my lungs relaxed.

Was it the breath I’d let out or Jayden’s hand on mine that soothed me?

I kept my gaze fixed on his face as he stared ahead, maneuvering the car with his free hand. The light splashed over his face. This time a hint of red dusted his full lips. A ripple of gray shot through his jaw, and his lips pressed into a thin line. I looked forward to seeing what caused this but saw nothing to warrant his reaction. “What is it?”

“Um—well—you’re just squeezing a little hard.”

I snatched my hand away. I’d grabbed his fingers without realizing it.

“You’re strong for such a small thing.” He shook out his hand, but a smile curled the corner of his mouth up. He steered the vehicle between two thick, light-colored lines and it stopped moving.

“Here we are.” He leaned across me, pulled a silver handle forward, and my door clicked open. “Let me get this.” He pressed a button, and the strap across my chest recoiled into the wall.

I stepped out, and my feet met a frigid, hard surface. For the first time, I saw the rest of my body. Jayden was right, I was small. Standing flat-footed, I wasn't able to see over the roof of the car. I smoothed my hand down the front of the button-up shirt Jayden had given me. The ends brushed my knees. I hugged it close, and his spiced scent wrapped around me.

Wait, if I felt cloth against my stomach...I pulled the neck of the shirt away and looked down. A piece of fabric barely covered my chest. My pants ended mid-thigh. If I understood my hazy vision correctly, the tips of the frayed edges were black.

So, I hadn't been *completely* naked.

"Trinity?" Jayden stood in front of me. A strap of material over his shoulder held a square object at his side. "Come on." He waved me to him, then guided me toward more light.

A glass box with a door. Jayden reached for the silver handle and pulled it open. A whooshing sound sent a wave of pressure over me. The smell of meat cooking triggered a roar in my stomach. I hopped onto the soft ground. It was warm and smooth, with some give to it.

Jayden pointed ahead of us to two more sets of doors. "I'm on the top floor."

The thick, padded surface felt like cotton against my cold feet. More color bled into my vision. "Is this ground we walk on red?"

"It's called carpet. Um— Burgundy is the color."

He leaned forward and pressed a round button with a triangle in the center. It lit up. “White,” I said. “I see white.”

A ding sounded, and the slate doors in front of me rolled apart, revealing a box with more red flooring. A wood railing halfway up outlined three of the walls. Two big signs with drawings on them decorated the top half of the wall. I peeked my head inside. A faint smoky scent clung to the air.

“It’s okay. Go in,” he said.

A sliver of silver separated the flow of the red carpet. A threshold to cross. My stomach roared again, demanding food. Something about that box he called an elevator didn’t sit right with me. Sure, it had lights perched in the ceiling, but still...

“The doors will shut if you don’t step in.”

I sucked in a deep breath and stepped over the threshold into yet another strange contraption. First the vehicle then an elevator. Why didn’t I know what any of these things were? Had I never been in them?

Or did I truly not remember anything? How’d I know how to walk and talk, though? And how did I know the button Jayden pressed once he entered the box was the number seven?

The whirl of the doors closing, and the sudden jerk of the box moving rattled my intestines. I shot my arms out to the side to balance myself. I inched closer to Jayden. The warmth radiating from his arm so close to mine settled me. Plus, with

my bare feet, bare legs, and thin shirt over my top half, I was cold.

“What is that thing you carry?”

“Portfolio. I was walking to my car after dropping off one of my pieces to a customer when I found you.” He shook his head. “You almost caused a five-car pileup on Central Avenue walking out in the street with barely anything on.”

I hugged my stomach, cheeks sizzling with embarrassment.

“Then, when you stopped at that person’s fire...” Jayden shifted the portfolio.

I stared at my muddied toes.

“That was a rough part of town to land in, you know?”

I caught his wide-eyed stare. He must be at least a head taller than me. His hair shifted across his forehead as his slate eyes fastened on me, and a soothing heat bubbled in my stomach.

I wasn’t sure what possessed me to reach out and grab his hand, but I did. It felt as smooth as I’d imagined. But what I enjoyed most was the calm sensation flooding through my fingertips into my arm. Such a soothing wave of energy.

His pupils blackened, eating up all of the gray—whatever color his eyes really were—and his nostrils flared.

Ding!

That ring shattered the connection with Jayden, and I jumped. The box swayed then hitched, finally stopping. The

doors rolled open and a cozy, yet cluttered room lay before me. A familiar, nostril-stinging smell singed my nose hairs again. It was the same scent I'd picked up from Jayden mixed in with his essence.

He moved forward and, since I still held his hand, so did I.

“Let me show you to the bathroom so you can get cleaned up while I find some food. Does that sound okay?” Jayden asked as he let the shoulder strap slide down his arm. He released my hand, much to my dismay.

“This box opens to your home?”

“Only if you have a key pass.” He winked. “Come on. Let's get you to the bathroom so you can get cleaned up and fed.”

I wasn't following much of what he said, but I did pick up the word fed. That one I knew and considering I didn't remember anything about myself, who knew the last time I'd eaten.

Hopefully, once my stomach was full, I'd remember something.

Anything.

FOUR

THIS THING JAYDEN CALLED a shower was the most amazing contraption ever.

The steaming hot streams of water pounding on my skin worked out the knots in my neck. I almost felt relaxed despite not being able to remember anything yet.

At least my sight was nearly fully restored. Although hazy, almost everything that *should* have color did. But what I found myself most excited about was seeing Jayden.

I reached back to wash my neck with the dark blue sponge-like thing. My fingers grazed over two ridges, on either side of my spine. I stretched as far as I could, but the ridges didn't end.

What the heck could it be?

When I had stood in front of the mirror analyzing my looks before I got into the shower, nothing about my shoulder-length brown hair or golden-colored eyes held any familiarity to me. I hadn't detected anything on my back, but then again, I hadn't seen it in the reflection, either.

I turned the knob, and the water stopped.

The blue, fluffy towel felt like heaven against my skin. I wrapped it tight around me, tucking it beneath my armpits. The flash of the golden band around my left wrist caught my attention.

No seam on the thing. How had this gotten on my wrist?

A knock rattled the door.

“Trinity?” Jayden’s voice trickled through the wood.

“I’m here.”

“I found you some clothes. Can I come in?”

I tightened the towel around me. “Yes.”

The door clicked open, and Jayden filled the doorframe, but all I saw were the emerald green eyes. Jewels perched beneath thick blond eyebrows. His strawberry-blond wisps of hair framed flawlessly smooth, olive skin.

I liked the green much better than the dull grays and black.

He held out a bundle of clothing. “I think these’ll fit you. I—well—are you feeling okay?”

“Much better, thank you.” I reached for his offering. How come he had girls’ clothing in his studio?

“Get dressed. I have some food cooking, then we’ll talk, okay?” He stepped back.

“Oh. Wait. Jayden. May I ask another favor?”

He nodded.

“I can’t see on my back, but I felt something strange there.”
I showed him my back.

“I need to shift this down a little.” Two gentle tugs later and a hint of air touched my bare back.

Silence.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I—um—well there’s a—” He brought his hand toward me but didn’t touch my skin. “You have two long lines along the sides of your spine. They’re purple-ish and have ridges.”

“How long?”

“Nearly twelve inches. Here. You look.”

“I can’t see back there. I—”

“Use the mirror.”

“It reflects my face; how can it see my back?”

A grin replaced his sour look. “I can’t believe you don’t know what a mirror is. Here, look.”

He guided me in front of the sink. I stared at my reflection. Jayden stood behind me, to the side, with one hand on each of my shoulders. Gently, he turned me around, and I faced him. More accurately his chest. A deep breath gifted me with the scent I’d already come to crave.

Musky, with a hint of spice—cedar maybe. But something stronger, too, a chemical.

Smudges of blue and green spotted the shoulder of his white shirt. Red and yellow smears marked the fabric over his

stomach. I touched the yellow one. “What is this?”

His chest rose, pressing close to me, and his breath shifted strands of hair onto my forehead. “Um—that’s paint. Here, turn just your head like you’re looking behind you, okay?”

His jaw flexed again, the muscles twitching something fierce. Didn’t make me want to look behind me. Instead, I’d rather curl my arms around his waist and rest my cheek on his big chest. Just felt like I’d be safe if I did that.

“Trinity?”

I straightened, then turned my head. Two long, purple lines paralleling my spine on both sides started above my shoulder blades and stretched to the middle of my spine. Several inches long, at least. The breath squeezed from my lungs at the sight.

“What is that?” I reached back and touched the first couple ridges. The skin was shiny and purple. About an inch wide. Notches that intertwined.

“Maybe you had surgery at some point?”

The marks were hideous. My stomach clenched. The noise it made resembled that of a wild beast.

“Look. Just get dressed and let’s get some food into that stomach.” He stepped to the side, his hands sliding from my shoulders.

I closed my eyes, willing myself not to cry, but tears still stung. *Everything will be okay, Trinity.* I had to keep telling myself that, or I’d crumble to the tile floor in a puddle of tears.

The door clicked closed, marking Jayden's exit.

Pushing through the fear of not knowing, I dressed in a hurry. I creaked the bathroom door open to sounds of chatter. I couldn't make out the words, but I recognized Jayden's voice.

Since I was still barefoot, I crept down the short hallway without making a sound against the hard wood floor. It took only five steps to make it to the end, and I peeked around the corner into a main room.

A large, full-grown oak tree could have fit in the apartment, the ceilings were so high. The entire house—er—studio as Jayden called it, was an open space. On the floor to my left lay a clutter of white boards and pads of paper propped against the wall and scattered about.

Scanning to the right led me to an enormous bed. Covers were rustled and bundled into a disarrayed mess. At the foot of the bed sat a dark brown wooden chest. The far wall, across the spacious room, consisted of only windows. It revealed a black void. Must be nighttime.

Wrought iron poles dressed with cream-colored cloth sectioned off a small space facing the wall of windows. A stand that held a sheet of blank paper, and a stool propped before it, were the only pieces of furniture in the partitioned space.

I stepped forward, venturing deeper into the vast room. To my left lay empty, open space until the elevator box.

I turned, and Jayden fell into my line of sight. He stood over a table, moving his free arm from a bowl to a plate and back with a spoon. The clean, tight, white shirt he wore clearly outlined each of his movements.

His other hand cupped the side of his head near the ear. Did he have an earache?

“No, Grace. It’s fine. Don’t come back to town,” he said.

I opened my mouth to ask him why he called me Grace, but he moved to the side. He pressed a small blue box to his ear. What was that thing?

“She’s harmless. Almost as small as Amy.”

“No, I’m not going to do that. You know I could never do that.”

Who were Grace and Amy?

I stepped into the area confined by the tapestries. They acted as walls to enclose the space that faced the dark windows.

“Grace, listen. Everything’s fine. No. I’m not going to call them. I’ll figure this out.”

“No. Doesn’t seem like she hit her head or anything. I wonder—”

“She’s *not* crazy. I have to help her. Can’t let—” His shoulders curved forward.

“Look. I’ll see you in a couple days. I have to go.”

“Yeah. You, too.”

He pulled the blue box from his ear, pressed the front of it. He glanced over his shoulder, and I ducked back behind the tapestry.

I faced the stand. It wasn't blank after all. It had the start of a pencil drawing. A faint outline of a figure, but I didn't see a model anywhere. Must be a drawing of something out the window the area faced. It was too dark to see anything, though.

“Trinity?”

I whirled around, my hands gravitating to my throat. “I was—um—I was just looking around.”

“That’s cool. Hungry?” He waved me in his direction as he backed from the space.

I followed him around the makeshift wall to where I’d seen him earlier. On top of the tall table sat two steaming plates of food, each with a fork and knife beside it and an empty glass at the head of the little settings.

“What’s this?” I asked as I peered into the dish. Smelled savory. “I’m very hungry.”

“Pasta,” Jayden said.

The table I stood at went to my chest, but there was a chair in front of it. A tall one that would probably get me to the height I needed to eat the food.

“You want something to drink? Water? Soda? Beer?” Jayden rounded the corner.

“Soda?”

“You don’t know soda? Pop. Coke? Pepsi?”

I shook my head as I pulled out the chair. “Water.” One push with my legs got me some height—so much I landed on the seat on my feet. “Whoa.”

Jayden faced me. “What?”

“Nothing.” As I settled onto the seat, I looked to the floor. It was at least three feet, maybe more. And I’d easily jumped that.

He yanked open one side of a tall, black contraption and something suctioned as he did. A light spilled out.

He reached in and pulled out a bottle of water.

“What is that?” I asked, pointing to what he took the water from.

“Refrigerator. Keeps things cold. Keeps food from spoiling.”

“Ah.”

“I can’t believe you don’t know that. You must be from another planet or something.”

Okay, that stung a little. I picked up the fork next to the bowl of pasta and took a stab. I obviously remembered what utensils were.

The salty taste of tomato exploded onto my tongue. Oh yes, this I knew. I’d had it before. Tomatoes picked fresh from the garden, sitting on a windowsill, flashed through my mind. The

noodles were vaguely familiar as well, only a little harder. I shoveled in another bite, then another until my cheeks must have resembled a chipmunk's after it'd gathered food for the winter.

“So, I don't totally suck at cooking, then,” Jayden said.

“I enjoy this pasta very much.”

He held my gaze.

“What?”

“You say *very much* a lot.” He held my gaze for a long breath, arms crossed over his chest.

I couldn't get enough of those green eyes. They were the color of grass, yet a swirl of topaz on the rim. I managed to shovel in another forkful while staring.

A grin curved his full lips, then he stepped to the side, breaking our connection. He turned back to the refrigerator and opened it again. That same suction sound occurred, and light spilled out. He reached in and came back holding a red, white, and blue object.

Oh, speaking of blue. “Jayden, where is that thing you spoke into earlier?”

He faced me and froze. “Um—you saw—did you hear?”

“You were talking to someone after all?” I filled my fork with the treasured food. “I heard only what you said, but there was another person talking into it as well?”

He strode around the corner of the table and set the object he'd pulled from the refrigerator next to his plate. He cranked a silver tab back, and it crackled. A fizzing sound followed. His fingers curled around the cylindrical object and poured a dark liquid into the glass from the small opening the tab had made.

On top of the dark liquid, a cream-colored foam formed, and little bubbles of air worked to the top of the brown water.

"This is soda," Jayden said. "Pepsi."

"Pepsi." I didn't know that word.

"You're sure there are no bumps on your head? No injuries anywhere?"

"I'm fine."

He offered that pleasant looking half smile again. I very much enjoyed looking at him. Mostly the brilliant eyes, but that smile was intoxicating as well.

"That blue thing?"

He leaned back in his chair and shoved his hand into his front pocket. I watched in earnest wondering what fun contraption would appear. Out came the blue object.

"This is a cell phone."

No bells rang on that one, either. I grabbed my bottled water and took a drink.

He set the device on the table, then loaded his fork with pasta. He reached over and pressed the front of the phone, and

small pictures filled the black screen.

“We make calls on this to other people. And we can surf the net, play games, do email.”

“Nope.” I scraped my plate clean and snatched my water. “Grace and Amy?”

His fork clanked against the plate, and he coughed. He brought his dark drink to his lips. After a few gulps he set the glass down. But he didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry, Jayden. I didn’t mean to listen to your private talk.” My gut churned the pasta I’d eaten into a rock-hard lead ball. My belly swelled against the pink T-shirt fabric now that it was full of food and water.

“It’s okay.” He gripped his neck and looked toward the ceiling. “It’s just been a long day.”

“It does feel late.”

“Nearly midnight.”

Must be, considering how dark the windows were. But it was hard to tell for sure without being outside.

Wait, I could tell time by being outside?

“But to answer your question.” He drew in a deep breath through his nose. “Amy’s my sister. You’re wearing her clothes.”

I patted my stomach and looked at the jeans I wore. They fit me perfectly. I didn’t understand the five frayed rips up the leg, though. Maybe they were so old they weren’t going to

mend them. I did like the shiny objects affixed to the back pockets.

“Will she mind I borrowed her clothes?”

He cleared his throat, eyes focused on the plate in front of him, yet he didn't eat.

I'd gone and upset him again.

“No. She won't mind you wearing her clothes. They're from when she was younger.”

“Oh. I see.” Really, I didn't, but his back shot straight, and his jaw flexed. I suddenly felt like I'd violated his privacy as I did when I'd listened to his cell phone conversation.

This place made no sense to me.

I ran my forefinger across the bottom of my plate, scraping the last bit of sauce and brought it to my mouth. I loved the taste of tomatoes.

“I could get you some more if you're still hungry.”

“Yes please. But maybe I could get it?” I slid off the high chair. Didn't much like those. I'd rather stand and eat.

“Sure. Um—it's on the stove there.”

I felt his eyes following me as I ambled around the table toward the thing he called a stove. The spoon rested in the puddle of red sauce. Pasta sat in a yellow container beside the stove. So, I used the sauce spoon to scoop up those little tubes.

The slick utensil slipped through my fingers and clanked against the wood floor. Sauce splattered, defacing my nice

pink shirt with red spots. I stumbled back. “Oh.”

“It’s okay.” Jayden jumped up from his chair.

“No. I will manage this.” I bent down and retrieved the spoon, then returned to the stove.

“I wouldn’t use that thing. My floor’s a mess. It’s probably contaminated.” Jayden eased back into his chair.

“Okay.” I set it aside. The long, silver thing protruding from the pan appeared to be the handle. I picked up the pan and reached for the other side to steady my hold to pour it straight from there.

“Wait, don’t touch that,” Jayden yelled.

Searing pain jolted through my hand. My heart exploded into a sprint. I peeled my fingers from the burning object and threw it to the ground. More red sauce splattered against me, in bigger splotches, and coated the floor and refrigerator.

Heat boiled at the base of my neck and scampered down my spine. Something tugged at the back of my shirt, and I expected Jayden to be there, grabbing me.

Instead, he bolted toward me, eyes fixed on my hand.

I followed suit. Skin bubbled on the surface of my forefinger and thumb. Blisters.

But as soon as the bubbles formed, they deflated and disappeared. Along with the pain.

Jayden grabbed my hand. “What the hell?” He flipped it over and back, then speared me with a stare. “What *are* you?”

FIVE

I DARTED FROM THE kitchen toward the elevator and hurdled the silver threshold to the center of the wobbly box. How had Jayden made this thing work before?

Oh, yeah. He pressed a round number. If we were on seven, *one* had to be where we entered, right?

I pressed it, and the button illuminated. A ding later the doors rolled closed.

“Wait. Trinity. I’m sorry.” Jayden came into sight as the doors snapped shut. “Shit.”

The box jerked, then fell downward. My stomach gurgled.

Where would I go? I had no idea where I was or what to do. But the look in Jayden’s eyes when the blisters disappeared was too much. Fear, disgust, and something else I couldn’t place hardened his features. But the fear, that hurt most. I’d scared him. Really scared him. And after he’d been so kind to me.

I’d moved faster than I ever thought imaginable, and my first thought was to get into the box that would take me away

from this place. But I was barefoot, wore a stained T-shirt and ripped jeans.

I backed against the wall, then slid down as the elevator swayed in its descent to the ground floor.

At least that was where I thought it would take me.

I stared at my open palm. Smooth as it was before the hot pan burned the flesh. How could that be possible? Not even a hint of an injury. I fisted my hand, then relaxed it again.

The repulsion contorting Jayden's face flashed before my closed eyelids. *What am I?* He'd only said out loud what I'd thought, so why had I run? Jayden had been nothing but fantastic to me. Took me in off the street, clothed and fed me, and then I bolted at the first hint of frustration on his part.

He had to be relieved I was gone. What could he do with me, anyway?

The elevator slowed as it neared the ground floor. I slid my fingers beneath my eyes, swishing away the tears. My heart hammered at the thought of what might lie behind the doors when they rolled open. Everything felt so foreign to me. I was so alone. Maybe I should push the number seven again and go back to Jayden.

No.

I needed to figure things out. Maybe if I could find the town's authority figure. A sheriff of some sort. Surely they had them here. Wherever here was.

The final ding rang, and the doors opened. I stepped onto the tile floor. A chill zipped up through my bare feet into my legs, and my teeth chattered. To my right, a harsh light splashed its artificial illumination against a wall of silver boxes. A number etched each one. Ahead lay another set of doors that led into the ever-present darkness outside. To my right, pieces of colored paper announcing Sales and Grand Openings littered a bright, white wall. Beside the postered wall was a gray door with a silver handle with a sign above it that read Stairs.

Clanking and muffled noise leaked from that entryway, like someone was coming. I scurried across the cold floor toward the dark windowed exit and pressed my hand against the glass. I glanced back at the door marked Stairs. Shadows flickered through the tiny, squared window a few feet above the handle.

I pushed the door open, and it led to another. I pressed the glass, but it didn't budge.

The silver bar across it had the word Push marked on it so I did. The door clicked, then flew open. I burst out into the darkness.

A blast of arctic air stung my bare arms and crippled my lungs. My toes flexed up so only the balls of my feet touched the cold cement. Across the street a building stood dark. To my left three people huddled together, talking. The tallest man, who had long, dark hair, looked at me and slapped at the guy standing beside him with the back of his hand.

The third one, a woman, eyed me with her chin tilted down toward her big chest. I went right and collided with someone. “Sorry.”

Dark eyes stared down at me. A wave of foul breath slammed into me. The world tilted slightly as I looked up at him.

He grabbed both of my shoulders. His lips curled up over yellow-stained teeth. One was the same color gold as the bracelet on my wrist. Maybe this man knew how to remove it. Or maybe where the person who made my bracelet lived?

“Where you going in such a hurry?” he asked.

“Please, can you help me? Do you know who made this?” I held up my golden-cuffed wrist.

The man’s eyes widened, and he jerked me to the side. He released one of my shoulders but clamped his fingers around the other even tighter. He dragged me toward the corner.

“Do you know where the person who made this lives?”

“Where’d you get that?” the man asked, never looking at me. “That’s worth a fortune. I could get...”

Stinging pain ignited at the base of my skull as he dragged me into darkness.

I didn’t know much, but I knew I was in trouble.

The pain in my back stabbed more, stinging me like a bee, only hundreds of them. I keeled forward, but the momentum of the guy tugging at me kept me upright. My stomach

clenched and my mouth watered, preparing my body to purge everything I'd just eaten.

“No..” My voice cracked as tears sprung. “Please don't.”

The ripping pain jolted down my spine again. It started at the top and moved agonizingly slow. My shirt shifted like someone tugged it from behind. I turned around but saw only the three people at the other end of the building.

Why weren't they helping me? The curly-haired girl huffed and turned to her two friends. I reached back to feel what was pulling at my top.

Nothing. Searing hot energy pulsed through my blood. Bones crackled as I felt movement beneath my shirt.

“Jayden,” I screamed. His was the only name I knew.

My voice must have exposed the panic gripping my intestines, because the guy stuttered to a stop.

“Trinity?” Jayden's voice sent a wave of relief over me.

“Here!” My throat burned I yelled so loud.

The guy shoved me against the brick wall then ran. The sound of his plodding footsteps trailed him into the darkness of the alley. I stumbled to the ground on all fours and heaved all the pasta and water I'd consumed. The acid burned my mouth almost as much as the pain searing my back.

“Trinity.” Jayden fell beside me. His warm hand settled on my shoulder. “Are you hurt? Are you—”

“Guy.” I gulped a breath. “Ran.” I pointed down the way. “Tried—”

“No,” Jayden yelled. “Did he hurt you?” He hopped to his feet. His chest heaved. His hands lay fisted by his side, and his body shook. “Please tell me he didn’t hurt you.”

“You scared him away. What’s on my back?”

Jayden whirled around. “Your back?” His gaze shifted up some. “Nothing. Did he hit you?” He stepped closer, hand outstretched.

I pushed myself up to my knees. “No. I’m okay.”

“Come on. Let’s get inside. It’s not safe out here.”

“Where are we? Why would that man try to hurt me?”

“This isn’t the best area of town.” He reached for me. “Let’s go.”

“No. You’ve done enough already. I should—um—is there a sheriff or someone in authority in this place who can help me figure out who I am?”

“I’ll take you to them tomorrow. But for now, we need to get off the streets.”

I stood. The light from the streetlamp behind him bounced off the gold around my wrist. “The man wanted my bracelet.”

He guided me by the elbow around the corner. The group of three still stood outside the building next to Jayden’s. The tall guy with long golden hair streaked with violet raised his chin in our direction. “Yo, Jay, she with you?”

“Yeah, Luke.”

“Sorry, man. Didn’t know.”

The girl eyed me with contempt, but the two men’s gazes softened. I smacked my dry, sour lips. What kind of strange place was this that they would stand by and do nothing to help me?

“Just watch out for her, okay?” Jayden said as he pulled open the first round of doors. “She’s new to town, doesn’t know her way yet.”

New to town? I was new to *everything*.

“Welcome to Crimesville USA, Jayden’s friend,” the man named Luke said. He dipped his head toward me, and his buddy followed suit.

So, Jayden knew these horrible people who didn’t help me when the man was trying to hurt me? Jayden guided me into his building with his hand on the small of my back.

I stopped in front of him, just before we got to his elevator box. “How did you get down here? I was in this contraption.”

“Stairs. You were quick in the apartment. I couldn’t get to you before the doors closed. Are you really okay?”

“No. That man tried to hurt me and those people you know didn’t even try to assist me. I don’t understand. This place is very confusing.”

“Look. I don’t live in the best neighborhood. But Luke and his buddy watch out for me a little. Promise me you won’t run

out again.” He squeezed my shoulder tight. “I don’t know what town you’re from, but here, it’s not safe for you to be alone outside after dark.”

His bright eyes had darkened to a muted shade of green. His jaw clenched tight.

“Promise.”

“But—”

“No buts. You could get hurt. Like you almost did. I can’t let that happen again—” He coughed into his hand and shifted his weight from one foot to another. “Just swear it.”

The strangest vibe rolled off him in tangible waves. Sorrow and anger, yet a tenderness I craved. He didn’t know me, yet he worried for me. Cared what happened to me for some reason.

The elevator dinged, and the doors began to ease open. Why did he even care? He thought I was some creature who didn’t get hurt when she touched something hot.

“Where is this place?” My voice squeaked through my thick throat.

He ushered me into the box. I went to the back wall and clung to the railing.

“You mean where is this apartment? Here in Berg.”

“Is that the name of your district?”

“District?” Jayden shook his head and pressed number seven.

I slid to the floor and sat, but I still held the railing. It grounded me, but my legs couldn't hold me anymore. Fatigue robbed them of their strength.

“We're in Berg. A town in Minnesota.” He plopped down beside me and leaned against the hard wall. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. His hands lay on his outstretched thighs.

Something dark clung to his nails, his fingers were dried and cracked, and his jeans were ripped, much like the ones I wore. It wasn't just Amy's jeans that were in dire need of repair.

The whirl of the elevator bringing us to the top lulled me into a stupor. That was until the ding and jerking of the elevator startled me. The doors slid open, but Jayden made no move to get up.

I glanced out the open doors into the only place I recognized. His studio. I loosened the grip I had on the railing, and my heavy arm flopped to my side. The metal around my wrist brushed against my jeans with a dull thud.

Not wanting to get up, I pulled my knees to my chest, wrapped my arms around them and rested my forehead on the scratchy material covering my legs. Jayden's arm coiled around my shoulders, and soon, I sat nestled beneath his warm, protective arm. I rested my cheek to his chest, curled tighter into myself, and heaved a long sigh. I seemed to fit perfectly under his wing. Like I was small for that very reason.

My eyelids grew heavy, and in the next instant, I slipped into darkness.

But this time it was okay. Jayden would protect me from the black void.

Right?

SIX

“SHE’S BEEN DOWN TWENTY-EIGHT hours.” Jayden’s voice sounded far away. Muffled.

“How’s that possible?” someone else asked.

I didn’t recognize that voice, but it thrust me closer to consciousness. I must still be sleeping or dreaming.

“Just really tired I guess. Come on, I need a drink,” Jayden said. “Or twelve.”

I finally worked my way to consciousness and found myself in a big, soft bed. A heavy blanket formed to my body and an earthy scent wafted from it.

Jayden.

The smell and the thought of his name brought the image of his face to the forefront of my brain. Bright green eyes and smooth olive skin. Last thing I’d remembered was sitting next to him on the elevator floor, tucked neatly beneath the shelter of his strong arm.

Bubbling warmth tickled my lower stomach as my thoughts dwelled on him.

I pulled the blanket away and my gaze landed on my spaghetti-sauce-splattered shirt and jeans. But on the chair next to the bed lay a fresh shirt and a pair of brown sandals.

I didn't see Jayden anywhere. I'd heard him talking to someone earlier, though, I was sure of it.

Carrying my new shirt and sandals, I scurried around the bed and shot into the bathroom. I smacked my lips for some moisture but found none. One quick turn of the knob and water flowed. I positioned my hands beneath the stream and cupped some to my mouth. Cool and refreshing, but it didn't chase the foul taste from my mouth. To the left of the sink sat a tube of toothpaste and a small brush. *That* I recognized.

Within minutes I stepped from the bathroom, tongue running over freshly cleaned teeth and my hands smoothing down the front of my new red shirt. The soft cotton clung to my body so closely it felt like a second skin. But the fabric didn't cover my shoulders, which left me free to move my arms without restriction.

I opened my mouth to call out Jayden's name when I heard laughter. It sounded far away, yet near at the same time. Like it came from the end of a long tunnel.

I crept toward the tapestry-walled space and snuck a peek. Papers littered the floor. All had markings on them. But what caught my attention most was the one still perched on the easel. It could have been a mirror reflecting my face.

White paper and dark strokes of black so perfectly in tune with one another formed an identical image of me. I knew my

hair was brown from having seen it in a mirror, but Jayden had captured on paper the exact length of it, resting on my shoulder. He'd even replicated the slight curl some of my strands held.

My eyes had a halo of black rubbed into a muted gray. In the bottom right-hand corner of the sheet it read, *Amy's Angel*, by Jayden Brown.

I fisted my hand in the fabric of my shirt just above my heart. I thought maybe it'd crack through my chest, it pounded so hard. I swept my gaze over the sheets on the floor. Twenty variations of me looked up. I squatted down, knees close to my chest, and balanced on the tips of my toes as I shuffled the papers. One of me looking up at something, half finished with only my nose, eyes, and some of my hair. Another of me looking down—my face with only a few wisps of hair.

A third one showed me curled up in a tiny ball. Knees to chest, arms wrapped around them, and lying on a blanket.

I stood from my crouch. Holding the drawing of me in the fetal position, I faced the wall of windows. Brilliant strokes of purple and crimson ignited like a rainbow of flame against the sky. My heart pounded, reminding me to breathe. I glanced at the easel one last time, then stepped back, in search of the voices I'd heard earlier.

Around the corner of the tapestry wall, I found a door that led to a landing of some sort. It was cracked open, and the voices seemed louder from that direction.

I stood in the shadow of a tall beam, supporting the windows that spanned the entire length of the studio.

The back of Jayden's blond head came into view. He was sitting, back to me, in a chair next to another person. Black hair.

I crept forward. Jayden's arm was perched on the armrest, but his hand held a dark brown bottle, and it hung out over the edge. It moved against the chair, and the clank sounded like glass hitting metal.

"Shit, what do I know, anyway?" the stranger said.

"This is crazy. I don't know this chick." Jayden raised the bottle toward him, but the back of the chair he sat in prevented me from seeing. Liquid sloshed. "But she's—there's something about her."

"What are you going to do with her? Dude, you slept on the couch, didn't you?"

"I *haven't* slept. You saw my studio. All I did was draw."

"And you drew *her*," the black-haired guy said.

"Can't explain it. They're just flooding me...the ideas. *Her.*"

"What's Grace going to think about that?"

Grace? Who was Grace? Another sister maybe? Like Amy?

"She's not gonna like it, I can tell you that much for sure." He set the bottle on the floor next to his chair and leaned

forward. He tunneled his fingers through his hair and stared straight ahead.

I couldn't help but follow his line of sight. The purple had faded into a solid orange and red combination. *Beautiful.*

“You know Grace is going to freak when she finds out Trinity stayed in your apartment all night. Not to mention slept in your bed.” The man coughed. “You taking Trinity to the cops today? Turn her over?”

“Yeah. I have to. I mean, what can I do with her? Zander, she didn't even know what a refrigerator was. Or a hot pan.”

Did Jayden tell this man he called Zander about my injury healing so quickly? His friend didn't seem too happy, and the one named Grace didn't sound like she would be happy, either.

My presence seemed to cause much frustration. I eyed the drawing in my hand. I felt like such a baby. Unable to care for myself. I should be stronger.

Maybe Jayden could take me to the place where he found me. Perhaps something would feel familiar when I saw where I'd been. Like hearing my name. That clicked right away.

Then again, so did the feeling of warmth and protection when I nestled against Jayden in the elevator. He couldn't possibly be that for me. I fell into his life by chance. He didn't recognize me, so I couldn't have known him from before.

I reached for the door. They'd obviously not heard me, despite the flopping sound my sandals made. The strip of leather between my big toe didn't feel natural, but it must be

the style, because the shoes I wore were similar to those Jayden had worn the other night.

And they kept the bottoms of my feet from feeling the cool wooden floors.

I pulled the door all the way open. The creak cut through the silence and Jayden jumped up from his seat. His foot knocked over the bottle.

“Trinity,” Jayden said.

The other man turned his head and stared at me with wide, gray eyes. Curly hair flopped over his forehead, but his bushy black eyebrows arched, pushing some of the curls up. “Wow, you really are tiny.”

“Zander,” Jayden said.

I hugged my midsection. So, I was smaller than most, big deal. Now that I thought about it, almost everyone I’d met, that I could remember, towered over me. Great. One more item to add to the ever-growing list of things that made me different.

Jayden stood, staring at me like I had something shiny on my face. I glanced at the one he called Zander then back to Jayden. Behind him, the tip of the sun crested the distant horizon.

I stepped outside and to the railing surrounding the flat slab of hard surface. I rested my arms on the cool metal and stared forward, still holding the drawing I’d rolled into a tube. I’d not

seen the view, but I instantly understood the need for the wall of windows and why the easel faced it.

Waves from a large body of water lapped against the rocks below the building. Rays of sun spilled over the horizon, leaving long trails of red and orange bouncing off the swaying water. Damp yet surprisingly crisp air refreshed my lungs.

Hair slid across my face as the breeze swirled around me, and I closed my eyes. It carried a scent of musk as well, unmistakably Jayden's.

"It's finally morning," I said.

"You slept through the morning and an entire day. It's the next day's sunrise." Jayden leaned in beside me. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay. I'm sorry, I know it made you upset when I listened to your conversation into the cell phone, but I heard you talking out here."

He arched an eyebrow at me then looked at his hands dangling over the side of the railing. Darkness tainted the tips of his forefinger and middle finger and his thumb. The side of his hand as well. "You heard?"

"What are *cops*? Are they someone who manages this place?"

Zander chuckled behind me, but I focused on the stunning sight before me instead of him. I didn't care if he laughed. I only wanted to know what Jayden meant by bringing me into the cops.

“They’re the police. They make sure we follow the laws,” Jayden said.

“Makes sense. We should go to them, right? They might have record of me.” Red rays from the rising sun bounced off the gold encircling my wrist and flashed their brilliance on Jayden’s cheek. “Will they know of this?”

“Don’t think so, but we can try.”

“Thank you for the fresh clothes and toothpaste and toothbrush.” I looked down to my shoes. “These sandals are comfortable as well. How do you have these things?”

“Zander brought them.”

His friend still sat in the chair, holding the dark glass bottle. Three more lay on the floor to the right of his chair. As they did beside Jayden’s chair. I leaned toward Jayden and smelled an acidic odor, and not the one I’d noticed mixing with his musky scent like before. This one was more distinct. Almost heady. Mostly it emanated from his mouth when he talked.

I looked to Zander again. “Thank you for the clothes and bathroom things.”

“No problem. The wife had some extra lying around. My youngest is about your size, so I grabbed some of her clothes.”

“Youngest?” I asked.

“I have two rug rats. Thirteen and fifteen.” He brought the dark bottle to his mouth and gulped.

“So, I am thirteen, then?” I asked Jayden.

“I highly doubt that, but you’re as small as one. *Mostly.*”

Jayden’s eyes shifted down, then forward toward the sunrise.

“I see why the space where you draw faces this direction. I, too, would very much like to look at this view every morning.” I pulled in a deep breath through my nose. “Inspiring.”

“Really? You think that?” Jayden asked.

“How could anyone not?” I whispered. “I found this on the floor.” I held up the drawing then and peeled it open. “And many more. I like them very much, Jayden.”

Redness tipped the edges of his high cheekbones, and he looked forward again, then down to his darkened fingers.

“Your hands. Are they injured?”

“It’s charcoal, that’s how you blend it out to get different shades. I just—well—Zander and I’ve been hanging out here for a bit, I haven’t washed them yet.”

“You drew these of me. Why?”

He fastened his gaze on me. His mouth opened as if to speak, but then snapped shut. He drew in a deep breath through his nose and clenched his jaw.

“Have I upset you again?” I asked. “I seem to do that a lot.”

“No. It’s okay. I—well—”

“He hasn’t drawn a lick until you dropped onto the scene,” Zander said, joining Jayden on the other side. He dangled his hands over the edge, too, but one still held the dark bottle.

“What do you mean?” I leaned forward. “Hasn’t drawn a lick?”

“Nada. Zero. Nothing. No drawing. No painting. Nothing. For twelve whole months.” He drank from the bottle, then let out a long sigh through a tight jaw. “Then you sleep for twenty-eight hours straight, and he’s drawn more pictures than he has in all of the last two years combined.”

Jayden stared straight ahead. The red of the sun brightened his face. Brown specks from his irises ignited like little bolts of lightning. Black lashes darted out from his lids, so long that they almost touched his light eyebrows.

A dark smudge on his cheekbone marred his otherwise flawless, smooth skin. I brushed my knuckles down the side of his face, erasing the mark.

He turned toward me, and a smile curled his lips, crinkling the skin around his eyes.

“Yeah. I should be able to sell a few of those. It’s about time, too, it’s been a while,” Zander said.

“You sell your artwork?” I whispered to Jayden. “Oh. That’s right. When you found me, you were delivering a piece, right?”

He nodded.

“The one on your easel. It says *Amy’s Angel*.”

“It’s nothing. Just a title.” Jayden pushed himself from the railing. “Are you hungry?” He grabbed the bottles next to his chair.

I couldn't get a read on him. One minute smiling, then darkness claimed his eyes like I'd done something wrong. I must be such a burden on him.

Zander turned and leaned against the railing. I wasn't sure how he could turn his back on such a beautiful sunrise. Three quarters of the way up from the horizon of water, the sun beamed its early morning heat on my face.

"When is it?" I asked.

"Sorry?" Zander asked.

I turned toward him and glanced over my shoulder. Jayden had gone inside, leaving the door open.

"Season?"

"Spring." He turned around again and planted his elbows on the railing.

"Feels cold, still." I rubbed my hands over my bare arms. "But not too cold."

"It's nearly the end of May, so it's starting to warm up. We're lucky so far this spring. Not usually this warm yet. Still thawing out from nine months of snow." Zander laughed, and it echoed into his bottle.

"You are Jayden's friend?" I asked, staring at the fireball rising in the clear, blue sky.

"And his agent."

"Agent?" I could tell Zander was tall, even though he leaned forward. Maybe Jayden's height. His hair was black, like the

coal Jayden used on my sketches, but some gray dusted right above his ears.

“I help him sell his artwork.” He winked a long-lashed eye at me. “Thank you for dropping into his life.”

“Excuse me?”

“He hasn’t had a sale in over a year.”

“The other night he was delivering a piece.”

“Sold *thirteen* months ago. He’d just finished it.”

“Good work takes time.”

“Not for him. You saw all those drawings he did of you. And in less than thirty hours.” Zander stood, crossing his arms over his chest. He towered me by almost two feet.

“How tall are you?”

“Six-one.”

“How tall do you think I am?”

“Four-foot-ten tops.”

“That’s short I assume.” I shook my head. “Okay, so, why’d it take so long to finish the last drawing?”

He held my gaze for a long time as if trying to read my face. I looked over the water again. Being so high up provided a great view. Unbelievable how scary the place was in the dark, though.

“He hit a block,” Zander said, then stepped toward his chair. “So, what’s your story?”

“Don’t have one yet.” He must have known that would be my answer. Surely Jayden told him of my situation. “You must be good friends with Jayden to be here so early.”

“Artists hold strange hours. Jayden’s one of the best—well—when he’s working.” Zander smiled, his slate eyes twinkling. “He called me asking advice on how to handle you.”

“Handle?” My heart rate spiked.

“You slept nearly thirty hours, Trinity. Barely moved from what he told me. He was worried.” Zander picked up the three other bottles by sticking his fingers in the openings. “You’re so small, he thought you might fit into some of my Lizzy’s clothes and that you might need some things when you woke up.”

“Oh.” Jayden worried for me? Why?

“I can see why he cares what happens to you.”

“Why?” I stood straight.

“You remind him of his sister, Amy.”

“Will Amy be coming over soon? I’d like to thank her for the clothes of hers I was wearing, along with you. Thank you for bringing me these things. The shoes feel very nice.”

“You’re welcome. And no, Amy won’t be stopping by. She ___”

“Ready for some food?” Jayden said from the open door. I hadn’t even heard him approach.

Hopefully it wasn't because of me that Amy refused to come here.

“Um, yes. Thanks. Then, could you take me to where you found me? I'd very much like to see the place. Maybe it'll help me remember something.”

Jayden nodded. “Sure. It's on the way to the police station.”

I was so very ready to go find out who I was.

SEVEN

I DIDN'T LIKE THIS whole driving thing. With all these people milling around. I was sure we'd hit one.

"There sure are a lot of people here," I said, looking out the car window.

"It's noon. That's lunch hour for most of these businesses," Jayden said.

The meaning of lunch hour eluded me, but I kept quiet. Jayden must be sick of me asking him about everything.

I wanted to ask him more about Amy, but I decided it made him angry because the last couple of times I'd mentioned her name, he'd gotten that twitch in his jaw. So, I decided to try another.

"Who is Grace?"

Jayden coughed and looked at me, then back out the big front window of the car. "Grace?"

"Is she another sister?"

"Oh. Um no. She's—well—she's my girlfriend."

“Will I get to meet her?” So far I liked Jayden’s friends.

“She’s—um—Grace is out of town until tomorrow.”

“Oh.” I glanced out the window, hoping something would look familiar. Feel familiar. *Anything*. “Are we almost to the place where you found me?”

He nodded. “Five minutes.”

In five minutes, I might know more about what happened to me. What if I didn’t recognize anything? Maybe someone would remember me and could tell me what happened.

“Jayden?”

“Yeah.”

“Why haven’t you drawn anything in a very long time like Zander said?”

His jaw tensed, and his knuckles blanched around the steering wheel. “Can’t really dictate art. If the ideas aren’t there, or the passion isn’t there, then nothing gets drawn.”

“And you have passion now?”

I could see only one side of his face, but his cheek turned red, like the tomatoes he had put on the sandwiches he’d made for us to eat.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No. Um—it just works that way sometimes with art. Inspiration comes and goes.” The car veered to the right, and I leaned into it. That much I’d learned. Otherwise, you got

thrashed around, especially how quickly Jayden powered the car.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Zander?”

“He’s pushing forty-five.”

“Pushing?”

He laughed. “Just a saying. He’s forty-four years old. Going to be forty-five—oh crap. It’s Friday today. Surprise party tonight.” Jayden leaned back and dug into the front pocket of his jeans and pulled out the blue cell phone.

His thumb pressed several spots on the phone, and then he put it to his ear. “Hang on a sec, I have to call Karen.”

“Karen?”

“Zander’s wife.”

The side streets were crowded with people walking all directions. Some held phones to their ears as Jayden did. Some had white things stuck in their ears.

Must be some sort of hearing device.

The sun peeked between two tall buildings when we turned on First Avenue. I closed my eyes and tilted my face toward the warm beams. My lungs searched for the crisp, fresh air they craved, but only stale heavy air filled them.

“Yeah, hi, um Karen, it’s Jay. I—”

Silence.

I turned to Jayden. His mouth was frozen open. I looked around wondering what he saw.

Nothing other than a few people hurrying across the street to avoid his car. Jayden maneuvered the vehicle into a small parking space then moved the lever on the center console up all the way.

“I—no, she’s fine. Thank you for the bag you packed.” Jayden glanced at me. “Look, I forgot about Z’s party. What time am I supposed to be there again?”

“I know. I’m sorry. I—”

I pressed the button to release the belt for the seat and straightened my shirt.

“No. I shouldn’t bring her. It’s—”

“Karen, no. Grace would—”

More silence. His smooth forehead creased, and his jaw muscles twitched. Something the other person said had made him angry.

I didn’t much care for that.

He tilted the phone from his mouth. “Trinity, we can get out now. Just pull that—”

“I remember.” I pulled the silver handle, and the door clicked open. Jayden did the same and hopped out of the car.

“I know you don’t like Grace, but she’s still my—”

He shook his head. I shut my door, then stepped back from the car. It hissed, like water dripped on something hot. Several brown and orange spots bubbled on the blue surface of the car, near the tires and on the front of the car.

Jayden leaned against the door he'd shut. I couldn't hear what he said, but suddenly his arm shot up toward the sky, and he turned around.

His green eyes made me smile every time I saw them, and this time was no different. I stepped back and to the side to move around the metal pole sticking up from the cement ground so I could go to him. Something slammed into my shoulder. Felt like I'd walked right into a brick wall.

I stumbled back, but my feet moved fast enough to catch my weight. A tall woman with long, blond hair leered down at me.

Jayden hurried around the front of the car, phone still pressed to his ear. Determined to not run to him, I planted my feet wide, to stay balanced. I was so sick of being this helpless frail little thing.

"Fine, I'll bring her. See you at six." He dropped the phone into his front pocket. "Trying to play 'tackle the Amazon gods'?"

My mouth fell open. Did he just speak a different language?

He laughed and reached for my hand. "Come on, it's this way."

He tugged me to follow him but released my hand once I was beside him. "That chick was huge, you handled yourself

pretty well.”

Okay, I didn't understand what he meant, but his wide, face-filling grin told me all was well, so I went with it. I would have enjoyed it more if I held his hand again, though.

Such crazy thoughts I had about Jayden. His warmth comforted me. When I was near him, my heart felt calm and relaxed. I found it so strange, yet invigorating.

We rounded the corner of a tall brick building and Jayden slowed.

“Is this it?”

He nodded and motioned for me to step near the side of the building next to him. Through the sea of people, I saw a street overflowing with different colored cars. Some taller, some longer, some more like a box but some shaped like a bug I'd seen on Jayden's bathroom floor earlier.

Such chaos. It was difficult to focus on anything, let alone relax to see if something felt familiar. Past the flow of cars was another sidewalk adjacent to a shorter building. The window had a picture of a plate and a cup with a spoon next to it. That must mean a place to eat food.

At least I'd hoped, because my stomach had started growling all of a sudden. Off to my left there was a green pole. Thick at the bottom then thinned at the top. It wasn't as high as the buildings, but from it sprang a branch that held three round lights.

Green, yellow, and red.

Two thick white lines painted the street and people walked between them from one side of the street to the other.

Like herding livestock.

Wait, I knew about herding livestock?

“I first saw you when you were walking across the street there.” He pointed in the direction I’d been facing. “In that crosswalk. But it wasn’t green so you shouldn’t have been in the crosswalk. Two cars swerved to avoid hitting you. It was like they hadn’t seen you or something.”

My heart rate spiked. I inched closer to him.

“I’d already made my way across and was heading that way.” He pointed to his right, down the side of the building we were leaning against. “I’d parked there, see where that red car is at the end of the road?”

“Yes.”

“When I heard the tires squeal, I turned around and saw you wandering through the street. Arms out in front of you. Hair all over the place and your clothes looked burned. Fried on the edges like you’d walked through a fire or something. And, well—um—your shirt didn’t cover much. But your skin wasn’t burned like when it was with the pan.”

My stomach fell to my feet at the mention of burning my hand. The blister stayed only seconds before fading away.

“There was dark stuff, almost like my charcoal, on your face and some on your legs and arms. Oh, and you were barefoot.

It'd just rained so it was really wet, and you were sloshing through the puddle of water that accumulated on a sewer lid.”

“I remember cold on my feet.” I inched closer to Jayden. He calmed the nerves threatening to throw me into a state of panic. “Loud sounds, too. But I was coming from the other side? Like near that little building with the cup painted on the window?”

Jayden nodded.

“Is there a chance I was eating at that place over there?” I pointed across the street. “It feels a little familiar, but maybe it’s because I’m very hungry right now.”

“You sure eat a lot.”

“The pasta the other night doesn’t count. I regurgitated that when I was attacked. Then I slept for so long. That leaves much to make up for, right?”

His lips curved into a smile, and he fastened his gaze on me. Heat flushed my cheeks and trickled to my neck.

“Okay, Trinity, let’s go get you some food and see if it jogs anything loose for you.”

“I have no idea what you said other than getting some food. But that part, I agree with very much.” I stepped forward.

A warm hand gently gripped the nape of my neck, then slid down slightly and urged me forward. Jayden stayed a fraction behind me, guiding me with his gentle touch.

A pulse of electricity zipped through my spine to where he touched me. Heat pooled in my stomach, and my knees weakened. Suddenly my heart pounded, and my breaths came in quick gasps.

I looked around wondering if we were in danger of some sort, but didn't see anything other than people buzzing around. Jayden stared straight ahead.

His hand drifted down, to nearly between my shoulder blades. Claps of thunder ignited within my head. The heat pulsing through my veins was so intense I thought I might melt into a puddle soon. He yanked his hand from my neck.

Instantly the heat flooding my body dissipated.

“Are you okay? Are you remembering something?” he asked.

“Not sure. Um, I'm feeling weird. Like, ahhh, weak knees. And shaky.” I held my hand out, palm down. It vibrated with a little tremor.

“You must really be hungry.” He hurried me across the street, and by the time we reached the other side the shaking and bubbling heat vanished.

Both of Jayden's hands were in his front pockets.

Wait a minute, had his touch caused the soothing, heady rush of warmth inside me?

EIGHT

“AMAZING STORY.” DETECTIVE NICKS rounded the corner of his cluttered desk and held out his hand to me. “If we find anything, we’ll call you.”

I stood from the cracked leather chair and reached for him. He grasped my fingers and squeezed so I followed his lead and did the same.

“Boy, that is one strong grip,” he said, looking to Jayden then to me. “You must work with your hands.”

He was a kind man with a gentle smile. His skin looked weathered, like he was older, maybe. But his bronze-colored eyes revealed his calm nature.

I liked him.

“Do you think you’ll find something?” I asked.

“We’ll do the best we can, Trinity. I’ll be honest with you, though. It might take some time. There’s so little to go on. But Zander’s a friend of mine. I’ll push things through. I know a few people who might be able to help if this level doesn’t find anything.” Detective Nicks faced Jayden. “Zander told me

she's staying with you in the mean time? Do I call your cell if I find something?"

"Um—yeah. You can call me. If she's not with me, I'll know how to reach her."

If I wasn't with Jayden, where would I be? I worried the inside of my cheek. He must intend to place me elsewhere. That didn't settle well with the cheeseburger I'd eaten.

"Okay then. I'll walk you out."

I followed the path around the cubicles toward the front entrance. The scent of stale smoke and body odor assaulted my nostrils. Distant ringing and muffled voices carried through the air. I stepped through the doorway into the lobby area, ready to get back outside and fill my lungs with a long, deep, fresh breath.

The lady at the desk looked up, then her gaze shifted to my wrist. The bright lights overhead reflected off the bracelet, sending white reflections flashing against the wall and her thick glasses.

"Oh, and you might want to get something to cover that arm with, Jayden. That's a robbery waiting to happen, you know that, right?" Detective Nicks said.

"All too well." Jayden grimaced.

"Did something happen?"

"No. Um—no, it's just getting looks, I can tell." He gripped the detective's hand and shook it. "I'll figure something out."

Jayden hadn't mentioned the attack while talking with Nicks for some reason. I was glad he didn't bring up my instant healing incident. We'd spoken of it only once, and very briefly, since it'd happened, but it was like a great big elephant sitting on my lap that I couldn't talk about.

Detective Nicks escorted us out, and as I made it down the steps in front of the police station, I sucked in deep breaths of the fresh air, hoping to calm my thumping heart. I needed to be patient. They'd find something on me, somewhere, right? I couldn't have appeared from nowhere.

I flipped my hand. *Trinity*. The etched letters were unique, yet familiar. No other sign of anything. No seam, no markings, not even scratches from when I'd fallen against the brick wall while attacked. That rough surface had pricked my skin, surely it would have scratched this fine gem.

What did this big *B* on the front mean?

"I have an idea about that bracelet of yours." Jayden's voice pulled me from my daze.

"You do?" I stopped at the bottom of the steps. He stood beside me and reached for my golden wrist. The bright sun speckled my vision with floating black dots. "I wish I were taller so I wouldn't have to strain my neck looking at you."

He laughed. In a quick motion, he gripped my waist and hoisted me up two stairs, but he stayed at the bottom. He'd moved so fast, and it was so unexpected, I didn't have time to process anything until it was already done.

“I can’t get over how light you are. How much do you weigh? Sixty pounds? Seventy?”

“The female officer measured me and put me on a scale. She said four-foot-ten and sixty-five pounds.”

Jayden whistled.

“She said I look healthy, though.” I curled a strand of hair behind my ear. “She guessed at my age. Size-wise, I look young, but she said my face and body development would put me at anywhere from nineteen to twenty-two if she had to guess.”

He nodded to the side. I stayed two steps up, but followed his lead. I figured by the shade from the oak tree hanging over the end of the stairs, he was headed for a break from the sun. He held my golden wrist the entire time.

I liked that.

Once to the side, I stood and faced him. To my left there was a half wall painted white. It looked like the concrete we stood on but had a railing down the side of it. I gripped that while Jayden held my other hand.

“What’s your idea?” I asked.

“I see girls wearing those leather bands around their wrists. Like as in a bracelet. If I can find a strip of leather, strap it up nice and tight around this, it’ll look something like that.” He bent over, pulling my wrist close to him. His forefinger and thumb touched each edge as if measuring.

His finger grazed the inside of my forearm in the process. A shiver shot up my arm. It tickled a path over my shoulder and to my chest like an electrical current charging my heart. My arm straightened in the process.

“Oh, sorry, didn’t mean to tickle you.” He let go of me.

Almost like a reflex, I snatched up his hand, turned it over, exposing his inner forearm, and then brought it to my face. I brushed my cheek against the smooth, soft skin. A deep inhale fused his musky scent into my brain more than it already had been.

Two quick strokes of my cheek against his flesh, then I pulled away. My face flushed, and my heart pulsed like I’d just run a long distance. My fingers, on the hand that bore the golden bracelet, tingled like hundreds of feathers caressed my skin. My breath hitched in my throat.

He stood, staring at me with wide, dilated eyes for a several breaths. His tongue swiped his bottom lip, and he swallowed hard. “I—um—well, I think I can get—”

“I’m sorry. Not really sure what happened there.” I cupped my hands over my flaming cheeks.

“It’s okay. It was—um—nice.” He cleared his throat and stepped back.

Standing two steps up on the stairs made up a lot of the height difference, and it let me see his green eyes that much more clearly.

He was beautiful.

Then I had to go and do that odd thing with the cheek. How embarrassing. Strange thing, though, I felt more connected with him. His scent was that much more intense. The heady smell of musk, with a hint of something else... Sweet, but not too sweet? Vanilla. Yes, vanilla.

I would never forget that scent. And I would detect it above any other. Somehow, I knew it. I glanced up and was met with his big, emerald eyes.

“Let’s go get you a dress for Zander’s party tonight, okay?” His voice sounded lower than usual. Husky.

“Can we walk?”

“Not a fan of the car, are you?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Not many people can take my driving. And yes, we can walk. It’s actually just down the sidewalk and up a block. Come on.” He nodded for me to follow him.

True to his word, a few minutes later we stood in front of a small store, where the window had a display of short dresses on white human-looking dolls. “Jayden. This must be costing you something to buy me a dress, am I right?”

“No problem.”

What did he have to trade or use in exchange for dresses? Compared to the cars I saw on the streets passing by while we ate, his was very old or broken with all the brown and orange spots on the blue paint.

“Will you paint the owner a picture or something in return? Is that how it works?”

“Something like that,” he said as we entered the building. The door had been propped open. “I draw or paint, Zander sells them, I get money and can buy things like food and clothes.”

“Makes sense.” And it did. I knew it. Things must be coming back to me.

“Hello, how are you two doing today?” A tiny girl, not quite as short as me, but closer to my height than anyone I’d met so far, hurried around the corner of a small counter.

“Fine, thanks,” I said.

“What can I help you find?” She clasped her hands together in front of her chest. Her big chestnut eyes stared at me, but her smile made them sparkle with a touch of genuineness.

“I am going to a birthday celebration and need some appropriate clothing.”

Her eyebrows pulled together, and she bit her bottom lip. “Okay. Well, what kind of party is it? Formal? Casual? Somewhere in between?”

“Somewhere in between,” Jayden said. “Dinner dress. Black, that might look good with a bracelet like this, only it’ll be black leather instead of this gold. But the same size. She’ll need shoes and under garments as well. Can you give her the full treatment?”

The woman's eyes widened, and she nodded, and her gaze shifted down. He held a silver card out to her.

“Oh, sure. I can take care of her,” the girl said. She slid her arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. “Come on over here to the dressing rooms, sweetie, and I'll bring in a few things for you.”

“Trinity?” Jayden said.

I turned and faced him.

“I'll run to get a couple things and bring the car here while you're getting fitted. I won't be gone more than thirty minutes, okay?”

I nodded.

“We'll get her taken care of in the meantime.” The girl tightened her grip around my shoulders. “We'll have fun.”

A spike of nerves dug into my stomach at the thought of separating from Jayden. But I swallowed them down.

What could go wrong in a place like this?

NINE

“YOU KINDA LOOK LIKE a character from a comic book with that gold bracelet and belt,” my new friend Penny said.

“Jayden said black would look nice. I think he’s right, and I would like to wear what pleases him.”

“I see. He’s dreamy, by the way. You’re lucky.” A grin filled Penny’s face. “I have another one in mind. It’ll knock his socks off. He won’t know what hit him.”

I turned toward the dressing room, mind whirling. Once again, my stomach growled. How could I be hungry again already? Penny spoke in riddles about knocking socks off, turning cranks, and hunks with money. I hadn’t understood any of it, but she seemed nice enough.

I pulled the white dress down my body and stood in front of the mirror in my new bra and matching underwear. Black, with lots of lace.

Analyzing my back again, I couldn’t stop staring at the two purple marks. I shrugged my shoulders and the marks moved slightly, but mostly my skin shifted tight against the ribs below

it. Like there were bones there, and the skin tightened over them, shifting.

“Here, hon. I think it’s *the one*.” She flipped another dress over the door.

I grabbed the garment from her, and it felt like fine silk in my fingers. I removed the cloth from the hanger and slid it over my head.

This one was angled to the left with sheer black over a tight black under part. Off one shoulder but had a single strap over the other one and covered the marks on my back perfectly.

Penny might have been right about this one. I pulled the door open to show her, but she wasn’t there.

“Hiya. What can I get for you today?” I heard her say. I peeked around the corner, holding my dress tight against my chest, since the back was still unzipped. Another woman had come in. Penny glanced in my direction and put her finger up. “Be right back, Trinity.”

I nodded and stepped in front of the mirror. It showed three angles. It was a little loose, since the back hadn’t been zipped up, but I could still tell it was my favorite.

Hopefully Jayden liked it.

“Wow.”

I whirled around, and Jayden stood, leaning against the entryway into the mirrored area. I clutched my chest hoping the dress would stay up.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. It looks great.”

“You like it?”

He nodded and stepped forward. “Here. I’ll zip it. Then let me see.”

I turned back to the mirrors and watched him lean down and reach toward my back. Instantly my breath left me. It was as if I could feel his hands nearing my body.

He gripped the start of the zipper at the small of my back. A zing of electricity shot up my spine and gathered between my shoulder blades. My breath morphed into pants. I cleared my throat and shook my head, working to chase the haze away.

No, not chase it away, because I really liked the feeling. Just needed to get it under control before my body melted into a puddle beneath his touch.

The click of the zipper sounded as he eased it up. As he neared my shoulder blades, my spine tingled, and I fought to catch my breath.

Another pulse of energy swirled in my stomach. “Oh.”

“There we go. Almost covers the tip of your marks. It should—” His finger brushed my spine, where the mark was. I gasped, and I heard him suck in a sharp breath as well.

I caught his reflection, and his wide-eyed gaze met mine.

Was he feeling the same thing? It felt like I was flying—no—falling from a cliff the way my head floated and heart hammered.

“Did you feel that?” he whispered; his breath warm against my neck. He stepped closer until his body touched mine. Instantly I settled against him, my body forming to his.

I nodded, not trusting my voice. I was still dizzy from whatever was going on.

“What is that?”

“I don’t know.” I rubbed my palm over my stomach, not sure what to do to calm the blaze inside. His scent overwhelmed my senses. I turned and faced him. His gaze showered me in heat as it shifted from my eyes all the way down the length of me and back. Analyzing me. Taking in every curve as if to memorize.

His chest rose and fell with bated breaths. But then his gaze locked on mine again. Everything else faded away. His tongue slid over his bottom lip. “I—um—you look great. Is this the one you want?”

I stepped closer, hating the distance between us. He blanketed me with his essence, and my knees nearly buckled. I snatched up his hand, turned it over and pressed my cheek to it. That fanned the fire building within me.

Yes. This was right. I was supposed to do that.

I just knew it.

“What?” he asked.

“Shhh, it’s okay.”

“I. Trinity. I have a girlfriend. This isn’t—”

“I’m a girl friend, too,” I said. “Penny, the one who found this dress for me is a girl and my friend now, too.”

“No—it’s not the same thing,” Jayden said. “Grace and I—I—we—oh God.” He leaned toward me. My lips tingled in anticipation of his pressing against them. His black pupils expanded, eating up his jade irises. That triggered another flame, only deeper within me. An ache.

I stepped in to him. My body flush against a wall of muscle. His jaw clenched shut. “Trinity,” he said through his teeth. His hand went to my back, tracing up my spine toward the spot. Penny had touched my back, near my marks, several times while helping me dress, but never did it elicit such an electrifying sensation as when Jayden’s fingers neared it.

He hadn’t even touched it yet, but my knees weakened, and darkness curved my vision. *Breathe, Trinity*. What was happening to me?

Fire seared my spine to the point of pain. I snapped my eyes shut. Images of feathers. Pain. Burning and darkness claimed my consciousness.

“Trinity?” Jayden said. “Something’s happening.”

I felt him guide me into a room. Bursts of light exploded at the corners of my vision, but I forced my eyes open. He stood behind me in the smaller dressing room. My dress unzipped in the back and pulled open.

The searing pain intensified when his fingers grazed the sensitive spot. I flinched, and he jerked away. Energy crackled.

Or was that my bones?

“Oh my God, they’re moving,” Jayden breathed.

“What are?” I looked over my shoulder toward the mirror. My purple marks, the bones beneath the surface shifted. Stretching the skin tight from beneath the surface. “Jayden. What’s happening?”

“I don’t know,” he said breathlessly and reached for me. “I have to touch you. I—”

“Everything okay back here? I—” Penny cleared her throat. “Oh. Um. I—”

Jayden yanked away from me and stood straight. Instantly the connection was severed. My slamming heart slowed, still drumming, but less intense. The burning pain simmered to a dull throb.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I was helping her unzip. We’ll take this one.”

TEN

I MUST BE A monster or something.

Whatever happened between us in the dressing room was scary yet somehow amazing. Something in my back shifted. I saw it, he saw it, but neither of us said anything about it since.

It must have scared Jayden as well, because he didn't say a word and scarcely looked at me, even as we stood next to each other in the elevator to his studio.

I should have taken the stairs.

My stomach roared with hunger, and the heavy silence between us punctuated the obnoxious noise.

The corner of his mouth curled up into a half smile, and he gave a slight shake to his head. "There's no way you can be hungry again."

"I'm sorry," I said with a whisper. He'd have to sell many paintings if he kept feeding me so much. What could I do for trade on all the things he was giving me?

"It's fine. I'm just not that great of a cook. Pasta and sandwiches are about the most I know. I usually order pizza.

Sometimes I forget to eat when I get lost in my art.”

The elevator doors rolled open, and he ushered me out. I’d noticed the extra bag he carried but couldn’t work up the nerve to ask, since it’d gotten so awkward after the dressing room incident. It carried a smoky smell to it, though. Dark brown lettering on the bag was crinkled, so I couldn’t read the name. Not that it would have made much sense to me.

“Um—I could try to make something for us to eat,” I said.

Jayden set the parcels on the tall counter I learned was called a bar. Such a strange name for a table, but I went with it.

“No. I don’t want you in that kitchen after the—well, that pan.” He dipped his hand into his front pocket. “I’ll call for some pizza.”

“Pizza.” I didn’t know that word.

He stared at his cell phone for a few breaths. “I’ll call from the balcony.” He turned and moved toward the wall of windows.

Did I scare him so much he couldn’t even look at me anymore? First with the fast healing and then the dressing room. I must disgust him. I should probably disgust myself, but for some reason, what happened with the healing and the bone shifting didn’t disgust me. Scared me, yeah, but didn’t disgust me.

If it felt natural that wouldn’t make me a monster, would it?

Out on the balcony, Jayden leaned forward, resting his elbows on the railing, the phone pressed against his ear. I

could see only the back of him, but that was a pretty good sight.

His hair shifted in a slight breeze and carried the hem of his loose shirt up, and I got to see some of his back because his jeans hung low. A black band of fabric clung to his narrow hips, an inch above the denim. Nice, firm backside. He'd flipped off his sandals and pressed his bare toes against the cement balcony floor.

He held his phone out enough for me to see he pressed the screen. Thinking he was done with his call, I was about to walk out there, but then he brought the phone back to his ear.

Keeping an eye on the balcony, I navigated to the kitchen and opened the fridge. Too bad I couldn't hear what he was saying. He glanced back, and I turned my head fully into the fridge and reached for a bottle of water.

My heart slammed. I snatched the water then snuck a look. He slouched into the chair I'd found him in earlier that morning, next to Zander. His hand went to the top of his head, and he fisted his fingers. That had to pull his hair.

I sauntered across the room to the back wall beside the kitchen. I could keep my eye on him as I looked at the various pictures hanging. One of him sitting on the grass next to a young girl with the same color hair, leaning shoulder to shoulder, caught my eye. She resembled Jayden, only smaller.

In the center of the wall a big picture, framed in thick black wood, drew my attention.

A pencil sketch of a girl. Long hair and big full lips. Her eyes were light colored, I assumed, since the pencil wasn't darkened in. The locks of hair flowed over her narrow shoulders and rested on her chest. A splash of red shaded the corner of her lips and the bow in her hair.

“Beautiful.”

I stepped closer. The scribble in the bottom right-hand corner read, *Amy, by Jayden Brown*. It must be a picture of his sister, Amy. I scanned the remaining two sketched faces, but didn't see anyone named Grace. Or any other girl friends.

The second to last picture was of a scaly animal with wings the color of the deep blue ocean—wait, I knew what the ocean looked like? This one felt familiar. Calming.

The last one was of a tree. One that had massive leaves and had it been real was probably big enough to reach the clouds in the sky.

A violet-tinted orange sun set behind the tree. A color I'd never seen before. Or maybe I had, but didn't remember. Was this a place he'd seen or dreamed of? It drew me in with the calmness and vibrant colors. I could almost imagine the smell of fresh blooming flowers and long green grass surrounding the tree.

Beneath the shade of the massive tree lay a person. I stepped closer. A man. He lay on his back, resting his head in his hand and one leg crossed over the other at the ankle. But as I moved closer, what I thought was just bunching of the

clothing or the blanket near his waist, turned out to be another person.

A tiny girl curled against the man lying down. Long, flowing dark hair coiled around her shoulder and rested on the man's chest, right next to her cheek. And that wasn't a belt around the man's waist. It was her thin arm hugging him tight.

I sucked in a deep breath at the familiarity of that scene. Tears stung my eyes at its beauty. The corner of the drawing was signed, *Home, by Jayden Brown.*

“Home?”

“I did that one years ago,” Jayden said.

His voice washed over me like a soothing flow of warm water. I peeked to my side. He leaned against the wall, holding his cell phone against his chin as his arms were crossed over his chest. By the look of his smooth forehead and relaxed jaw, I guessed he wasn't mad anymore. Maybe whoever he talked to out on the balcony had calmed him down. I'd been so entranced by the drawings I forgot to watch him.

“It's beautiful.”

“I always used to have this dream. Over and over when I was a kid and through high school about that tree.”

“And the girl?”

His eyes flickered, but he held my gaze for the first time since the dress shop. “Just someone I dreamed up.” He stood away from the wall. “Come on, I have something for you.”

I took one last look at the drawing, then followed him to the kitchen. He reached over the bar and grabbed the bag he'd brought in.

“I got some leather bands I think will work to cover your flashy bracelet.”

I wonder what turned his attitude around.

He patted the chair next to the bar. “Sit up here. Let's see if I can get this right.”

I hopped up to the seat and swiveled it so the back was to the bar, and I faced him. He grabbed some dark shards of leather from the bag and inched toward me.

I pulled my legs up and crossed them. “Are you okay, Jayden?”

“Me?”

“You seemed kind of mad before.” I pointed to the balcony. “And then on the phone.”

“You saw that?” he asked.

I nodded.

He brushed his hand over my gold wrist. “Jeez. It's such a strange material. I mean, I know it's gold—er—pretty sure it's gold, but it's so thin and flush with your skin.” His fingers grazed my forearm.

So, once again, it didn't seem like he was going to answer me. “May I ask what made you upset on the balcony? Was it something I did?”

His hands stopped, fingertips resting on my skin. “No. You haven’t done anything wrong, Trinity.”

“Then what? It seems you are mad one second, then not the next.”

“Things are a little complicated at the moment. Nothing you need to worry about,” he said, brushing his fingers over the gold again.

“I wonder how it got on there?”

“I’m curious, too.” He wrapped the black leather around my gold wrist and held it tight. A silver-gray symbol was etched into the leather. Four thin leaves with pointed tips aimed upward and down and side to side. In between, smaller, more rounded leaves shot out, all meeting in the middle. Each leaf, if that was what they were, had thin lines within it, decorating it like a fine, intricate drawing.

“This gray on black reminds me of how I saw things when I first came to you.”

Jayden’s motions stopped.

I brushed my finger over the emblem. “Everything was black, except strokes of gray. Like your charcoal drawings.”

“Um—yeah, that’s—well, that’s what made me pick this one.” He cleared his throat. A subtle shade of pink floated to the surface of his olive skin. “I remember you said that’s what it looked like. I just didn’t know if it was going to be small enough. Your wrists are so tiny.”

“Like the rest of me.”

He nodded and leaned forward. His hair shifted, perfuming the air with musk. “It’s more of a buckle instead of snaps, though, like the other ones, so I might be able to make it work.”

“We cover this to prevent someone from trying to steal the gold, right? Why don’t I wear a piece of clothing long enough to cover my entire arm?”

“You could. But you’d always have to wear it and it’d slide up, too, so this is just easier. Until we can figure it out, I mean.”

“But how would someone get the gold from my hand?”

“I don’t want to think about the ways some greedy son-of-a-bitch would try to get this amount of gold off your body.”

I tensed. The emotion—I couldn’t quite place it—rolling off his body slammed into me and pummeled my stomach. Anger maybe? Fear?

“Sorry. It’s just that crazy people do some sick shit to get money. They don’t care who they hurt. Or who they kill—” He shook his head. “But—um—I think this’ll work.” He tugged a little harder and a clank sounded against my golden wrist. “Oh, sorry.”

“It’s okay. You got upset there. Why?”

“No reason.”

“Is it because that man, from the other night when I ran? He tried to hurt me.”

Jayden nodded.

I reached forward with my free hand and touched the silky hair that shifted onto his forehead as he hunched over my hand. My fingers disappeared into the soft mane. Heat radiated through my palm.

I moved my hand down until I touched his ear, then brushed the side of his face with the back of my fingers. His intense stare fastened onto mine. I brushed my thumb in a slow circle over his cheek, savoring the smooth, warm skin.

So mysterious. Beautiful. Distant. But I sensed pain. Something deep. Dark. “You’ve seen darkness. Been deeply hurt.”

He froze, swallowing hard.

I was right. Someone or something had hurt him in the past. Maybe even recently. I wasn’t sure how I knew that, but I did. If only I could take that from him. Ease his suffering.

“That’s why you haven’t been inspired. Why—”

“Um—” He pulled the leather strap from my gold wrist. “I’ll cut this end off here, it should fit fine. Do you want to see the others before you decide on this one?”

I pulled my hand from his face, instantly feeling his absence. “No. I like this one. You picked it out for me. It’s special now. I will wear it always.” I hugged my knees to my chest. “Why does it upset you that I was almost hurt when those three friends of yours gave it no thought at all?”

“When you stop caring about people, you stop being a person yourself.”

Jayden moved around the corner of the bar to the kitchen. I swiveled my chair so I could see him. I was now boxed into my seat by my legs pressing against the rim of the tabletop and my back tight against the cushion of my chair.

“What kind of person would I be if I didn’t help someone in need?” He pulled a drawer open and reached in. Clanking sounds followed. “Those guys out there don’t care about anyone but themselves and a select few.”

“But you told them to watch out for me. They will do that just because you said to?”

Jayden retrieved a black device with two sharp blades. He placed the strip of leather between them, then cut.

“Yeah. I’ve known Luke ever since I’ve lived here. We’re kind of buddies. So, since you’re with me, he’ll watch your back, too.”

“With you? Because I’m your girl friend. And he’d protect Zander if you told him to because he’s your boy friend.”

Jayden glanced over at me with raised eyebrows, then back to the contraption he was using to fix my bracelet. His chest expanded as he drew in a deep breath.

“What is that thing you’re using there?” I asked.

“Scissors. I’m cutting the extra so this thing will fit your wrist.”

“Scissors.” I didn’t know that word.

“You repeat a lot of words I say,” Jayden said.

“Some feel familiar when I say them. I’m just trying to remember.” I rested my chin on my knees. “Anything. Even in its smallest measurement.”

“That must be so frustrating not knowing anything.” Jayden made the last cut with the scissors, then set them on the counter. “Wish *I* could forget some things. Okay, here, I think this is ready for you to try.”

“Forget things?”

“Here. Give this a try.” He stepped forward and handed me the bracelet but stayed on the other side of the bar. He crossed his arms over his chest, eyes dancing between me and the leather.

He said he’d like to forget things. What things? The fact that he’d opened up to me a little bit ago about the drawing of the tree, I didn’t ask again about what he’d said. Maybe later.

I slid the leather over my bracelet and fastened it, then held my arm straight out.

Not even a hint of gold showed. I caught his gaze. “Thank you, Jayden.”

“Sure.”

“For everything. I—” I touched my new bracelet. “I—feel so at home here with you.” I was almost beginning to wish I

would never find anything out and things would stay like they were right now.

But even I knew that wasn't possible.

ELEVEN

“OKAY, SO YOU REMEMBER what I told you, right?” Jayden said as his car shuddered to a stop. A loud pop sounded, and I flinched. “Don’t worry, it’s just the car. This piece of crap is on its last leg.”

I lifted my eyebrows, totally confused. I understood the words he said, but they made no sense together.

He laughed. “I’m going to have to watch my slang around you, aren’t I? Obviously, they don’t have it where you’re from.” He settled into the seat, resting his hands on his thighs. “Funny, though. You don’t have an accent or anything, but I picture you being from a farm or countryside in a small village in France or something.”

“France, *huh?*” I said with the most slang I could muster.

He laughed. He was so handsome in his black jeans and button-up white shirt. Cotton. And very soft. His freshly cleaned hair wisped over his ear with a few long strands splayed across his smooth forehead.

His musky scent was intense tonight and filled the car. I could bathe in that aroma forever.

“So, I got you all filled up with pizza, that should last a couple of hours, right?”

My turn to laugh. “It should. I like pizza very much.”

“I could tell. I should have ordered three larges. I can’t believe you eat so much yet weigh so little. Your bones must be hollow or something.” He rested his head. “It’s so strange.”

“What’s strange?”

“Nothing.”

“Please tell me.”

“Everything. How you stumbled down that street and—well—just everything.”

He probably alluded to the quick healing of the burn I’d gotten. Evidently that wasn’t something a normal person could do. Hearing that earlier only confused me more. Hopefully Detective Nicks would call soon with some answers.

I reached for the door handle.

“Oh, wait. I’ll get it.” He pushed open his door, then hurried around the back of the car to my door.

He reached in to help me up from my seat, and I slid my fingers into his big hand. I stepped out onto solid ground. Dark, and it was wide, like a street, but led to what looked like a castle.

Tall, like some of the buildings I'd seen in the city, but painted a light, refreshing tan color by the looks of the lights shining on it. Six tall white pillars held up a black roof over the front porch. The expansive lawn seemed to go on for a great distance before it met the front of the home.

"This house is very big."

He motioned for us to move forward. "Sure is. It's a ways out from the city, so there's more room to have yards."

I drew in a deep breath and detected a hint of grass and blooming flowers. Roses.

"So, do you remember what we talked about?" he asked again, walking a step ahead of me.

"Don't mention anything about appearing in the middle of the night on a cold, dark street?" I said with a shake to my head.

"Only Zander, Karen, and I know."

"And Grace. You told your girl friend Grace, too, right? On the cell phone? Will I get to meet her tonight?"

"I told her you were almost hit by a car and had a little amnesia, but that the cops were helping find things out."

"Amnesia." I'd heard the detective say it, too, but I didn't know what it meant then, either.

"That's when someone loses their memory."

"I would say *that's* accurate."

“If people ask what you do or where you’re from, just say you’re from out of town and that you’re in sales or something.”

“Sales or something. Yes.” I stepped onto the sidewalk leading to a towering door.

“But most of all, stay with me. I’ll cover you. It’s only if you get caught alone is what I’m worried about.”

“It sounds like it’s very difficult to have me here with you at this place. Why did you bring me?”

“No. No. It’s not that.” He stepped forward, motioning me to follow. “Karen really wanted you to come. Thought getting you out might jog a memory loose or something.”

“You don’t believe that to be true?”

“It could. I guess.” He moved ahead of me. “Let’s just hope none of Grace’s friends show up.”

“Some of Grace’s friends will be here? How about Amy?”

Jayden stopped for a brief second, mid-step, then kept going. Boy, when he said his family wasn’t close, he wasn’t kidding, because he seemed to get angry any time I mentioned Amy. I decided right then not to bring her up again even though I really wanted to know about her.

Maybe I could ask Zander or Karen if I saw them later.

We stood behind two people waiting to enter the giant house. The girl in front of us held the boy’s hand in a way that looked very appealing. Her fingers intertwined with his. Their

palms opened to each other more. Jayden had held my hand before, but not like that.

He leaned to the side as if trying to look around the people in front of us. I reached over and slid my fingers between his.

Touching his open palm was much nicer than I thought it would be. It sent a pulsing current up my arm. It was most pleasurable for me, but he didn't seem to be enjoying it judging by his clenched jaw.

Maybe I was doing it wrong.

I glanced at the couple ahead of us, then back to our hands. It seemed I had it right. "Like this?"

He leaned close. "Detective Nicks was right. You do have a strong grip."

"That's why you aren't enjoying holding my hand?" I loosened my grip. Hadn't felt like I was holding too tight.

"It's not that. We probably shouldn't hold hands. Might give people the wrong impression. I—"

"Jayden, you made it." Zander's voice boomed so loud it echoed in my head. His gaze shifted down. "Trinity?" He looked at Jayden. "You brought Trinity?"

Heat steamed my cheeks. I didn't know much, but I could tell he wasn't pleased I was there. His gaze analyzed me from my hair to my feet. But it intensified when it rested on our joined hands.

"What's going on here? Where's Grace?"

Jayden pressed his palm against Zander's bulky chest and pushed. "Ask your wife. This is her doing. Obviously she's scheming again. You really didn't know?"

"Know what?"

I stood there, looking around, not sure what to do. They seemed angry, yet playful to cover up the emotion. I didn't understand. Scheme? Grace? And why did Zander look at our hands? Many of the people here held hands as Jayden and I were.

"Come on. Let's go find you a drink. I think you're going to need one, buddy." Zander went to the other side of Jayden and grabbed his shoulder, then pointed. "Because Isabel is here."

"Shit," Jayden said.

I looked in the direction Zander pointed and saw a girl with long red hair draped around her shoulders. Little strands of hair framed her fair, plump face. But what caught my attention, and that of many of the boy friends surrounding her, was that I could almost see her breasts.

Instantly my cheeks flamed.

A tight pink dress clung to her curvy figure, but the fabric wasn't enough to cover her chest. They nearly spilled over. She tilted her head back, and a shrieking laugh spewed from her bright, ruby lips and her chest moved with the laughter, jiggling the flesh already testing the limits of the fabric.

But her laugh stopped when she saw Jayden.

He froze.

I wasn't sure where she pulled it from, but she held a device similar to the blue cell phone Jayden had. He'd told me it came in many different colors and shapes and sizes. That must be hers.

"Shit," Jayden said again.

"Come on." Zander led us around the corner into a bright room.

Jayden grabbed some sort of glass. It had a very narrow bottom and a wide base, and it was only half-filled with a red liquid.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Wine. But I think you better stick to water. Okay?"

"Could I try some of that? It looks very good. I smell sweetness, too."

"You smell that? In here? I can't make out any smells other than a bunch of food and perfume."

Interesting. I detected Jayden perfectly clearly, but then some sweetness, too, like sugar and some vanilla. Close to that odor from the dark bottles they called beer.

Someone brushed against my shoulder. Even in the shoes Penny had given me, which made me three inches taller, I still had to look up at most everyone.

The person who'd bumped into me carried a small tray of glasses that held the familiar amber liquid I'd learned was

beer. So, it seemed I was able to smell things very clearly. Jayden's scent was the one I liked the most, though.

“So, may I try some of that drink you called wine?”

“Oh boy,” Zander said. “I'm going to find my wife.” He left after sending me a quick look.

“Have I made him angry by coming to this party with you? Or maybe he wasn't surprised for his surprise celebration?” I asked Jayden as I reached for his glass.

He handed it over. “Just a sip, okay?”

The liquid touched my tongue, and it was bitter. My nose tingled and my mouth, near my back teeth, tingled as I swallowed. “Oh. I don't like that.”

“That's probably okay.” He grabbed the glass back from me. “I'll be drinking the beer and wine tonight. Let's find you some water.”

“So, Jayden. Who's your friend?” A shrill voice vibrated my eardrums with the subtleness of a hammer.

It bordered on painful, but I caught a hint of anger in it as well. Not sure how, because I hadn't seen the source yet. Maybe it was the way Jayden stiffened next to me, and his hand went slack in mine.

He shook his hand free and stepped away from me. I followed his line of sight to the girl with long red hair and the big chest.

Her green-eyed stare burned a hole right through me. I glanced behind me in case she was looking at someone else, but it seemed to be directed at me.

“Hi, Isabel. This is Trinity.” He pointed at me. “Trinity, this is Isabel.”

“Nice to meet you, Isabel.” I held my hand out to shake hers.

Isabel shifted her focus to Jayden, and a smile curved her bloodred lips. She didn’t even shake my hand. Okay, maybe I’d done it wrong.

“So, where’s Grace?”

“You know where she is, Isabel. In San Diego on business.”

“So, you sneak out with the first hussy that comes your way while she’s gone?”

“Knock it off, Isabel.”

He snatched my hand and pulled me around the woman. She glared at me like I’d stabbed her with a knife. While I liked holding Jayden’s hand, usually, I didn’t like how he’d curled his fingers around my wrist and all but dragged me through the swarm of people.

A soft, gentle tone caught my attention. A slender woman with a long body leaned against a harp. Her delicate fingers floated over the strings, plucking the most beautiful music I’d heard yet.

I shrugged from Jayden's grip and stopped. A man bumped into me from behind. "Oh, I'm sorry."

I stepped toward the musician, letting the tones wrap around my senses. I knew that music. I felt it before. Heard it before. I knew it like my name.

"Trinity," Jayden said.

"I like this. I've heard it before."

Jayden stood beside me, glass of wine in hand and stared at the musical instrument. "It's a harp. That's Brahms' Lullaby."

"You know this music, too?"

He nodded then drank the rest of his wine in one swallow. He set the empty glass on a tray someone carried. A different guy with another tray filled with glasses of beer passed by. Jayden grabbed one and took a long gulp.

I returned my attention to the woman strumming the strings. I hugged my stomach, enjoying the soft hum of the music massaging through my body.

"Hi, Trinity. I'm so glad you made it." A soothing voice blended with the music. Zander towered over a woman who approached me with hands outstretched. She grabbed my hand and shook. "You're so beautiful."

Jayden seemed calm about this as he nodded, and a slight smile quirked the corner of his mouth. All his different and rapidly shifting moods confused me.

“I’m Karen.” She tilted her head to the side. “Zander’s wife. I’m so glad you came.” She glared up at Jayden and her forehead crinkled. “Although you missed the surprise.”

“Sorry,” Jayden said with a shrug.

“We were eating pizza,” I said. “Very good.”

“Oh dear. She’s precious.” Karen’s chestnut hair brushed against her forehead, just long enough for some of it to stay tucked behind her ear. Thick eyelashes fluttered over brown eyes as she scanned the area. Parentheses formed at the corners of her mouth as she smiled.

Her short, black dress hugged her thick midsection while see-through fabric clung to her plump, fair-skinned arms. Happiness rolled off her in tangible waves.

Karen looked at the harpist then to me. “Do you like the music?”

I nodded. “Very much.”

“Decided this birthday would not be filled with beer bottles and baseball. Trying for a little class this year.” She wrapped her arm around my shoulder and pulled me close. A strong scent of rose tickled my nose. “So, how are you feeling, honey?”

“I’m okay.”

“The dress you chose is very pretty. You’re so beautiful. I’m sorry you’re—” She glanced around, then back down to me. “I’m sorry you don’t have your memory. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Okay, dear. Don’t suffocate the girl.” Zander stepped in behind her, resting his hand on her shoulder. He leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

“It absolutely breaks my heart how Jayden found you. What you must have gone through.”

Jayden’s nostrils flared, and he brought the glass of beer to his lips.

“Okay. Enough. This is a party. Who wants to dance?” Zander said.

“To harp music?” I asked.

“Oh, sweet Trinity, there’s a whole ’nother wing of the house you haven’t seen yet. There’s a hopping DJ spinning some records.”

Jayden laughed. “Come on, buddy. You’re old now, don’t try to talk hip. It hurts my ears.”

“Let’s try this dancing thing,” I said.

“See, she’s getting it,” Zander said with a snap of his fingers.

“I’m going to need another beer for this,” Jayden said.

TWELVE

“WOW, THAT WAS FUN.” I slid the back of my hand over my damp forehead.

“I haven’t danced like that in years,” Jayden said.

“You sure haven’t.” Zander slugged Jayden’s shoulder. “Good to see you out and about, man.”

The music slowed and Karen’s eyes lit up. “Our song!”

“I know. I told him to play it at ten o’clock. I didn’t even know it was that late,” Zander said.

“Oh, you’re such a romantic.” Karen looped her arms around Zander’s neck and brushed her lips against his cheek.

Several people left the dancing space and Jayden turned to leave. I grabbed his hand. “We can still dance if you want. This looks very fun.”

“We better not. Are you hungry or thirsty? I can get you something.”

I’d much rather hold Jayden as Zander held Karen, but it seemed he was uncomfortable with that.

“Sure. I could eat some food.”

Karen rested her cheek on Zander’s chest, and her eyes were closed. They swayed to the music flowing over the speakers and my heart rate spiked. Their love for each other rippled from their entwined bodies. It was so intense it nearly plowed me over. Two other couples did the same sort of dance, and the emotions rolling off them were intoxicating.

I faced Jayden. He’d stepped several feet back and was watching me. Both his hands were curled into fists so tight his knuckles blanched.

I hurried to him. “Sorry. Are you ready to find some food to eat?”

“You were watching them,” he said, his voice barely audible above the music.

I nodded.

He dipped his head. “You seem to know dancing.”

“It’s familiar.” I looked back at the five couples swaying. Their bodies were so close they almost melted into one being. That, somehow, I knew.

And I craved it with Jayden.

“What did Karen mean by *our song*?” I stood near Jayden, hands clasped behind my back. I wasn’t really sure what to do with them. This snug party dress didn’t allow for pockets.

“At their wedding, it was the first song they danced to as husband and wife.”

“That sounds amazing.”

His gaze landed on me with an intensity I’d not yet seen from him. “I guess we could dance one more song.”

“You don’t have to. I can tell you’re uncomfortable with it.”

“It’s okay. Let’s try it.” He reached out, and I put my hand in his.

His arms wrapped a blanket of warmth around me, and his palms rested on my lower back. Being pressed against his body sent mine tingling to life. I moved so close to him I had to put a foot on either side of his feet to move. He drew in a breath and hugged me tight.

One of his hands moved to my head, and he combed his fingers through my hair as I nuzzled his chest. His heart thudded, nearly in time with mine, and it was racing.

His spicy, earthy smell was so intoxicating my vision tilted. Heat bubbled in my stomach, and my spine tingled again, like it did before, between my shoulder blades.

There was something about his touch that ignited this feeling. Woke something deep within me with such a force it rocked my body.

“What is that?” he asked. The hand on my back pulled me closer to him. His breath brushed against my forehead.

“What?” I knew what I felt, but did he feel it, too?

“You don’t feel that?” His grip around me loosened.

“Don’t let go.”

“So, you *do* feel it.” His lips brushed my forehead. “What is it?”

“I don’t know, but I like it very much.” Warmth pulsed through my stomach, lower and lower each minute I clung to him.

The fingers combing my hair traced down my neck and over my shoulder. I snatched up his wrist in my hand and leaned in to it, brushing my cheek against the soft inside of his forearm, and inhaled.

That ignited an explosion of heat between my shoulder blades. I couldn’t hear it because of the music, but I felt my back shifting, like I’d seen in the mirror.

I slid my arm around his waist and held tight. He anchored me. My fear melted into his strong body. He sucked in a deep breath. His arm went around my shoulders, fingers resting near the marks on my back. Through the fabric separating our flesh, his heat seeped through, massaging my firing nerves.

“Trinity,” Jayden said. “Wait.”

“It’s happening again.” I needed to be closer to him. No barriers.

“Karen, can you take her to the bathroom?” Jayden said, winded.

“Are you—” Karen gasped. “Honey, come on.”

“Take her. Take her,” Jayden said as he pushed me away.

Why was he doing this? I wanted to stay with him. He stared down at me with wide, dilated eyes. His chest rose and fell rapidly, and his nostrils flared as he leaned toward me. Zander reached in and grabbed him across the chest, his hand curling around his shoulder.

“No,” I said and stepped toward Jayden. A zip of energy shot up my spine. Why would Zander want me apart from Jayden?

“It’s okay, Trin. Just go. I’ll be here when you get back,” Jayden whispered.

Trin? He called me Trin. I knew that name. That was my name, only shorter. I’d heard that before.

A familiar feeling slammed into me, and a face flashed before my eyes. Shiny, bright orange eyes and plump cheeks. He was missing a tooth, but his eyes and his smile were so familiar. I couldn’t see anything else around him.

“It’s okay, Trinity. Just going to take you to the ladies room.” Karen’s soothing voice sliced through my memory.

“I remember something,” I said quietly as I collected my raging body. Liquid fire seared through me, pooling in my stomach and pulsing through my heart. “Family. He was family. A brother maybe. Older.”

“That’s good. Come on.” The burning still tingled between my shoulder blades. Last time it stopped when I’d disconnected from Jayden. Maybe it was because I still had his scent deep in my senses from being so close to him. My body

must think he's still touching me. I wanted him touching me. Nothing felt more right.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“Oh, hi, Samantha. I’m just showing my friend to the ladies room. Be right with ya,” Karen said. Her grip around my shoulders tightened. “Hold on, Trinity. Breathe, honey. Breathe.”

The fear crackling Karen’s voice spiked my fear into tangible prickles in my back. “What’s wrong? Is Jayden okay? Why are you keeping me from him?”

“He’s fine, honey. He’s fine.” She leaned close. “It’s you I’m worried about. Something’s poking through your dress back here.”

“I feel it. It hurts, yet it doesn’t.” That made no sense. I knew things were shifting beneath the surface of my skin, yet it didn’t hurt as badly as I thought it would, considering it was bones moving around.

“Here we are.”

I reached for the door handle and pushed it open. I stumbled into a world of fuchsia, blue, and white. A tall mirror covered most of the wall to the ceiling above a sink. Karen slammed the door shut behind us.

I leaned forward, hands on the counter. She reached for the zipper of my dress and yanked it down.

“Oh my God.”

The mirror reflected her terrified reaction. Her trembling fingers went to her mouth, and she covered her lips with the palm of her hand.

“Sweet Jesus.”

“What?” I craned my neck and saw a line of bumps.

I whirled around and showed my back to the mirror.

Five knobs pressed against my flesh so tight I could tell they were brown, yet hadn’t broken through the skin. Bones cracked as they shifted. A ripple of movement swirled through my back, and I arched, my spine contracting on its own.

Karen backed against the wall, staring wide-eyed, hand over her mouth.

I sucked in a deep breath through my nose, willing myself to calm down. *Calm down. Shhh, do not do this. Stop.* I didn’t know what I was trying to stop, but the scared look on Karen’s face told me it was the right thing to do.

Whatever was happening to me wasn’t normal.

That must have been why Jayden looked so scared. He’d felt these knobs through my dress. Earlier at the shop, though, he’d wanted to touch them. And I wanted him to. But now—

“Should I—should I get someone? A doctor?”

“No,” I said with a gasp. “I’ll be okay. I—” Another wave of tension roared through me. I leaned toward the sink and turned the knob. Water. Yes. I needed cold water.

The shocking splash of cool liquid on my steaming skin instantly calmed the chaos in my back. My heart rate slowed.

“It’s working,” Karen whispered. “They’re...they’re going away.”

She stepped toward me and reached for a towel.

“I’m sorry Karen. I never should have come.”

“I didn’t give you a choice, dear. I’m the one who’s sorry. I—I don’t know what to say other than that. I’ve never— Oh dear. This is just—”

“Try going through it.” Tears stung. “I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll help you, honey.” She handed me the towel then rested her warm hand on my shoulder. “It’s all smooth now.”

I turned to look. Everything was normal again. It was being close to Jayden that did this—whatever *this* was. What if a beast lived in me and would be let loose somehow?

Now I was being ridiculous.

“Look. Hon. Just stay in here a little bit and freshen up some. Use whatever you need in the drawers here.” She opened a few and I recognized some of the items. “Then come back out to the kitchen. Okay? Can you find your way there?”

“Yes.”

She combed her fingers through my hair. “It’ll be okay. I’ll go check on Jayden. He was so worried for you.” She pulled

the door open.

“Karen. Will you tell him something for me?”

“Sure, hon.”

“Tell him I’m very sorry for everything.”

She nodded, then stepped through the doorway.

Because once I was cleaned up, I was leaving this place.

THIRTEEN

TIME TO DISAPPEAR.

I stuck my head out from the bathroom. To my left lay an empty hallway. *Good.*

Clutching the little brown bag I'd found in Karen's cabinets, I stepped out. I'd filled it with anything I thought I might need. I hadn't seen any of that paper that Jayden had called money in these drawers, or food, but I'd make do. Somehow.

The thing with my back had happened twice now with Jayden. Although it felt very stimulating and enjoyable to me when I was near him, I seemed to frighten him and everyone around him.

I feared I would bring danger to them. As much as my body craved Jayden's presence, to feel him close to me, I knew I had to leave. The guy, Detective Nicks, I'd met earlier might be able to find a place for me until my memories returned.

But what if they never returned? What if no one was out there looking for me?

I stepped to the right, the opposite direction of the kitchen. Maybe there was an exit this way.

The clack of my high heels echoed off the dim walls flanking me, so I stopped and yanked them off. On silent feet now, I crept to a room with a large bed in it. Tall poles stuck up from each corner with a sheer piece of fabric draped over the tops. I paused at the sight of Zander and Karen standing cheek-to-cheek in a still picture next to the bed.

They were so happy. And, in the bathroom, behind the disgust tainting her pretty eyes, Karen did look like she cared for me.

“No. I have to leave.”

“That’s a great idea.” The redheaded girl named Isabel stomped into the room. She planted her fists on her wide hips. The little bag she carried dangled from the thin strap she fisted. “Who the hell do you think you are coming in and taking Grace’s man while she’s gone?”

“I’m sorry, what?” I moved back, toward a large window to the side of the big room.

Isabel stepped in, and I made out another figure filing into the room as well. I hadn’t turned on the light, so it was dim, but I could still tell, the girl behind Isabel was about the same height and build. She peered over Isabel’s shoulder and glared at me with dark eyes.

“Don’t play little cute and sweet tiny girl.” Isabel raked me with her stare. “I know you’re after his money, you little slut.”

“I don’t understand the things you’re saying. I was just going to leave.”

“Grace told me how you *stumbled* into your jackpot. All homeless and wandering and cute.” Isabel crept toward me, and I backed away, looking both directions for where I’d be able to escape.

“Do you know how I can get to Detective Nick’s office? I can go to him. He will assist me.”

The girl laughed. “Um—yeah—I’ll call you a cab.”

She pulled a cell phone out from her tiny purse and started tapping the screen. I moved toward the large window that had a handle on it. The metal cooled my flaming skin. Something felt off about Isabel. My stomach churned, and my breathing increased. Negative energy rippled from her body. Somehow, I knew it.

Sensed it.

“Oh yes. Um, I have a friend who needs a ride. Can you come get her?” Isabel said into her phone.

I pulled on the handle, and the window cracked open. It was actually a door that led to a small patio outside the room.

“Can’t miss her. Tiny and in a pretty black dress. Ten minutes? Okay, she’ll be out front, just charge me for it, okay?” Isabel giggled as did her friend behind her.

Yes. Something was terribly wrong. It wasn’t as obvious as the man who’d attacked me near Jayden’s home, yet no less

threatening. A tight smile masked the hostility on Isabel's face, but I saw it.

More felt it.

"There. That was easy. He'll meet you out front. Blue car. Tall, skinny guy. Can't miss his great ass, and we all know you love great asses, since you picked Jayden to hustle."

"I—"

She stepped forward. "He'll be here in a little bit. Then he'll come drive you into town to the police station."

"He will?"

"Sure. That's where you should be. Jayden doesn't need the burden of taking care of you. He's too nice to tell you because of what happened to his little sister."

I stepped into the doorway of the glass window I'd pulled open. Cool air hit the back of my legs and neck. "His sister, Amy?"

Isabel flinched as if I'd slapped her across the face. "He told you about her?"

"Just that he had a sister." The cement chilled the bottoms of my feet as I moved backward.

"Did he not tell you he had a girlfriend, too?"

"Grace. Yes. I'm his girl friend as well. It's okay."

Isabel lunged. My knee collided with the leg of a tiny glass table. It toppled to the side, and I stumbled toward the two-foot wall hemming in the concrete patio. First floor,

thankfully. From the look on Isabel's face, she might have pushed me over the edge. I knew, now, whomever she'd called would not do well by me.

"I can't believe he brought a hussy like you into his apartment. Men think only with their—"

"Please. I don't understand what you're saying."

"I saw you dancing. I know exactly what you're after. Just go."

I planted my hand on the top of the short wall then kicked my legs over. It was a little farther than I'd thought, but I held my arms out and glided eight feet to the ground. The soft lawn padded my landing. It led to a set of sliding glass doors to another level I didn't know was there.

Darkness nipped at the edges of the spacious lawn, so I wasn't sure what lay after the field of grass, but it was probably better than the person Isabel called to come drive me to the detective's office.

From the patio, Isabel yelled, "Don't you dare come back."

I had no idea what had just happened, but I didn't need to know anything other than the fact that she was going to hurt me.

This place had many rules I wasn't aware of, but one concept I grasped with complete clarity—I didn't belong here.

FOURTEEN

ALONE. NO MEMORY. NO food. This might not be the best situation.

Cool blades of grass slid between my toes and chilled my feet as I stood on the outskirts of Zander's huge home. Maybe I should run around the side of the house and find him. He'd take me to the detective's office.

But then he'd tell Jayden. And like Isabel said, maybe Jayden was only being nice to spare my feelings.

Jayden was better without me.

They all were.

I trotted farther into the darkness, out of the rim of the light radiating from the patio. The air was crisp and heavy with moisture, but that didn't calm me as much as I'd hoped.

The bright moon acted like a beacon, and I faced it, closing my eyes. For some reason, I decided to move to the right as if it was the direction I needed to go.

The cool grass felt so familiar to my feet, like I'd done it countless times. I tightened my grip around the three-inch

heels of the pretty shoes Penny had picked out for me. Tonight had been so much fun. The music. Dancing. Being close to Jayden. I felt so pretty and desirable wearing these beautiful things.

The thin, silky fabric brushed against my skin, so soft and luxurious. An image of Jayden's arm around my waist while we danced warmed me from the inside and stole my breath.

I came to a break in the row of trees that separated Zander's home from the next. I took a few long strides to the left and met the road. I recognized it from when Jayden drove us here.

The moon's brilliance beamed through the thicket. I had the urge to jump up toward it and imagined myself soaring over the tops of the trees.

It'd be easier to see, that was for sure.

Regardless, I moved onward, following the road off to the side. Sounds of gravel crunched, and the hum of an engine approached. I froze to listen, then stepped into a shallow ditch and ducked. A blue car sped by, leaving a wake of dust. I wondered if that was the friend Isabel had called.

I hopped back onto the roadside and walked. The grass was much softer than the rough street and its pebbles and sticks.

Felt unnatural.

Another set of headlights came, but this time from the direction of where Zander and Karen lived. I melted into the darkness of the ditch again and watched. The car slowed, and its lights went brighter all of a sudden, catching me in their

beams. I shaded my eyes, but the slamming of a door jolted me loose from my stare.

I took off running. Wasn't sure why, just did. A surge of flames ignited in my back. The same shifting and grinding from when Jayden touched me there.

But none of the euphoric, bubbling heat in my stomach.

No, this was fear clenching my chest.

“Trinity. I'm here to drive you into town. Isabel called.”

I don't think I'll take you up on that.

I kept running. Something deep within me urged me to turn right, then I took the first left I saw. It led to an open field. The moon splashed its radiance as if lighting a path for me. I drew in a deep breath, my heart thrashing my chest, and I ran.

And I ran fast.

It was natural to me. Like that'd been the only way I'd ever traveled before. Flashes of the man with a missing tooth ignited in my brain again.

It seemed like I should know him. Know his name or something. So familiar, yet not. Could he be family? Brother? No. Cousin. *Cousin August*. The revelation took me by surprise, and I didn't see the rock in front of me that my toe connected with.

The soft grass padded my landing, but my palms burned as I slid forward. I tucked and the momentum rolled me over, then I popped up onto my feet.

I took off running again and veered left. I knew I didn't know where I was going, yet I followed a pull or beacon guiding me. I couldn't quite picture it, but I felt it with every pore. Just like my name.

Thank you, moon, for lighting my way.

The cool breeze sliced through my hair, brushed against my skin, and I'd never felt more alive. Like I could launch up if I wanted to.

The bubbling heat surfaced on my back again.

This time it was too much to bear. The pain felt like liquid fire poured on my flesh. White blasts flashed in the corners of my vision. The burn followed my spine, and I heard the crackling of my bones again.

I sped up. Maybe I could outrun the pain. I dropped my shoes and the little bag and pumped my arms harder. My heart crashed, fluttering faster than a hummingbird's wings.

Heat exploded from my back, and I lurched forward, but I didn't fall to my hands like before. Instead, I felt air beneath me.

Free. I was free.

My eyes slid shut, but as they did, I thought I saw the tops of the trees.

Darkness swallowed me whole.

FIFTEEN

WARMTH SPILLED OVER ME, and light pierced my closed eyelids. I turned my head toward the heat and smacked my lips, searching for moisture. A gust of wind brushed over me, and I curled back into a ball to capture the heat I'd felt seconds earlier.

The caw of a bird drew my attention forward. I cracked open my eyes. A morning dove strutted across the cement ledge. I sat up more, and soft cushions beneath me groaned.

Where was I?

The sun crested the little wall before me, and I instantly knew.

Jayden's balcony.

I jumped to my feet and tightness gripped my sides and back. Running my fingers across my stomach, I'd expected to see cuts for how much it ached. Instead, I realized it was my abdominal muscles that were sore. Like they'd been stretched beyond their limits.

One step forward brought me to the railing on top of the wall. Seven stories up. Nothing but rocky beach below. The orange orb rising drew my attention again. The bottom tip disengaged from the water, hanging fully suspended in the clear blue sky now.

It was morning, and I was on Jayden's balcony. How had that happened? I moved to the door and turned the knob, but it didn't budge.

I remember when he locked it last night before we left for the party. I'd asked why he did that, since he was on the seventh floor. Nothing could get up here.

He'd said he didn't trust it. If someone wanted in bad enough, they'd find a way.

So cynical. Yet right. Somehow, *I'd* gotten up here. I rapped against the glass, then cupped my face to it. The studio was dark. But I saw the bed. It was empty. The couch on which he slept, so I could have the comfort of the big bed to myself, lay empty as well.

I rapped again. "Jayden?"

My breath clouded the glass, and I stepped away. My reflection showed shards of fabric flapping out from behind me. Now that I thought about it, I did feel an extra breeze against my skin back there. I remembered falling forward while running. But I'd rolled and jumped to my feet. I must have ripped my dress then.

Who had been chasing me? Oh, that man in the blue car. Isabel's friend. I pressed my hand on the window again, then turned around to face the warmth of the sun's rays and closed my eyes. A deep breath of the fresh morning air didn't chase away my confusion, though. The previous night was but a choppy barrage of images.

I sank into the soft chair cushion. It nearly swallowed me whole it was so plush. My stomach roared for food, and my tongue almost stuck to the roof of my mouth it was so dry.

How did I get here? And seven stories up?

I slid my eyes shut and replayed the evening. It was all painfully clear until I was running through the open space. The feel of the grass beneath my toes, the breeze in my face and cutting through my hair. So free. A hot flash in my back, then darkness.

It didn't make sense.

My mind wandered to Jayden, like it always did. Maybe it was because he was the one who rescued me. The only person I really knew. Maybe that was why I was so drawn to him. But it felt like more to me. I had wanted to get away from him, to keep him safe from whatever was going on with me, yet I found myself back here. At his place. Somehow.

That meant something.

The sun faded; I could tell even with my eyes shut, so I slid them open. A dark cloud stalled above me. Several more reaching east, blocking the warmth of the sun.

The smell of moisture triggered my mouth to water. It would rain soon. I could drink from the sky, like it was meant to be. Like *I* was meant to. I drew in another deep breath. The smell of rain rejuvenated my heart, and it pounded. I licked my lips in anticipation.

A bolt of lightning streaked the sky from one billowing slate cloud to another. Gooseflesh puckered my skin, and I detected the scent of the electrical charge lingering in the air.

Thunder clapped.

I sank into the chair, letting the lullaby of rolling thunder soothe me. It was like I'd done that my entire life—slept beneath nature's cover, listening to her sounds.

Muffled noises leaked into my state of calm. Someone talking. Then a click.

“She's not here.”

Another click.

“How would she even know how to get to my house?”

The door creaked open, and I jumped from the chair.

“Trinity.” The phone slid from his hand and cracked against the ground.

One push from my legs, and I leaped the five feet separating us, and landed in Jayden's arms. His strong, warm arms.

Tears stung. Drops of water slapped my back. It was then that I realized how bare I was. But I didn't care. I was with Jayden. He was holding me tight.

Jayden held me close and leaned down. “Hold on.”

I did, and he easily maneuvered with me clinging to him and reached his phone. “Zander. I got her. Call you later.”

More raindrops landed on me. I pulled away and faced skyward, then slid down the front of Jayden, enjoying every bit of friction on the way. Warmth swirled at my back again and in my stomach. I turned skyward and faced the rain falling down. In sheets it drenched me. I opened my mouth and every little precious drop of water that made it to my tongue was absorbed instantly.

“Trinity. What are you doing?”

“So thirsty.” I cupped my hand out in front of me, collecting more rain as it poured down over me. Thunder clapped again.

“Come inside. How did you get up here?”

“I don’t know.” I cupped more water to my mouth.

Jayden’s hand curled around my arm, near my elbow. “Trinity, come on. Let’s get you inside. You’re all wet. Your dress is ripped.”

I faced him, and once again, jumped up and wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. “My Jayden.” Right then I didn’t care that I probably shouldn’t be clinging to him or that I should probably leave and not be a burden to him.

It felt so right to be held by him.

With me wrapped around him like a second shirt, he stepped through the doorway into the warm, dry studio. My lips touched his wet neck as I nuzzled close. His pulse thrashed against my lips. He drew in a deep breath, and his chest expanded against me.

He stopped and just held me tight, both arms around my waist. I'd latched my feet together behind him and my arms were locked behind his neck. I didn't plan on letting go any time soon.

His fingers combed through my wet hair. "I've been looking all over for you."

I hugged him tighter.

"So have Zander and Karen." His hand rubbed up and down my spine, but not quite to the spot, almost like he knew what it would do to me. He rotated at his waist, lulling my body to calm down and relax.

I was safe. I was with Jayden.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Doesn't matter."

"Trin."

Tears stung when he said that. His voice imprinted on my soul when he said the shortened version of my name. In my heart I knew only those close to me ever called me that.

Those I treasured and who treasured me.

"Did Isabel do this to your dress?"

“No. I fell,” I said into his neck.

He started moving again. A shiver ran through me, but it was because of the cold air against my bare back this time. Not like the warm feelings I had when touching him.

Like I’d felt before. Like I craved now.

“You’re shaking. Come on, let’s get you dried off.” He pulled some towels from the bathroom, then carried me to the kitchen and set me on the counter. It made us more eye-to-eye than when he stood.

The warm, fuzzy towel felt soft against my bare back. He tucked it around me while he grabbed another one and threw it over my head. Gentle motions pressed against my head and the cloth eventually pulled back so I could see him again, but he still massaged my head with the towel.

His stare fastened on mine, and I stopped breathing. With a gentle stroke of his finger, he pushed the hair from my eyes and curled it around my ear. His gaze shifted down.

I leaned forward, wanting to taste those shiny lips. To feel those subtle whiskers against my smooth skin.

His hand cupped my face, his thumb brushing my chin, and I pressed my hand over his. The contact. His warmth. He was everything I needed. Even more than my memory. “Jayden, I —”

My stomach growled, and not a subtle noise. More like a lion.

“That’s my cue to make breakfast, then?”

I laughed. And boy, did it feel good to laugh. Like it felt good to dance with him at the party. That's what I wanted. Fun times and laughter.

With him.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his finger beneath my chin, forcing me to look at him.

I nodded. Physically, yes. Mentally, not so sure. Darn stomach interfered with my chance to kiss Jayden.

"Going to tell me how you got back here? And on my balcony?"

"Don't know."

"How could you not know, Trin? What am I supposed to think? Your dress is torn. Isabel came into the kitchen with a shit-eating grin on her face but claimed you decided to leave town because you were sick of being a burden on everyone."

A huff snuck out from my mouth before I could catch it.

Jayden's eyebrow shot up. "What did Isabel do?"

"Nothing. I—well—Karen was so scared at what happened with my back and then—well—I just knew I had to leave. I was causing too much trouble for everyone. I went to go find someone to take me to Detective Nicks." I cleared my throat. "I got lost. I—Jayden I don't remember how I got here." Tears stung my eyes.

"Trin—"

"But somehow, I did. It's really the only place I want to be."

His piercing green eyes bore right through me. They shot a line of liquid heat into me and got my heart moving again. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but snapped it shut. His gaze shifted to the side, and his hand fisted the towel.

I grazed my fingers along his arm, leaving a trail of goose bumps. Yes. He felt something for me. I could tell. It radiated from him. His jaw muscles fired, and he stepped closer to the bar. So close, the heat from his body chased away the chill from my wet clothes and hair.

I wanted him closer. Wanted him touching me.

Jayden drew in a deep breath and pushed away. “I can’t, Trin. I—” He clutched the back of his neck. “You—” He coughed. “Better go clean up. I’ll make some food.”

A sudden and intense emptiness hollowed out my stomach at the sight of his back to me. He didn’t want me.

I couldn’t explain what happened last night or how I ended up seven stories in the air, on his balcony. All I knew was that I’d wanted to get away from him, but I ended up here.

That meant something.

SIXTEEN

FRESHLY SHOWERED AND DRESSED in dry clothes, I stepped out from the bathroom, determined to make Jayden see Fate had brought us together.

Somehow, I was meant to know him. To be with him.

The sounds of muffled talking stopped me near the corner. I drew in a deep breath.

“Are you kidding me, Jayden? I walk into my boyfriend’s apartment and find out a woman, other than me, has been sleeping here. And in your bed?” a female voice said.

“It’s not what you think, Grace. I slept on the couch.”

Grace? She was here? I would finally meet Jayden’s girl friend?

“It doesn’t matter, Jayden. She doesn’t belong here with you. *In your bed*. I do. Let the cops handle her case. Why do you have to?”

“I can’t kick her out, she has nowhere to go. She doesn’t know anyone.”

“That’s the city’s problem.”

I stepped around the corner. Jayden stood facing a woman with long black hair and a snug black outfit. She waved her hands in the air, and the lights flickered off shiny fingernails, tipped in white.

Jayden leaned against the kitchen counter, back to me, but his head hung low, and his shoulders curved forward. Like he was dejected or sad.

She lifted his chin with her fingers. So tall, she stood nearly eye to eye with him, especially when he slouched like he was.

I’d never seen him so down.

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. My heart erupted into a fit of rage, and I battled the urge to run and push her away. But what right did I have to think that? To even feel it?

Regardless, I did.

Jayden turned away from her just after she made contact.

“What? I can’t kiss my boyfriend?” She stomped across the kitchen, hands toward the ceiling. “I’ve been gone a few days and all hell breaks loose. Where is this little bi—”

“Grace.” Jayden glanced in my direction but must not have seen me. “Just don’t.”

She crossed her arms over her big chest. No wonder she and Isabel were friends. They had exactly the same sized chests.

Only Grace wasn't as heavy in the hips and around the waist as her friend. But her lips were bigger.

Reminded me of a fish.

I stepped back, wanting to crawl into the bathroom and close the door. I couldn't stand that woman, and I didn't even know her. She'd done to Jayden what I'd wanted to do for two days—press my lips to his. I'd craved doing that, especially after the dressing room incident, then while dancing.

My body pulsed thinking about it.

Then it all made sense. When Jayden had said I didn't understand girl friend, he had meant *girlfriend*, as in someone more special. Not just a friend who was a girl. Isabel had reacted when I'd said I was a girl friend of Jayden's.

I palmed my temples. *I am so stupid*. I didn't understand anything. I didn't belong here.

But I belonged with Jayden.

I paced the tiny hallway outside the bathroom.

“You know, Jayden. You can't bring Amy back by helping every little stray who stumbles along.”

Jayden grunted.

“You can't rescue everyone else because you couldn't save Amy.”

I hurried to the end of the hallway to see Jayden. Rescue Amy? Bring Amy back?

“I can’t believe you brought Amy into this.” Jayden slouched even more.

What was wrong with him? It was like he’d turned into a different person. He’d always stood so tall near me.

“Jay.” She grabbed him at the waist with both of her hands. “Babe. You can’t bring Amy back. She’s gone.”

Jayden looked downward and Grace tried to get in his line of vision. I would have been able to because I was so small, but not Grace. She was only a couple inches shorter than Jayden from the looks of it.

Jayden shook his head. “It’s not that.”

“Yes it is.”

Jayden shot a look in my direction and stiffened. He’d seen me. I stepped out from around the corner, and his eyes widened. Grace’s eyes narrowed as her brows pulled together.

“Trinity. Come here.” Jayden stepped out from Grace’s grasp. “This is Grace.”

I inched toward them, past the couch, and I gave a little glance to my left, into the space with the easel, and saw my picture still hanging there. *Amy’s Angel*.

Warmth rushed through me.

“Trinity.” Jayden’s voice was closer. “You okay?”

“Amy’s Angel,” I whispered.

“I’m sorry, what?” Jayden asked.

“Nothing. Um—hello, Grace,” I said, looking at her. Her gaze dropped to my leather-clad wrist.

Jayden led me, without touching me, under the scrutiny of Grace’s eagle eyes. “Grace is just in time to have breakfast with us.”

He stepped in beside her. She possessively curled her hand around his. Fingers intertwined, as I had the previous night.

No wonder he’d flinched.

The tight black skirt she wore clung to her narrow hips. She had miles of legs. I saw why she was so tall, though. High heel shoes, at least three inches, pushed her close to Jayden’s height.

Two plates of omelets sat steaming on top of the bar, ready to be devoured. My stomach rumbled. Despite the thick tension stifling the room, I was starving. Whatever I’d done the previous night that landed me on Jayden’s balcony had left me empty. I hopped up onto the chair and picked up my fork.

“Thank you for cooking, Jayden. It looks delicious.” I took the cool fork into my shaking fingers.

He moved toward the stove. “Um—sure. Grace. I—well—didn’t know you’d be coming by, so I didn’t make enough. You can have mine while I make another.”

“You know I don’t eat omelets,” she said, drilling me with a stare, venom dripping from every drawn-out word.

I shoveled two forkfuls of eggs while she stared at me. The cheese, tomatoes, and onions exploded with flavor. Jayden’s

omelets were amazing. How could she not eat them?

“Right. Um—sorry—what can I get you?” he said.

I’d never seen him so confused looking. So uncomfortable.
Who was this Grace?

“I’ll just take some coffee.”

He nodded. “Have a seat.”

“I’ll stand.” She crossed her arms over her chest again, making her boobs nearly pop out from the thin, white fabric covering them. “A kitchen table would come in handy about now, wouldn’t it?”

“This table is high, isn’t it?” I said, trying to break through some of the tension choking me. “Especially since I’m so short.”

She glared at me; her plastic-looking face didn’t crack a smile. Jayden reached into a cabinet above him, and she leaned toward him. “I’ve been gone for a few days, so I want to spend the day together.” She glanced at me. “And the night. I miss my Jayden.”

He stood straight and coughed. “Um—me too—I—” He looked at me.

“What, do you need to ask *her* for permission?”

“Grace.” Jayden stepped away from her. “I can’t just leave her. I—”

“You don’t mind. Do you, hon?” Grace flashed a toothy smile as her hand slid into the back pocket of Jayden’s jeans.

Karen had called me hon and dear plenty of times in the short time I knew her, but when it came from Grace's mouth, it didn't feel as warm and nice.

But Jayden didn't say anything. Maybe I was a burden on him like Isabel said, and he didn't have the heart to tell me. To shoo me away.

On the balcony earlier when he found me, he'd seemed so happy to see me, though. Like he needed me as much as I needed him. I could almost feel his warm arms around me and his fingers caressing my hair.

The foul smell of coffee filtered into the air. I'd tasted it the other day and nearly vomited the six pieces of pizza from my stomach. The dark drink tasted like tar.

"Maybe I could stay with Zander and Karen?"

"There, you see? That'll work. Let's go. You know I like it better at my place—it's so small here." She reached for his hand.

His usually bright eyes darkened. His skin took on a pasty look, and his normally thick, musky scent had diminished.

Probably by the overpowering stench of Grace's perfume. She smelled like a rose, but the scent was too thick to enjoy.

He dug out his phone. "I'll call Zander. You sure you're okay with this, Trin?" Grace glared at him, and he straightened. "Er—Trinity?"

What was wrong with Jayden? It was like another being possessed him or something. I didn't like this one. He seemed

weak. Broken. I wanted to scream at him to wake up. To come back to me.

Instead, I shoveled the last of my omelet into my mouth as I nodded. His sat next to mine, cold. I tried to put on my most solid face so Grace and Jayden couldn't see my heart was ripping out.

Jayden held my gaze, as if searching for something, then he turned the corner of the bar. I would be strong. Show him it didn't hurt me like it did. All the while I wanted to cry. How could he leave me after what happened between us last night and yesterday? Then this morning when he found me. He slouched his way across the open room, phone pressed to his ear. He snatched some things from the dresser next to the bed, then disappeared into the bathroom.

I turned my attention to his cold omelet and reached for it. Guess he wouldn't be needing it anymore.

"You're going to eat that?" Grace asked. The last of her words were more like a screech a bird would make, though.

"Yes." I slid my fork into the soft, fluffy egg.

"It's cold."

"I'm still hungry."

"So, what's your story, anyway?"

"Jayden already told you."

"His version. He's gullible. You've tricked him somehow." She stepped forward and planted her hands on the end of the

counter, glaring at me over the bar. “It won’t work.”

This woman was not well. “Isabel said the same thing, but I don’t know what you mean. Jayden is just helping me until Detective Nicks finds something out about who I am.”

“Let’s hope that’s soon.” Grace turned toward the coffeemaker. “*Very* soon.”

I ate his omelet in three bites. “You’ve been with Jayden as his girlfriend for—”

“A year. *And counting.*” She reached into the cupboard and pulled out a blue mug. “So don’t think you can stumble in here and after two days steal him away from me. You got another thing coming, girl. I don’t care how cute and cuddly you look.”

Her tone of voice told me she was threatened by me, but I couldn’t figure out the words she was using. Cute and cuddly? Another thing coming? Whatever she said I decided was just anger and not worth my time.

“And Amy? You mentioned Amy?”

“So, you were eavesdropping, you little shit.” She hitched her hip against the counter next to the refrigerator and brought the steaming cup to her lips. “I knew you were a game player the minute Isabel told me about you at the party, dancing with *my* boyfriend.”

“Game player.” I didn’t know that word.

She arched an eyebrow over the mug at me. “Amy was his sister. She was killed last year, down the street from here.”

“Killed?”

“Yes. And so close to here. I can’t believe he didn’t leave this godforsaken dump. Especially how she was killed. This is a terrible neighborhood.”

I could attest to that.

“But he says the view is too much to give up for his art. Not that he’s been drawing anything in the past year.”

She must not have seen what was on his easel yet. Which was probably a good thing, since it was a picture of me. She didn’t seem to like me all that much. I drank the last of the water in my bottle and swiveled the chair toward the wall of windows. It was a great view; I wasn’t sure why Grace would bemoan it.

So, Amy was dead. That was why he got upset each time I’d mentioned her. And I’d worn her clothing. That must be very difficult for him.

Maybe if I saw Karen today, I’d ask to borrow some more of her daughter’s clothes so Jayden wouldn’t have to look at me in his dead sister’s clothes.

That is, if he even wanted me around anymore now that his girlfriend was home.

SEVENTEEN

“I CAN’T BELIEVE HE went with that little gold-digging—” Karen coughed into her hand. “How could he leave you all alone?”

“He didn’t leave me alone, he called you,” I said.

It didn’t sound any better when I said it out loud than when I’d tried to convince myself of that while waiting for Karen to come and get me.

“Oh, hon. And after what you went through last night. How the heck did you get to his balcony?”

“I don’t know.”

“I can’t believe Isabel treated you so badly.” Karen shook her head. “That girl—and Grace, too. They give our gender a bad name.”

This car was much nicer than Jayden’s. It didn’t jostle my insides around so much. And it was a lot quieter. The buildings and the people milling around remained the same, even in this part of the town. It was cleaner than where Jayden lived.

“And you said you remembered a name?”

As she drove, she faced forward, and her hands gripped the steering wheel. She wore a brown short-sleeved silk shirt, which looked nice against the brown hair that rested on her shoulders. Part of it was pinned up so I saw large, gold rings dangling from her earlobes.

I reached over and touched them. “Earrings you called these?”

“Yes. I see you don’t have your ears pierced.”

I tugged at my lobes. “Doesn’t appear that I do. Just this big gold band around my wrist is all I have for decoration.” I stared ahead. “And yes, I remembered a name. Do you think I should go and tell Detective Nicks? Might it help him find out something about me?”

“I’ve always been told to tell every little detail to the police, anything could help.”

“Then I should probably do so. Can you drive me there?”

“Just call him.” She handed me her red phone.

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“I’ll tell you. Do you have his number?”

“He is assigned a number?”

“Each phone has a number, and you dial it to reach the person who owns the phone.” Karen let out a soft giggle. “Gosh, I’ve never really had to explain a cell phone to anyone before. Even my thirteen-year-old has one. She knows it better than I do.”

I wanted to laugh with Karen, to enjoy fun time with her, but my heart hung heavy. She was so nice and very giving to agree to bring me to a store to trade for some more clothes, but I didn't want to be there. It would have been okay by me to lie in Jayden's bed and wait for his return, but if I understood what I'd heard Grace say, he would be gone even through the nighttime and in *her* bed.

What I didn't understand was, Jayden didn't seem happy to be with Grace, so why would he share her bed with her?

"Trinity?"

"Oh. I'm sorry." I leaned forward and pulled the small piece of paper Nicks gave me from my back pocket. "He gave me this. I see numbers on it."

"Yep. Here." With one hand on the wheel and the other pointing at the phone she said, "You tap each number, then press the green button."

With my thumb, I pressed the smooth pad above where the correct number was, then found the call button. I put the phone to my ear because that was what I'd seen Jayden, and so many other people, do. Some crackles and then a tone. It rang like a bell.

"You've reached Detective Nicks..."

"Hello?" I said.

"Leave...message..."

"Karen, it's his voice, but he's telling me to leave a message and not answering me."

“When you hear the long tone, speak into the phone and say what you remembered and your name.”

Beep.

“Hello? Detective Nicks. I am Trinity. You helped me the other day with Jayden. I remember a name. August.”

Karen nodded. “Tell him more.”

“He has brown hair and is missing his front tooth. I think—*er*—he feels like family.” I held the phone. “Now what?”

“Are you done?”

I nodded.

“Press the red button.”

I found the red button at the bottom of the screen, and it beeped as I pushed it. “I’m not sure I like this thing. It’s hard to hear on it.”

“I know. Reception in this area isn’t so good. We’re close to the mall, anyway. So, August, that’s the name you remember. You think he’s family?”

“Feels like it.” I settled into the soft seat. “Your car is very much more comfortable than Jayden’s.”

“I’ve been wanting him to get rid of his piece of junk for years now.”

“You’ve known him a long time?”

“Ten years. Met him when he won his first art contest. I knew he’d go far. And thankfully, my husband is an agent.”

“Jayden is a very good artist.”

“He is. And I’m so glad to hear he’s drawing again. I understand they’re all pictures of you?”

I nodded. “It’s like looking in a mirror they’re so real.”

“I saw him with you last night. I’ve never seen him more alive. It’s been a while since he’s looked so happy.” Karen spun the steering wheel, and my stomach went with it as she turned a corner. “It’s been a year since he’s been working, ever since Grace and then Amy.”

“Grace.” I clamped my mouth shut. Didn’t feel right to say anything, since I had nothing but bad feelings about her.

“He hooked up with her a year and a half ago or so, and his drawing slowed. Then, pretty much stopped. It was like she stifled any artistic flow in him. And then Amy died.”

“Grace says she was killed. Near his home.”

“Grace is speaking out of turn. Jayden should be the one to tell you.”

“So, you won’t?”

“It’s not my story to tell. All I can say is that Jayden feels that Amy’s death is his fault. That he let his sister down. He’s never been the same.” She glanced at me. “Until you, that is. What I saw last night was what I remember of Jayden.”

Tears stung my eyes. “Then why does he go to Grace? I see he’s uncomfortable with her. She treats him very poorly.”

“You see that, too?” Karen veered the car toward a dark opening.

I stiffened in my seat, but then remembered it was what Jayden called a parking garage. Like the one he drove his car into. I still didn't like it. Much rather be walking.

Or running.

“It's okay, Trinity. It's just a garage.” She grabbed my forearm. “Jayden said you're not fond of driving. Oh, and that you eat a lot. Are you hungry?”

“Yes. Hungry,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Three omelets this morning?” She stopped the car, then turned in her seat and faced me full on. “How are you hungry again?”

“It's strange how much I eat, yes?”

“Indeed.”

“May I ask you something?”

“Sure, hon.”

“Is it normal for a boyfriend and girlfriend to share a bed for sleeping?”

“Oh, dear. I just had this talk with my daughter a couple of years ago. We had better go get some food. This might take a while.”

Karen's already thin lips thinned out to no more than a line across her ivory-skinned face. The look sent a quiver of fear

around my stomach. She reached to the back seat for the bag she put there.

“Why are you asking me about that?” Karen asked.

“Grace said that Jayden would be in her bed tonight screaming her name.”

“For the love of Pete. She said that to you?” Karen yanked her purse from around the back seat. “That money-hungry little—”

“I don’t understand the words you’re saying.”

“She just makes me so mad. She’s been after his money since day one. Jayden’s too heartbroken or confused or—hell—I don’t know what’s wrong with him. It’s like Grace has some sort of trance over him or something.”

“Money. He doesn’t have much, or he would use it to buy a new car or move to a better place to live that isn’t so dangerous, am I right?”

“He lives like he has nothing, true. I’ve never understood that.” She clicked open her door. “But he has more money than he could spend in three lifetimes.”

“From his art?”

“That, but his family is very well off.”

“Why would Jayden not use his money to get better things in his life if he has it? I don’t understand this.”

“Haven’t quite figured that one out. I’ve narrowed it down to two or three guesses, though.” She pushed herself out of the

car, and I cranked my door open, anxious to hear more. “First theory is, he wants to stay in the rough for his art. To stay inspired.”

I walked next to her toward two doors that had the big letters Mall painted on them.

“Second theory is, he doesn’t want to be defined by his family or money. You know, it’s hard to find out who your *real* friends are when you have lots of money. There are some strange people out there who will do whatever they can to get a piece of the pie. That’s for sure.” She reached for the door handle and pulled it open.

A wave of stale air blasted over me, sending my hair flying.

“Third theory— He doesn’t care anymore. Nothing has mattered to him, not even his art, since Amy.”

My gut soured.

“That’s why I think you fell into his lap.” She grabbed my hand.

“Me?”

“You’re his angel.”

I pulled her to a stop. “The picture of me on the easel in his drawing space. It says, *Amy’s Angel* on it.” My heart thrashed.

Tears welled in Karen’s eyes. “I knew it. It’s true. You’re *his* angel. Now, we’re going to have to get him to see it.”

EIGHTEEN

“I HAVE CLOTHES NOW!” I held up five bags, brimming with items of clothing. “Thank you for all the things you bought for me.”

“Unlike our Jayden, I enjoy spending my money.” Karen laughed. “You’re such a beautiful girl, Trinity. You have a radiant soul. Pure. I can tell.”

We strolled toward an area in the mall that had much noise. Many voices talking, echoing off the tall ceilings. The smell of food triggered my stomach.

“You are like clockwork, dear. It’s been a couple of hours. How ’bout a snack before we leave?”

I nodded. “I very much liked the pizza we ate the other night.”

She pointed to a store that had a sign with a red hat and white writing below it and said, “There’s a pizza place.”

I leaned close to her. “Where is the bathroom?”

“Oh. I’ll go with you.”

“No. It’s okay. I’m feeling very much like a child when everyone has to take me everywhere. Is it nearby?” I leaned in and drew in her jasmine-laced scent.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing. I was just—well—smelling you. Is that jasmine?”

“Yes.” Her face flushed. “Um—jasmine. You know that smell?”

“Smells very familiar. I can smell Jayden’s musk anywhere. If he were close, I would know. I know your smell now, too. It’s nice.”

Her chestnut eyes widened, and her hand navigated to her throat.

“I’ve done something wrong again, haven’t I?”

“We usually—people usually don’t know other people by their smell.” Karen’s light skin darkened as a deep red blush took hold of her cheeks.

“Oh.” Seemed natural to me. “So, you don’t smell anything from me?”

She shook her head, then stepped toward the line forming in front of the pizza stand.

“I don’t think I’ll ever fit in here,” I said under my breath. “So where is the bathroom in this place?”

“You see that blue sign there? Up top, it has a woman in white painted on it.” She pointed behind me.

“That’s close. I’ll hurry. I’m very hungry.”

She reached for my bags. “I’ll hold these and put in our order. See the tables? I’ll be sitting at one in there.”

I scanned the sea of tables in the middle of the open area. Most were full, but enough were empty that Karen would find one and I would find her. It was about time I started figuring things out. “Okay. Thank you.”

I stepped away, my heart pounding. I could do this. It wasn’t far. Karen turned toward the person standing behind a short table. I faced my target area again and followed the opening between the tables.

To my left sat a grand stone fireplace. The pit remained dark, probably because it was so warm out, there was no need to heat the area. There was another wall of food stores across from the one Karen stood at. Lines of people stemmed from each store.

A cluster of five girls, not much smaller than me, huddled together in front of one of the stores. Their teeth had shiny silver things across them, and the girls often put their fingers to their mouths as if to hide it. Giggles flowed from that direction.

“Hi,” a small man with wavy dark hair said as I passed his table.

I slowed, but kept going as I said, “Hello.” He seemed pleasant. His smile genuine. He faced the man next to him, and they both grinned. I hurried on, casting them one last glance as I turned the corner beneath the blue and white sign.

They'd returned to eating their French fries. Two girls joined them at their table. I walked the narrow, white-tiled hallway toward the bathroom. I pressed my hand against the orange door that had the word Women painted on it. It squeaked and gave me a little resistance.

I stepped into a world of white and red tiled walls and floors. An overpowering smell of chemicals of some sort slammed into me.

But I didn't care. I'd made it. Found my way. Sure, it was a tiny feat, but I was sick and tired of having people constantly taking care of me. Showing me things.

Finally, I was figuring some things out.

I was washing my hands beneath the warm water when the hairs on my neck prickled. My heart hammered, and a chill spiraled up my arms. I turned toward the door and held my breath.

Nothing. Only the sound of the water flowing from the tap. I clicked it off and listened. Distant voices, muffled by the closed door, seeped into my awareness, but that was it. I swallowed hard. What was happening to me?

I inched to the door and cracked it open. Voices grew louder, but they blended into unrecognizable tones and pitches. The scent of food cooking swirled around my senses.

But still, the uneasy feeling lingered.

Several steps brought me toward the end of the hallway, to the swarm of people in the eating area. My heart thrashed

against my insides. A foul taste leaked into my mouth, like stomach juices had come up.

Fear. My body was leaking an essence of fear. Like it sensed something and was trying to tell me.

My chest heaved as I took in deep breaths. I peeked around the corner at the end of the hallway. Bustling, chatting, laughing and—

A small man with wavy dark hair stood propped against the pillar near the doors that led outside. His arms were tight over his chest. On his left hand, he wore a bracelet that was exactly like my gold bracelet, only darker. Silver, but dull. Brushed.

His head tilted back as if he smelled the air. He tensed, then faced me, and locked his gaze on me.

I almost choked beneath the weight of his glare.

He bounded toward me, pushing a man from his path. Hairs prickled on my neck. My instinct to run ignited, and I took off to the left. The man gave chase. Another person bounced off him, a woman that time.

She crumbled to the ground, bags spilling everywhere, but the man didn't look twice. That confirmed my instinct. I had to stay away from him. He would hurt me. Like the man in the alley. He knew I had a gold band on and wanted it. But how? It was covered with leather.

No. It wasn't my band. He wanted *me*. Somehow, I knew he'd harm me.

I couldn't run to Karen, then he'd see her, if he hadn't already. She might get hurt. But where? Where could I go? The garage. Yes. I could run there and wait by Karen's car. She would come there. Soon, right?

I rounded a corner and collided with what felt like a stone wall. A guy with a long, dark beard and four gold hoops in his ear looked down at me.

"You okay, miss?"

"Yes. I'm sorry." I pushed off him and glanced back.

Oh dear, the man was close.

Too close.

I bolted around the tower I'd collided with and pumped my arms, running as fast as I could against the stream of people. The tip of my sandal skidded against the slick surface, thrusting me forward. I stopped and flicked them off near a bench next to a trash can.

Barefoot was better.

I turned to run but rammed into another person.

"Do not scream," a male voice commanded as ice-cold fingers coiled around my arm.

Dark brown eyes stared at me.

"Unhand me." I tugged, but his grip was relentless.

"Come with me, Trinity. Quietly."

He knew me.

People streamed around us, not paying any mind to this guy harassing me. I thought about screaming for help, but what if that drew Karen's attention? What if she got injured in this?

I couldn't risk it.

"Who are you?" I asked.

The man laughed.

He tugged me into the line of human traffic leading toward the eating area again. No. I couldn't go back there. Couldn't chance him finding Karen. He'd been waiting there for me. What if he knew I had been with her?

I pressed my bare feet to the cold floor, working to slow us down. "No. What do you want? Who—"

"Shut up," the man said with a hiss.

I wrenched my arm, but his hold tightened. Before I realized I'd moved, I cranked my bent arm back, connecting my elbow with his stomach. He leaned forward, and I hit his chin with my palm.

Something cracked.

I didn't care, though, because all I knew was that his grip loosened, and I twisted away from him.

My feet slapped against the floor as I ran. I was faster now without the shoes, and I took off. The people zoomed toward me, but I wove around them. Quite easily, actually. Like I could anticipate which direction they'd move before they did.

I snuck a peek behind me and saw the man following me was equally as agile.

A tall, skinny man, wearing a white shirt and dark pants, stood near a small center fixture in the mall. It resembled a table, but connected into a square with someone sitting inside and another standing nearby. The guy standing wore a badge on the chest of his shirt. One like I'd seen at the detective's office. Maybe he could help me.

As I neared the area, just before another set of doors that led outside, the word Security affixed across the back of the guy's shirt caught my attention.

He must be some sort of authority in this mall. I slowed and veered toward the connected tables.

"Sir?" I said, my voice barely recognizable I was breathing so heavily. "Um—there's a man. He's—" The guy who had been chasing me stopped and paced around a bench occupied by three women, watching me. So, I'd been right. Near this security man, the stranger with the bracelet couldn't approach.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" the security guy asked as he stood from his chair.

"That man with the dark, wavy hair chased after me when I left the bathrooms. Pushed people over to get to me."

The wide security guy who had been standing near the tables stepped toward me as he held a small black box to his mouth and pressed a button on the side. "10-107, east entrance. Man, under five feet, dark hair, silver wrist."

“Ma’am, stay right where you are,” the short-haired security guy said. “Don’t look at him.”

My chest heaved as I fought to calm my heart. The guy who’d chased me was small, like me. Had a band on his wrist, like me. But who was he? He’d known my name, too. Even more scary, how was I able to fight out of his grip?

“Do you know him, ma’am?”

The gold name tag on the man’s chest said Jenson. “No. I—well—I don’t think so.” I reached into my back pocket. “Can you call Detective Nicks?”

“You’re working with Nicks? He’s in missing persons.”

“I—”

A woman screamed. Two guys, with security written on their shirts, descended on the man who had been chasing me, but he slithered through and sprinted away. The guy I’d been speaking with faced the commotion.

And I ran.

These security people could not keep me safe. I felt it to my very core. I needed to disappear. Think things through.

With some effort, I found the garage entrance from the outside of the mall. I retraced the route Karen had driven the car and found the spot. Her car was still there.

I squatted down beside the black vehicle, waiting, hoping she would come and take me back to Jayden’s. The only place I felt safe. The only place I would be able to think.

I fisted my hands in my hair and tugged. “Why can’t I remember?” Tears burned. My gut churned, yet growled for food.

I wasn’t sure how much time passed, but the squeak of a door opening drew my attention. I peeked over the hood of the car and Karen came into view. She carried the bags; her face was tense, and her hands fumbled through her purse as the echoes of her shoes against the pavement clicked in my direction.

I stood.

She gasped. “Trinity.” The bags fell to the ground. She hurried toward me with open arms. “Honey, are you okay? What happened? Where did you go?”

“I got lost. Only remembered how to get back here.” Total lie. No way could I tell her what really happened.

“Lost?” She stepped back, still holding my hands. “How. I ___”

“Can you take me home—*er*—to Jayden’s?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay with us?”

“I just want to be at Jayden’s.” Tears stung my eyes again, threatening to spill over. I couldn’t let her see that, though. She’d already witnessed what had happened to my back at her party. I refused to give her this burden, too.

“Sure, honey. Come on.” She gathered the bags strewn across the concrete. “You scared me. I didn’t know where to look for you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I almost called Jayden, but I wasn’t sure what he could do.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. No need to worry him. I’m fine.” I was *not* fine, but I said nothing further. Everything would be fine once I got to Jayden’s.

NINETEEN

I BELONGED OUTSIDE, NOT in malls, cars, or even that horrible thing called an elevator.

The setting sun had bounced its last crimson ray across the eastern sky I faced a long time ago, but I didn't move. Stars twinkled, and I drew in a deep breath. I settled into the chair on Jayden's balcony and watched the sky blacken as night firmly took hold.

I'd pulled the blanket from the couch that Jayden had slept on, so it was thick with his rich scent as I cuddled it around my body.

It soothed me. Calmed my racing mind.

For hours I'd sat here, replaying what happened at the mall and the previous night. The only conclusion I could draw was that I'd escaped from some evil place that had branded me with this gold bracelet. That man had a bracelet similar to mine, but it was a different color. That had to mean he was with whoever had held me captive.

And they wanted me back.

It couldn't be family, because the face I'd seen in my memory didn't elicit such angst like the man I saw today. And the name, August, didn't worry my soul or bring on a wave of unease.

Maybe August was, indeed, family but held captive by that strange man. Maybe my whole family was, and I somehow escaped.

That felt right.

I gripped the ends of the armrests until my knuckles hurt. I needed to figure out who I was and where I'd been so I could rescue my family.

I needed to tell Nicks what happened today. Maybe describe August and this man who chased me.

He'd help me find my family. Help me rescue them.

"Trinity." Jayden's tense voice burst through the closed balcony door. "Trinity."

I hopped to my feet, and the blanket fell to the patio floor. His panicked voice ignited an explosion of fear in the pit of my stomach. Was he hurt?

I saw him through the window running from the elevator toward the kitchen. Our gazes met through the glass, and he stopped behind the couch.

He ran his fingers through his hair, then folded into himself and melted to the floor. I lunged toward the door and pulled it open.

“Jayden?” My voice cracked. “What’s wrong?”

I found him on his knees near the art space that held his easel. His hands were buried in his hair.

I fell before him, not really knowing what to do. I leaned in, trying to see his face. He crouched too far forward. I touched each of his elbows with my fingers. “Jayden.”

His chest heaved, and he looked at me. The whites of his eyes had tiny red lines throughout, and they were moist.

“Nicks called.” He slumped back against his feet. “Said—” His breath hitched. “God—are you okay?”

“Yes. But I can see you are not. I don’t understand. I—”

“I thought it was happening all over again. All over.” He drew in a deep breath through clenched teeth. “Nicks called. Started the conversation with ‘I have some tough news to tell you, Jayden’ and it all came back.”

“Came back?”

“He said you were attacked.” He swallowed hard. “At the mall.”

“How—” I nodded. “Oh. I showed the security guard his card. He must have still called Nicks.”

“Karen said you got lost and that’s why you went to her car. You didn’t tell her what happened?”

“Didn’t want to burden anyone. I—”

His warm hands cupped my cheeks. My heart and back bubbled to life.

“You’re *not* a burden. Nicks said he wasn’t able to find anything on the man from the mall who attacked you. I thought someone had hurt you. Like Amy.”

I was so sick and tired of feeling confused. Jayden was so upset, but I couldn’t track all he said.

“Nicks said the guy from the mall was like a ghost. Nothing on him at all. Much like you.”

“Like me?”

“Yes.”

“So, Nicks hasn’t found me in any missing person reports. Or anything on his searches?” I leaned away from Jayden’s touch. “Even with his friends he said he knew could help more?”

“Nothing.”

I stood and moved toward the balcony. I needed the cool air on my warm face again. Jayden’s touch made it burn. Karen had told me the true meaning of a boyfriend and girlfriend sharing a bed. Which meant if Jayden was with Grace, I couldn’t be with him.

But his touch, his scent, and how I felt when I was near him made me want to be his girlfriend and share his bed with him. Be paired with him.

Once out on the balcony I stared at the sliver of moon hanging in the dark sky. The water rippled beneath the stiff breeze, creating whitecaps. Jayden stepped beside me.

“Where is Grace?” I asked.

“I left her when Nicks called.”

“I’m sorry, Jayden. I didn’t intend for that. I didn’t intend to make your life so chaotic, either. And to scare you like you were scared with Amy. I’m sorry.”

His jaw twitched. “Did Karen tell you?”

“No. She said it’s your story to tell.”

“She’s an amazing woman, isn’t she?” He smiled. “Amy was my little sister. I’d gotten this studio right out of high school. Just wanted to sit here, with the view, and draw and paint.”

“I can see why.” I looked out at the silver rays bouncing off the sparkling water. “It’s beautiful.”

“But not safe.”

“That, I know.”

“Amy was here for a weekend. She was only fifteen. I was painting. Lost in it for the first time in a few months. I’d told her I would take her out for ice cream soon. But she snuck out. On her own.”

“She left?”

He studied his hands. They still had darkness beneath the fingernails. “When I was done, I called out for her, but she didn’t answer. I realized she’d gone and freaked. Went out looking for her, calling her cell. But she wasn’t answering. I

figured she was mad and was screening my calls. So, I texted her. Nothing.”

“Texted.” I didn’t know that word.

“It’s a short message. We type the words into the phone instead of talking. But she wasn’t answering that, either.” He turned around and leaned against the little wall around his balcony and crossed his arms over his chest. “Got a call around midnight from the police. They’d found her body two blocks down, in a dumpster.”

My heart exploded, and I faced him front on. “Trash? They threw her—”

“I told you. There are things people would do for money or pleasure that you would never believe.” Jayden looked skyward. “That call was the worst thing ever. My little sis was dead. And on my watch.”

“My watch.”

“Slang. It’s like, well, like with you. You’re here. I’m watching out for you. And, well, you were hurt while under my care. Under my watch.” He scrubbed his face with his hands. “I left you alone. I left—”

“You have a girlfriend. It’s not right for me to be here with you. It makes her upset. I understand that now. You had to be with her because she is your girlfriend.” The words tasted like bile. I didn’t want him with her. I wanted him for myself, but I had to help relieve some of the guilt he carried for me. “I’m sorry I frightened you.”

“It’s okay. You’re safe. I won’t leave again.”

“That’s not right, though. You have a life, Jayden. A girlfriend. And she was right. I’m not Amy. You want to take care of me only to make up for Amy. I understand that now.” I understood it, but I didn’t like it.

I wanted to stay. Everything felt so much better—bearable—when he was near. I wanted to tell him everything about the man who chased me, but I didn’t. I couldn’t burden him any more than I already had.

“Karen offered to have me stay at her house. It’s very big. You wouldn’t have to sleep on the couch anymore. You could have your bed back and share it with Grace like before I came here.”

“Is that what you want? To go stay with Zander and Karen?”

What I wanted to do was step in to him, cuddle up against him beneath his blanketing arm of security. Didn’t matter what I wanted. What he wanted mattered more. Maybe once I figured things out, I could return to him.

“It’s for the best.” I pushed away from the short wall. “I need to get my things ready and then call her telephone number in the morning. She said she would come get me.” My stomach churned at the thought of leaving Jayden. The thought of that woman, Grace, touching him, sleeping with him... Heat streamed through my chest, burning my cheeks. It triggered my heart into a steady pounding.

I wanted Jayden. Wanted him to be mine.

“Can I ask you something?” Jayden asked.

I stopped, having gotten only a step away from him.

“Twice I’ve felt something with you. I—” He studied his hands. “I can’t explain it. But I did.”

“I know.”

“You felt it, too.”

“I feel it now.” I closed my eyes, savoring the subtle bubble in my stomach. The fluttering of my spine. Heat pooling between my shoulder blades.

“I have you here because I want to help you. I care about what happens to you.” He stepped closer to me. “You fell into my life for a reason. I’m drawing again. I’m inspired by you.”

“Amy’s Angel.”

“And mine,” he said. His hand cupped my cheek, fueling the flames inside me to a roar.

“You have a girlfriend,” I whispered.

“Not anymore.”

His mouth captured mine with such gentleness, a flutter tickled down my spine. One step brought me flush against his body. All points of contact tingled with energy. He wove his arms around my waist and hoisted me up.

I wrapped my legs around him. He turned toward the short wall surrounding his balcony and set me on top of it, never breaking our connection. My hands went to his hair and pulled

his face closer. An energy hummed through my body as I tasted him for the very first time.

And oh, what a taste it was. Earthy with a hint of sweet vanilla laced throughout his essence.

My heart crashed against my chest, forcing the breath from my lungs.

My world tilted, and I pulled away, gasping. By its own will, my back arched, pressing me against him.

His mouth trailed my jaw to my neck. My back crackled again, heat boiling, intensifying the pleasure with a touch of pain. It was happening again, like it did at the dress shop and when we danced. He triggered something in me, both frightening and amazing.

His hand darted up the back of my shirt while his other hand held me close to him. His fingers traced my spine up toward my spot.

The spot.

“I feel it again,” he whispered. His breath came quick against my neck. “It’s a warm, crackling energy.”

“Yes.” His scent overwhelmed me. I tilted my head back, white lights exploding in my vision. Something tugged at my shirt from behind. His fingers grazed me where my marks were. A tingle shot down my spine, and the pain intensified.

I squeezed him hard.

“Trin,” he said.

“Don’t stop.” I took his mouth with mine, and he pressed against me. The feeling sent my mind to another place. Floating, falling, toward darkness. Fabric ripped behind me, and I flinched. It wasn’t only fabric tearing, something clawed through my skin, shredding the muscle. Bones snapped.

I screamed, and at the same time something slammed into me from behind, forcing my chest against his. Darkness curved my vision until I saw only him.

But his eyes were wide and the green dark. Not so much with fear, although I did sense a bit of that as well. I couldn’t place it. Because what I felt was elation and relaxation. The pain was gone. I’d finally kissed my Jayden.

And yes, he was mine.

He must be tugging at my shirt, though, because something shuffled behind me.

“Oh my God,” he whispered. His gaze shifted to over my shoulder.

“What?” I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his. He didn’t respond as he had before. I must have been doing something wrong.

“Trin,” he whispered into my mouth. “Look behind you.”

I pulled away and glanced behind me. I screamed, but Jayden swallowed the noise with a brief kiss.

“It’s okay.” He touched a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “Shhh,” he whispered as he eased back. I tightened my hold on him. “Don’t worry. I’ve got you,” he said.

Silver moonlight bounced off the feathers, casting a gray tint. The breeze shuffled them, and they shimmered like scales of a fish. *Wings?*

TWENTY

A GUST OF WIND tugged at the extended wings, and I jerked with it, but Jayden's strong arms held me tight against him. Not to mention the fact that I'd still had my legs clenched around his waist. No way would I let go. I might have been carried away by the wind if I had.

I went to touch one of the feathered appendages, and it curled toward my hand, like it knew what I wanted.

My fingertips met pure softness. A slick, silky feel, yet the feathers held a hint of rigidity. But what surprised me most was the sensation radiated into my arm as if I touched my own skin. A tingle shot up my other arm. Jayden's fingers grazed the other wing tip. It curled toward him.

I had wings? Really? I should be thoroughly petrified by this revelation. Yet I wasn't. Surprisingly, a sense of peace washed over me. As if a part of me had been discovered. Revealed.

I felt lighter.

Jayden's wide eyes scanned the sight before him. His chest heaved against me, and he still had one arm wrapped tight around my waist.

"I guess we know how you got up here the other night after the party." Jayden's voice sounded distant and full of awe. He hadn't looked at me yet. It was as if his gaze was lost, no, mesmerized by the feathers.

He didn't look scared anymore, though. At first, I was shocked, but now that they were out, things made more sense. The bubbling pain along my spine, the scars, ending up here on the balcony the way I did, even how small and light I was compared to everyone else.

I curled my fingers around the nape of Jayden's neck, my thumb stroking his cheek. It drew his attention. The moon spilled its silver rays over his smooth face and sparkled off his eyes. His musky scent tickled my nose.

His fingers combed through my hair. When he reached the end, his hand slid to my neck. That triggered another bubbling feeling, just not in my back that time.

"So, you really are an angel, then, aren't you?"

His gaze shifted down, and he leaned forward, pressing his forehead against mine. I clenched my legs around him tighter and drew in a deep breath. "I don't know what I am. But I'm not from here, am I?"

He shook his head slightly, but stayed connected to my forehead.

“You’ve never heard of or seen someone like me?”

“No.” He pressed his lips against one of my eyes, then the next, then moved to the tip of my nose. “You’re the first.”

“That we know of. The man from the mall had a band around his wrist just as I do. He could be one of me. Or me one of him. Or—”

Jayden’s lips silenced me.

At that moment I didn’t care where I was from. I didn’t care that a man had possibly found me. I didn’t care about how hungry for food I was.

All that mattered was Jayden.

Maybe I was his angel. Thrown down here from the heavens to be with him. To love him. To protect him. He’d endured much with his sister’s death. Been riddled with guilt over it and locked into a terrible relationship with Grace ever since.

I would set him free.

Be a source of strength for him.

Whatever the reason I came here, all I knew was that I loved him. With my entire heart.

Jayden nipped at my bottom lip, and I let him in. I wouldn’t have guessed I could feel this good because someone kissed me or touched me. But I did. My heart pounded, pulsing warm and tingly blood through my body.

Mine.

This was all so new to me, at least I thought it was. Up until now, some things had felt familiar, like they maybe existed where I was from, but so many things I didn't know. And this was one of them.

But I liked it. And I wanted more.

I pulled back slightly, enough to move my mouth to his neck. I tasted a layer of salt on his skin, but I also smelled a hint of rose. That ignited a different feeling—anger maybe? No—jealousy. Yes, it was jealousy. A flash of Grace's face made me flinch.

I pulled his arm from around me, then inhaled and rubbed my cheek against his inner forearm.

“Mine,” I whispered with each stroke.

I twined my fingers with his as my lips brushed the crook of his elbow. He lifted me from the sitting position on the wall with his free hand. I let go of his fingers and wrapped my arms around his neck.

Over his shoulder, toward the door that led into the studio, I saw our reflection. His back, my legs around him, and then my wings. They spanned nearly twice my height on each side. They were light, I could tell, but couldn't see the color in the reflection because the moon splashed its silver tint over everything.

I asked my wings to curl around Jayden, and they instantly obeyed, like they were an extra set of arms. Jayden pulled in a sharp breath, then carried me through the doorway.

“Let’s get a look at these beauties,” he said.

He brought me to the kitchen and settled me onto the counter. I didn’t let go right away, dreading the thought of ever letting go of him again. He cupped my face and tilted my head. “Let’s have a look.”

I unfolded my wings. He stepped away, and a chill settled in against my body. The feathered limbs spanned the entire counter and then some. Jayden stepped back, his eyes wide with amazement. “They match your eyes.”

“You’re not scared by this?” I said.

“Not in the least. I’ve dreamed of this kind of stuff all my life. You saw my drawing.”

“Dreaming and actually seeing are two different things, are they not?”

“True.” He stepped around the bar, looking at me from behind. “They ripped right through your shirt.”

“It’s thin.”

“Or your wings are sharp when they’re coming out.”

“Where do they come from? All that can’t hide in me. I’m too small.”

“True. But they’re here now and they’re amazing.”

A warm zing of energy shuddered through my spine, and I stiffened.

“Sorry, does that hurt you?” he asked.

“No. Feels like you’re caressing my skin when you touch my feathers.” My cheeks flamed. “I like the way it feels very much.”

“I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it,” Jayden said.

His hand covered his forehead and the other was planted on his hip. I pulled my feet up to the counter and hugged my knees to my thudding chest. A growl rumbled from my stomach.

“Pizza or Chinese food?” Jayden said as he rounded the corner of the bar, holding his phone.

I didn’t really want to stop and eat. I’d rather keep kissing and touching Jayden now that I was allowed to. I’d ached to since I met him, but then Grace returned from wherever she’d been and said those horrible things to me. And treated Jayden so badly.

I licked my lips, still tasting him. I wanted more, but I couldn’t deny my body its calories. “I haven’t had Chinese before. At least I don’t think I have.” I curled my wings around my body. The soft feathers brushing against my bare arms warmed me like a blanket. And they obeyed my slightest thought. I was a bit chilled, and it was as if they knew it.

“Chinese it is.”

I brushed my fingers over the new extensions as he talked into his phone. I slid my eyelids shut and rested my forehead on my knees, letting his baritone voice lull me into a semiconscious state.

It must have been enough to let a memory slip through, because the face of the man named August flashed before my eyes. Crystal clear. Long, brown hair. Burnt orange eyes. His smile reached them, making them sparkle. The black hole where his tooth should be drew my attention, and another memory flashed of a small girl and boy wrestling on plush, green grass.

The tiny boy tumbled over the girl. Giggles reached my ears, echoing as if they bounced off Jayden's tall ceilings and brick walls. Joy filled my heart. Then the memory returned to the older version of the boy. I stood next to him, holding his shoulder. My hair was much longer than it was now, but I knew the girl was me. And August had been that little boy in my memory.

We'd grown up together. Friends as much as family. Yes. That was right.

August's mouth moved, but I couldn't hear the words. I saw his lips form my name. He wore a band on his wrist that resembled mine. Solid turquoise. But otherwise, exactly like mine.

In the memory, I turned and looked behind me. A sliver of black with shimmering turquoise waves emanating from it flickered. It was probably five feet tall and swayed like a wave in the ocean. "Go, you must hurry," a voice echoed in my brain so loud it shook me back to my reality.

There I sat on Jayden's countertop, wrapped in the warmth of my new wings. Jayden stood, back to me, with his cell

phone pressed to his ear. He leaned in to the open refrigerator, and I got to enjoy the view of his jeans hugging his backside.

My cheeks flushed. Karen had told me a little bit about the thing she called sex. Kissing Jayden, the way I did out on the balcony, I started to get an idea of how it would work—well—until the wings burst out from my back.

That might make things a little tricky. My heart hammered.

“Okay, thanks.” Jayden turned toward me. He clicked the phone dead and flopped it onto the counter beside me.

He stood in front of me and rested his hands on my knees, which I still held close to my chest. “You okay?”

“Considering the fact I have eight feet of feathers shooting out of either side of me, I’m doing okay.”

He brushed his hands, one hand over each wing, as far as his arms could stretch. “Amazing.” His eyes brightened as his gaze examined my body and my wings.

“I had a memory,” I said.

His attention snapped to me. “What?”

“August.”

“I’m sorry?” He leaned against me, stroking my hair. “It’s not August here. It’s only May.”

“No. That’s his name. The man I saw. I think he’s family. My cousin or something. I can picture him now and when you were talking on the phone, I saw him again. And something else.” I moved to stretch out my legs. Jayden stepped back,

giving me room. Not much, though. Seemed he wanted to be touching me as well. I liked that. I let my legs hang over the edge, feet dangling. “He told me to go and to hurry. I think he helped me escape wherever I was and sent me here.”

Jayden stepped between my legs and rested his steaming palms on my thighs. “How do you know?”

“I don’t. Just a feeling. But the sliver of black I saw was maybe the doorway that opened for me.”

“Doorway?”

“From Heaven, maybe?” I said.

Jayden brushed his knuckles down the side of my face. “I can see that.”

“But why would I want to leave Heaven? And quickly? I get a sense that Heaven would be a place I’d want to stay. Especially if family was there.”

“I’m not sure, Trin.”

“But then the guy from the mall. Maybe he came from a doorway as well,” I said.

“From Hell.”

I straightened. I knew that word, indeed. My wings shuddered, sending a ripple of energy through me. “But another interesting thing about my memory, though.”

“Yeah?”

“Was that I didn’t have wings.”

“Oh boy.” His gaze shifted, scanning the length of my feathered limbs. “That means you can retract them.”

I nodded. “I think I can.”

“Ouch. Do you want to try it?”

TWENTY-ONE

“I’VE DECIDED I LIKE Chinese food very much.” I licked my fingertips of the sweet and sour sauce.

“I can see that,” Jayden said.

Empty boxes of food littered the living room floor. My glass of water sat up on the little table in front of the couch and Jayden’s soda bubbled next to it. He lay on his side on the couch, watching me eat and staring at my wings.

“You want to draw them, don’t you?”

He arched his left eyebrow. “How’d you know?”

“You watch things so closely, like memorizing them so you can draw them, right?”

“That first night you were here. When you slept for so long, I watched you.” He sat up and rested his elbows on his knees. “I think I sat on the edge of the bed for a solid hour watching you.”

His gaze bathed me in warmth.

“I knew there was something special about you. A reason you landed in my arms. The way you stumbled across that street. And then, in the elevator. You fit under my arm and against me so perfectly.” He drew in a deep breath. “Just like that picture of *Home*.”

I nodded, fully agreeing. Nothing felt more right.

Jayden sagged against the couch. “I’m sorry, Trin.”

“For what?”

“For being weak.”

I turned toward him, but I stayed on the floor, hugging my legs to my chest. “You aren’t weak.”

“When it came to Grace I was. She was so mean to you. I didn’t want to be with her, but I didn’t stand up for myself.” He stared ahead toward the dark TV. “I didn’t stand up for you.”

I wasn’t sure what to say.

“I haven’t stood up to anything in a while.”

“Since Amy.”

He nodded. “I failed you. Left you to be with Karen, then at the mall that man tried to take you.”

“May I ask what happened with Grace? Karen tells me you were a pair for a long time.”

He grabbed the back of his neck. “I was such a wuss. She bullied me from day one. I was tired of being alone. Then with

Amy—she—well—she was there. And sometimes I was glad. But mostly, I just wanted to be left alone.”

“Sex?”

He snapped his gaze to me. Redness dusted the tips of his cheeks. But he nodded a yes.

“Karen told me some things today about that when I asked about sharing beds. I’m sorry, I didn’t know it was wrong to ask about it.” My heart slammed. “Karen talked like it wasn’t very uncomfortable to talk about.”

“That’s Karen for ya. Blunt, but fiercely loyal. She never trusted Grace. Never liked her. She liked you from the second I told her about you. Zander, too.”

“Because you started drawing again.”

He nodded.

“Sex?”

He nodded again. “People have sex, yes. And I’ve been with Grace.”

“Will you and I have sex tonight now that you’re not a boyfriend to Grace?” I wanted to be close to him. To remove her smell from him permanently.

“Wow. This is such an awkward conversation right now.”

“Why?”

“Just is. So much has happened in the few short days I’ve known you. And—well—people usually don’t talk like this about that.”

“Oh.” I looked at my white-tipped toenails. Karen had gotten me something called a pedicure today while at the mall. I didn’t enjoy someone touching my feet the way they did, but Karen seemed to. And they were shiny and pretty.

“Trinity?” Jayden leaned forward, clasping his hands together in front of him. His emerald eyes inspected my face, then shifted over my wings. “What are you thinking?”

“Something Karen said today while we were shopping at the place called the mall. She’d told her girls, when she talked to them about sex, that they should wait until marriage and if they couldn’t to at least make sure it was with someone they loved.”

“Oh.”

“So, you loved this Grace if you had sex with her?”

He let out a long breath and raked his hands over his hair. “It’s more complicated than that.”

Everything here was complicated as far as I was concerned. “But you’re no longer a boyfriend to Grace. So, you can be mine.”

A smile curved his full lips. Lips I wanted very much to kiss again. For a long time. “Yes. I can be yours.”

I uncurled my wings, and a gust of wind brushed the wisps of his hair from his face. I’d held them tight against me while we’d talked; it felt good to stretch them out. I popped up to my heels. “Do you *want* to be mine?”

He nodded. “I do.”

My heart exploded. “I very much want to be yours.”

“Good.”

Then it was done. He was mine. I was his.

A high-pitched ringing sounded in my ears. I sat straight.

“What’s that noise?” Jayden hopped to his feet.

I brought my hand to my face to push the hair from my forehead. The noise grew louder as I did.

Jayden turned toward me. “It’s you.”

I jumped to my feet and yanked the leather covering my bracelet. On the top part of it, in the middle of the gold, a tiny white dot inched around the surface, drawing a white line. Jayden stepped close.

The light zipped across the metal, leaving a trail of the same color. It glowed, but even more interesting, it pulsed. I drew in a deep breath, and the pulsing slowed. It matched my heart rate.

The bright light bounced off Jayden’s eyes.

The echo of the high-pitched tone reverberated off the ceilings, like someone tapping crystal. The ringing sounded like a song as the white dot moved across the gold.

“The *B* is gone. It’s drawing something new,” Jayden whispered. He reached forward but I stepped back.

“Don’t touch it. It needs to finish.”

“You know that?”

“No. Just feels right.”

“Wait. It looks like—” Jayden leaned over and grabbed the leather strap from the floor. “It’s this.”

The white light on my golden band was etching the symbol from the leather. Exactly. Instead of gray on black, it was white on gold. The tone came to an end, and with a pulse, the white ball disappeared.

Jayden’s musky scent slammed into me, fusing with every pore of mine. It knocked me to my knees. The emblem, now etched into the gold around my wrist, pulsed one final time, blasting a stinging, fusing surge of heat through the metal and into my flesh, then turned emerald green.

The exact color of Jayden’s eyes.

“What the hell just happened?” Jayden said as he stepped toward me. “Did I really see that?”

“Is this possible?”

“With you? Probably.” He stepped closer, hand outstretched. “I want to feel it. Need to.”

I needed him to as well. Something felt incomplete. Like he needed to touch me to—

The elevator ding was so loud it sounded like the bell was inside my head. Jayden whipped around. The doors began to slide open. “Quick, to the bathroom.”

On instinct, my wings flapped, and in one thrust, along with my bare feet pushing me, I darted to the tiny hallway where

the bathroom was. My heart crashed against my chest. I hadn't flown yet, that I remembered, but with that one thrust, I got the feel of it pretty quickly.

And I liked it.

Wasn't ready to jump off any buildings or anything, but a feeling of familiarity seeped into my brain.

"Jayden!" Zander's voice boomed against the ceilings.

Thank goodness, it was Zander. I moved to step around the corner, but Jayden held up a hand. "Wait."

He ran toward the elevator. I hadn't even heard the elevator close and descend, indicating someone was coming. Zander must have a key to get to this floor.

"Zander, what's up?"

"Damn it, Jayden. Where's your phone?" His voice cracked.

"Turned it off."

"Where is she? Is Trinity okay?"

"Yeah. Fine. What's wrong?"

Shoes shuffled across the hardwood floors. I guessed they moved toward the kitchen by the sound of the steps trailing farther from me. I pressed my back against the wall, but my new appendages reminded me of their presence with a gentle sting. That would take some getting used to.

I crept to the end of the hallway and peeked around the corner. Even though it was dark, I squatted down and watched.

Zander looked crazed with his wide eyes and wild hair. It stood on end, and his face was dusted with a thin layer of darkness that matched the hair on his head.

Facial hair.

“Z, what’s wrong?” Jayden grabbed his friend’s shoulders. “You’re freaking me out. Is Karen okay?”

“Yeah. But she got a call from Nicks. How did he get her phone number?”

“What’d he say?”

“He was trying to reach Trinity and you. I tried, too, but it went straight to voicemail. Your phone never goes straight to voicemail, Jayden. I called Grace, and she said you stormed out of there after getting a call.”

“You called Grace?”

Zander smacked Jayden’s shoulder. “Jay—you weren’t answering. The cops were calling my wife’s phone searching for you and Trinity. Then what happened at the mall—I thought something happened to you.” Zander paced the length of the kitchen floor. It didn’t take too long with his long strides before he had to turn around.

“Slow down, man. What’s going on?”

“Someone tried to attack Trinity while at the mall? Karen didn’t know anything about it. She said Trinity just got lost when she found her at the car. So, I might ask *you* what the hell is going on? My wife’s involved now. She’s scared.”

A prickle of fear scattered down my spine and forced me to stand tall. Karen was scared because of me. *Yet again.*

“What’d Nicks say? Why was he calling? Does he have news?”

Zander nodded. “Yeah. Found something on that guy who attacked her at the mall. Where is she?”

“Um.” Jayden glanced in my direction. “Well. She’s in the bathroom. She—”

“Get her. We need to talk. I love you, man. You know that, right? You’re like a son to me and, since your dad isn’t around for you, I—but Jayden—I have two kids. I have to know what I’m getting involved with. You got to level with me, okay?”

I pulled my wings close to my body. It didn’t do much to hide them, but I figured Zander needed to see them.

I stepped out of the darkness. “Hi, Zander.”

He looked at me, then to Jayden, but immediately back to me. His mouth opened and his bottom jaw went slack. His arms dropped to his side, but his hand clung to the edge of the counter. Jayden gripped his shoulder and sent a wide-eyed gaze in my direction.

I inched forward and slowly eased my wings out until they extended their full sixteen-foot span.

“Holy hell. You really are an angel.”

TWENTY-TWO

“SHE CAN’T GO WALTZING into Nicks’s office with those wings,” Jayden said to Zander as he turned to look at me in the back seat of the car. “Did I get everything?”

I nodded. He’d told Zander the entire story while driving to wherever we were going. Everything except the marking on my bracelet.

I shrugged out from the blanket around my shoulders. Since I didn’t know what I was doing, I didn’t dare try to pull my wings inside, so Zander threw a blanket over me and whisked me down to his car while Jayden gathered some things. I still wasn’t quite sure where they were taking me, but far away from the man who’d tried to snatch me from the mall sounded good.

The sway of Zander’s big car coaxed me into a state of calm, but the urge to get out and stretch my wings tickled the back of my mind. I looked out the shaded windows and watched trees zoom by. We’d already passed all the buildings, which I was glad to leave behind. Green trees and grass were way better than the tall, gray buildings.

“Where are we going?” I asked. “Is Nicks meeting us there?”

“I have a small place up north. We’ll call him from there,” Jayden said. “Do you remember how to get there, Zander?”

“I can’t go with you. Let’s swing by my house and you can take this car up.”

“Why can’t you come, Zander?” I asked.

“I need to stay with my family. Karen’s upset. I have some meetings tomorrow, too.” Zander stared straight ahead. “I’ve seen a lot of crazy as an agent, Jayden, but this—” He shook his head. “This is big.”

“I get it, man,” Jayden said.

“You have another home beside the studio?” I asked Jayden.

“Two, actually.”

“So, Karen was right in saying you have much money but don’t use it?” I asked.

“Leave it to Karen to say that.”

“She also said she enjoys spending the money her husband makes.”

Jayden laughed that time and slapped Zander’s shoulder. “Luckily your other clients are selling things.”

“What you drew of Trinity, that’ll sell. So, when all this is over, you’ll be back on the market, Jay.”

Jayden looked back at me and smiled.

I'd inspired him back into his gift. Helped him get away from Grace's suffocating grip and the guilt over Amy. And now he was mine to have. The image etched on my gold band was that of a gift he'd picked for me. Made custom for me.

"Why can't we call Nicks from your cellular phone?" I asked Jayden.

"I'd rather be far away. We can link to him through my computer for a video call if he needs us to," Jayden said.

"Why?"

"Even if Nicks helps us, I don't feel safe in the city."

"I agree," Zander said. "And Nicks has something on the guy who found you in the mall. If he's some bad guy, or bad angel. Or whatever the heck you are, then far away is better. Only Nicks can trace you to Jayden."

"But it was Karen with me at the mall," I said. "Are you and she in danger now because of me?"

"No. You didn't walk back to her at the mall. You went to the car. I don't think there was a connection made." Zander gripped the steering wheel. "As far as we can tell, anyway."

"All the more reason to bolt," Jayden said.

The thought of Karen, Zander or his family being hurt in all this didn't set well with my stomach. It churned, but not from hunger this time.

"No one knows of this place, except Zander. It's under my sister's name and hasn't been used in a while."

“Will you have cell service up there?” Zander asked.

“Should. If not, I brought my stuff along. I’ll rig up a link.”

“I forget you have a little technical side to you, Jayden. It’s been a while.” Zander chuckled. “Too long, man. I’m glad you’re back.”

Jayden winked at me. “It’s good to be back.”

The car moved, and I shifted to the right as it jostled over the entry to Zander’s driveway. Darkness blanketed the expansive yard. Even the moon had vanished behind a thick cover of silvery clouds. Tall trees lined the property like I remembered.

Nobody would see me if I snuck out and tried my new wings...

The car approached the side of Zander’s home. A smaller version of the house sat beside the main one. It had small doors, of which one slowly eased open. Zander drove the car closer to that, but stopped just before entering.

Fine by me.

I clicked the handle and thrust open the door, ready to get into fresh air.

“Trinity, stay close to the car. I want to make sure the kids are tucked in asleep. Don’t need them seeing those,” Zander said as he motioned to my wings. “Don’t want to have to pay for therapy later.”

Jayden smiled across the hood of the car.

“Come on, Jay. I’ll get you stocked up on supplies. You gonna have power up there?” Zander said as he moved toward the small, black door at the back of the house.

“I’ll stay out here with Trinity. I don’t want to le—”

“She’s fine. I’ve shut the gate. No one is getting in here without us knowing.”

“I don’t know about that. She got out of here no problem the other night, didn’t she?” Jayden said as he slammed his door. “I finally pried it out of Grace that Isabel practically pushed her off the patio to your room.”

Zander whirled around. “What?”

“I actually jumped,” I said as I came up beside him.

Jayden shook his head. “I’m sorry, Trin.”

“It’s okay. Go in with Zander. Get things settled so we can leave this place and call Detective Nicks. I’m anxious to hear the news.” I left off the part about being anxious to be with him alone again. I very much like touching and kissing him. That was new to me, so I must have never done anything like that before. “I’ll wait right out here.”

The house was dark. Surprisingly, I could see quite well despite the clouds hiding the moon.

I snapped the wings out. Zander drew in a sharp breath. Jayden’s eyes skimmed my extensions, then he pinned me with an intense stare. I wondered if he could read my mind that I had every intention to run and jump into the air once he and Zander disappeared into the house.

“Jayden. Come on,” Zander said.

Jayden flinched, then stepped to the side. I nodded, encouraging him on. The door clicked shut behind him, and a light turned on in the kitchen.

I stepped toward the grass that went up to the dark paved driveway. I kicked off my sandals and stepped onto the cool blades of grass. A slight chill oozed up my feet. A quick glance to my right showed some shadows milling around inside the house, hopefully finding some food to bring along on the journey.

For some reason, I knew I'd be hungry soon.

I drew in a deep breath and took two long strides, then planted my feet into the soft grass and leaped. I pointed my arms upward and, as if on automatic, my wings moved up and with one giant thrust, the ground fell away from the bottom of my feet.

Tugs yanked at my sides, pulling my muscles tight over my stomach. I stayed focused on the dark sky, reaching for it with my hands.

The breeze tore through my hair, I heard flapping, like little wings fluttering, and I chanced a look to my side. The light feathers on my wings shifted individually in the wind my movement created.

The ground was at least twenty feet below me already and in only three thrusts. I pointed downward. My wings stopped moving, and the wind flowed over me as my wings snapped

tight, gliding me down. I leaned left and swooped faster, with more momentum to that side.

I thrust only my right wing, and I turned sharper. My heart slammed into my throat at the speed that picked up with one thrust. On command, my wings worked together to get me altitude again.

But how did I hover in place? Evidently my wings and body already knew because I slowed, my wings pulsing at a quick pace but not enough to propel me forward. They flattened out and pumped tiny bits of air. It tugged at my stomach muscles, igniting an acidic burn, but it worked.

Thirty feet from the plush green grass, it looked more like a black pool of nothingness. This high up I could see the tops of many trees. Even the roofs of some neighboring houses.

“Down,” I whispered.

The frequency of my wings slowed briefly, and I dropped a few feet, but they snapped tight again when I told them to.

“Amazing.”

I commanded my wings to push, and they responded in earnest, like they were ready to be tested. I darted toward the trees surrounding the property line; as I approached, I veered right. A few branches touched my bare feet.

“Okay, that was a little close.”

I hugged the tree line shooting up and dipping down. It all felt so natural, like I’d done it all my life. And, since I didn’t

have my wings in the memory I'd had, I must have known how to pull them in.

So maybe I have had them all my life and used them regularly, because my muscles across my back and stomach relaxed. Like they'd needed only to be reacquainted with flight again.

I veered toward the house. The light above the door had been turned on. In the halo of the illumination, Zander and Jayden stood watching me, mouths open wide. I pulled my wings tight and glided, then they opened and backpedaled as I neared the ground.

With an expertise I didn't know I had, I fluttered to the ground, landing on my toes, five feet from the awestruck men, without a sound. My heart pulsed with excitement. The blood flowed through me, tingling my skin like little zaps of electricity. My chest heaved as I sucked in air.

"Trinity," Jayden said, barely above a whisper.

"So much for staying close to the car so no one saw you," Zander said.

"Your house is dark. They sleep. No one saw." I stepped forward.

Zander stepped around Jayden and me, then stomped toward the big car. I heard the door open but didn't look. Only Jayden's wide eyes held my interest.

"You were flying," Jayden said. "How'd you—"

“I jumped. It came back to me.” I eased toward him. “Are we ready to go?”

His musky smell tickled my nose. Another step closer showed me his eyes were dilated again. His chest heaved. His scent rolled off him, a smell I’d come to crave. My wings snapped out wide beside me, and I thrust myself two feet off the ground. His eyes widened further.

I pushed toward him, then back, and my heart thrashed.

“Okay, guys. Break it up.” Zander stepped beside Jayden.

I fluttered to the ground. The paved driveway wasn’t as soft as the grass, but I still preferred bare feet.

“How are you going to sit in a car for two hours with those things?” Zander motioned toward me.

“Well—” I peeked at Jayden. “I was thinking it might be time to try pulling them in.”

TWENTY-THREE

“FRENCH FRIES ARE, BY far, the best thing I’ve had since I came to this place.” I popped another one into my mouth and watched Jayden spin the steering wheel, sending the car onto a long, narrow paved road.

He snatched one of my savory treats.

“Oh, and thanks for stopping at that fast food place.”

“There are a few that stay open all night.” He winked. “How’s your back feeling?”

“Good. It didn’t hurt as much as I thought to pull in my wings.”

“I’m glad. I wasn’t sure what to expect.”

“You and me both.” I shivered and the phantom sting rippled through my spine. I needed to change the subject. “Will you tell me about your parents yet? And why Zander said you were like a son to him?”

He nodded and let out a long breath. “My parents live just outside of Berg. There’s really not much to say other than they’re too busy for a lowly art guy.”

“You aren’t lowly.”

“In my dad’s eyes I am. See, he’s this big fancy executive. Huge company. And my mom, well, she’s a stay-at-home drunk.” He pounded his fist on the steering wheel and I flinched. “I’m sorry. I just get a little pissed when I talk about them.”

“Why?”

“My dad, what I meant by executive was that he is very important at his job. They pay him a lot of money for his work. And he works very hard. Has all his life. Never really knew him.”

“Sad.”

“He’s very—well—he expected me to go the same route—*er*—go and do what he did for a living. You know? Be important. Make a lot of money.”

“Karen says you do make much money with your art.”

“He doesn’t see it that way. I make a lot of money, yes, but didn’t for a while. It was only about five years ago I made my first big sale. Then the rest just came after that. But still, he didn’t see it.”

“Why?”

“Maybe because I stay in the apartment I do. Drive the crap car I do. But for me, it’s never been about the money. I love it. The dreams I’ve had all my life; I just put them on paper, and they come to life somehow. And then, when Amy died...”

Jayden's jaw clenched. I reached out to him, but retracted my hand. I didn't want to disturb him while he drove.

"Dad cut me off."

"Cut me off."

"He disowned me. Severed all ties. Basically, he tells people he has no son."

"How could he say that? You are his son. His heir."

Jayden cocked his head at me. "Heir?"

"Yeah. I guess we have those where I'm from," I laughed. Felt good to laugh. I rested my head back. "Your father says he has no son when he does. That seems wrong. What of your mother?"

"She's so drunk she gets lost in their house."

"That's terrible."

"Mom's reaction to Amy's murder was—well, she hates me, too, that's the same as Dad—but she started drinking. I don't think she's ever sober anymore."

"When you say drinking, what do you mean? Drinking is something everyone must do."

"Remember the beer bottles Zander and I drank?"

"That awful tasting lager?" I shivered, remembering how horrible it tasted.

Jayden laughed. "Yes. Well, if people drink a lot of that stuff every single day all day long, it makes you drunk. Out of sorts. Confused and clumsy."

“And she does this on purpose to forget her daughter’s terrible death?”

“Exactly.”

“That’s very sad.” I sagged against the car seat.

I might have family out there somewhere, and here was someone who had family very close and was unable to be with them. No wonder Zander had taken care of Jayden for so long.

“It must feel amazing to fly, Trin.”

He spoke of it as if it were normal. Just another thing someone could do. But I could tell by Zander’s expression and the fear I sensed rolling off him, it was nothing near normal. *I* was nothing near normal. Maybe that was why the Fates had sent me here to be with Jayden. We were both different. Alone. Broken.

He was broken over the death of his sister and the disowning of his father. I was broken because I had no memory.

“Trin?”

“I enjoy that way you say my name.”

“Trin?”

I nodded. “And yes, it’s amazing to fly. I’ve never felt so free. It felt natural.”

“I can only imagine.” He drew in a deep breath. “You smell so good. Different than before. Did Karen buy you some perfume at the mall?”

“No.” I pulled the neck of my shirt to my nose and inhaled.
“I don’t smell anything.”

“Hmmm. It’s nice. Like jasmine something. I noticed it at Zander’s, when I was watching you flutter in front of me. I like it.”

I’d noticed his smell at Zander’s as well, but he smelled me? I pulled my shirt to my nose again. Nothing.

“Tell me of this place we’re going,” I said.

“Small cabin. Middle of nowhere. Little river running by it. I used to camp out there and do some power-drawing after I first bought it. I got it with my second big check.”

“Second?”

“First was used to buy my studio, pay bills, and play a little. But I’d always wanted a place out in the middle of nowhere that had a super view, where I could go and paint and forget everything.”

“When is the last time you’ve been up there?”

“Not in two years. But Zander’s gone up to check on the place for me a couple times. It might be pretty messy up there, but it’ll be safe. Nearest town is ten miles away, and it’s got only one gas station and one store. At least the last time Zander was here.”

“That sounds nice. I think I come from a place that is not like the city, but more like Zander’s house with the trees and the green and the grass.”

“Don’t like the city life?”

“The city? No. Life? Yes. At least life with you.” Heat steamed my cheeks. My boldness surprised me. But I spoke the truth. “Are we almost to the place so we can call Detective Nicks to find out his news?”

“Almost there.”

“Good, because I’m ready to—as a girl at the mall said—*get this over with already.*”

TWENTY-FOUR

“OKAY, WELL, PLEASE TELL him to call us right away,” Jayden said into the cell phone. “It’s important.”

My heart sagged. Those words meant Detective Nicks wasn’t available. I’d wanted to speak with him so badly. Maybe they had gotten the guy who chased me, and they knew something about me or where I was from.

I moved to the open door of the cabin. The sky held a faint hint of gray, signaling the rise of the sun was not too far behind it. I drew in a deep breath. Besides Jayden’s strong scent, the breeze carried subtle smells of the forest oak and pine trees, blooming flowers of some sort, maybe lilacs or roses.

Jayden moved from window to window in the small kitchen area, opening them. He darted around the corner of the kitchen into a dark hallway leading to a separate room, and I heard more windows opening.

The small main space had a couch and a chair in the center. They faced a grand window that overlooked the river, I supposed. Still too dark to tell. Framed pictures of his

drawings decorated the log walls, and I decided I'd have to look at them closer later. But for now, I had to step into the fresh air.

I tugged at my shirt and a cool breeze shifted down my back. The shirt was still ripped, my wings having torn through the fabric to get released. I hadn't changed since I'd called my wings in, because I wasn't sure I could control when they came out very well yet.

A mix of oak and pine trees hemmed in the long stretch of plush green grass in front of the cabin. They reached to the brightening sky, nearly touching the solitary puffy white cloud hovering. The tall car, which Jayden called an SUV, was parked on the gravel path. It was the only path I'd seen leading to this place.

It was very secluded and private, which ignited the bubbling desire to burst my wings out and soar high into the trees. Jayden's touch had triggered my wings' appearance, so I wasn't sure how to call them to the surface when I wasn't worked up. They'd pulled back into my body when told to, with minimal pain, but still...

I stepped down from the step and sucked in a deep breath. "Wings, come out," I whispered.

Bones shifting knocked me forward. That would take some getting used to. Without the distraction of Jayden's kisses and the pleasure of his hands on my skin to distract from the foreign shifting beneath my skin, I felt every tug.

Every pull.

And every tear.

My stomach lurched. I drew in a deep breath and put my hands on my knees. *Relax.*

“Wings,” I said with confidence, so much my stomach twitched.

In one fluid motion, the eight feet of bodily extensions shot out from my sides. It was my hesitation and fear that hindered it. I knew that now. My mind fought the logic, preventing my natural self to come out.

My natural self was with my wings.

Like I knew my name, I knew it to be true. Didn't need my memory back for that. I shot up into the air.

It was easier this time.

The tallest tree had to be fifty feet high. I aimed for the tips that the rising sun began illuminating.

“Trinity?” Jayden's voice echoed up to me.

I slowed, hovering higher than I'd ever gone. I coaxed my right wing to push me around. He stood just down from the step.

I waved. The movement carried through to the wing, and I dropped a foot. That would take some practice. I thrust upward to the peak of the tree. At the top my wings fluttered, and I inched close to the tip and reached out and touched it.

The soft leaves felt like heaven against my fingertips, and a rush of earthy vanilla tickled my nose. I couldn't see where the

ocean of treetops ended. It melted into the purple and pink sky.

I wished Jayden could be up here with me to see it.

He was moving from the car to the front door carrying that thing he called a cooler. I darted forward, my stomach muscles warming up to the movement of my wings.

A gust of wind caught my left side and thrust me off course to the next tree, but my abdominals contracted, and my other wing compensated to get me level again. I'd have to watch out for wind. Thankfully my body reacted on instinct, at least I assumed it was that, or prior training I wasn't conscious of.

The breeze flowing over my body, swaying my hair, brought stinging tears to my eyes. I veered left and saw a break in the sea of treetops. I slowed and hovered behind a tree. A little cabin, not too different than Jayden's, lay dormant. No car, no lights, no people. I glanced around, orienting myself to the area.

Nothing looked familiar.

A slight wave of panic squeezed my stomach. I'd gone to the left then to the right, or was it straight, then right then left?

I hovered away from the tree. Come to think of it, I wasn't sure which direction was Jayden's cabin.

My heart crashed. My wing movement stuttered, and I dropped several feet.

"Fly," I yelled. My voice echoed off the trees I'd descended into. That didn't help with my orientation, but my wings complied with my plea.

“Think, Trinity.”

I fluttered up above the trees again. The sun. I could use the rising sun. It was behind me when I touched the tree by Jayden’s. My heart began to calm. *Jayden*. My breathing regulated.

Just focus on Jayden. The cabin. He was walking from the car to the cabin. I drew in a deep breath. *Go south*.

I snapped my eyes open and moved. I kept my mind on Jayden and the cabin, and my body veered to the right. Three strong thrusts of my wings, and I veered left and went straight. Jayden’s cabin came into view, and I almost burst into tears.

I’d flown right back to it.

To him.

It was then I knew, I’d be able to find what I’d marked in my heart as home no matter where I was. Sense of direction must be innate.

I swooped along the line of trees and ordered my wings close to my body. The green grass rushed toward me at an alarming speed, but I snapped out my wings and pulled up, two feet before touching the softness.

“You’re getting good,” Jayden said as he strode toward me, holding the bag he’d packed for me. It was full of all the clothes Karen had bought me at the mall.

I wondered if, like my leather bracelet, Jayden would be able to fix my clothes to let my wings come out without ripping them to shreds.

He stood, five feet from me, his eyes roaming over the length of my body then the length of my wings. Heat flamed my cheeks.

“So much energy is rushing through me right now I think I’ll explode soon.” He stared into my eyes. “I should be scared that you have wings, shouldn’t I?”

“Probably. If no one here has them.”

“But I’m not. It’s like from my dreams. Like my drawing, *Home*.”

He reached for my wings but pulled his hand back like I might burn his flesh. The tips of his mouth curved upward, and he drew in a deep breath.

“You want to draw them?”

He moved the bag from his right hand to his left, watching me closely.

“You have your things with you, right?”

“No artist goes anywhere without his supplies, but—”

“Then draw,” I whispered.

He nodded, raising his eyebrows as if asking permission again.

I nodded. “But then, maybe you can help me with the new clothes Karen bought for me.”

“Help you?”

“Maybe cut the fabric in such a way that my wings could come out without ripping things too badly?”

“You got a deal.”

TWENTY-FIVE

“IS IT TOO WARM for you?” Jayden asked.

“I’m fine.” The blanket kept the soft grass from touching my bare arms, but I could still smell it. I lay on my stomach, chin resting on my hands, my eyes closed. I nearly slept, it was so peaceful at this place.

Only the birds serenaded us. The subtle breeze shuffled my feathers but kept me cool. Along with the tall shadow the tree lent us.

“I can see why you have this place, Jayden. It’s so beautiful.”

“Like you.”

The scratch of his pencil over the paper lulled me into a state of calm. I now loved that sound after lying here, listening to it along with the birds nearly all day. We’d had to stop only once for food. Without any running water, our choices were limited, but while I flew around to practice, Jayden made turkey sandwiches.

His tongue jutted out and pressed against the corner of his mouth as he stared slightly above me, his pencil moving. He stopped, brushed with his finger, then put the pencil to paper again. If I made a guess, I would say he'd nearly filled the entire sketchpad he'd brought.

“Are you sure you're doing okay? We've been at this for hours,” Jayden asked.

“I think I might want a rest after this one.”

“Are you ready for another flight?” he asked.

“No. I'm ready to be close to you again. I liked that very much. We've not touched since your studio.” And I've craved him. Especially these last few hours. His intoxicating smell made me tremble.

The sun flickered off the emerald green marking on my band. We'd taken the leather off for the drawing sessions. I ran my finger over it. Nearly flush with the gold, but still smooth to the touch. Resembled a flower, possibly. Maybe Jayden could find the meaning on the computer he had brought with him.

He had sent an email letter to Detective Nicks, but there had been no reply.

Jayden set the sketchpad on the grass beside the chair he sat in and laid his pencil on top. From what I could see, the drawing looked as real as I did sitting there.

“You're done?” I asked.

He nodded.

My heart stuttered beneath his intense stare.

“I could spend all day looking at you, drawing each and every curve.”

“You have been.” Heat fused my skin. I pushed myself up to my knees. My wings fluttered. “But now we can take a rest?”

He nodded again.

“And because you’re mine and I’m yours we can be close again.” I inched toward him.

He slid to his knees from the seat he’d called a lawn chair. The musky scent around him thickened, sending my blood rushing.

He drew in a deep breath. “There’s that smell again. It’s you. God, it smells amazing.”

I stopped inches from him. He sat back on his heels, so he was more my height. A ripple quaked through me, and my wings went straight out to my sides. We’d been together all day, but I’d yet to touch him; I wanted to so badly.

He reached out and brushed my hair back. I grabbed his hand and exposed the inside of his arm. I drew it to me and grazed my cheek down, then up, and nipped at his tender flesh at the wrist. He pulled in a sharp breath and reached for my face with his free hand.

He pressed his palm against my cheek, and I slid my eyes shut, lips tingling in anticipation of his against mine. A zing of energy ripped through my arm.

Jayden yanked his hand away. “Ahh.”

I snapped my eyes open. He was looking to the side, at his hand. I followed suit. The same white ball of light that had etched my golden band ignited against his flesh, inside his right wrist. It traced along the top of his skin alarmingly slow and with a loud sizzle.

Jayden’s jaw went tight, his nostrils flaring.

“What’s happening?” I shot to my feet. “Jayden.”

“It’s okay,” he gasped. “I think I know”—another tight breath—“what it is.”

I grabbed his hand. The sizzling sound magnified. His grunt sliced me like a knife. His free hand fisted at his side, and his face darkened to a deep red.

Then I understood what he meant. The mark was identical to that which was now etched in emerald green on my gold band.

But I couldn’t stand that he was in pain.

I twined my fingers with his and pressed my lips to his. He grunted but then relaxed against my mouth. I curled my wings around us, my fingers still threaded with his, and I settled over him, straddling him as he sat on his heels. Soon his tense shoulders relaxed, and I drew in his bottom lip. He moaned, but opened his mouth and let me in.

His heady, musky scent merged with mine. Fingers traced up my spine, and my wings went out straight.

“Are you okay?” I asked with a short breath.

He released my fingers and brought his hand in sight. The symbol that was on my gold band now marked his flesh. The same emerald green, like his eyes.

“We are truly paired,” I said. “You’re mine. I’m yours.”

My wings fluttered in agreement, and a smile curved Jayden’s full, shiny lips. I cupped his face, my thumbs running circles over his smooth skin. I traced the side of his face to his throat, then around the smooth curve of his neck. I tangled my fingers in his hair, then pulled his face to mine and brushed my cheek against his.

Ours were the only scents I detected, comingling, fusing, forever joining. I drew his earlobe into my mouth while my hands navigated his broad shoulders and down his bare arms.

I grabbed the bottom of his shirt, leaned back, then worked it up over his head. My hands kneaded his bare back as I pressed my body flush to his. I touched kisses to his neck, shoulder, then moved to his chest. “I like very much how this makes me feel,” I whispered. “You?”

“Hmmm,” he said. “My angel.” His hands went to my hair, and he tilted my face back, drawing me toward his.

I captured his mouth with mine, and he pulled me close. That fueled a new flame I’d never known could feel so good. Like when I was up in the sky earlier that day, the wind streaming over me. The adrenaline. Dizziness. Heated blood pulsing through my veins.

“Can you pull your wings in?” Jayden asked with a raspy voice.

I focused on the pretty blue sky as I called my wings in. Jayden touched light kisses to my neck, stealing my breath, but it helped distract from the bones crunching, pulling the wings in to wherever they went.

Jayden slid his hands up my sides, beneath my shirt and pulled it over my head.

“Oh, that’s why,” I said. When my skin hit his, my world tilted. I wasn’t sure which way was up. The breath I took in was his, so close, so...intimate.

A hum of electricity zipped through my stomach, igniting bursts of energy that sent me spinning even more.

“I very much enjoy being yours.”

“I want you. Are you ready for this? So soon?” he said between kisses.

“I’ve never done this before. But I feel ready. I like you touching me.” I bit at his throat. “And I like touching you.” And how he tasted.

“How would you know if you’d had sex before?”

“I would recognize these feelings.” I leaned back and caressed his chest, feeling every curve his corded muscles offered me. “Like the other things, remember?”

No, this was new, exciting. Something I’d never done, and boy did I want to.

“Hmmm.” His lips vibrated against my neck.

“But I like it. You and I bear matching marks. That feels right. That feels familiar.”

Jayden looked deep into my eyes. “You feel right to me, too.”

“You’ve been this way with other women? With Grace? Was it right with them, too?” I kissed his throat, his lips, then his forehead. The sun had warmed his skin, and I couldn’t get enough of how that tasted. Fresh. Clean. With a hint of pine.

A flicker of darkness clouded his bright eyes, and he slowed down.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No.” His chest heaved as he gulped air.

“Then what’s wrong?” I cupped his cheeks and kissed them. “Am I doing this right? Does this make you feel as good as I feel?”

“Yes.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to my neck. “But I think we should slow down.”

“Why? I thought you said people have sex. This is sex. I’m enjoying it. You aren’t?” I buried my fingers in his hair as he continued to kiss my neck up to my lips.

Wow, those soft lips were magical.

“At the risk of losing my man card, I have to say something.” He nipped at my bottom lip. “I want this to be different.”

“Man card.” I didn’t know that word.

He pulled me to him, then leaned me back into the blanket. The pressure of his weight against me sent another wave of heat slicing through my body. But then he rolled off me and lay flat on his back, his chest heaving.

The sun spilled through the tree branches and speckled him with rays of light. I saw his wrist, with the new mark. I pulled it close and brushed it against my cheek.

Smooth, like it’d been there his entire existence.

“Tell me, Jayden.”

“You asked me before about sex. I said everyone does it. You said Karen tells her kids to wait for marriage.” He cupped the side of my face and pulled me to him.

I rested my cheek on his chest. His heart thrashed about inside, almost as wildly as mine. “I’ve done the sex-right-away-thing before.”

“I don’t like that you’ve been like this with other women.”

“I know. I’m sorry for that. Now that I know you, I would have never done what I’d done.”

“Then why are you stopping? Do you not want to have sex with me?”

“Oh no. I really do. You have no idea.” He cleared his throat. “I’m stopping because I’m not sure you really understand it yet. There’s so much you don’t know. So much we don’t know.”

Dread swelled deep within my stomach. He was having doubts. Didn't want me. "I know how I feel about you. I know we're marked. I feel that. That's real."

"I believe it, too." He rolled to his side, gently pressing me onto my back with his palm to my chest. He offered me a crooked grin.

One filled with mischief. Heat steamed my cheeks.

"I want to take my time learning you, Trin." His finger traced my lips, over my chin and down my neck to the start of my bra. "Each and every inch."

I melted beneath his touch.

His fingers curled around my neck. With that one motion, he'd stoked the fire that had begun to calm. I crushed my mouth to his, unable to resist. Slow, steady kisses lured me into a dizzying state of mind.

He nipped at my bottom lip then licked away the sting as he eased away from me. "You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?"

I couldn't help my grin even though I didn't completely understand what he was talking about. "What's a man card?"

"I'm kind of glad you don't know, actually." He brushed his lips against mine. "Because I threw it out the window as soon as I stopped us from having sex."

TWENTY-SIX

“I CAN’T BELIEVE THERE was cheesecake in the cooler for me.” I stabbed the tip of the slice with my fork. “This is my favorite.”

“When I saw it in Zander’s fridge, I knew I had to sneak it in for you.”

I snuggled into Jayden more, and we both sank farther into the padded chair. The front of the cabin was beautiful, but this back patio was even *more* stunning. The river rolled over the boulders while long-branched trees leaned over as if the leaves tried to touch the water.

“I’m a little concerned we haven’t heard from Nicks. Zander said he hasn’t called Karen either,” Jayden said.

“How does he have Karen’s assigned number?”

“It captured the number when you called him from Karen’s phone.”

The last bite of my sweet, vanilla flavored cheesecake melted in my mouth, and I set the plate on the chair beside me. “Do you think something’s happened to him?”

“He sought us out. Even told Zander he had information. I can’t imagine he’d just up and disappear.”

“You could try again, maybe—”

The cell phone rang before I could finish, and I jumped from Jayden’s grasp so he could pull it from his pocket.

“Zander. What’s up? You’re on speaker,” Jayden said as he set the phone on his knee.

“Jay. It’s Karen—” The line crackled. “Hospital—attacked—shit.”

Jayden pushed up from the seat and put the phone to his ear. “What? Z, you’re breaking up. What’s happening?”

The next fifteen seconds were the longest, thickest stretch of silence I’d ever experienced. The air was heavy around Jayden as he stared at me, jaw tight, nostrils flaring. I could hear Zander’s muffled voice as if he were yelling through the cell phone, but managed to make out only a few words.

Trinity’s fault. If she dies. Damn you.

And those words shredded my chest. Jayden’s best friend’s wife, Karen, was in trouble. Hurt. Maybe even dying.

Because of me.

“I’m on my way.” Jayden tapped his phone, held my gaze for a long breath. “I need to leave.”

I hopped up. “I’ll go, too.”

“No.” He pivoted on his heel and hurried inside.

I wasn't sure if I should follow him. I knew I wanted to, but I'd never seen him so angry. Well, possibly when that man attacked me, but now I was the cause of his anger. His worry.

It was like our beautiful surroundings had suddenly morphed into a gray-tinted dungeon. I would have rather stayed here with Jayden and forgotten the rest of the world.

I tiptoed inside.

Something crashed. "Damn it," Jayden yelled.

I froze. More curses flew from the back room. I knew it to be the bedroom, but I stayed in the main living room, beside the fireplace. My heart hammered and my back bubbled as if my wings wanted out so they could whisk me away from this place.

"Jayden?" My voice sounded tiny, weak, in the expanse of the room. I stood straight. "Tell me what's happening." There, my voice was back.

"Karen was attacked." Jayden stomped out of the bedroom holding his portfolio. "I have to go." He shuffled through a bag sitting on the arm of the couch.

"Why must I stay here alone?"

"Because you're—"

"Because I'm what, Jayden?" I planted my fists against my waist, fighting the tears. "What?"

He stopped and nailed me with a dark look. No more bright, jovial emerald eyes. His were clouded. Angry. A hostility I'd

never seen. “It’s not safe for anyone around you, Trinity. Look what happened to Karen.”

My chest ached. I knew I was the reason she was injured. Deep down I knew I shouldn’t be with them—with any of them.

Jayden bolted into the kitchen and opened the cooler. “There’s plenty of food. Just lie low.”

I wanted to yell for him to take me with him. But I held my tongue. “Is Karen okay?”

“Not sure yet. Zander’s a wreck.” He shook his head, still not looking at me, and grabbed his keys from the counter. “I left money in the drawer there, beside the fridge.” He stopped at the door then turned. “The power isn’t hooked up yet. It’ll take a couple days. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“Nearest town is a few miles away.”

“I will find it if I need to.” I stood straight and swallowed the sob threatening to spill out.

I’d known Jayden only a short time, yet somehow, he’d become my world. I couldn’t explain it if I tried, but it was true. A fact I felt all the way down to my core.

And now he was angry with me and leaving.

“Trin,” he said, still holding the door handle. “I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t mean for any harm to come to your friends.” I slid my finger beneath my eye, but a tear snuck down my face

anyway. “Or you.” My stomach clenched. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt my Jayden.

But I had.

I’d disrupted his life beyond measure.

He pulled the door shut a little, but then stopped and said, “I have to—”

“Just go.”

He normally bright eyes dimmed.

I nodded through the heartache of him leaving. It was what he needed to do. What Zander and Karen needed. That was more important than my feelings right now. “Go.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

THE SILENCE WAS DEAFENING. It'd been a day since Jayden left. A mere twenty-four hours. Yet it felt like a lifetime.

I dipped my toes into the water from my rocky seat. Through the thicket the blue sky beckoned me, but I didn't dare fly. Someone might see, since it was so light out.

A ringing phone ricocheted off the trees lining the stream. I hopped to my feet, wings out before I'd even felt the tingle of them wanting out. Jayden had done good work mending my shirts to allow my wings easy access.

A quick thrust, and I was at the back porch. Maybe Jayden had returned already. The ringing got louder. I curled my wings to my body and went inside the cabin.

The couch. Jayden's phone lay tucked partially beneath the cushion.

He must have left it in his hurried departure yesterday.

I pulled it out and checked the screen. It lit up with Nicks's name scrolling across. I clicked the answer button and said,

“Hello, Nicks. This is Trinity.”

“Trinity?” His voice crackled. Distant sounding.

“I’m here. I’m here.” I held the device to my ear like I’d seen Jayden do so many times while ordering us delicious food to eat. “I’m talking with Jayden’s phone.”

“Where are you?” Jayden’s warning to not divulge the location of this cabin rang loud in my mind.

“I am safe. What have you found out about the person who tried to snatch me?”

“Found him—” *Crackle.* “others, but—” *Crackle.* “Something you should—. They have—” Two tones sounded, then the connection failed, according to the words on the screen.

“Hello? Nicks?” I shook the phone. Nothing happened. “Hello?”

I stepped out onto the back porch again and pulled in a deep breath to calm myself. Nicks had found something. Why wouldn’t this contraption work?

Wait. I’d seen Jayden hold the phone up toward the sky while here, swearing when the phone wouldn’t work right. Yes. Higher, for the towers to catch the signal was what he’d said.

I jogged around the corner of the house, and one quick scan of the sky showed me it was clear. Maybe if I got above the tree line that would help. I leaped into the air and my wings took over. The trees shaded me as I stayed within their

shadow. Both from the bright sun and to try to stay hidden. My guess was that everyone else would not be as accepting of me as Jayden and Zander.

Not that they were pleased with what I was any longer, now that Karen was injured because of me. I shook the thought from my head. I would figure out how to reach Nicks. If I could solve this mystery maybe Jayden would accept me back. Once things were safe again.

But if Karen died, he'd never forgive me. No matter how bonded we were.

A gust of wind shifted some branches to my left, and I spied a thick one, near the top of the dying tree. Another quick scan of the sky and ground below showed I was undiscovered.

With little flutters, I perched on the coarse wood and pulled my wings to my body. The phone rang as I settled onto my perch.

I pressed answer. "Detective Nicks?"

"Jayden," he said.

"Hello. This is Trinity."

"Oh, thank God. Trinity. Where are you?"

"I can't say. But I am safe. Can you tell me what you know?"

"Where's Jayden?"

"Tell me what you know please."

“The man from the mall—sighted nearby—day—” *Crackle*.
“Four of them.”

“Detective Nicks. I can’t hear all of your words.” I stood.
“Just one minute please.”

I lurched forward and let my wings catch the air. Two thrusts brought me higher. I did a full circle and the skies were clear.

“Detective Nicks?”

“I’m here.”

“I can hear you.”

“The man from the mall. We call him John Doe. Witnesses saw him later that night near the north end of town. Holed up in a house. Three others with him.”

“What does he want from me?”

“Trinity, have you remembered anything more about where you’re from?”

“No. I believe I was possibly held captive, and I escaped. I feel that is right.”

“I believe it. These guys—*er*—whatever they are—they had wings.”

My heart exploded. “Wings?”

“Trinity. I can’t even begin to explain this. But I know what I saw.”

“Are you sure? Did you or anyone else witness this?”

“No. See—well—I handle all the unique cases that come into the station. Yours fell into that category because of how you were found.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Trinity. There are street cameras on almost every intersection these days.” The phone crackled. “I went back and reviewed the video feed where you were found. One frame you weren’t there, then the next you were, following a brief flash of darkness. Like you—*er*—like you walked through something from somewhere else.”

So, I had come from some other place. Not a faraway town, but another place entirely. No wonder only a few things looked or felt familiar. We must not have many of the same things this world has.

“Trinity?”

“Yes. I’m here. I—”

“Don’t worry. I have the video. No one else here knows. But —” *Crackle*. “—think some have come through for you as well. Or followed you from wherever you came.”

“Is that why you’ve been absent for so long and not returned my Jayden’s calls? Have you been finding these people?”

“Yes. But Trinity, I couldn’t go in there. I don’t have a team of people who agree with this kind of thing. It’s not funded. I’m on my own.”

“I don’t understand.” My stomach was getting tired from holding my position so high.

“I spent the day observing their hideout. They don’t seem as confused as you, and they’re destructive. Violent. The house they overtook backs to a field. I heard much commotion, then one darted out the back and into the air. That’s how I saw the wings.”

My head went dizzy, like I’d held my breath too long. He knew about people with wings, yet he seemed to tolerate it as Jayden and Zander. Should I tell him about me?

“Detective Nicks, what should we do now?”

“You need to stay hidden. I’ve got to think of a plan. You don’t have any idea how you got here? How they might have or if more are coming?”

Hairs prickled on my neck, and my lungs suddenly emptied. Instinct demanded I drop several feet and look to the skies.

“Trinity?” Detective Nicks said.

My heart hammered against my chest, and I fluttered higher, above the trees for my head to see around.

I pressed the cell phone to my ear. “I’m here. Something feels wrong. I need to go.”

“Wait. Just stay in touch. Check in with me tomorrow. And be careful. We don’t know how many of those things came with you and why they want you.” He cleared his throat. “But I must ask. Are you—do you have—”

“Detective Nicks?”

“Here. Wings. Do you—”

A dark figure came into focus miles away, skimming the top of the trees. My heart slammed. That must be what I felt.

“I must disconnect. I see one approaching. They found me.”

“Where’s Jayden? He’s not with you?”

“He’s with Karen.” I squinted, trying to make out the object darting toward me. “Please. Just keep him safe. Keep them all safe, Nicks.”

“Where are you?”

“Jayden’s cabin.” The dark figure zoomed toward me. I tapped the end button and darted north.

Whatever charged me, I would meet it head on. They’d injured Karen. And in doing so chased Jayden away from me. Anger boiled through my stomach and sent a jolt of energy to my spine. I thrust my wings harder, and I cut through the breeze. I pushed the phone into my back pocket and pointed my arms outward.

Yes. I would meet this threat head on. And hard. I was done standing by. It was time to take charge. I would get answers from this creature charging me.

The creature object came fast. It must be quicker than me. Or I didn’t know how to work my wings yet to get them to make me go faster.

I looped a wide circle. The thing countered. Closing in on me quickly. I dove into the trees and moved from side to side, evading the branches. I soared up and over a big tree that didn’t allow for a way through.

The dark creature rammed into me. Hands with grips of steel curled around my shoulders.

“What have you done to her?” A gruff voice bellowed. “Where is she?”

I clawed at the fingers around my arm. My wings couldn't get full thrusts because he was over me. I curled them in and became dead weight to my attacker. He dipped toward the trees, his wings working madly to stay up. I didn't weigh much, but neither did he; could he carry me?

“I'll kill you if you've hurt her. I—” The man stopped.

I turned my head and sank my teeth into the two fingers I could reach. He flinched. One hand released its grip, and I thrashed. He dropped me. I plummeted toward the trees but snapped my wings out just before contact.

I kicked my legs, shot out my hands, and ordered my wings to push as hard as they knew how. I bolted forward like an arrow from a bow. Adrenaline coursed through my veins.

The winged stranger followed me, but no longer gained.

Where should I go? I knew only Jayden. The hairs prickled on my neck again.

“Trinity,” he yelled out. “Is that you?”

I stopped and hovered, facing him. The man neared, but slowed. His gaze shifted down to my wrist. He had a band as well, but his was turquoise.

“Trin?”

The man hovering before me had dark, shoulder-length hair. Something was familiar about him. His voice, maybe.

No. The eyes.

Burnt orange.

I knew those eyes.

“How did you get here? What do you want from me?” I asked.

“Sons of the gods,” the man said. “It’s really you?” He edged closer, and I darted back.

Dirt and splotches of red covered his white shirt. The thin fabric hugged his body, outlining every corded muscle. Purple spots covered his left eye, and something had sliced his pale skin.

“Do I know you?” I felt like I did but—

“It is you.” He smiled, and then I knew, by the missing tooth. It was the man from my memory. “Your gold was covered with dark, so I thought. I—” He darted toward me, arms outstretched. I dropped, then went below him. “Trin— It’s me. It’s August.”

“August.” I knew that name. From my memory. He was family. But I wasn’t sure. I doubted what I thought I knew. My mind whirled.

He held steady, staring at me. I dropped toward the trees for cover. He followed. The prickling on my neck dissipated.

“You do not know me?” he said.

“Where did you come from?”

“Your dimwitted mate found me directly after aiding in your escape.” August landed on a tree with an expertise I recognized. His small, graceful body perched, then he focused on me. “They found the book. I hadn’t even had time to put it away before they stormed in. You’d just barely crossed through.”

I spied a branch for me to perch. “You sent me to this place?”

August touched his eye. “I see we heal much faster here than back home.”

“Where is home?”

“You remember nothing of Bolentia? How is that?”

I slouched.

“Well, you remember that you slouch when you are frustrated, at least,” August said. “That always irritated me so.”

“Bolentia.” That word sounded familiar. Could he be telling the truth?

“Why are you out here? Have you drawn up a homestead?” he asked.

“How’d you find me?”

“We can find family anywhere. I just had to first get away from your mate.”

“Mate.” I knew that word. “I have a mate?”

“You really have lost everything. That’s the whole reason we sent you here, Trin. To escape your mate.”

“Mate. That means—” I gasped. “Married. I belong to someone? Someone back in this place you called Bolentia?”

“Oh boy.” He rolled his eyes. “Trin. Take me to your homestead. I will tell you everything. I pray to the gods you have food, though. Your mate’s minions withheld nourishment for many hours.”

My heart slammed into a rib. I was married? Pledged to someone for life? “My mate is here in this place?”

“He was not too pleased with me, or you for that matter, for our deception. He is here to take you back.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

“YOU HAVE A HUMAN helping you?” August asked. “The only humans I have met leave much to be desired.”

“My Jayden is different.” My heart swelled thinking of him. Yet it broke, too, knowing I was already paired with someone else, so even if I could rid the danger lurking over our heads, I could not join with him. The wind whipped through my hair; the breeze dried the tears before they could drip from my eyes.

“Trin. What is it?”

“Nothing. I’ve just been very lost. And very much scared.”

“I said Earth was an unusual place, I was not mistaken. I can see how you were scared.”

“I arrived here, unable to see or remember anything nearly seven moons ago.”

“You were blind?” August slowed to a hover above a grand oak tree. “Blind and no memory? I never anticipated that. I came through unaffected. But Trysten altered the incantation.”

“How did you send me here?” I moved toward August. “And where is here?”

“Earth. Humans. Advanced place, yet primitive in so many ways. I found Mother’s book. You know, the one with our lineage detailed more than anything ever kept with the historians on Bolentia?”

I shook my head and checked the open skies. The sun had begun to make its descent and cast its orange rays tickling the tops of the trees.

“What’s wrong, Trin?” He flapped his auburn wings and moved toward me.

His long brown hair was shoulder length, and was flowing in the breeze as we flew. His eyes were an odd color orange, burnt almost, close to the color of his wings, actually. Only a slightly sharper orange.

And there was a scar under his left eye. He felt familiar. Very familiar, like I could trust him.

But did I dare?

“Trin?”

“I’m just—very much surprised by all of this.”

“You never could lie very well, cousin.” He thrust forward.

I darted after him; a rush of playful anger zinged through me. I grabbed his bare toe and yanked. It popped in my grip, and he rolled to his side, then to his back as his wings worked to keep him up.

“How do you do that?”

“I see I will have to teach you everything *again*. But, wait... you remembered pulling my toe.”

“No.”

“Hmmm, interesting. Where are we going?”

“It’s close. North just a few strokes and—”

“You know your instinct to find home, but you don’t recognize the feeling of finding me?”

“*You* found me.”

“We’re related. Can communicate telepathically on a low level, like a homing beacon. I did not recognize you, though. Your hair is very short compared to what I know. And your gold band is covered.”

“My—*er*—Jayden made this for me to cover the bright gold. We could not figure out how to remove it.”

August laughed.

I pointed to the left. “It’s in that break in the trees. Why do you laugh?”

“Remove your bonding band. The one that shows you belong to Bastian. If I could have done that back home, I would not have sent you to this place to escape him.”

So, I belonged to Bastian. Someone I didn’t know. Someone August helped me escape. Was he so evil that I had to flee my homeland? My family?

As we neared the cabin, a sleek red sports car was parked in the gravel driveway. “Wait. I don’t know that vehicle.”

We both slowed, ducking behind a thick tree. No activity, just a car.

“Come on, we’ll follow the stream to the back porch.”

August followed behind me. “This is quaint. This Jayden has taken you in?”

“Yes. There.” I pointed to my left.

We landed, pulled our wings in, and traversed the rocky ground toward the back entrance.

“Flying is much easier,” August huffed.

“I don’t know who is here. Only three—no four—people know about us.”

“It’s difficult to believe only four humans know with Bastian and his minions flying around so much.”

The patio where I’d cuddled up with Jayden came into sight. Through the window, I saw a shadowed figure move within the house. Starting first in the kitchen, then disappearing into the bedroom.

“It’s female. Tall. Skinny,” August whispered as we approached the door.

“Damn it.” A female voice screeched.

A thick wave of rose-tainted air slammed into me. “Grace.”

“Who is Grace?” August asked as he ducked at the loud curse that streamed through the open window.

“I will tell you later.” I cranked the back door open.

“You!” The woman charged me.

August stepped in front of me. “Stand down or I will subdue you.”

Grace skidded to a stop in her stilettos. I drew in a deep breath, seeking out Jayden’s scent on her, but found none. Thankfully. But still, my heart cracked a little, knowing she’d been close with him. Shared a bed with *my* Jayden.

“What are you doing here, Grace?” I stepped out from behind August and rested my hand on his forearm.

“What are *you* doing *here*?” She waved her hand to the surroundings. “This is Jayden’s place.” She eyed August. “And where is Jayden?”

Something dark and unfamiliar to me rose deep within my chest. Anger, tainted with a little hate and frustration. I didn’t have time to deal with this woman. I needed to find this Bastian and his minions, as August called them, and tell them to leave.

“He’s not here. You should leave.” I stepped around the couch, toward the kitchen. Jayden had left the cooling unit that had food within. And I was hungry. *Again*.

“I’m not sure what your story is, *little girl*, but you’ve got Jayden all confused and out of control.” She charged me like a cougar with food in her sights. “He’s mine.”

I snatched the finger she pointed at me and squeezed until I felt bones shifting. She grimaced, and her jaw clenched. “He is *not* yours. I believe he ended his relationship with you, yet you

chase after him like a pathetic sapling.” I released my hold on her and stepped away before I did something I knew I’d regret. It might feel good, but I’d regret it. “Just go. And if you’re so sure he’s yours, ask him. If he takes you back, then there, he’s yours. If not, leave him be. You’ve hurt him enough.”

Her dark eyes widened. “I would never hurt—”

“You sucked the life out of him, Grace, to the point where he stopped drawing. No longer painted. Two things he loves to do more than anything in this world. Was born to do.” I stepped toward her, holding her gaze. She towered me by several inches, but my fury over how poorly she’d treated Jayden made up for what I lacked in height. “Now go.”

She stared at me, stunned. I was a little surprised myself, actually, but it felt good to stand up for Jayden. For myself. I knew deep down he was meant to be mine. I had to figure out how to make that happen.

A warm hand landed on my shoulder. “I think she asked you to leave.” August stood beside me, a mere three or four inches taller than me, though he commanded a strong presence with his sizable arms and broad shoulders.

I dug Jayden’s phone from my pocket. “Here. Give him this when you see him.” I stomped into the kitchen and leaned over the cooling box to dig out some water. Anything to keep busy. To keep Grace from seeing the pain I knew my eyes portrayed.

I had to be strong. Jayden had some choices to make, as did I, but sending him his former girlfriend—what was I thinking? What if he took her back? Being with me was next to

impossible as it was. It was my fault his best friend's wife was injured.

The fact that I just found out I was from another Realm complicated things even further.

Oh, and not to mention I was mated to someone already. I wasn't even free to be with Jayden if he chose to come back to me.

Muffled voices followed, then a door clicked shut. I glanced over my shoulder as I stood, holding two bottles of water.

"That was a very strange interaction. Reminded me a little of the rousting that occurs at The Games," August said. "Mind explaining?"

I handed a bottle of water to him, and he grabbed it, eyes wide. "What is this?"

"That's what holds the water to drink." I squatted next to the food box and rummaged through, hoping to find something I could figure out how to make. Without Jayden here to cook, it might be a challenge.

The plastic crackled and August grunted. The front of his shirt was wet, and I couldn't suppress a laugh.

"Please tell me you have some form of food in that box you're digging in."

"I do."

"Thank the gods. Please talk while you gather a meal. I'm eager to know what just happened, cousin."

“That was Grace. She was Jayden’s until recently. She’s not happy he’s helping me. Or *was* helping me.”

“Was?”

“I need to figure this out without him, August. The mate and his minions have hurt Jayden’s dear friend.” I swallowed back the tears emerging as I stood with the bread and peanut butter in my hands. “I don’t even know if she’s survived. Jayden left very quickly, and he was quite angry with me.”

“You didn’t do anything.” August waved to me to give him the bread. “I saw Bastian’s people make something called sandwiches with these slices of bread. I will help.”

We prepared our food in silence, but my mind whirled. So much had happened in such a short span of time.

“You care for this Jayden.” August bit into his sandwich and perched on the back of the couch holding another bottle of water.

“He was kind to me when I landed.” Heat fused my cheeks. “I’ve brought him nothing but trouble.” I bit into my sandwich and leaned against the counter. “Tell me of Bolentia. Of my life.” I held up my wrist. “And how I might get this Bastian atrocity off my wrist.”

He grinned, his toothless charm shining through. “There’s my Trinity.”

TWENTY-NINE

“FIRST LESSON IN HUNTING is dropping.” August grinned so wide his cheeks crinkled.

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that.

He folded his wings in.

And he dropped.

Like a rock in the stream by Jayden's cabin.

“Oh.” I hovered above as he zoomed toward the ground, directly above a small animal. It resembled a rabbit from this distance. My rumbling stomach didn't care. It wanted food.

A stabbing pain sliced my heart. It literally stopped beating, and I dropped several feet. I gasped for breath as I hugged my midsection. My heart rate shot up.

Jayden.

His name whispered along my consciousness. I turned a circle, hovering inches above the tallest oak tree. South. I needed to go south.

I thrust forward, faster than I'd ever flown. August's voice chased after me. I couldn't make out what he said but figured he was surprised I'd taken off. I was surprised, too.

My wrist pulsed, nearly reaching the point of agony.

"What's happening?" August came up below me. "Trinity."

"I don't know. I feel scared. Anxious all of a sudden. I must get to Jayden's cabin. Quickly." What was happening to me? It was like my wings worked on their own accord, directing me, leading me.

The roof of Jayden's cabin came into view. And there he was, pacing the long yard, hands buried in his hair. "Trinity," he yelled.

His voice echoed against the surrounding trees, but instantly my heart calmed. My fear abated at the sight of my Jayden safe and sound.

He'd come back!

My shadow grazed the grass beside him, then over him.

"Trinity." His voice carried the distinct sound of fear. Tight and crackled.

August waved. Jayden froze. Even from fifty feet up, I saw Jayden's big, emerald green eyes widen. I swooped to my right and landed within three feet of him. August on the other side, maybe ten feet from him.

Jayden ran to me. He turned his back to me and put his arms out, caging me behind him as he faced August. "Who are

you?”

August hiked his eyebrows up and huffed.

I didn't recognize that gesture, but figured it was mocking Jayden's attempt to protect me. I rested my hand on his back. “Jayden, that is August. My cousin.”

“How?” He whirled around and yanked me into a hug. “Trinity.”

I let his warmth and his spiced scent infuse my body. I called in my wings and hugged him back, burying my face in his neck. He felt like home.

“When I got here, you were gone. I—you—” He petted my hair. “I thought something happened.”

“Why have you returned, Jayden?” August asked.

Jayden tensed, then lifted his head from my hair and eyed August. “What's going on here?”

I stepped out from his embrace. My stomach rumbled as loud as a beast would roar. “How are you here?”

He dug out his phone. “Grace showed up at the hospital this morning.” His jaw clenched as he dropped his phone into his pocket. “She said you were with someone here.”

“Just this morning?” She'd left here two days ago. I figured she'd run straight to Jayden to try to claim him.

Jayden eyed August for a second, then slouched. “I thought I'd lost my phone in my hurry to get to Karen and Zander. She said it took her a while to figure out where I was.”

My heart hammered. What had she told him?

“Are you okay, Trin?”

August straightened and arched an eyebrow.

“I am fine. August found me two days ago. He’s my cousin. The one I remembered.” I smoothed the front of my shirt, not sure what to do with my hands. I wanted to jump into Jayden’s arms but that didn’t feel right, either.

“Did you bring food? We’re very hungry.” August stepped toward the house. “My hunt got disrupted.” He glared at me.

I waved him off, not wanting to explain something I didn’t really understand.

“There’s food in my car.” Jayden rested his hand on my shoulder. “My car was packed, and I was getting ready to head this way. I’d just stopped off at the hospital when I ran into Grace. What happened with her? She was here?”

“Come. I will tell you everything while we eat some food.”

Well, everything except the part about my being married.

Within twenty minutes, food was prepared, and I settled into the chair next to the couch.

“So, Bastian—or one of his people—injured this human called Karen?” August set his plate on the small table in front of the couch and leaned over. “But she will live?”

“Yeah. She’ll be fine. She made it through surgery.” Jayden sat next to me on the small chair next to the couch.

“How was she hurt?” I asked, resting my hand on his forearm.

“Stabbed through the chest. Looked like a robbery. But the suspect was described as very small and fast. Darted away right after he stabbed her.”

“Bastian or one of his minions.” August drank from the water bottle.

“Who’s Bastian?”

August’s eyes scanned Jayden from his soft strawberry blond hair, over his body, and to his toes. “Why do you help us, human?”

“The name’s Jayden, you jerk.” He looked at me. “Because I’m with Trinity. She’s my—”

“Jayden helped me. Remember, August. I spoke of this many times.” I had to interrupt him because I couldn’t let August know I’d given myself to Jayden. I didn’t know if that had consequences for him or not. I couldn’t risk that. “Bastian is someone from my home Realm it seems.”

“He’s here and he wants Trinity back home.”

“Why? What’s it to him?” Jayden tightened his hold on my hand.

August shoveled several more bites of pasta into his mouth, very rapidly, and I could tell that was how I got the same habit.

“What?” he asked.

“You eat fast,” Jayden said.

“That’s what we do back home. Eat fast, eat often, and get back to flight.”

“Why?” Jayden asked.

August settled in against the back of the couch, pensive. I did not like how he scrutinized my Jayden. Like he was reading into him or something. I had yet to tell August about my bracelet being etched with Jayden’s symbol and how intensely I felt for him.

“Trinity and I have a post on the perimeter of our homestead. We maintain watch over all that enters and leaves. We are among the strongest of the Wind Travelers.”

“Wind Travelers.” I loved saying that word. It felt familiar.

Jayden studied me as if trying to reach into my very mind.

“Yes,” August said, setting his plate to the side. “It is no surprise Trinity learned her wings so quickly. She’s one of the best female Travelers on the fleet. But it was because of *my* teachings, of course.”

“How old are you, Trin?”

“August tells me I’ve been alive nineteen years. His mom and my mom are sisters. We’ve grown up side-by-side as brother and sister.”

“Where is Bolentia?”

“According to my studies and what I overheard Bastian and Trysten discussing, our Realms live side by side. All I know is I sent Trinity through the ripple from our Realm to this one.

Within minutes of it sealing her in this place, Bastian stormed our hideout. He saw my book and figured out I'd sent Trinity here." August ran his hands through his hair. "He grabbed my parents, threatening their lives if I didn't go with him to find Trinity."

And I was married to this evil monster? I must have been so blind to not have seen Bastian's sinister nature.

Or he was a very good deceiver, as August had said.

Jayden set his hand over mine, calming me. "What does Bastian want?"

"Her." August stared at me. "He wants Trinity. And those who are not sane do strange and horrible things."

"But you escaped him," I said. "Tell Jayden what you told me."

"Yes. It might help to tell you the whole story, but I would very much like some more of this food you called pasta. Is that possible?" August asked Jayden.

"Sure." He got up and grabbed the plate. "Keep talking, though."

August nodded. "Many moons ago, I found the book of ancestry. It showed of this crazy place called Earth. In vivid detail. So, obviously someone had been here before to account for such detail. In my studies, I found the incantation that would open the ripple between our dimensions."

"In your studies?" Jayden asked.

“Trin always called me a Neph. One who likes to study and learn. I was the best of that along with the best of Travelers. It runs in our family genes to be such strong flyers.”

“Family,” I whispered. “I have a mother and father.”

“They miss you terribly.” He leaned close, “But they understood why you had to leave. Bastian turned crazy in front of them. They had no idea they’d played a role in bonding you to someone so evil.”

Jayden was reaching into the fridge, so he hadn’t heard August. “Are they safe?”

My cousin nodded. “Bastian chose to pour his wrath on my parents instead. They are locked up in his homestead.”

“He has his own?”

“Seems he’d been building it on the east side of the main homestead, deep in the forest out of sight.”

“Why?” Jayden said.

“He was going to form his own District, possibly.”

“Why? How?” Jayden asked.

“Bolentia is very small. Not like this place. New divisions happen, that’s how the population grows. He’d taken a very physically strong and powerful mate. He is very smart and cunning. Combine that and he could have an enviable community built very soon.”

“How do we get back?” I asked.

“I don’t know how. Remember—oh wait, you don’t—I knew only how to make the portal big enough for one but didn’t know how to return. I was going to research that and come for you eventually. Not that you could have come home anyway.”

Jayden rounded the corner of the couch. “Why not?”

He handed August another plate full of pasta.

“You sent four through, though?” I asked, interrupting Jayden so the focus wouldn’t return to how Bastian and I were married. “How?”

“Seems I wasn’t the only one who knew how to come here. Unbeknownst to the citizens of Bolentia, Trysten, that little snipe, had knowledge of the crossing to Realms.”

“So, he’d know how to get back?” I asked.

“I believe he does.”

“And he dragged you here?” Jayden asked.

“He knew Trinity would comply if my life was threatened. Of course, he had no clue that you’d not remember anything.”

“How did you escape this Bastian guy?” Jayden asked.

He puffed out his chest. “I am not the strongest of flyers without reason. I know a few tricks.”

A laugh slipped through my lips and surprised me. Such familiarity with August, and even in this time of frustration, he still joked. Like a little prankster. I remembered that.

“I don’t think I ever said sorry about tackling you, though, Trin.”

“You tackled her?” Jayden’s body tensed beside me.

“I thought more had come over, and I felt you near, so I thought, since I didn’t see the gold on your band, that it was one of Bastian’s clan watching the skies while holding you somewhere.” August blushed. “I was determined to get to her, and I’d sensed her nearby. The short hair and black around her wrist deceived me.”

“Your hair was longer?” Jayden tugged on a lock.

“Much,” August said.

“I think it was burned. The clothes she had on when I found her were all charred. No shoes, wild hair.” Jayden put his arm around me and hugged me close.

I pushed myself up from the chair—not quite sure where I got the strength to tear myself away from Jayden’s intoxicating warmth. I wanted to tell him everything about Bastian being my mate. Him chasing me here to bring me home to finish the bonding. But I couldn’t. I had to find some way to break the connection to Bastian because it was that very connection that had thrown Jayden and his friends into such terrible danger. Not to mention August’s family.

But how could I care about Jayden the way I did if I was mated with Bastian? Shouldn’t I feel a void, since I was apart from Bastian? Nothing made sense. I couldn’t envision

anything in Bolentia or with the Wind Travelers. I recognized only the name, not what it meant. Not how it felt.

I wanted nothing more than to stay in this tiny cabin with Jayden and share a bed with him. Share the rest of my life with him. I moved to the door, gave Jayden a look, then darted outside.

The coolness of night had taken hold of the warm day. The sun sank down behind the trees, casting long shadows over the open grass.

I needed to be in the air. To sort things through.

“Trin?” Jayden yelled.

With one leap, I shot into the air.

THIRTY

“YOU ARE THE FASTEST flyer in Bolentia, besides me, cousin,” August said. “Don’t make me tackle you again.”

“I’ll remove another one of your teeth.”

“You remember?”

“Flashes. More like feelings.” The wind whipped through my hair. “Nothing linking anything together. Why didn’t you lose everything like me?”

“I’m sorry, Trin. You were my first attempt at opening a door. I am very wise in my studies, but not perfect. This is my fault. But I am here. I have found you. I will help you.”

I slowed my wings. He’d said that to me several times over the previous days, but it felt good to hear again.

“That’s better. Even though I just ate, I am still fatigued. I would like to take a rest.”

I hovered above an oak tree. He inched toward me, his hand reaching for mine. I pushed back. “Remember how I showed you how to greet another Bolentian?” He reached out toward me again.

“Open palm up.” I offered him my hand. “And you touch my arm.”

He grazed his middle three fingers from the crook of my elbow to my wrist.

I couldn't help but smile at his childish grin. “That or a brush of our cheeks.”

He nudged forward and pressed his cheek to mine for a quick touch.

The pine and dirt scent sure was familiar.

He drew in a deep breath. “Our sense of smell is how we know one another. It helps us find each other like I found you. Along with our family ties.”

I nodded.

“I smell another on you, though, cousin.” August nailed me with a glare. “I have since I first found you.”

I pushed away.

“This Jayden, he puts his arm around you possessively.”

I swallowed down my nerves. “I—um—he had a sister once. I remind him of her. He protects me.”

“It is more than that. His eyes dilate when he looks at you in a way that means affection.” August dipped toward a tree. “Come. Let us sit.”

“August. What happened with Bastian? Enough to make me leave in such a manner? I must know.” Even though knowing might break my heart.

We settled on the branch. “He was not always crazy in the head. When young, you were very compatible. Feisty. Fought often, but were close friends. Everyone thought it natural you would bond. You were the best of friends. Actually, *we* all were.”

Tears stung.

August’s brow creased. “But then, we entered Academy, us three, and he fell in with a crowd. One that thought themselves superior to all. They abused others. Soon left.”

“Academy.”

“I think the people on Earth call it school. To learn. We, who were on The Guard, concentrated on our flying. Others honed their traits, such as wielding metal. The arts.” August slouched, rubbing his belly. “Some worked on baking goods to eat and raising animals.”

“You and I?”

“We come from a long line of flyers. Naturally strong, so we went that direction. We take to the skies, watch for incoming threats.”

“Threats.”

“We are not the only things that fly in Bolentia. And we can see mischievous folk easily from the skies, so we help maintain order in the homestead.”

“Like the police or sheriff.”

“Yes. That is what Earth calls it.”

The sun set completely, leaving only a trace of its light against the clear sky. Its disappearance muted the beautiful pink into a dull, ominous gray.

“Bastian’s parents are very well respected in the town. Hold much weight over decisions, as do yours. That is why your match seemed so ideal. You guys were compatible. From strong families. But no one had any notion of his malicious intent.”

“You helped me leave. Risked everything.”

“I couldn’t see you bonded to that man for eternity.”

“You sent me here, why?”

“Lack of choice, really. I first read of Earth, and it was like a fantasy novel. We were out of time. You’d married. I found out his ill will. We stole away from the celebrations. Time was of the essence.”

“It’s very scary here. Many rules. Many things I’m not used to.”

“The car is the most amazing thing,” August said.

“You know of it?”

“They get around their township in them. Unlike us, we just fly, run, or walk.”

“Everyone in Bolentia has wings?”

He dipped his head. “Walking and flying is how we travel. Eating vegetation and small animals we catch. Raising some in the community stables. That is how we live. It looks very

much like this place. Green. Tall trees. Not like the place that had the metal buildings.”

“No wonder I like it out here most.”

August smiled.

“What are we to do?”

“I think it’s time for a rest, and then we must go. Bastian has a small book that I believe has the incantation to return home.”

“We will do battle?”

“They have only three people. But you and I are strong.”

“I am not.” A breeze tangled with my hair.

“Look at all you’ve been through the past few days. You *are* strong.”

“What are we to do with Jayden?” I knew what I wanted, but it didn’t sound as if it would be acceptable.

“We must leave him, Trin. It’s not safe for him. If Bastian were to find out his affections for you.”

“Affections?”

“It’s obvious, and I’ve seen him only a short time. You were right when you said he thinks of your life before his; the way he jumped in between you and I when I landed.” August puffed out his chest. “It’s most honorable. But it will get him killed.”

“You said I couldn’t return to Bolentia, so why do you now say I should go back?”

“If we can get back before Bastian, we could seal the door, preventing his return. We would be free of him. Free Bolentia of him as well.”

“Only one door?”

“Yes. There is a cave rumored to have been the first homestead of the first of our kind. It holds much power, according to the stories. Which you obviously don’t remember.”

I shook my head.

“That’s okay. Most things I know are rumor. Even after accessing Mother’s books, it is not described in detail for some reason.” He smiled. “We used to go to this cave as kids and challenge one another to see how close we could get to the entrance before cowering back. You were always the bravest. Never to be beaten. Even by me.”

Funny, I didn’t feel very strong or brave or courageous. I must have been, though, to risk August’s life and my parents’ to leave Bolentia.

“So. This cave. This place that the power exists to open the fabric separating Earth and Bolentia, if we get there first, we could seal it, leaving Bastian and his two men here on Earth?”

“Yes.”

“And they will terrorize this place?”

“Earth is big. It can handle three unique individuals.”

“I don’t think we’re the only unique things here. Detective Nicks says he handles strange occurrences like me. He wasn’t scared of your wings.”

“He saw us?”

“Yes. He said he saw a man, probably you, fly from the homestead Bastian and his men had overtaken.”

“How do you know this?”

“It is called a cellular phone. He called and told me. But I saw you coming to me and thought you were trying to hurt me like the one at the mall.”

“Trysten, Bastian’s second in command.”

“He is very scary.” I looked out over the sea of darkness before us. “I was able to escape his attempt, though.”

August’s warm hand rested on my shoulder. “I know this is all very strange to you. Earth is strange to begin with, but I am here now. I will take care of you like family does.”

I wanted Jayden to do that for me. I’d never wanted anything more. But I knew I needed to resolve this Bastian issue to protect Jayden.

To protect his friends.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“Rest. I need rest and some more food.” August stood, balancing on the branch. “But then, we should go to Bastian’s homestead and retrieve the book so we can leave this place.”

“What about Jayden?”

“We must keep our distance from him if you desire him to remain safe.”

I couldn't be with him anyway, could I? It wasn't like he could come home to Bolentia with me. I couldn't stay here, either. I had family back home. I did not fit in here with my wings. I knew nothing of how to be human.

I knew nothing of how to be Bolentian, either.

Once again, it was evident I belonged nowhere.

But I loved Jayden. The mere thought of him sparked his scent in my nose and a warm bubble in my stomach.

“If I were to belong to someone else, here on Earth, what would happen?”

“I didn't realize we'd have the power of rapid healing here. Add that to the wings, I'm not sure what would happen if you bonded with a human. But it doesn't matter. We will be returning home, locking Bastian here. You'll be free. I'm confident the bond with Bastian will dissolve once locked in different Realms.”

“Dissolve?” I held up my wrist. “I will be allowed to be with someone else?”

“In theory.”

August's dry voice wasn't particularly encouraging.

If I stayed on Earth and Bastian returned to Bolentia, our bond might dissolve. Then and only then could I be free to be with Jayden. And he would be safe.

But if Bastian returned to Bolentia, he'd be a menace to that society as well. Had already threatened August's parents. If he stayed here, he'd continue to harm innocent people around him, including ones I'd come to care about.

If I went home to Bolentia with Bastian—*No*—that wasn't even an option. If he was anywhere *near* as scary as the man from the mall called Trysten I couldn't even entertain the idea. Plus, I'd be away from my Jayden. Then again, that might be best, since all I'd brought was chaos to his life.

Since being on Earth, I'd heard the confusing phrase, *stuck between a rock and a hard place*. I hadn't understood its true meaning until this very moment.

THIRTY-ONE

“THOUGHT YOU WERE RUNNING again,” Jayden said as he stepped onto the porch.

“Needed some fresh air,” I said.

Jayden held my gaze a long breath, then nodded for August and me to follow him into the cabin. The smells of garlic and tomato sifted through the air and tickled my nose. Three bowls of steaming food sat on the kitchen table.

I slid my hand into Jayden’s and pulled him to a stop. August went right to the bowls.

“You were gone a long time. I figured, if you were flying, you’d be hungry.” Jayden pressed his warm lips against my neck, just below my ear. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I nodded. Tears stung my eyes. He really did think of others before himself. Exactly what I’d want in a mate. Everything this Bastian person I was bonded to wasn’t.

“I’m glad the power is finally on. Makes things a little easier.”

“Jayden, did you draw these?”

August's voice pulled me from my Jayden's stare. August, holding a steaming bowl of food, sat on the couch. White sheets of paper covered the small table in front of the couch. I caught glimpses of wings, faces, and trees.

“Got inspired again while you two were out flying around.”

To the noise of paper shuffling, Jayden led me to the table and handed me a bowl of food. “It's just pasta. Like I said. Don't cook much and no pizza delivery places around here.”

“Very good. Gives me much energy.”

I took the steaming bowl from Jayden's hands. His green eyes flickered against the light perched high on the ceiling. I would stay here and eat pasta every day with him if it meant I could be with him forever. An ache permeated my chest as the knowledge of the situation engulfed me. I loved him, but that wasn't enough. I was from a different place, sent here to escape Bastian.

I hadn't asked August if I could enter into a covenant with Jayden, because I didn't want to hear the answer. I couldn't bring Jayden home with me. He was human. I was Bolentian. Maybe I could stay here on Earth. Send August home to seal the portal, but then I would be stuck on Earth with Bastian chasing me. And Jayden would be in harm's way.

Jayden and August did most of the talking while I ate my pasta. I lost myself in Jayden's baritone voice and sifting through the pictures he drew. It was like the drawings poured out of him. It made me smile to think I helped that. He would

be okay when I left, since he was drawing again. Zander could sell these and Jayden would be happy.

“Trin?” Jayden whispered. I pulled my gaze from the latest picture I’d been staring at. Jayden stood over me. On the couch, August lay on his side, eyes shut, mouth open, a loud noise vibrating from his mouth and throat.

“That is horrible noise,” I said.

“He snores,” Jayden laughed and pulled me up from the chair. “Come on. Let’s get you tucked in.” Jayden led me down the short hallway.

Night had settled in without me even noticing. Lost in my frustrations about having to leave, I let my last evening with Jayden slip by. That fueled my frustration. I wanted to see him more, touch him, and memorize everything about him before I left.

My heart hammered against my chest like a mallet. He pushed open the door to a room with a large bed in the middle and two big windows on either side. The bag of clothes he’d brought me sat on the edge of the bed. A tube of tightly rolled paper stuck out of it.

I stepped through the threshold, into the room, and reached for the paper. I uncurled it and found a picture of my face. Only the tips of my wings showed over my shoulders. But what I loved most was that he’d drawn himself, his face, leaning forward so our foreheads met. His fingers rested on my neck, and my eyes were closed. The soft lead pencil

strokes, blurred by the brush of his flesh over them, made the picture come to life.

“You drew yourself?”

“Not the easiest thing to do, but—” He eased into the room. “I just see myself with you.”

I set the picture on the dresser beside me and pulled him close. His lips met mine like a brush of a feather against my skin. The room filled with his musky scent, and I pulled away. “The picture is beautiful, Jayden. I will treasure it always.”

I wove my arms around his waist and rested my cheek against his chest, drinking in his scent and his warmth. Sturdy fingers tracked down my spine then up again as he caressed my back.

A shiver rippled through me as he touched between my shoulder blades. Such a sensitive spot.

“You were so quiet tonight.” He touched kisses against the top of my head.

“Much has happened today.”

“It must be so amazing to have your cousin here. You’re not alone anymore.”

I pulled my face from his chest. “I’ve not been alone.”

“But family. That’s different.” He stroked my hair back from my face. “You remember him?”

“Bits. More a feeling.” I rested my open palms on his chest.

Jayden's pupils had taken over nearly all the bright green color. His scent rippled off him in tangible waves and streamed over me like a warm flow of water. My body responded in earnest as it tingled to life.

"I wonder if it will ever all come back?" He whispered into my ear. Skin prickled behind my neck. "I almost hope it doesn't."

"You do?"

"I know that's selfish." He touched a kiss to my neck. "But I'm scared if you remember, you'll leave."

My stomach knotted.

"And I don't want you to ever leave." His mouth claimed mine.

His fingers curled around the nape of my neck and held my face close to his. I relaxed against him, letting all of my worry disappear into him.

I couldn't imagine ever finding anyone who made me feel like this. Bastian sounded like he would be one to hurt me rather than touch me with the tenderness Jayden did. I felt the love radiating from his body into mine.

"Jayden?" I whispered against his lips.

He pulled back slightly, his nose touching mine still. "Yeah?"

His breath tickled my skin in little bursts. His thumbs swirled against my cheeks.

“Will you share this bed with me tonight?”

With a quick motion, he swooped me into his arms. I curled my arm around his neck and tasted his salty lips again. He moved to the side and settled me against softness, but his lips never broke contact. He nestled in the bed beside me.

My heart stampeded through my chest. These new and wonderful feelings were so foreign, yet so right. So natural. I tangled my fingers in his hair.

“Trin,” he whispered then dropped kisses along my jaw. I turned my head, giving him more access to my neck. His lips touched the sensitive skin along my throat. He drew in a deep breath. “We really met only a week ago, didn’t we?”

I attached my mouth to his, and I scooted my hands up the back of his shirt. Had to feel that softer-than-silk skin one last time. Each bump of his spine felt like home beneath my fingertips, like I’d been doing it for years.

“I feel like I’ve known you a lifetime,” I whispered as I pressed my lips to his.

His hands cupped my cheeks and turned my head to look up to him. “It can be a lifetime.”

“I would like that.” Tears sprung. “But there is much to deal with, still.”

“Forget about that now.” He kissed the tip of my nose. “That’s tomorrow’s problem.”

But tomorrow I’ll be gone.

THIRTY-TWO

“WHY DID WE SNEAK out while still dark?” August asked with a yawn. “Although that thing Jayden called a couch was quite uncomfortable, I was sleeping soundly when you woke me.”

I thrust my wings, propelling myself forward. “We must go and find Bastian. Jayden would not let me go alone if he knew what we were going to do.”

“He is protective.” August’s wing brushed mine. “Isn’t he?”

My heart swelled as the image of Jayden’s calm, sleeping face flickered. I’d crawled from the bed quietly enough that he didn’t wake up. I’d stood there, staring at him for a long time, before gathering up a small bag of clothes and food and waking August to leave.

“It was strange to sleep beneath a wooden ceiling, though.”

August’s brilliant wings flapped with sureness. The confidence of a warrior. I should probably tell him I wanted him to go back to Bolentia without me. But I couldn’t yet. He

would surely disagree, not understanding my desire to stay with Jayden.

“Where do we normally sleep?”

“In the trees. Built small watch-out points high in the trees. Some have shelter over the top if it rains, but most lay open to the stars. I often sleep at those.”

“No mate for you?”

“It’s strange you don’t remember.” His eyes darkened. “I wish I didn’t.”

“Remember?”

“My mate died in childbirth. Both my son and wife perished that day.”

“When?”

“Three years earlier. That was why I agreed to find a way to help you escape binding with Bastian when we found out how undesirable he was.”

“Because you know true love.”

He nodded. “I could not stand to see you with someone who is incapable of it. You are so full of life and energy. Bastian would bleed you of it.”

“I’m sorry, August.”

Maybe I could trust August with my feelings for Jayden after all. Maybe he would understand and would help me find a way to be with Jayden.

“We are close,” he said.

“How do you know where to go?” I asked.

“I marked that place when I left, because I knew I’d have to find it again someday if I found you.”

“Marked?”

“It’s just like being able to find home. You were able to find Jayden’s cabin by feeling the directions, right?”

“Yes, but I thought that was different.” I followed him as he veered to the left.

“Different but the same. Finding our home or loved ones is a bit easier. But we can still mark a place to be able to return to it. You study the surroundings, pick a point, and burn it to memory. Study it from all directions, noting the sun’s location to it along with the moon and stars.”

“I see.”

“I know you have lost your memories and all your training, Trin, but those things woven into your DNA can never be forgotten. Trust your instincts. They will not let you down.”

My heart slammed. “My instincts tell me we must kill Bastian.”

“I thought you might say that.”

“You did?” I slowed my wings and moved to a flutter. “How?”

August hovered toward me. “Another instinct of ours is the mating instinct. I recognize it in your reactions to when Jayden dotes on you. You care for him deeply.”

Tears stung.

“And I noticed the space on the other chairs was not disturbed.” He arched an eyebrow. “You and he shared a room?”

Heat fused my cheeks. Jayden and I had not had sex, but I wasn't going to explain that to August. His furrowed eyebrows and tense jaw told me already that he did not approve. “I know I'm not free to be with someone, but—”

He put his hand up. A split in the trees showed a dim house with a long back yard facing a field. “It looks dark. Let's circle around.”

“This is where Bastian is?”

“This is the home they overtook, yes.” August's burnt orange eyes scanned the area. “It seems they are no longer here.”

I dove toward the structure. “Let's look.” I wanted to get in there to see if I could find out anything about where Bastian was. I wanted to be free of him, forever.

We landed on the gravel on the side of the house. A window was there, drapes opened, so I peeked in.

The small room was dark. One large bed with a dresser in the middle of the room. “Empty,” I said.

August stepped in front of me. “Let's get inside and take a look around. I doubt Bastian would leave the book behind, but it is worth a try.”

We crept through the gray-painted door. Some of the color peeled away and fluttered to the hardwood floors.

A rotten stench stung at my nose, and I cupped my hand over my mouth.

“I smell it, too,” he whispered.

“What is it?”

“Spoiled food, I assume.”

The floor creaked as we crept past the kitchen table into the other room. Furniture, similar to Jayden’s, cluttered another room and faced the television. White boxes with plasticware sticking out of them sat on the table in front of the couch. I remembered that from when Jayden ordered Chinese food.

“Looks as if this has been sitting here a while.” I touched the white box.

“I like Jayden’s home much better,” August said.

Where windows would be, orange pieces of cloth covered the glass, casting a putrid color to the room that matched the stench. The air held a rancid smell and was heavy with a dull haze. Fear prickled my spine as I stepped down the small hallway toward another darkened room.

“I was held in that room.” August nodded in my direction.

“Why did they take you?”

“Bastian knew I helped you escape. They brought me as insurance.”

“To get me back. Yes. I remember now.” I faced him. He was hunched over a small wooden table that had many papers stacked on top. His large wings clung to his back. To his left was a wall that had books stacked against it.

“We are closer than most siblings, Trin. He knew that and hoped to exploit it to get you back.”

“But he never used the portal before?”

“Not that I know of. Trysten seemed to know plenty, though,” August said as he turned to face me. “What?”

“What do you mean, what?”

“You’re thinking up something, aren’t you? I can tell.”

“How?”

“You always cross your arms over your chest and bite at your bottom lip when you are thinking.”

Sure enough, my arms were over my chest, my foot tapped, and I had been biting my bottom lip. I’d never known that about myself.

August turned toward the books perched on the shelves of wood. “So, tell me what’s going on in that head of yours.”

“I’m not really sure, it’s just a feeling, but I think they, or some Bolentians, have been here before.”

“I agree. But why do you say that?”

“How would they have known how to find me so easily? In a mall no less.”

August shrugged his thick shoulders. “Bastian’s link with you isn’t as strong as a mate’s, since you’d not consummated your bond yet, but he has a sense of you, even if it is a weak one.”

“And the stories you found out about Earth in your mother’s books had to come from somewhere, right?” I moved to the little table that housed all the rancid-smelling boxes of food.

“True.”

“What happens if Bastian unites with me? I mean, specifically me?”

“You’re an only child. Your parents are prominent leaders of our District. So, by your union, your land and Bastian’s land would merge, you and your families even more powerful.”

My heart sunk like it had turned to stone. “And access to my land...”

“The portal.” August stood straight up.

“How does the portal work? Can anyone with the correct incantation open it?”

“No. You have to have Founder’s blood in you.”

“Founders?”

“Those who came to Bolentia and cultivated the land. Founded our Districts. Descendants of them are rumored to be able to open the portal,” August said.

“I have Founder blood in me, and you’re a relative of my parents, so...you can open the portal. This Trysten? He is from

a Founder?”

August tapped his lip and glanced toward the ceiling. “No, he’s not—wait. His mother. Distant relative of you. I didn’t even think of that. She died many years ago. Snake spit! That snipe, Trysten, I will—”

“What do the history books say about that cave?” I strode toward August.

He sifted through papers in the desk near the window of the main room. “Not much. Remember, I found the incantation in my mother’s private collection of history books. She’d never even told me about it.”

“So, they were hidden. The cave has only limited access, mainly to *our* family. That means something bad probably happened. Or something the leaders of the township did not want anyone to repeat again or even know about, since the books about Earth were hidden.”

“Snake spit,” August said.

“And you noticed how quickly we heal here, right?” I said.

His fingers brushed his forehead. “I do. I dueled with one of his minions and cut him as well. So, they’re aware, if they hadn’t already known. Which they probably had, considering the direction this very disturbing conversation is taking.”

“We have to assume they know everything. Which means we have to assume that someone as evil and hungry for power as Bastian is, might like it here. Who knows how long we can

live here if we constantly heal from injuries? Even illnesses, maybe.”

The ideas came to my head faster than I could verbalize them, but judging by August’s wide eyes I knew he understood my direction of thinking.

Long ago Bolentians had probably been on Earth, but those back home cut off their access. Maybe they’d caused trouble here, or brought things from Earth back to Bolentia. Once Bastian got his hands on me, took me back to Bolentia, and consummated our marriage vows, I’d be bound to him—essence exchanged, and he’d have free access to the portal.

To Earth.

What was he planning to do here, though?

THIRTY-THREE

“WHERE COULD THOSE MISCREANTS be?” I asked as I dangled my legs over the edge of the branch. “We’ve sat here all day.”

“You’re not much for watching the borders anymore, are you?” August slapped my shoulder.

“We would sit like this for hours and hours? It’s quite boring. Maybe that’s why I don’t remember.”

It wasn’t so much that it was boring, but the lack of movement left much time to think about my Jayden. The mere thought of him brought warm feelings to my stomach. I could almost feel his lips on my skin.

I shook the thoughts from my head.

“I can’t imagine why they haven’t come back to this place. We had been here for two days. Someone always at my side while others were out looking for you.”

“Why would I ever marry someone like Bastian?”

“He fooled everyone.”

“Almost.” I held my arm up that had the leather-covered gold on it.

“Why do you cover it with this black?” August touched it. “Leather?”

“People on Earth see it as a treasure. One tried to take it by force.”

August sat straight. “To take it? As in remove it from your flesh?”

I nodded.

“In the name of the gods! Earth is in a dark place, isn’t it?”

“Not every part is dark.” My thoughts went to Jayden, Zander, and Karen. Even Nicks. He seemed to be very concerned and helpful. “There are many people who are not so evil-minded.”

“You thought of Jayden just then, didn’t you?”

I nodded. “And Zander, Karen, and Detective Nicks.”

I watched as the sun descended on my first day apart from Jayden. I didn’t much care for our separation. If each day dragged on and on such as this one, I would fall into madness before long.

I wondered if he found the note I’d left and how he reacted.

“I find Jayden very helpful, but you said someone tried to take your gold band?”

“Yes. A man said he could get much money for it. Things work with money here. Not like the trading you mentioned

back home.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No. Jayden came to my aid before the man tried.”

“Can’t take it off.”

“I know this. Jayden and I have tried. It’s most peculiar. No seams as to where it was molded on.”

“I really am going to have to tell you *everything*, aren’t I? But this is really a talk to have with a female, such as your mother.”

“She’s not here at the moment, so you’ll have to do, *cousin*.”

“Fine.” He sat up and pointed to my arm. “Can’t remove that. It’s bonded with our magic. At the wedding ceremony, the vows are performed, sealing the seam. Never to be removed until consummating your covenant.”

“So, it is sealed, magically, but once I...me and my mate... *bond*, it gets removed.” My cheeks steamed. He was talking about sex, and yes, he was right, I wished I had a female to talk to about this. I cleared my throat and asked, “You have a band, but you were married.”

“When a male reaches his twelfth year, he receives his band. It’s his own band that is the color of his family’s. It has the first letter of his first name, and it is magically sealed, never to be taken off again until he’s fully mated. Once he finds his mate and she accepts his band offer, her family’s band is removed.”

“So, females have their own bands?”

“Yes. At the age of twelve, like the males, they receive theirs. The only difference is the female’s is removable.”

“So, theirs has a seam so it can be removed, and she can accept a band from her mate.”

“Precisely. A band identical to her mate’s is forged and put on her wrist showing she’s betrothed to him. It is not permanently sealed, yet. Not until the Oath of Companionship does the seam vanish.”

“But there is a seam in the band she gets from her mate until this Oath of Companionship ceremony?”

August nodded. “Until then, either one can step away from the other. If they find they are incompatible for some reason. But when the Oath of Companionship happens and vows are exchanged, her band is sealed. The union is celebrated for many days until the Covenant Ceremony.”

“So, it starts with a verbal proclamation.”

“Yes.”

“Oh dear.” I grabbed my wrist. I’d done that with Jayden. While still wearing Bastian’s band. “What happens after the verbal part?”

“What is wrong?” August shifted on the branch. “Your cheeks are flushed. I get the sense of mischief.”

“Nothing. After days of celebrating the Oath, then there is a Covenant Ceremony?”

“Yes. It’s a grand ceremony with final blessings of both families and at least one Council member. And then...” August’s cheeks reddened.

“What?”

“And then... the couple consummates the covenant.”

“You mean sex, right?”

“You know this word?”

“My friend Karen told me of it. It did not sound familiar, but she told me of it, a little.” I was thankful the skies darkened to hide my embarrassment. What rules had I broken by bonding with Jayden? Maybe Bastian sensed it and that was why he was so violent.

“You didn’t know of the word because until we are united with our mates, we are not allowed to enter into sex with another. We keep ourselves pure for our mate because during the act our essences are exchanged, fusing us together, forming our own marks. We mate only once in our entire existence.”

“Even if the mate dies?”

“Indeed. Like my Alanna. She died. I will not unite with another because I’ve already given my essence away and hers is forever imprinted on my body. Once with your mate, everyone else pales in comparison. It’s how it is.” He glanced at his fingers. “I would never want another anyway. My memory of her is pure, never to be watered down by another. So, I put my band back on.”

Tears stung my eyes at the passion in his voice. “August.”

He cleared his throat.

“When you say forming your own marks... you mean something other than the initial on the face of the band?”

He nodded.

I sat up as the image etching Jayden’s skin and my golden bracelet flashed before my eyes. But it had been after we decided to be each other’s boyfriend and girlfriend.

“What’s the matter?” August nudged my elbow with his. “You are keeping something from me.”

My fingers brushed over my leather band. “Each family has an emblem. A crest. It’s a symbol that represents their family.” Hope filled my sad heart as I snapped open the leather hiding my gold. “I think something’s happened with my Jayden.”

August reached out and pulled the leather from my golden band. His eyes widened. “He bears this mark as well. I remember seeing it on his inner wrist. How did this happen?”

“I can’t explain it. He and I—we—I love him, August. I feel like I’ve known him my entire being. And I think we did the verbal exchange thing you described earlier.”

“You pledged yourself to him? Have you shared a bed?” August’s voice echoed off the neighboring trees. A shrill of icy panic slid down my spine.

“We did share a bed, but we did not unite. We were only close to each other.”

“Trin—”

“I wish to stay here with Jayden. He is mine. I am his. We decided.”

August hopped up on the branch and jammed his fingers into his hair. “But there was no Oath Ceremony. We’re on Earth, no magic to bind bands. No band on Jayden.”

“August?” He was scaring me.

“That’s why it etched into his flesh. Has to be. This is unprecedented, Trinity. Gods only knows what’ll happen to him.” He glared down at me. “What will happen to you if this union is consummated.”

I hopped up to my feet now, even more scared. “What do you mean? Jayden will be harmed?”

“I can’t even begin to imagine...well, yes I can, I’m quite imaginative, but a Bolentian and human bonding? How could we know what might happen? It’s never been done before.”

Ice shivered down my spine. I’d done only what felt right with him. What my heart had desired. So had Jayden. But of course, because of who—no *what*—I was, things were all wrong. Jayden might be in trouble because of it.

“I’d sent you here hoping the separate Realms would sever your bond with Bastian. That you’d have a chance at finding a true mate back home once you were able to return. But now —”

“I don’t belong there, August.”

“Yes. You do. Bolentia is your home.”

“I belong nowhere.” I pushed off, vaulting into the air. There wasn’t a Realm for me, but there was a person for me, and that person was Jayden.

He was right.

He was mine.

August’s wide wingspan darkened the pink sky near me. He’d followed.

“How can you say that you belong nowhere?” he asked.

“I remember nothing of home. I know nothing of this place, Earth. I fit nowhere. But Jayden is here, and I fit with him.”

August drew in a deep breath and after a long pause, he said, “Then let us go to him. If you have found a mate, who am I to keep you apart?”

“Really?”

“Maybe his Detective Nicks friend can assist me in finding Bastian so I can attempt to retrieve the book that will allow me to return home. I do not remember the incantation, but I know it’s written in that book they have.”

“And then you must seal the door, August. Does that book contain words that will forever seal the door?”

“I believe they do. I remember reading of it in my mother’s book.” August’s voice was quiet. “You would never again be able to return home, Trin.”

“Will Jayden fit in there?”

“About as much as you fit in here.”

“And I have no memory of my home, so I will stay here with him. Forever.”

“Trin. We know nothing about how this place works. You could be immortal for all we know. The healing process for us here is nearly instantaneous.”

“I don’t care. All I want is him, and he wants me.” Well, if I hadn’t turned him against me by sneaking out and leaving that awful note.

“Back home. When the union is complete, the mated pair exchange essence, becoming one. Who knows, maybe when you unite with Jayden he will join you in immortality.”

THIRTY-FOUR

“IT’S JUST OVER THAT hill of trees, there.” I pointed ahead of us. My heart thumped in anticipation of seeing my Jayden.

“Your connection with him is strong to be able to so easily pick out his homestead in the dark. And you have not joined with him completely? Just the verbal exchange along with the symbols?”

“Right.”

“Strong, indeed.”

I thrust my wings harder, despite my fatigue at all the flying we’d done. We hadn’t eaten nearly enough to keep our muscles fueled for the amount of flight taking place, but I had to get to my Jayden. I couldn’t wait to tell him we could be together. I hoped he would understand why I left in the middle of the night like I had, and the note I’d left, telling him to continue drawing and to find love with someone who loved his art as much as she loved him.

I shook my head. “Of course, he’ll forgive me.”

The road leading to Jayden's homestead came into sight.
"There. See that light?"

"Barely," August said.

"That's the road we follow to his home." I pulsed my wings.
"Hurry."

I crested the last tree and Jayden's small home came into sight. Dark windows, not even a hint of light. The moon hung bright, casting a silver tint over the sea of plush grass.

"Not home?" August asked.

Zander's SUV was still parked in the driveway, but as I turned to circle the cabin, there was a second car parked in its shadow. "Someone else is here."

We both darted to the cover of the trees and descended slowly, watching every corner. If someone was there, surely the lights would be on in the house. It wasn't late enough to have gone to sleep yet, but all was silent.

Eerily silent.

August's eyebrows puckered, and his jaw clenched.

We scurried across the lawn toward the house. My heart slammed so hard I thought the sound would give us away if someone were nearby. Maybe my note upset Jayden enough to leave? No. His car would be gone.

We approached the corner of the house, my toes chilled from the cool grass. Gooseflesh clung to my skin, and I willed myself to not burst through the door yelling Jayden's name.

“Zeffer County Police?” August whispered. “Police?”

“Detective Nicks is an authority over this land.”

“He is the one who knows about you.”

“Yes. But I did not say where I—wait, I did tell him where we were. When I saw you coming, I blurted it out. And he is friend to Zander as well.”

“He must have come.”

“But where is everyone?” My breath rushed out from my lungs. “What if—”

“No. He’s fine. Come on, let’s go.” August stepped in front of me, wings out wide. I followed his lead. The loose gravel from the road leading to the house cut into my bare feet.

Everything was quiet. Too quiet.

I swallowed back a ball of fear lodged in my throat.

August pulled the first door open and held it to the side. He nodded me to the other side of the door. The wood pricked my hand as I leaned against it, my wings tucked close to my back. The hairs on my neck stood up, stinging my flesh with the acidic worry coursing through me. Was Jayden okay? Where could he be?

August squatted down and pushed the inner door open, and we were met with darkness. August stepped in, and I followed, fists tight.

Only the light from the moon spilled in through the kitchen window. Papers lay strewn on the floor. Some crinkled and

torn. A lamp lay on its side on the floor to my right. The oil spilled onto one of the drawings and left smeared, distorted shades of black and gray.

“Jayden?” I said, barely above a whisper.

His scent dusted the air, but it was lingering, not emanating from his skin right now.

“Is he here?” August asked.

“No. I can’t smell him. Only his lingering scent.”

“You knew that’s what I meant?”

I nodded.

“Instinct for your mate.” He stepped into the dark hall to the room I’d shared with Jayden.

I followed, my hand rested on the small of August’s back, so I could watch behind me. He opened the door to the room, and I scented him even more, but still, it was faint enough to tell me he wasn’t in there.

“I smell blood,” August said. “Can you?”

I drew in a deep breath. “No. Not sure what to smell for.”

“Minerals. Metallic or iron.” He pulled me from the room. “This way.”

He went back into the main room but led to the back door toward the patio. He pushed the door, but it stopped before it fully opened. He pushed again and someone groaned.

I crouched, wings out and skin puckered with goose bumps. August stepped through, and I followed.

“Detective Nicks.” I fell to his side.

Red oozed from the side of his head, and that was when the smell hit me. Yes. I knew what it smelled like. My stomach clenched. Blood.

“What happened?” I asked as I helped him to a sitting position.

His hand went to his head. “The one from the mall.”

“How? I don’t—”

“They know of this world more than I thought. Followed me.” He coughed and leaned to the side. He slid his hand into his back pocket and pulled out a cloth. He pressed it to his head and winced.

His thinning hair was disheveled and splattered with blood.

“Jayden?” I asked.

Nicks looked up at me. “I’m sorry. They took him.”

THIRTY-FIVE

“TRINITY. CALM DOWN.” AUGUST grabbed my shoulders. “Focus.”

How could I focus? Bastian had my mate.

“Get Nicks inside, I will scout the area. Nicks, how much time has passed?”

“Twenty minutes maybe?”

August leaped off the porch, landed at the bottom of the steps, then thrust up into the air.

“I’m sorry, Trinity. Your call ended so abruptly. I had quite a time convincing Zander to give me details on how to get here. I—”

“Come inside. I’ll help clean you up. Tell me everything as we do that.”

I helped him to his feet and I guided him in the door. Once inside, I slammed it shut and led him to the couch. Still holding the cloth to his forehead, he slouched into the leather.

I scurried to the kitchen and leaned against the counter to catch the breath my beating heart stole. *Wings, go home.* My wings slid into me with the bone-crunching noise I'd come to know.

"They followed me. Must have seen me watching them. I led them straight here," Nicks said as I shuffled through drawers looking for another cloth to put some water on. "I got lost several times. Stopped at the diner in the next town to get oriented again."

I grabbed a cloth and pulled out a bottle of water and some ice from the fridge. "What happened?"

I carried the bottle to the couch and set it on the table in front of him.

"Your wings are gone," Nicks said.

"Yes. Please, tell me." I leaned forward, cracked the lid open, and poured the clean water onto the towel, then waved him forward.

I pressed the damp cloth against the deep cut, and he winced. "Sorry."

"I pulled up beside the SUV and hopped out. I even looked up and didn't see anything. Jayden must have heard the car because he came rushing out, saying your name." Nicks took over pressing the wet cloth to his forehead and sank back into the seat. "He stopped when he saw it was me and out of nowhere three guys swooped in and landed next to him."

I bolted to my feet and hugged my stomach. Tears stung and my gut roared both with hunger and fear. I stomped to the kitchen and pulled the cupboards open looking for food.

“The leader, he called himself Bastian, went into the house, the other two marched us inside as well. Bastian went nuts when he saw pictures of you all over.”

I grabbed a jar of peanut butter and some bread.

“He demanded to know where you were. Jayden said you’d left and were never coming back.” Nicks coughed.

The note.

That was exactly what I’d written. I’d said I would never return. Told Jayden to find another who was free to be with him. One who would not bring such angst into his life. He deserved better.

Nicks stood near the couch, facing me.

“Go on,” I said. “You said Bastian knew of things of this world.”

“Yes.” Nicks ambled toward me as I finished the first of the peanut butter sandwiches. “He talked of money. Knew of my police status. The other guy, too. Silver band, the one from the mall. He knew things. Called me the fuzz. That’s old slang for cop. They spoke like they’d been here a while. Or at least before.”

I glanced past Nicks to the mess of drawings on the floor. My heart throbbed. A shuffle outside the door to the patio startled me into a crouched position.

The door burst open, and August strode through, wings clinging tight to him. “Nothing.”

He hurried to the kitchen and grabbed a sandwich. “It’s so dark, too, I can’t see much. Nicks, you said they were here twenty minutes ago?”

“Yes.”

August shoved half the sandwich into his mouth with one bite, then grabbed another one and strode away as he inhaled the second half of the first one.

I took two bites of the sandwich I’d just made and continued making more. “Why did they leave you?” I asked Nicks.

“Didn’t seem too interested in me, to tell you the truth.”

“Why? You were the one watching them,” I said.

“I know. But when they came in here and saw your face on these papers everywhere, the one called Bastian went crazy,” Nicks said.

August paced in front of the back door. I noticed he’d finished his sandwich, so I tossed him another. He snatched it from the air, and I took more bites of mine.

“He grabbed the drawing that showed your gold band and then saw that Jayden had the same mark.” Nicks shifted his look from August to me. “Does that mean something? That Jayden has the mark on his skin that you have on your bracelet?”

My legs couldn't hold my body any longer, and I folded to the ground. My knees hit the wooden floor with a crack. I leaned forward, face to my hands. Tears streamed. Bastian had taken him because he knew Jayden was my mate now. Probably assumed Jayden and I had consummated our proclamation and Bastian could no longer join with me in his plan to get my land.

“Trinity,” August exclaimed.

Both he and Nicks stood.

“What does the mark mean?” Nicks asked.

“Means he and Trinity are mated,” August said as he held out his hand for me to take.

“Mated?”

I nodded. My intestines twisted around the one sandwich I'd been able to eat so far. One would have to be enough to fuel me.

“How is it you did not use your weapon to defeat Bastian and his minions?” August asked, pointing to Nicks's gun.

“I got a shot off. One was nicked in the process, but then this.” He pointed to his head. “And I was out for the count.”

“I did not understand much of that, but I assume, by your motions, you mean you have injured one of them?” August asked then took the last bite of his fourth sandwich.

I leaned against the countertop, near the sink, staring at August. “What are we going to do? How will we find them?”

August stepped toward me, his eyes wide. “First, you must eat something. You expended much energy flying today. And now this. You will do Jayden no good if you are weak and overpowered when we find him.”

“How will we find him?” I asked, reaching for a sandwich. My stomach churned with objection as if daring me to try to consume another bit of food. But August was right. I had to try to eat to stay strong for my Jayden. Because I would get him back or die trying.

“I’m not sure yet how we will find him. But Bastian couldn’t have gotten far in the darkness. They couldn’t have flown with Jayden. Even with three strong male Wind Travelers, Jayden is too large for them to carry. There are few houses out here, from what I can tell from when we flew overhead.”

The soft bread stuck to the top of my dry mouth, and I snatched a water from the fridge.

“Very few houses here. Small town. But Bastian said something about if he’s really her mate, she’ll be able to find him.”

“Like you found me, August?” The bread swelled in my throat, and I drank some water. “Mates. I should be able to find him.”

“Yes. You haven’t mated yet, so his essence hasn’t moved into your system, binding you, but your connection is still very strong.”

Nicks reached out for my leather-covered band. “That’s the mark.” He peeled the leather off. “And it’s on your metal now? It had a *B* on it when you were at the office.”

“Much has happened since we last spoke, Detective Nicks.” I looked past him. “August?”

“We can try.”

“Try what?” Nicks asked. He dropped the bloodied cloth onto the countertop. “Would someone please tell me what the hell is going on? And who you people are?”

I turned, focusing on the bread I was coating with peanut butter. I couldn’t explain much, since I didn’t remember anything of importance, so I let August’s voice fade into a distant rumble as I tried to keep myself from curling up into a ball and crying over Jayden’s situation.

A situation caused by me. My presence.

He said I was his angel, but I turned out to be something completely opposite. My mind drifted toward the possibility of Bastian hurting Jayden. Trying to punish him for something Jayden hadn’t even asked for; to become my mate. To become bound to me until death.

I’d had no idea that was what was happening when I asked him to be mine. It had felt natural. Maybe it was, but now it may get him killed.

“Wait. Okay, I know there’s more of you here!” Nicks yelled.

I whirled around as August asked, “What do you mean more of us?”

“Five or six years ago. When I first started taking on these weird cases, a girl wandered in off the street. No band around her wrist, but confused and mumbling about wings and ability to fly. She was small, like Trinity.”

August shook his head as if to silently answer *I don't know*.

“As a cop, you see a lot of strange things. Most brush it off as crazy people, but I don't. I know there's more to this reality than what I see every day.”

“What happened to this girl from years ago?” I asked, finally finishing my second sandwich. My stomach began to settle down, and I reached for my third.

“She was committed to an institution. That's the last I know.”

“Do you have access to finding her?” I asked. “Or do you remember what she looked like? Maybe August will remember her?”

“Small, like you. Red hair, though. Strong grip. Yeah. When I met you, Trinity, your grip was strong. Now I know why it struck me. It was like hers.”

“Have you seen more?” August asked.

“Not that I'm aware of. Besides the ones who had you. Without the wings, you look as normal as any human walking down the busy streets. Just a little on the small side.”

“How does this help me, August? How does this help my Jayden?”

“It doesn’t. Calm down. Let’s see if you can sense him.” August strode over to me. “Come on.”

“I’ll get my computer. I’m going to dig into the records and find out what happened to this girl.” Nicks stepped toward the door.

After I heard the door click shut, I looked over at August. “Please tell me you can help me find my mate.”

THIRTY-SIX

“NOTHING,” I SAID AS I sat on the cool grass. “I don’t feel anything.”

“Be quiet.” August sat beside me. “It’s like the hairs on your neck stand at attention and there is a little sting—no—prickle from the stiff end of our feathers.”

He sat cross-legged beside me. Eyes closed. His chest heaved with each deep breath he took.

“I thought this would be innate, like you said.” I closed my eyes and drew in a deep breath.

The sounds of Nicks inside the cabin, clanking things around, faded to the background. I zeroed in on my heartbeat, willing it to slow down so I could hear something or feel something or whatever was supposed to happen to help me find my Jayden.

“It is innate, but, like I said before, you two haven’t fully mated yet. So it’s not as strong as it will be.”

“But I found my way to him before.”

“Exactly. Tap into that. You were very scared then, lost. Maybe that played a part.”

“I’m very scared now, too.”

“But you’re panicking. It might be making things more difficult.”

I let out a calming breath. “Can Jayden still refuse me? Refuse our bond?”

“I don’t know, Trin. You two are connected, sharing marks. But it’s different than how it is done back home. The fact that he’s got the mark etched into his flesh, something that happens only after fully mating, I...I just don’t know.”

I was at a loss for words. This might be permanent—eternal. How would he react when he found out?

“I must save him, August. I can’t explain it, but I—” Tears choked my voice. A warm hand rested on my shoulder.

“I know, Trin. We’ll get him. Now, try again. It will be light in a few hours. We must rest. Bastian may try to move him again once light hits.”

I drew in a hiccupped breath and closed my eyes.

“Focus on him. His face. His scent,” August said. “Block everything else out.”

A gray sketch came into sight. Like the first time I’d seen him when my eyes were adjusting. Gray charcoal on black canvas. I could still see the sparkle in his eyes, though. The

cute half smile that dimpled his left cheek. Soft feathers of hair resting on his forehead and flipping up over his ears.

I drew in a deep breath and imagined his scent near me. On me. In me. *Jayden*. I called out to him mentally, hoping against hope he'd answer. I knew it to be impossible, but my heart would not listen to reason.

I sat for several long breaths, hoping, listening, and feeling, but I didn't experience anything August said I should. No prickles. No raised hairs. No sense of anything.

A creaking door yanked me from my meditation and sent a wave of irritation crashing through me. I snapped my eyes open to see Nicks standing beneath the little light perched at the side of the door.

My glare must have cut through the thick blanket of darkness surrounding me out in this yard, because he stopped, holding a contraption Jayden had called a laptop.

"What?" I asked as I stood, brushing the grass from my jeans.

"I found her," Nicks said.

"She lives?" August asked. "How far away?"

"An hour south of here." Nicks waved us to him and moved through the threshold of the door. "She's no longer in the hospital. She's on her own, and the last address I have for her is an hour south of here."

"Can you go to her quickly?" August asked.

“What good does this do us?” I asked. “She won’t know where my Jayden is.”

“But if she’s Bolentian, she can assist us.”

“She’s been here for many years. Not living your ways,” I said.

“But if she has memories and has just kept in hiding, then this is good. She can help. And if not, nature will trump, like it has for you.” August looked at me. “We must try anything and everything to get the upper hand. Bastian is strong. You are out of sorts, Jayden is human.”

“I should stay and help. I have firearms. Those morons can’t out-fly a bullet,” Nicks said.

“We heal quickly here, but I don’t think we could withstand a bullet to the heart or head. Can’t heal quick enough to beat death like that, I wouldn’t think,” August said. “But I’m not sure.”

“Okay.” I faced Nicks. “You go find this woman. Find anything you can. Bring her here if possible. Hopefully she remembers something.”

“I think that’s best.” Nicks slapped his computer down and reached for his jacket.

“But wait, Nicks.” I stepped toward him. “Do you have extra firearms in your police car?”

“Yes.”

“I think it’s about time I learn how to use one.”

THIRTY-SEVEN

“NICKS SHOULD BE THERE by now.” The wood creaked beneath August’s weight as he paced in front of the picture window. “Sun will be up soon.”

Black leather was strapped around my thigh, and the pistol Nicks showed me how to use was cinched tight against me. My heart slammed at the thought of having to use it, but I would for my Jayden.

Couldn’t sense him yet, but after I finished fastening the weapons Nicks gave me, I would try again. If I didn’t sense him, I would take to the sky to see if that helped.

I reached for the hem of my pants and pulled the material up, rolling it twice. The leather straps of the holster for a knife hugged my thin ankles. They were too tiny, so we had to wrap it twice to stay put. I slid the knife from the top of the counter and shoved it in the slot.

I unrolled the pants and stood straight. Strange how wearing these two weapons empowered me. August said I had been the strongest female of the Wind Travelers, but I hadn’t felt it until

this moment. Maybe the added weapons helped fill the void of combat knowledge locked, or lost, somewhere in my mind.

“Are you ready to try again?” August’s voice was close. I hadn’t noticed him moving near as I loaded the weapons onto my body.

“Yes.” I hurried around him toward the door.

His heavy footsteps fell in time behind mine. I thrust the door open and stepped out. The dark sky had begun to gray. Just a faint silver tint, but it signaled how quickly time moved. My stomach churned at the recently eaten sandwiches.

I walked out into the middle of the patch of grass and looked skyward. *Please let this work.*

I slid my eyes shut and drew in a deep breath. With every ounce of my being, I focused on Jayden. My wings slid out from me, and I narrowed my thoughts on our first kiss. Our exchange of verbal commitment. The bedroom the night before I left.

Why had I left? I was so wrong and look what happened.

I shook the negative thoughts from my brain and returned to focusing on my Jayden. My mate. *Where are you?*

Nothing.

Tears sprung before I could stop them. Warmth oozed my cheek and tickled my earlobe. I slid the back of my hand across my cheek and returned to facing skyward.

Nothing.

My knees bent and with one thrust, I leaped into the air. My arms pointed to the darkness. “Please, Jayden.”

Trin. Jayden’s quiet voice echoed in my brain.

Hairs prickled, itching my skin. Afraid to break the connection, I kept my eyes closed and turned a circle. The sting of the hairs rising intensified as I faced one direction, so I stopped.

“North.”

Two quick thrusts propelled me forward. I heard the snap of August’s wings behind me, but he said nothing. I closed my eyes, calling out to Jayden. The chill lessened, and I slowed. A quick circle brought me around, and the cool feeling over my skin returned.

“Jayden,” I whispered.

Two structures sat below us. Dark. Instinct pulled me toward them, but August’s wing brushed mine. He nodded north again.

Several thrusts later, I asked, “What?”

“Just scouting. You feel him down there?”

“Yes. He’s there.”

“You sure? No doubt?”

“Much doubt. I’ve never done this before.” I marked the spot where I’d sensed him.

“Always scout out the area first. Sure, Bastian wasn’t in The Guard like us, but he’s not stupid. He probably has someone

watching.” August moved out in front of me. “Make a wide loop, then land.”

“Land? Air is better, right?”

“Trust me.”

“I do.” I followed him on a long half circle.

The tip of the sun began to peek over the horizon of trees. Hopefully they hadn’t left yet. August dropped through a small opening. I closed my wings in and darted after him. I thrust my wings out as I neared the ground for a soft landing. My heart hammered my chest.

“Okay. It’s that way.” August pointed ahead.

“I can’t tell from the ground.”

“I can. You’ll get your bearings soon, I’m sure. You sense him still?”

“No.”

“No?”

“We’re far from him, aren’t we?”

“Not that far.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Nothing. Let’s move.”

He hurried around the thick tree trunk, and I followed. The plush forest floor muffled our light footsteps as we approached. August checked our surroundings. He did that often. He moved like a predator, focused and silent.

Doubt crept in like a thick tar. I didn't know enough to be any help. How could I save my Jayden? My foot caught a root and pitched me forward. I flapped my wings and stayed upright—mostly.

August stopped. His eyebrows pulled together, and his jaw tensed. Seemed that was the universal sign men used to show displeasure.

He moved forward.

The structure came into sight. August held out his hand in a fist and stopped, so I did too. All seemed quiet. The building lay dark. A small white door was cracked open, but a bigger, brown door was shut.

A breeze slapped the door shut against the frame, then it bounced back open and cracked against the house. The tall trees surrounding the small yard towered over us. The sun rose behind them, casting a long shadow.

Larger than Jayden's cabin, it looked to be two of his attached together. Three stairs led to the slapping back door, then three windows to the right and one to the left. Did Jayden lay hurt behind one of those? The curtains were drawn.

My heart hardened like a large lump of metal in my chest. But my skin prickled just after, at the nape of my neck and between my wings.

Jayden.

Yes. I sensed him. He was there. Had to be.

August pointed to me, then the back door. He pointed his finger to his chest and looped above his head. I had no idea what that meant, but I understood I was to move to the back door.

I darted across the lawn, and I hopped up the steps with an unusual lightness considering my wings were tucked close to me. August leaped into the air. He did a circle, and I realized what his hand gesture had meant.

I squeezed the door handle and turned. Something clicked.

A quick look up showed August veering in my direction. I pushed the door open a crack. Darkness to my right.

I crouched and pushed more. The creak of the door echoed off the air surrounding me, sounding as if I'd set off an alarm alerting everyone in the forest I was entering.

Cover blown, I pushed the door wide open and burst in. For some reason, I knew that to be the wrong tactic, but it was too late.

To the left, Jayden lay slumped against a white wall, hands in his lap, held together by a rope. His head tilted to the side and eyes were closed.

“Jayden.” I scrambled to him.

Blood dribbled down the corner of his mouth and over his chin. Drops speckled his white shirt.

“Jayden.” I shook his shoulder, but he didn't wake up.

“Trinity,” August yelled.

At that moment, a blunt force to my shoulder sent me through the air like one of my feathers in the wind. The wall stopped me; my wings cracked like dried twigs.

White-hot stabs of pain radiated from my shoulder to my arm as I slid down the wall. I landed on my knees, my hands on the carpet before me. The man from the mall stood over me. August had called him Trysten. I recognized him by his silver band and dark hair. He reached toward Jayden's face, holding a shiny object.

A knife.

I hopped to my feet. "No."

My vision tilted, and I palmed the wall beside me. Throbbing pain pulsed in my shoulder. Shuffling beside me drew my attention. August wrestled with someone else. His fist met the man's cheek, and a loud crack rattled the air. Much like my wings had just sounded.

I returned my attention to Jayden. He was still unconscious.

Trysten squatted next to Jayden, fisted his hand in his hair, and pressed the tip of the knife to Jayden's neck. He glared at me and said, "You must be his mate, then, after all."

A wicked laugh cut through the air between us. Its rancid smell covered Jayden's scent.

"No. Don't do it," I said, my hands up.

Glass shattered in the room where August was, but I didn't dare shift my gaze for fear of missing a chance to advance on Trysten.

“A human, Trinity?” he said. “Are you daft?”

I inched forward.

“Stop, or I will end him.”

I froze, hands up. “Please. Don’t. They call you Trysten, right? That’s your name, right? Trysten?”

He simply glared at me.

“Please. Why are you doing this? How—”

His eyebrows lifted. “You don’t know me?”

“Please. Let Jayden go. He’s done nothing to you.” I inched forward.

“Stop moving, *mate*.” A deep voice bellowed out from off to the side.

August lay motionless beside the man he’d fought.

From the side, cloaked in darkness, a figure began to take shape. I squinted to see, but couldn’t.

Jayden still lay against the wall, unconscious, Trysten holding the weapon to his neck.

Back to looking at the man coming from the hallway. The first things to come into focus were piercing blue eyes. Thick black eyebrows shadowed them, giving them a hooded look. His strong, square jaw materialized next as he stepped out from the darkness of the room he was in.

He towered me by several inches, but was small, like August, with long, lean muscles coiled around his arms. His

jaw twitched as he stepped forward. He threw a glance to the side toward where August lay. “Bind him.”

He turned his intense gaze toward me again. A shiver rippled down my spine.

“Time to return home, mate.”

“I will never go with you.” I stepped toward Jayden.

“Each step you take the knife goes deeper into your human’s neck,” Bastian said.

Blood trickled down Jayden’s smooth flesh. My heart cracked as I stood before Bastian.

“That’s what I thought.”

“How is taking me home going to solve anything for you? I no longer bear your mark.”

“I saw that. But it doesn’t matter. All the township has seen my mark on your band. All I need is your essence.”

“Why? Why are you doing this?”

“I’ve known about that little portal this entire time. Trysten has been tracking Detective Nicks since he saw you go into his office.”

“What?”

Trysten grinned. “My father has crossed over several times. He knows how to work the portal. And how things work on Earth.”

“But August tells me it’s on my land, how do you use it?”

“Whose land it is doesn’t really matter. It’s whose blood flows through your veins.” Trysten grinned, something of evil, not pleasure. “My mother was a distant cousin of your mom’s. I have enough Founder blood in me to let me work the portal, with my father’s help of course.”

“With our union I can come and go as I please.” Bastian held up his arms and turned a circle as he sneered. “Earth has many things that will help me rule the land I inherit from you.”

“Inherit.” I knew that word.

He intended to kill me once he mated me.

“This place is much more pleasing. I am liking it very much.” The hint of pride and dominance in Bastian’s eyes sent a chill down my spine. He stepped toward me. “And I will soon be in the market for a new spouse. Maybe I’ll take a human, like you have. Seems that is enough to break a bonding.”

A grunt from behind him pulled my attention.

“Trinity,” Jayden said.

His eyes fluttered open. My heart burst when I saw his green eyes. “Jayden.”

“Stay away from her,” he said to Bastian, his voice scratchy.

There was my mate, held at knifepoint, pinned against a wall, hands and ankles bound. Bastian approached me, with the intent to take me home, a place I knew nothing of, mate me, then kill me. August was on the floor, not moving. His

chest rose and fell, so I knew he lived, but he was of no aid to me.

The hair on my neck spiked with fear and desperation. What choice did I have but to go? It might spare Jayden's life.

"Run, Trinity," Jayden said. "Run."

"I will not leave you." I slid my hand down my side to the gun strapped against my thigh. I could try to fire this weapon and injure Bastian enough to overtake him.

But he was so big compared to me. My stomach clenched.

Jayden shifted against the wall, eyes wide now, taking in the situation, I assumed. I curled my fingers around the handle of the gun.

"I would stop, Trin, or Jayden dies," Bastian said.

I froze.

Two long strides and Bastian was at my side. His bone-crushing grip curled around my fingers. One by one he peeled them from the gun, then slid it into his pocket. Tears stung my eyes as I stayed focused on Jayden.

He was so much bigger than Trysten, but the knife held him in place. Maybe if I caused enough of a fuss, he could pull away from Trysten's weapon.

I thrashed against Bastian's grip. I planted my heel on the top of his foot, then bent my arm and thrust my elbow into his stomach. His foul breath washed over me, but he grabbed my hair.

With one great thrust, he whipped my head back, and his fingers clamped around my throat. “I understand you have lost your memory, but you seem to remember some things from The Guard, I see.”

Hopefully some more would come rushing to me soon so I could escape his iron grip. His other hand snaked around my waist and pulled me to him. My back flush against the front of his body. My wings crunched.

“Do you want to watch him die?” Bastian asked me.

I squirmed against him.

“Then pull your wings in, and we will go.”

“Let her go!” Jayden yelled.

“Sorry, I can’t do that. She’s mine.”

“Fuck you!” Jayden yelled. “She’s mine!”

“We have a little situation here, don’t we Trinity?” Bastian laughed, then tightened his hold on me. “Pull your wings in, and we will go. I won’t tell you again.”

“Go where?” My voice strained beneath his iron grip.

“Pull them in or Trysten presses hard enough to do some damage to your human,” Bastian said. His cheek touched mine as he spoke. His grip around my neck tightened, his hand fanned out over my abdomen, pressing me against his core. “Mmm. I might enjoy mating you after all. You’re feisty,” he whispered.

“No,” Jayden yelled.

Sounds of shuffling behind me fueled my hope that August was awakening. “August!” I clawed at the flesh fastened around my neck.

Bastian turned slightly, but I saw nothing. “Enough,” Bastian said. “Pull your wings in now, Trinity.” He moved toward the door.

I snapped my head back hoping to hit him, but it only thudded off his chest. If I could only reach my knife. Then again, he took the gun from me easily enough.

The door approached. I squirmed, kicking my feet. My heel landed on a soft spot on Bastian. He grunted and leaned forward. He didn’t let go of me, and we tumbled, his weight pinning me to the floor, stomach first.

“Trinity,” Jayden yelled.

More shuffling and a grunt. I couldn’t see, but it sounded like Jayden’s grunt. Bastian writhed but turned to his side somewhat. I pushed up as hard as I could, my arms shaking.

The gun came into sight. It’d fallen from his pocket. I reached for it. My fingertips grazed the handle, but Bastian pulled me back toward him by my ankle.

I planted my free foot in his face. Something crackled and blood spurted to the light carpet. Bastian’s grip loosened, and I stretched toward the gun. The cool handle brushed against my hand, but the third guy reached the weapon and snatched it from me.

He towered over me, pointing it at me, then August. He stood in the center of the broken room panting like he'd flown a great distance at top speed. His left wing hung low and crooked. Blood trickled down his face and neck.

Behind me, Jayden had risen to his feet, but with hands bound, he couldn't do much, despite towering Trysten. The white-haired third guy, who had stolen my only chance at getting free, pointed the gun at August. With his thumb, he clicked back the hammer and his forefinger curled around the trigger. This guy had done exactly as Nicks had shown me to do.

It was hopeless.

"No. Wait." I hopped to my feet. "Stop."

Bastian moved toward me. Jayden squirmed. August, the only family I knew, who risked everything to send me to Earth to escape Bastian, was held still at gunpoint. Jayden, the human who gave up everything to love me, was at knifepoint.

"Promise me August and Jayden live," I whispered.

"Trinity, no," Jayden said. "No."

"What was that?" Bastian asked me as he stepped forward.

"Promise me August and Jayden will live." I stood straight, trying to put on my bravest face.

"Sorry. Can't."

"Then I will not go with you."

“I don’t think you’re in the position of choosing that right now.”

“If you kill them, I will die, too.”

Bastian cocked his head.

“I will find a way to end my life before you ever lay a finger on me.” I meant it, too. I would never let this heathen touch me.

Jayden sucked in a sharp breath. A wave of his scent collided with my soul. Tears stung at my eyes.

“Give me your oath,” I said. “Jayden and August live if I go with you.”

“Done,” Bastian said. He eyed Trysten and the other one, and they nodded.

“Trinity. No,” Jayden said.

“I love you, Jay—”

A sharp pain to the base of my neck erupted. White blasts of light speckled my eyesight as the darkness took hold.

“No!” Jayden yelled. “Trinity.”

I felt my body go limp. I slumped against Bastian, and his arm went beneath my knees, while the other beneath my back, and he hoisted me into his arms.

I remembered when Jayden had held me like this, but this was so different. Hostile.

“Let him live. I want him to know the pain of losing his mate. To live with the knowledge that I will mate with her,

then watch her die.”

“Trinity!” Jayden yelled.

Darkness swallowed me whole.

THIRTY-EIGHT

A COOL BREEZE SHIFTED over me, and hairs tickled my face. I snapped my eyes open and saw trees zooming by, below me. I was flying?

Bastian's face was inches from mine. A crooked smile curved the side of his thin-lipped mouth. His black hair floated back as the wind flowed through it. I went to move, but something constricted me.

Rope tied around me held my arms tight against my body.

“Good morning,” Bastian said.

The orange orb of the sun rose above the treetops, but there was nothing good about this morning. I arched my back, but Bastian held me close.

“How can you carry me?”

“Why do you think the females are so small?”

That didn't sound familiar.

“You really do not remember anything, do you? How mates are meant and molded to be together. You fit perfectly in my

arms; do you not see that?” His breath was warm but did nothing but increase the chill seeping into my bones. “The men care for and protect the women, so we are able to carry your weight.”

“No.” I squirmed. “Jayden.”

“Don’t worry. I will uphold my oath. Trysten and Johnny are keeping an eye on them until I can get us to the portal.”

A break in the trees approached. “Where?”

“Not far. South of this very small town is where the portal opens. Your cousin misread the incantation, which landed you in the middle of a big town, which is how we found you so easily. You caused quite a commotion.”

I bucked again. I would not go with him. If it meant plummeting to my death in the trees, so be it. I would never join with this man.

His altitude dipped. “Careful. Wouldn’t want you to fall. It’s a long way down, since your wings aren’t working.”

The rope burned my skin as I shifted, searching for a weak spot to break through. My movement affected his trajectory; if I thrashed enough, maybe I could dislodge myself from his iron grip.

I would fall into the trees below me. It would hurt, but hopefully be quick. Maybe I would survive, since I healed quickly. Then I could get to Jayden. Then again, if I died, I’d not be with Jayden. But it was better than being with Bastian because Bastian would kill me anyway. Or I could go home

and seek out my mother. August said they now understood Bastian was evil.

My mind whirled. August said I should trust my instincts.

So I thrashed. Whipped my head forward, cracking my forehead against Bastian's chin, then I arched my back. He dropped sharply and tilted to the side. I curled my legs close to my chest and lodged my foot against his bicep.

And I pushed with all my strength.

I dropped through the air like a stone in a river. I thrashed, the ropes singeing my skin as I fought to get through them. My shoulder met the first branch with a resounding crack. The pain was instant and intense. The scream that left my mouth wasn't one I recognized. It seared my throat like knives.

Another branch to my side. I squeezed my eyes closed, waiting for impact, but instead, frigid water engulfed me. Icy liquid pressed and bubbled against my skin as I sank. I kicked with all my might, lungs instantly burning, searching for air.

Without the use of my arms, it was futile. Momentum from such a long fall kept me moving downward. How deep was this body of water? As if the gods answered, my feet hit solid ground. I gave one quick burst and shot up.

Would it be enough?

I kicked and kicked. A small circle of light formed above me. The surface. Brightness. *Just kick to that.* My shoulder stung as the cold water penetrated the cut. My stomach clenched. My grunts rippled through the thick water as my

instincts told me to breathe. The lungs needed air, but my brain knew it would be only frigid water.

I couldn't hold back. I gasped.

The arctic water seared my nose and lungs as I inhaled it. My body coughed, rejecting it, then sucked in more. I kicked and kicked. Something pressed against my shoulder. I felt a solid tug, then pain ripped through my body.

I bobbed out of the water, then fell back in.

Another tug at my shirt.

“Trinity!”

Whose voice was that? High-pitched. A female? Through the muffled sounds of water and me coughing and choking I couldn't tell. My body flopped onto a hard surface. Many tiny pricks dug into my flesh. Rocks maybe.

I rolled to the side. A sharp pain to my back forced the hot liquid from my lungs. My stomach clenched, then spewed sandwiches and water.

Click.

“Here. Get these ropes.”

Another strange voice. Who?

“Trinity, can you hear me?”

Another cough. I thought my lungs would come out with that one, but they didn't. A tug, then my arms fell loose, and I steadied myself against the rocky shore. The sudden thought of Bastian flashed through me. I scrambled away.

“Trinity,” the man’s voice said. It was laced with concern.

I flopped over and landed on my backside. Detective Nicks squatted beside me. A tiny woman to his left held a knife in her hand and watched with wide eyes.

I pulled my gaze back to Nicks. “Bastian.”

The woman, long red hair, looked to the skies. She crouched. “Quick. Take cover. He circles.”

Nicks grabbed me by my armpits and dragged me beneath a bush. He squatted beside me and pulled out his weapon. “Where is that son of a bitch? I need some target practice.”

The woman came to my other side, clicked the knife closed and put it in her sock. “Trinity. Blessed be the gods. You’ve grown into such a beautiful woman.”

Her cold, shaky hands brushed the side of my face. She grabbed my hand and grazed her cheek to it.

I pushed myself to a sitting position. “Who are you?”

Wings that were a lighter shade of green than her eyes shot out from each side of her. “I would be your aunt.”

THIRTY-NINE

I THOUGHT FOR SURE my body would snap in two from shivering so violently. My aunt's big, green eyes shone down on me. Long strands of red hair spilled over her shoulders and onto her chest.

“My name is Catherine.” She reached toward me. “Come. Let me warm you some. It's frightfully cold here until the sun fully rises.”

She wrapped her warmth around my quaking body from behind and pulled me close to her. She nestled my wet head to her neck while rubbing my bare arms. The cuts from the rope stung as if salt had been poured onto them. Nicks crouched in front of us, eyes to the sky, his hand on his weapon.

So much for teaching me how to use the gun. I was worthless in a fight. I failed Jayden and August.

“Trinity, where was Bastian taking you?”

“Portal entry.”

“Yes. I know of the area,” Catherine said.

Nicks faced her. “You do?”

“Yes. Detective, I’ve been here nearly seven years, stranded. I have found my way back to the place I’d been abandoned.”

“Abandoned?” I didn’t understand how she was here or exactly who she was. All I knew is that her body warmed mine.

“Can you lead us there, Catherine? I need to get this Bastian-guy out of the picture. I didn’t much like what he was planning,” Nicks said.

“He wants my land and my essence to control the cave. To come here whenever he wants,” I said between chattering teeth.

“Here. Sit up, Trinity. Let your wings out and curl them around you. That will warm you better.” Catherine settled me upward.

The wings coming out hurt like never before. Crackling bones, tugging muscles and skin. I lurched forward, my chest heaving.

“Relax. Shhh, relax.” Catherine’s hand brushed down the side of my face.

I drew in a deep breath and ordered them out. In a snap they were and instantly curled around my body like a blanket that had been heated by the sun.

“There you go. Warm yourself. You and Bastian, have you mated yet?”

“No. Not fully. He was taking me home to finish it.”

“You do not choose to be his mate?”

“No. Not now. Evidently I did back home, though. His letter was on my band when I arrived.”

“Oh yes. Your band.” She patted the leather. “Wasn’t sure if your band was beneath this.” She combed my hair with her fingers. “Nicks says you have chosen another.”

“Jayden.” My breath hitched. Was he okay? I couldn’t sense him, but then again, I was shivering still. “My Jayden. We professed as well. Marks fused on his skin and my band. Replaced Bastian’s mark.”

“Then Bastian has no claim on you.”

“He was going to force me to mate or kill Jayden and August. By taking my essence he would have free access to the portal. But he was going to kill me after we mated.”

She held me tight and sighed.

“Jayden has my mark on his skin, but we have not consummated our pledge.”

“Must be different with a human then. But your band is still intact. That should fall off once you mate. Then your covenant will be complete.”

Nicks tensed and squeezed close to us. I tightened my wings around me, willing myself to stop shivering. I was so tired. Catherine pulled her wings tight and crowded beneath the cover of the trees and bushes surrounding us. Nicks held his gun close.

Catherine's eyes shifted from side to side as if thinking, searching for a way out of this situation.

"Okay. We need a plan," Nicks said.

"The only one feasible is to kill Bastian and seal the portal," Catherine said, "if what you say is right, and he has a book with the incantations. How to seal it should be in there."

"Seal us here on Earth?" I asked.

"Yes. We can't afford to leave it open. Look what it has done to Bastian. What it did to my family. Our worlds are not meant to unite. Neither is ready for the other."

She had a valid point.

"Are you ready to go?" Catherine asked.

"I must get to Jayden first. To make sure he is safe."

"Where is he?" Nicks asked.

"At the town. There's a home. Or a place to buy things, I think it's called a store."

"We are so close to the portal. Let us go there first, then to the town. Jayden is of no help to us right now, anyway," Catherine said.

"But August is there. He can help us. He is very strong." The shivering subsided, and I curled my wings back slightly. The breeze was still frigid.

"He will find you. You are family. He can zero in on you. We must move forward." Catherine stood. "We must end this."

Nicks rose, and I followed suit. My knees ached as my legs straightened. A stray shiver rattled my spine, and I gripped my arms, hugging them close to my chest.

“Come. Let’s stay beneath the cover of the trees. It’s west.” Catherine pointed to her right.

“Let’s go,” Nicks said, eyes to the sky. He held his gun at the ready. The blue sky trickled between the leaves as the breeze moved them from side to side. When the sun got through, it warmed my skin.

Catherine squeezed my hand and tugged me along. I ran a step behind her. I had so many questions to ask her, but the tension smothering us kept them at bay. Didn’t matter. I’d found another Bolentian. A female. One lost and stranded here, much like I was. She had her memories, though. Maybe I would soon get mine.

If I even wanted them. Maybe it would be okay to seal the portal and remain here forever. As long as Jayden was alive and well, it would be okay for me to stay. But August? And could I really kill Bastian?

If it meant protecting those I loved. Yes. I would have to do what it took to ensure their safety.

Hairs on the back of my neck prickled. I pulled Catherine to a stop. “I feel something.”

As the words rolled off my tongue, a grunt sounded above followed by crackling branches. Sounds of fists slapping against flesh reverberated off the trees. Catherine and I

crouched, looking up. Like a bolt, two wrestling bodies plummeted toward the ground, directly toward us.

The flicker of a blade flashed against some of the sun's rays leaking through the thick forest trees.

Another grunt.

I recognized the auburn wings. "August."

The two figures collided with a tree trunk. Bastian's wings took the brunt of the force. They both plopped to the ground in a heap. I leaped toward August, Catherine and Nicks close behind. "August."

If he was okay, then Jayden should be as well. Was he near? No. He couldn't travel like August. Please let him be safe.

August smashed his fist against Bastian's face, then pushed off from him, pulled his legs to his chest, and whirled through the air backward. His feet flipped over and around, and he landed soundly, crouched and ready to counter anything Bastian had to offer.

Nicks's heavy footfalls clamored up behind us. "Freeze," he yelled.

His gun was pointed at Bastian. Bastian leaped; Nicks fired. The bark exploded, spraying shards of wood onto the forest floor. Another shot rang out against the tall trees, but Bastian flew fast.

A third shot, and Bastian flinched, but he kept on. He darted around the trees, and I ran to August who leaned forward, chest heaving.

“Hurry, more are com—”

A grunt drew my attention behind me. Bastian’s white-haired minion rammed Nicks against the tree, and he slumped to the ground, limp.

Catherine leaped, her wings fueling her. At the last minute, she kicked her feet out in front of her and connected her heels with the guy’s chest.

He stumbled back, but she was relentless as she pushed forward and connected her open palm with his chin. Her wings folded against her back. She spun, and on the roundabout, her heel connected with his jaw, and he fell flat to the ground. Motionless.

Catherine darted to Nicks’s side. She squatted beside him, then snatched his gun from the ground. With a quick motion, she pulled back the slide, clicked the trigger, and the cartridge fell out. She gave the cartridge a look, then she shoved it back in, clicked it in place, and pulled back the hammer.

Ready to use.

She winked at me. August rose to his feet and stepped beside me. “Catherine?”

She gave a last look at the unconscious detective, then clicked the safety on the gun. She shoved it into her belt at her back, then stood. “August. Nice to see you again.”

“How?”

“We’ll talk later. Mind if we go kill Bastian first?” She reached for August’s hand and brushed her fingers down his

forearm. “I’ll need your help.”

His eyes went wide, then met mine.

“He has to die, August. Like I said, he can’t stay here, and he can’t go home,” I said.

He nodded.

“Jayden?” I asked.

“Fine. Injured, but safe. I made sure before I came here.” He turned to Catherine. “But Catherine. I must tell you—” He shook his head. “I can’t believe you’re here. You died years ago. Your son—”

“Trysten? What do you know of him?” She stepped toward him. “You did not lose your memory as Trinity did?”

“No. Catherine.” He reached for her. “Trysten is here.”

Her eyes widened.

“And he’s with Bastian.”

Her little body swayed, but August steadied her.

“*With*...Bastian?”

“I’m sorry, Catherine. After you died he—”

“No. After I was *abandoned* here. After my own mate left me here. I—No. Later. Let’s get to the portal.” She shot out her wings and vaulted into the air.

Her magnificent white wings flapped, pulling her toward the sky. August nodded for me to follow, and I did, with him close behind me.

We had no choice but to leave Nicks. We needed to get to this portal.

Catherine flew ahead, above the tree line, and veered west. Trysten was her son? How was that even possible?

I caught up to her and August was on my left. Catherine pointed to her right toward a clearing. “It’s in this area, I can’t pinpoint it exactly, though.”

“I can. They dragged me through. It was near a cave. Much like that one back home,” August said.

Catherine’s jaw clenched. She dove forward. “Bastian must be near, then. He has the book tucked in the side pouch of his pants.”

“That small?” I asked.

“My mate made notes in a smaller book from the larger,” Catherine said.

“How?” August asked.

“I found it and confronted him on it. I believe they somehow got into your mother’s library. Copied it. Had been coming to Earth. Anyway, like I said, I confronted him on it, and he pulled me through the portal. Left me. It was either that or kill me. His heart hadn’t hardened enough to do the latter, so I got banished.” She looked to August. “What was told of my disappearance back home?”

“That you were lost in the water. There was a storm—”

“Enough. It no longer matters.” She surged forward.

We landed a short distance from the entrance of the cave. No sign of anyone. Quiet, except a breeze rustling the leaves.

Muffled voices came in from overhead.

Trysten and Bastian glided toward the cave. We shrank back, watching.

“We will return with more assistance. I will not let Trinity ruin our plans,” Bastian said as his feet dusted the ground.

“Let us just move on, Bastian. We are strong enough to take —” Trysten stopped and straightened his back. “I feel something. I—”

Catherine clicked her gun and pointed it at Bastian. From what I could see, she had a clear shot, but Trysten stepped to the side and faced our direction. August pulled back and rounded the other corner. My heart slammed into my throat. Trysten pivoted in our direction.

“He feels me,” Catherine whispered. She handed me the gun. “I will distract them. August will come from the other side.”

“No. I can’t—”

“You must.”

She stepped out from around the cave. “Hello, son.”

Trysten’s jaw dropped, and he slouched. August leaped at Bastian and tackled him to the ground.

“Trinity,” August yelled. “Catch!”

A brown object shot up.

The book!

With a grand push, I leaped into the air and snatched the soft leather-bound book and pulled it close to my chest.

“Go,” August yelled.

I bolted toward the sky. Motion from the side caught my attention. The third of Bastian’s gang approached me at a speed so great he was almost a blur. I darted toward him, each thrust harder than the last. My speed increased to a point where I nearly was unable to dodge a tree trunk I approached.

Hopefully he would choose the opposite direction as me to peel off, but it was the only way to slow his momentum, otherwise he would have caught me. At least that’s what felt right.

Maybe it was all instinct after all.

I saw the whites of his eyes, and they were wide, only a speck of gray among the white. I charged forward. He veered to my left, I went right, but I heard a crash and slowed. He’d run right into the base of a tree as wide as a house.

Branches splayed out all around him, and he fell back, face bloodied and slack with unconsciousness. His body slammed into to the ground, and I didn’t think he would get up.

Ever.

I jettied to the top of the tree canopy and zeroed in on August. I had to help them. With the book close to my chest and the gun in my other hand, I moved over the trees, toward my cousin and my aunt.

I neared a spot to dive in, but Bastian shot out and rammed into my stomach with his shoulder. The air spewed from my lungs in one burst. The book and gun were dislodged from my grip.

The treetops swallowed them up.

I opened my hand, like I'd seen Catherine do, and connected my palm with Bastian's chin. His grip around my waist didn't loosen. We began to lose altitude.

Bastian grunted. Blood dribbled from his eyebrow. Purple marks covered his cheeks.

"Doesn't matter if I can't get back. If I can't have you, no one will."

His fingers curled around my neck, and he squeezed. Like me, he had a strong grip. Probably due to all the flying and holding on to things such as branches and food. I fluttered my wings, trying to pull away from his grip. I clawed at his fingers indenting the tender flesh of my neck. He grabbed my hand.

His jaw tensed with rage, and his eyes filled with hatred. It was then that I knew he would kill me. With my free hand, I groped my ankle. Darkness curved the corners of my vision. My fingers grazed the smooth ebony handle of the knife lodged in its holster.

I slid the blade out and gripped it tight.

Bastian's crazed eyes stayed focused on mine as if he enjoyed watching my life slip away by his hand. Tears

streamed down my face as I fought for one last breath and plunged.

The knife sliced into his skin so easily. He jerked, his grip tightening to the point where I thought I heard things popping in my neck. That last breath I'd taken burned in my lungs, needing release.

My vision tilted.

His wings slowed. I didn't have the energy to pump my wings harder. The lack of air weakened me. Blood covered my hand. I'd stabbed him in the stomach.

His eyes were glassy, unfocused. I withdrew the blade and stopped my wings. Dead weight.

We dipped, he fell forward, and the blade pierced his chest. Right where his heart would be.

If he had one.

He bellowed, and his wings stopped. Then started again. His grip around my neck loosened. Another push against his chest drew another bone-rattling yell from him. Blood trickled out from his mouth and down his chin.

"Trin..." Bastian went slack, and I pushed off him, his fingers sliding from my throat.

I faced skyward and gulped for air. Bastian's wings flapped, but not consistently, so he bobbed and sank. His eyes never pulled from my gaze.

He reached for me and grabbed my foot. I kicked, but his cold fingers cuffed my ankle.

And down we went.

FORTY

“NO.” I FLAPPED MY wings with all the strength I could muster, but Bastian’s weight was too great.

He’d stopped moving, but his grip remained. His added weight dragged me toward the treetops. I clawed at his cold fingers, but they wouldn’t budge.

We were going down.

August popped up above the trees.

“Here,” I yelled.

He darted toward me, but another figure came up behind him. Trysten.

“Watch out,” I screamed.

August bolted toward me, hand outstretched. We connected, and his strength slowed my descent.

Trysten zoomed toward us. “August. Behind you.” I pointed.

“It’s okay.”

Trysten fluttered his massive chestnut-colored wings, hovering in front of Bastian. He reached out and peeled Bastian's fingers from around my ankle. The dead weight floated down. His wings retracted, and the trees swallowed up the evil with one big gulp.

Two big thrusts of my wings and I separated myself from August and Trysten. August reached behind him and pulled out the book. "Got it."

"Catherine?" I asked, eyeing Trysten.

"I'm okay," she said from behind me. I whirled around, my mind firing in so many directions I didn't know which way was up.

She fluttered beside her son. He looked at her, then at me. "I'm sorry, Trinity."

I faced August. He nodded. I turned to the north and pushed with all my strength. I no longer cared about anything but Jayden. If Trysten and Catherine had reunited, and he'd seen the error of his ways, fine. Bastian and the one he called Johnny were dead. We had the book. Everyone had what they wanted—but me.

I just wanted my Jayden.

The wind ripped through my hair as I veered to my right, arms pointed in front of me, going faster than I ever had. My heart thrashed.

Jayden.

The store came into view. The sun bounced off the dark roof sending a blurry glare. I shaded my eyes and searched the grounds. Just a yard full of green grass backing up to a sea of trees. The small structure sat quiet.

The door that had once been slapping against the doorframe in the breeze lay shattered to pieces on the porch. My breath caught. The warm sun no longer heated my skin, instead, it punctuated a cold chill that puckered my arms with goose bumps.

The soft grass caressed my bare feet as I fluttered to a landing, my heart pounding as fast as my wings had been flapping to get here. But now that I was here, I didn't want to go inside. August had told me Jayden was okay, but I didn't trust it. The looks of the door shattered and—well—something could have happened after August left.

I crept over the shards of wood through the front door, my wings tight to my body to not get scratched from the jagged edges. Despite the several windows on the wall to my right, the room was still dim. A cloudy haze hung in the air like there had been a fire.

I scurried into the room to the left.

Empty.

Same for the room on the right. Down the narrow hallway, toward the back of the building, there were two more doors.

Ahead of me, I saw one door to the right, then a door that must lead back outside as the small window showed trees

swaying.

“Jayden?” I pushed the door on the right open. “Jayden?”

Empty.

I thrust the last door open, and it led to a porch. It faced the wall of trees on the side of the house. One quick leap and I was on the grass. “Jayden?” Where could he be?

I quieted myself and listened for him. Searching for his face, his touch, his smell. *Jayden*. Hairs prickled on my neck. I snapped my eyes open. At the very edge of the trees, the farthest part of the yard, I saw him between two massive trees.

His tall, strong frame was something I couldn't mistake. Despite a pronounced limp, he walked tall. I unleashed my wings and rocketed toward him.

He stopped, stepped back, then a smile filled his face. His arms went wide, welcoming me. It propelled me even faster. One last swoop of my wings slowed me, and I melted into his embrace.

“My Jayden,” I whispered into his neck as I hugged him tight. His scent wrapped around me, and my body shuddered against his as the tears spilled.

I ordered my wings in so he could hug me, and he must have been wanting me to do that, because he squeezed.

“Trin. Are you okay?”

“I am.” I pulled my face from his neck and touched a kiss to his lips, then his cheek, then his eyes. But his lips were what I

wanted most so I made my way back to them before pulling away.

I slid down his body and stood before him. His hair was shiny with moisture as was the neck of his shirt, but it was pink.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I went to the river to wash the blood from my face.” He rubbed his bruised cheek.

I grabbed his hand and pressed his inner wrist to my cheek. “Are you okay?”

“Banged up a little but okay.” He looked up, and I turned. My breath caught in my chest.

It was August, Catherine, and Trysten.

Jayden tensed, probably at the sight of Trysten. He grabbed my hand and pulled me behind him.

“It’s okay. Trysten is with Catherine.”

“Catherine?”

I twined my fingers with his and stepped beside him.

“You were quite fast, Trin,” August said. His gaze shifted to my hand clasped with Jayden’s. “Mates, indeed.”

“Nicks?”

“We got him up and mobile before we returned here.” Catherine stepped forward. “So this is your Jayden?”

Trysten watched us beneath hooded eyes. He may have apologized, but I still did not trust him. I wasn't sure I ever would trust him. Not after what he did to my Jayden. To me. He must have sensed that as he stepped back and shoved his hands into his pockets.

August held his hand out to Jayden. "Glad you're okay."

Jayden grabbed it and nodded.

August turned to me. "Are you okay?"

Physically, yes. Mentally, no. I'd taken a life. Killed someone. Sure. It was to protect the ones I loved, but it still weighed heavy on me regardless. Jayden slid his hand from mine and draped his arm around my shoulder.

"Taking someone's life is a heavy burden to carry, Trin, but it was a clean kill," August said.

"Kill?" Jayden cupped my face. "You had to kill...Bastian. Trinity, no."

I nodded.

"She had no choice. Bastian would have killed her," August said.

Jayden pressed his lips to mine, then drew me into a tender embrace. "I hate that you had to do that. But I'm so glad you're okay. Safe."

"Like I said, it was a clean kill."

"No such thing, August," Catherine said. "Death is death. For him to have turned his back on all that Bolentians stand

for breaks my heart. He dragged my son down with him. It will take much time to overcome that.”

“Trysten is your son?” Jayden asked, shifting us slightly so we faced Catherine. “But I—”

“First, I need food,” August said. “Let us all go back to Jayden’s and eat, then we will figure out our next step.”

“Next step?” Jayden asked.

“We have to seal the portal so nothing like this happens again.”

“But that would mean—”

“I might be going home,” I said.

“Nicks will come pick you up, human,” August said to Jayden with a grin. “We’ll go back and, since Catherine’s the nominated chef, she’ll prepare something with your food, Jayden, is that okay?”

He nodded, never taking his eyes from me.

I vaguely heard the flapping of wings and felt a brush of wind from their takeoff.

“You can’t go home,” he said and pulled me to his chest.

We melted to the grass, both to our knees, still hugging. “I don’t know if I can stay here, Jayden.” I wanted to, and with him, but that meant so much more than Jayden could ever fathom.

“Why can’t you? I want you, too, you know that, right?” His finger lifted my chin.

“You say that now, but—”

“No buts, it’s true.” He kissed my nose. “I’ve known it from when you first fell into my arms, blind, confused, and so scared.” His hands brushed my hair away. “You’re here for a reason. In my life for a reason. I see that now.”

He pulled my face to his and covered my lips with his. He kissed me back in earnest. Heat stormed through me as I melted into his embrace. Into him. He was so warm, strong. I loved him so much.

But was that enough?

“You’re mine, Trinity,” Jayden whispered against my lips. “I want you to stay.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying. You’ve known me such a short time and look, I’ve brought so much chaos into your life. Then, when you agreed to be with me, you got marked. Nearly mated for life. We almost—”

“I want you for all time.” He sat back on his heels. “We can take it slow. But if you leave and the door is sealed, we can’t ever be together.”

Tears stung my eyes when I saw the compassion and love in his. My heart swelled.

“Or I could come where you are.” His fingers brushed down the side of my arm, and then curled around my wristband. “I could learn your ways right along with you, since you don’t remember them.”

“And leave here? Forever? Leave Zander, Karen, your art?”

“They’ll have art in Bolentia. And you’re all that matters so, you and art anywhere, I’ll be fine.”

I looked down at the grass.

“What?” he asked. “Are you having doubts?”

“No. Not for me. But—” I glanced back at the store, to the skies, then rested my gaze on him. “We don’t know what you’ll become if we mate—er—have sex.”

Jayden’s back straightened. “Become?”

I slouched onto the heels of my feet. That flicker of doubt in itself was enough to make me cry, but I willed the tears back. It was too much. We didn’t even know if I would ever die if I lived in this world with how quickly I healed.

“When two Bolentians come together after they pledge themselves to each other...” I reached for his hand and brushed my fingers over the mark etched forever in his skin. “Their essence combines, infuses into the other.”

“Oh.”

“I would be yours and you mine until death. And—well—you see how quickly I heal. With the exchange, you might be...altered.” My gaze drifted to his full lips. “We just don’t know. No Bolentian has ever mated with a human.”

“Well. I guess either this world or Bolentia will find out what happens, because I’m yours.”

FORTY-ONE

“OH. HERE IS THE error I made.” August jabbed his finger at the page of the open book beside his plate. “Sons of the gods, such a simple mix-up in the incantation. I’m sorry, Trin. It was my first time. To interpret the scratchings of those before me. I—”

“It’s okay,” I said as I shoveled a mouthful of pot roast Catherine had made in Jayden’s oven. “This is very good, Catherine.”

“I learned quickly once I figured out what was going on. It’s quite a strange place here, isn’t it?” She smiled. “I learned much from the doctors at that institution your police department committed me to.”

Nicks slouched, cheeks red. “Talk of wings and flying and portals would land most humans in a mental institution. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Once I caught on to how things worked, I learned much. Even have a job at the local library.”

“I can’t believe how you have settled in,” I said. “I find myself so confused much of the time here.”

“Well, I didn’t lose my memory as you did. I was dazed and confused and very weak when I stumbled upon the good detective here all those years ago.” Catherine eyed her son. “And heartbroken. But many good meals later I got my wits about me and observed. You will do fine here, Trinity.”

“Here?” August asked.

I nodded. “I would like to stay with Jayden. My place is here more than there. I know even less of Bolentia.”

“But—”

“I am staying as well,” Catherine announced. “This is my home now.”

“But mom—” Trysten snapped his gaze back to his plate.

“Speak, son,” she said. “You’ve wronged many people but have heartedly repented. Speak up.”

“I would like to stay with you,” he said, his voice quiet.

“I would like that. But you have a potential mate back home, do you not?”

“No one has accepted my band.” He swallowed hard.

“Well, then my decision to stay is that much easier,” August said. He settled back in his chair and rubbed his belly.

“You?” I asked.

“What? Don’t want your older cousin cramping your style?”

“What are those words you’re saying?” I asked.

“*Slang*. You better learn it if you’re going to fit in here,” Catherine said. “They don’t talk with proper English much around here.”

“How did you learn all that you know?” I asked. “I saw you fight.”

“When you’re as small as me, self-defense classes are some of the first things you need. Many violent people in this place.”

“I can’t believe Justin left you here. Did you know about it, Trysten?”

“No.” He sat straight. “I would never—”

“I’m sorry,” August said. “That was out of line. You just, well, you seemed to come along with Bastian and believed what he was telling you.”

“He’s convincing. And my dad—well—he was always pushing me to be more, too. I thought—” He cleared his throat. “Bastian was my best friend.”

“And Trinity’s. I can’t believe he did that to her.” August shot up from his seat.

The entire table rattled at his outburst. Trysten stood as well, eyes wide.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to hurt you, Trysten. It angers me like nothing else.” He looked at me. “But she ended up better off.”

I didn't remember any of my family or anything about Bolentia, but what I knew of my new family, I loved. Here in this strange place, it felt normal.

"Come on, Trysten and Catherine, let us go get this thing sealed." August snatched the book, then strode toward the door. "Then we can get on with our new lives."

"Can't you leave it open and go back to say goodbye to family? Friends?" Jayden asked.

"I have none," Trysten said. "I can't see Dad. What he did to you—"

"Shhh." Catherine rose and pulled him into her arms. "It's over. We're together now."

He buried his face in her neck. "I thought you were dead."

"August? You have no one to tell goodbye?" I asked.

"My mate is dead. And thanks to Trinity, Bastian is dead, so my mother and father will be safe."

"Trinity's parents will protect your family, August," Catherine said. "I have no doubt in their abilities."

Seemed weird hearing about my parents like that, but streams of pride swelled deep within me.

August nodded at Trysten and Catherine. "Ready?"

Trysten slid the back of his hand beneath his eye and nodded. "Yeah."

August yanked the door open, and the two followed after him. Nicks, Jayden, and I made our way to the back patio.

“Well, I’m going to head to the city. I’ve got to get this taken care of,” Nicks said.

“Taken care of.” I didn’t know that phrase.

“Two bodies out in the forest, remember? But don’t worry about it. I’ll handle it on this end.”

Jayden stepped forward, hand outstretched. “Thank you, Detective Nicks. For everything.”

“I’ll help you guys get settled.” He turned to leave. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Can you give Zander and Karen a call? Tell them everything?”

He stepped off the patio, nodding. “Sure,” he said as he rounded the corner with a wave.

I drew in a deep breath and musky-scented air tickled my nose. The silence soothed my ears. To be still, and with Jayden, was like being in a dream.

The sun spilled through the trees and lit the flowing stream ablaze.

“Would you like to stay here?” Jayden asked.

I turned and faced him. “No more studio?”

“I’ll keep that place, too, but how ’bout you and I stay here?” He curled his fingers around my waist and lifted me to the railing surrounding the patio. “All the utilities are finally hooked up.”

“Hooked up?” I pulled him close to me. His narrow hips parted my legs, and I wrapped them around him.

“Has several meanings.” He winked. “But the one I meant was the electricity, and all the comforts of the studio.”

I pressed my mouth against his neck. His hands went around my hips and rested on my backside. The heat seeped through my jeans, branding me.

“What about your drawing studio?”

“Trysten and August can live there. Or, if Trysten lives with his mom, August can have it.” He brushed his lips against mine.

I drew in his bottom lip, and he let me in. The taste of salt and his familiar musky scent tingled my body to life. I pulled him close to me. He deepened his kiss and clutched me to him with strong yet gentle arms. Ones that promised love and protection at the same time. I melted against him, never wanting to let go.

And now that I was staying, I wouldn't have to. The portal to Bolentia would be sealed. Bastian was gone. Jayden and I were safe.

The idea of becoming his mate sent tingles along my spine. We'd agreed to take it slowly, but moments like this...made that difficult.

He pulled away. “So, is that a yes?”

I brushed my cheek against his and pulled myself flush against his wall of muscle. “Yes.”

“I think we have some time before the *family* gets back from the cave.” He pulled me up from the railing. “To get to know you a little better.” He winked.

“Lead the way, mate.”

DON'T MISS THE NEXT BOOK
IN THE WINGED SERIES

CLIPPED

CLIPPED TEASER

I NEVER THOUGHT FALLING out of the sky could be so much fun.

The wind coursed through my hair, whipping me in the face, but I didn't care. The rush pulsing like little fire ants beneath my skin was addicting.

"Hold steady," August said as he dropped by me.

The plush, grass-covered ground rushed toward me. My stomach clenched, self-preservation urging me to let my wings out and keep me from slamming into the ground.

But I didn't.

I hugged my wings to my body, swallowing the fear swelling in my throat.

I could do this. I was strong.

"Now?" I asked. Didn't want to disappoint my cousin, who was more like my big brother, by being a wimp, but I really wanted to let out my wings.

“No.” August’s wide, burnt-orange eyes flickered with joy, and a smile filled his face. But the biggest attraction was his brilliant auburn wings that covered his body.

The ground rushed forward, the vibrant dandelions swayed in the grass below me. My wings itched beneath my skin along my spine.

“Now.” August’s wings snapped out, and he shot up.

I followed suit and flexed at the serious tug across my abdominal muscles. My stomach fell to my feet as my momentum abruptly stopped.

What a rush.

My heart hammered.

Adrenaline prickled along my skin like tendrils of electricity.

I hovered only fifteen feet above the ground, my wings fluttering, as I pulled in a calming breath.

“Not bad, Trin. If only you didn’t look so pale from fear.” He leaned back and hugged his stomach, laughing.

“Son of the gods, August. That was so scary, but...” I glanced around the open area and zeroed in on Jayden’s cabin.

“But...” August nodded.

“But absolutely amazing. What a rush.”

WHAT'S NEXT?

If you enjoyed *CROSSED*, please consider leaving a review, and be sure to sign up for my newsletter so you don't miss news on my next release.

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ABOUT LYNN RUSH



New York Times & *USA Today* Bestselling Author, LYNN RUSH, is a full-time writer, wife, and trail runner living in the Sonoran Desert, despite her fear of rattlesnakes. Known as #TheRunningWriter, Lynn can't resist posting epic sunrise pictures while running in the desert with her trail sisters, even if she has to occasionally hop a scorpion. When she's not running or writing, she's watching movies that fuel her everlasting love of superheroes, vampires, and all things *Supernatural*. The books she reads usually carry the same theme, but this former college athlete loves reading sweet sports romances as well. She's madly in love with her Ironman husband of 25+ years who is the inspiration for what true love

is. You can find her on social media as @LynnRushWrites and sign-up for her newsletter at: <http://bit.ly/LRNewsletter>