

KERRY TAYLOR

FINDING EVIL

VISION OF EVIL - BOOK TWO

Finding Evil
Visions of Evil - Book two
Kerry Taylor

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ISBN-13: 9781234567890

ISBN-10: 1477123456

Cover design by: Author

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309

Printed in the United States of America

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CHAPTER 1

LANA

“My name is Noah. I...I’m your brother, Lana....your twin.”

I sat in the freezing cold snow, just staring at this stranger as his words rattled around and around in my head. It made no sense to me. Surely I would know if I had a twin brother? That was something a person would remember, right? And yet, as I stared, I saw myself in him. Our eyes were identical, and his nose turned up slightly at the end, just like mine did. His hair looked darker, but it was hanging in filthy clumps. Maybe once it was washed it could possibly be the same color as mine. He was bigger though, much taller than me, though it was hard to tell how tall when we were both sat. His limbs were longer though and his shoulders much wider than mine, even in the emaciated state his body was in. It was clear he hadn’t been fed properly in a very long time and he had scars on every inch of his skin that was visible. His hair was long and wild and his skin so pale it was almost see through. Whatever he had been through, it had been bad.

“I...I’m sorry, but I d-don’t know you,” I whispered, knowing I needed to say something.

“That’s m-my fault, so you....you don’t need to be sorry.” His words were pained and I looked down to his torso, realizing for the first time he was still bleeding badly. It was a miracle he was still conscious judging from the amount of blood soaking the hospital gown he wore. I had no idea what was going on, how I got there or if what he was telling me was true, but I did know if I didn’t stop him from bleeding, I’d never get those answers.

“You’re bleeding badly. We need to stop it. Can you do whatever you did to bring us here, again?” I asked, pulling myself from my confusion and taking back some control.

“What *we* did.”

“We?”

“Teleportation. We can only do it together. It’s one of our connected gifts. I w-wasn’t sure I’d be able to....but it worked....thank the powers it worked,” he gasped breathlessly. That explanation gave me nothing but more questions, but Noah was fading and we needed to do something before it was too late.

“My guys,” I looked up into his eyes as I spoke. “They can help us. Joel is a doctor a-and he can heal. We need to go to them.”

“No!” he hissed, as he started to look all around him as though someone was there. I couldn’t help but look too, but all I saw for as far as the eye could see were trees and snow. “We can’t trust anyone. We’re safe here. We.....we stay here....safe here.” Before I could even utter an argument Noah leapt to his feet, a rush of something seeming to come over him and spurring him on. He grabbed my arm bruisingly and wrenched me up too, then he was dragging me behind him as he trudged barefoot through the snow.

“Noah! Stop!” I cried. I struggled to stay on my feet as he dragged me behind him. All I had on were sleep shorts and a thin t-shirt. The freezing cold wind was whipping at my bare skin. My feet were already going numb. It wouldn’t be long before we both died of exposure out there if I couldn’t get some control over the situation. “Noah, we can’t stay here. Y-you need help.”

“No. We don’t need help. We need to stay hidden. We need to stay safe.” He seemed to be talking more to himself than to me and I wondered how much of the slightly crazy way he was acting was the blood loss, and how much was the lasting effects of everything he had, very obviously, been through.

“We...we’ll be safe with my guys. They’re m-my Quin, Noah. They would n-never h-hurt me. They can p-protect us.” My teeth were chattering and I was gasping for breath as I fought to keep up with his huge strides and not fall on my face.

“Damned Quin,” Noah scoffed, followed by more muttering I couldn’t make out. I had no idea how he was still moving, a trail of blood following behind him still pouring from the wounds in his stomach, but he showed no signs of slowing as he just dragged me behind. His grip was bruising and I couldn’t prise his fingers from my arm no matter how hard I tried.

Just when I thought my numb legs were going to give up and collapse beneath me, a static sensation brushed over my entire body. I looked up with alarm, wondering what the hell was going to happen next, then gasped when a huge log cabin appeared before us, in a space that had been filled with trees only a second before. It was a two-story building with a wraparound porch that surrounded the whole thing.

“It was cloaked,” I realized aloud. It had appeared just like Arcem had when we got close to it.

“Only y-you and I can find it. Safe...we’re safe here,” Noah rambled without pausing for even a second. He dragged me up the five wooden steps and onto the porch. I was relieved

when he finally came to a stop at the door, raising his hand to touch the solid wood, which had been painted a pretty shade of blue. As soon as his hand touched the wood, that static swept over me again and with a small snick, the door released and opened just a crack.

Noah ploughed inside, throwing the door open so hard there was an almighty crack as it smashed into something. Having no choice, since he still gripped me, I followed him in.

Noah flipped a switch on the wall and the space around us was instantly filled with warm light, revealing an open plan living room, dining area, and kitchen. The walls were rustic, made up of logs, just like the outside. There was a huge open fireplace off to my right and before it sat two decadent looking, cream, leather sofas. The furniture seemed high quality – solid and well built, likely made from the same wood as the whole building. Below the thick layer of dust and the overwhelming musty smell, the place appeared homey and cozy.

“Where are we?” I asked as I looked around me, taking it all in. Finally Noah released my arm as he leaned down, grabbing the back of one of the sofas and showing weakness for the first time.

“Home....we....we’re home,” he whispered, and then he dropped to the floor hard. I ran to him, kneeling at his side, but he was out cold.

Knowing the first priority was to stop the bleeding, I jumped up, as much as my messed up knee would allow, and hurried to the kitchen, tearing open drawers and cabinets until I finally found a pile of white dish towels.

Returning to kneel beside Noah, I pulled up the gown he wore, relieved to find boxers beneath it. Three stab wounds marred his stomach, but only one was bleeding now. I pressed the towel down over that wound as hard as I could, praying it would be enough to stop the bleeding, and then frantically looked around for a phone. I needed to call my guys. I needed their help and I also knew they would be freaking out not knowing where I was or what had happened. I was definitely freaking out, not having them at my side.

I don't know how long it took, because my freak out was making rational thought tricky, not to mention how freezing cold my shivering body was, and the agony in my knee, but eventually when I pulled the third blood-soaked cloth away from Noah's wound, the bleeding had all but stopped. He still looked deathly pale, but his breathing was steady.

Returning to the kitchen I found a first aid kit in one of the cabinets, and as I headed back to Noah, I scanned every surface around me, but still found no phone or computer. Nothing I could use to contact my guys.

Luckily, my time with the Glenn's made me pretty adept at dressing wounds and I soon had the three on Noah's stomach closed with butterfly closure strips and dressed with huge gauze pads and tape. It wasn't ideal and I knew he needed real stitches, but it was the best I could do for the time being. I managed to drag him into the lounge and onto the plush, cream rug, hoping it would be warmer than the cold wood floor. I wanted to get him on to the sofa, but there was no way I could manage it. Even with how thin Noah was, he was much bigger than me. I pulled a cushion and blanket from the sofa and made him as comfortable as I could, then set to work lighting a fire, praying the chimney was clear enough to allow the smoke to escape. The last thing we needed was to die of smoke inhalation. It was clear to see the house had been abandoned for years, but we needed heat. My teeth chattered

so hard and my body would not stop shivering, so I knew Noah was likely just as cold.

Thankfully, a fire had already been laid in the fireplace, the wood dry from years of just sitting there, and an electric candle lighter just sat on the mantle ready for me to use. Testing it out, clicking the button, I sighed in relief when a flame appeared at the end of it. I lowered it to the balls of rolled paper, strategically placed between thick logs in the fireplace, and instantly the paper lit. Within moments the years old, dried logs caught fire too and I exhaled a huge breath of relief as the heat quickly engulfed my frozen form.

Once the fire was blazing, I sat on the floor before it, looking over Noah, who was laid exactly where I put him, unmoving. His face was a patchwork of bruises and a long scar ran down his right cheek, faint but visible.

The longer I looked, the more I began to accept what he said was true. It was impossible to deny the similarities between the two of us. He looked so very much like me that we really could be twins, and yet I had absolutely no memory of him.

Looking all around me at that place Noah had called home, I tried hard to stir some memory of having ever been there before, but again there was nothing. If this was once my home, I had zero recollection of it.

Thinking of that, just made me think of my real home with my guys. They were my home now, and I knew they'd be losing their minds by then, just trying to work out where I was. Resolved to find a way to at least let them know I was safe, I stood and started searching around more thoroughly, opening cabinets and hunting through boxes for a cell phone or a computer. I didn't know any phone numbers for any of them,

never needing to memorize them when they were stored in the cell phone they had given me, but maybe if I could look up their company, 'Visbyte', I could find a way to get in touch with them.

Once I'd torn apart the whole of the bottom floor and come up with nothing to help me contact home, I headed up the wide staircase to check the upper floor. At the top of the stairs I found a long carpeted hall, off of which were five doors. I walked down the hall and took a quick peek into each room, trying to get the layout of the place straight. The first door led to a nondescript double bedroom with a dust covered king bed in the center, flanked by two night stands. There was a closet in one corner and a dresser in another. There were no pictures or ornaments in sight – nothing to show any sign of who might have once occupied the room - just lamps on the nightstands and plain cream curtains hung at the window. A quick search of the dresser and closet turned up absolutely nothing either, so I moved on to the next door down the hall.

This door opened into a large, white tiled bathroom with a white, claw foot tub, and a shower cubicle in the corner. Once again there were no signs of anyone once living there, no products on the shelf over the shower or toothbrushes on the vanity.

The next door was a linen closet filled with towels and a few sets of cream sheets. The door after that revealed another bedroom much like the first, with almost exactly the same king-bed and furniture. This one had an adjoining en-suite, but a search of it still left me no closer to finding a phone, or any clues to my past.

As I made my way down the hall to the next door, I felt for my bond with the guys for the hundredth time in the last half hour, but I couldn't feel any of them. It was as though they weren't there and I hated that feeling. I had become so used to

feeling them with me, even when they were at work and miles from me I felt the bond between us; felt on some basic level the way my guys were feeling through that bond, but now they were simply gone. What did that even mean? Was it because I was very far away from them? Or had something happened?

Spurred on to find a way to contact them I opened the next door and gasped when I walked into what was obviously a little boy's room. The walls were painted light blue and a border of baseball themed paper ran the top of the room. A twin bed, in the shape of a blue sports car sat against the back wall and there was a shelf filled with colorful books. To my right sat a chest covered with stickers of dinosaurs and diggers, half open with toys spilling from it. There was a small, child sized desk with crayons spread over it, like a child had been busily working there just moments before.

Seeing a picture frame at the corner of the desk I approached and picked it up, gasping as I swiped the dust from the front of it to reveal an image of two small kids, sitting out on the steps we had walked up into the cabin. I guessed they were around four or five years old, both dressed in thick puffer coats and wool hats with colorful bobbles atop.

Both had bright blue eyes and slightly turned up noses, their cheeks rosy red, as though they had just been running around and only stopped to snap that picture. Tears filled my eyes as I allowed my brain to process the realization that I was the little girl in that picture, a huge smile on my face as I hugged the boy beside me so tightly I could only have loved him. Noah. He was telling the truth. He was my brother – my twin – and once upon a time we had been happy in this house. So many questions swirled through my mind as I placed the picture back on the desk and turned to leave the room, knowing what would be behind the next and last door.

Directly opposite Noah's room, was a door adorned with daisy stickers. When I turned the handle and opened it, I found a room painted a bright daisy yellow. The walls were adorned with daisy stickers too and the linen on the twin bed was yellow and white checked. A white lace canopy hung down around the head of the bed and a brown teddy bear with a yellow ribbon around his neck sat in front of the pillows. There was a shelf filled with books and a chest overflowing with toys, just like in Noah's room, but where a desk sat in the other room, there was a dressing table here, with a round mirror framed with little round lights. A yellow fabric covered stool was pushed underneath. I walked over and opened the small drawer, finding a myriad of brightly colored nail polish inside. I walked around, taking everything in and trying with everything in me to just remember one moment of ever having been in that room before, but nothing came. There was no sense of familiarity or flashes of long lost memories. Nothing came to me. If that room was once mine, it wasn't any longer. Whatever life I had lived so many years ago, in that house, was lost to me.

I left the room and headed back downstairs with no memories of my past and no way to contact my future.

After a quick check on Noah's dressings, to make sure the bleeding hadn't restarted, I opened the door and walked out onto the porch. There were no other buildings, and no signs of a car or a road I could follow out of there. All I could see for miles were trees and heavy woodland. I had no idea where I was or how far from civilization I was. Hell, I didn't even know if I was still in the states. Noah had said we teleported. Did that mean we could be in a different country? I wanted to set off walking, hoping it would take me back toward home, but I knew it was a bad idea. The snow on the ground was heavy and still falling. I had no idea which direction to head in and even if I did, my rapidly swelling knee was not going to get me far.

Despairing, I reached for the bonds within me and tried with everything I had to send a message to my Quin, but there was nothing at all. My guys weren't with me. Whatever came next I was going to have to face alone, and that terrified me.

GIO

“MALIK! Just fucking stop!” West yelled as he tried to get closer to Malik, avoiding the furniture that was hurtling in his direction.

It was twelve hours since Lana had disappeared and we were no closer to finding out who had taken her or where she was. We'd been up all night looking through the books we brought back, for any way to trace the gift that had been used to take our fifth from us, but the books had turned out to be useless and Malik had finally snapped, his terror that we'd never get Lana back coming out as he used his gift to tear our apartment up around us.

West dove to his left as two dining chairs hurtled past him, only just missing them, thanks to his speed.

“For fucks sake Mal! This isn't helping!” I yelled as I remained plastered to the back wall, staying out of the line of fire. Joel was beside me. Malik looked to me and it was all the distraction West needed. He used his speed and ploughed right into Malik, taking him down hard.

“Get the fuck off of me!” Malik yelled as West held him face down into the floor, his arms pinned behind his back.

“Not until you calm down,” West gasped breathlessly.

“You can’t fuck this place up. What will Lana think when she gets home?” Joel asked as the two of us cautiously approached.

“She’s gone!” Mal cried; his pain clear to hear. “She’s fucking gone.”

“We’re going to find her,” I said vehemently. We had to. There was no other option. She was ours and we were going to get her back.

“How? We don’t know where she is or who took her! We don’t even know how they fucking took her! You tell me how exactly we’re supposed to get her back? She could be anywhere!” Malik deflated below West, giving up the fight and collapsing down to the floor, resting his forehead on the wood.

“I don’t know, but giving up and losing your fucking shit isn’t the answer. We have to keep a clear head,” I lectured, hoping he listened and saw sense.

“We have to find the other Vis,” Joel spoke up.

“Let me up, West. I’m fucking calm,” Malik ground out. West looked to me and I nodded, agreeing that Malik seemed to have gotten his shit together some. West jumped up and backed off as Malik got up too. We all stood facing each other, looking to Joel to go on.

“Whoever took Lana is strong. That kind of gift can’t go completely unnoticed and yet we haven’t heard a thing about it. Maybe the other guys have. Maybe they’ve had run ins with him or her,” Joel explained.

“That’s a long shot,” West pointed out.

“I agree, but right now it’s all we have,” I shrugged as I looked to Malik. The chances that the other Vis knew who had taken Lana were slim to none, but they were the best odds we had on getting a lead so far, and we had to run with it. If there was a chance then I’d take it.

“It’s worth a try,” he agreed. “West, see if you can get any info on where the others are living. Gio, arrange a flight. I want to head out as soon as possible.”

I was already turning, headed for the office before Malik even finished speaking. I wanted us to head out as soon as possible too. We had no idea who had Lana or what they were doing with her. All we knew was that it could be the Venator, and if that were true our time for getting her back was limited. We had to move and we had to get a lead as soon as possible because there was no alternative but getting her back.

CHAPTER 2

LANA

I was awoken by the quiet trickle of running water. I had spent hours the night before trying to work out a way to get a message to my Quin. The pain in my knee had eventually become too much, and I'd collapsed down on the floor beside Noah. I must have eventually dropped off, the exhaustion of travelling with my guys and then everything that had come since, too much to fight any longer.

I sat up, taking in the bright sunlight shining through the huge picture window. It was morning. The next thing I realized was that the space beside me was empty and Noah was gone.

"Noah?" I called as I tried to jump up, but I collapsed back down, crying out the second I tried to move my knee. Looking down to it, I was horrified to find it was twice the size it should be and glowing hideous shades of purple and black. It was much worse, the injury I sustained in Arcem obviously aggravated by all that had happened the night before.

"You need to stay still." I looked up as Noah walked into the living room from the kitchen. I couldn't help the gasp that escaped me as I took him in. He looked like a different person, now clean and dressed in black jeans and a dark blue sweater. He had color back in his face and there wasn't even a hint of the terrible state he had been in the night before. Most dramatic of all, he had shaved and cut off all of the long, scraggy hair. His face was now clean shaven, making him look even more like me, and his hair was buzzed short to his head, clearly having been shaved.

He walked over to me and dropped to his knees, the small grunt of pain the only sign that he wasn't completely magically healed. I flinched a little as he moved his hands toward me, but calmed instantly when I realized he held an ice pack, which he placed over my knee.

"Thanks," I whispered between the hiss of pain as the ice hit my now warm skin. Thankfully, the fire was still alight, though burning low, and the space around us was comfortably warm.

"This is bad. D-did I do this?" Noah asked as his blue eyes glanced to my face for the briefest second before he nervously looked away again. He seemed calmer than the day before, but he was still twitchy and unsettled. He held the ice to my knee gently as he kept his gaze from mine.

"No. My knee was already messed up before. It happened in Arcem." I was unsure whether I should mention the island, but I wanted to know if he would recognize the place name. I got my answer when his head snapped up and his eyes met mine, filled with worry.

"Arcem?"

"You know it." It wasn't a question.

"You went there?" he asked.

"Yes, with my Quin. We needed to get some books about the Vis and the Venator. Do you know what happened there ten years ago? That the Vis were all killed?" I asked, not once taking my eyes from his face. Something dark crossed his features and then he started to lose it. I couldn't stop the way my hands went up to cover my head as I fell back away from

Noah. It was an instinctive defensive reaction when he jumped up violently. He backed away from me as he began to hit at his own head with real force.

“You should never have gone there!” he yelled at the top of his voice. I lowered my hands enough to look up, and found him now between the living area and kitchen, pacing back and forth angrily, still hitting his own forehead. “Too dangerous... not safe....take you.” He was muttering to himself and I couldn’t catch all of what he was saying, but it was clear he was agitated and terrified.

Realizing he wasn’t going to hurt me, I took a deep breath and struggled to my feet. I was shaking a little from the adrenaline that had surged as soon as he scared me, but I was calm enough to approach him, needing to do something to try and settle him. I didn’t know him, but he was my brother and he had clearly been through more than I could even imagine. I needed to help him. I wanted to.

“Noah,” I said softly as I stood a few feet from where he was still pacing.

“They would kill you!” he yelled as he stopped and looked at me, his eyes glassy with tears. “I have to keep you safe...I pr-promised.”

“Promised who?” I asked, taking a step closer to him.

“Mom,” he looked right into my eyes. “She said that I...I had to do it...had to protect you...protect both of us. I did it... I did what she asked and still...you still ended up in Arcem... ended up with a damn Quin!” He was getting worked up again, the last words hissed angrily.

“You did that, Noah. You did what Mom asked. You protected me and now we’re here and safe, right?” I asked, curbing my desperate desire to push him for answers about my past, opting instead to try and keep him calm and stop him from hurting himself. He was the only way I was going to get back to my guys, so I needed to do all I could to get him to think a little more rationally. It wasn’t logical for us to stay there and I needed him to realize that.

“Right,” he agreed with a firm nod. “Safe. We...we’re safe now. Safe here.”

“Good. That’s good. How about you lie down for me, okay? You’re still hurt and you need to rest. I’ll make us some food. I’ll bet you’re hungry, huh?” I asked.

“I...yes, food sounds good,” he agreed with another nod. “But you’re hurt too?” He looked down to my knee which I was fighting not to put any weight on.

“I’m good. Don’t worry about me,” I assured him as I approached cautiously and put my hand in his, then led him over to the sofa in the living room. “Lie down, just for a short while, okay? I’ll see if I can make us some food.”

“There should be food...in the pantry...Mom made sure we’d h-have food.”

“I’ll find it. Just rest now, okay?” I was relieved when he finally laid back, his eyes instantly becoming heavy.

For several moments I just stood watching him. He must have been exhausted because he was instantly out cold, but even in sleep he didn’t seem completely relaxed, his entire body tense and on guard, as if just waiting for the next attack. I

knew that feeling. I hadn't been through the nightmarish existence my twin clearly had, but I knew what it was like to always be coiled tightly just waiting for whatever torture came next.

Once again, as I studied his face I focused hard on his features, just willing something to come back to me – some memory of our lives before they fell apart, or some feelings for this man who I had once loved very much. I growled, frustrated, when there was nothing other than the logical part of my brain rationalizing that he had to be my twin based on how much alike we were and the sympathy I felt for him and everything he had suffered.

My stomach rumbling loudly, reminded me I really did need to find food. Noah was going to need it to heal and I needed to do all I could to be ready for whatever came next.

I found the pantry in the back corner of the kitchen, packed with canned and packet food on every shelf from the floor, right up to a couple of feet above my head. It seemed Noah was right, whoever had filled this had prepared for a damn apocalypse.

I looked for soup, thinking Noah would be better with something that would be easy on his stomach. The cans seemed to be in categories, and the third shelf up was filled with soup. I pulled out a can of tomato and brushed away the dust that had gathered on it, then looked for the expiration date. I was surprised to find it was only a year ago, and that instantly had me wondering when someone had last been in that house and who it was. How long had Noah been held by those men who had hurt him? Was our mom taken by them too? Was she still alive? Did I...we have dad's somewhere out there?

Hoping Noah would be up to answering some of my questions when I woke him, I concentrated on heating the food. Maybe once he ate something, he would be better and able to provide me some of the answers I needed.

“Noah.” I spoke softly staying far enough back from him so I wouldn’t catch a fist if he woke up swinging, but the one soft word still caused Noah to leap awake violently. He sat straight up, his head on a swivel taking in every inch of the space around him until those bright blue eyes met mine.

“Lana?” he rasped, seeming confused.

“Sorry to wake you, but I thought maybe you should eat?” I was trying hard not to back further away from him, but my instincts had me on edge, still so unsure of what he was capable of. A shiver of unease raced down my back, making me shudder slightly.

“Are you cold?” Noah asked as he studied me way too closely. I shrugged, undecided whether to admit the shudder was more from fear than a chill. “There are clothes...I should have told you...mom’s....upstairs. I think they should fit.”

I realized that must have been where he had gotten the clothes he now wore. Did they belong to one of our dads’?

“Great. I’ll check them out after we eat,” I agreed, as I walked sideways back toward the kitchen, refusing to turn my back to him. I had learned the hard way why you should never give your back to anyone you don’t trust.

As I took a seat at the table, where I had placed my own bowl of the tomato soup I had reheated, Noah very unsteadily got to his feet and followed behind me, taking the seat opposite.

“The crackers are pretty stale, but I think they’ll be good if you dunk them in the soup,” I told him as I pushed a plate filled with stale crackers a little closer to him. He nodded once and took one from the plate.

I watched as he tentatively took the first bite, then, as though that bite had ignited his hunger, he went at the food like he was starved. Maybe he was? There wasn’t an ounce of fat on him and I guessed he was malnourished to say the least. Within a couple of minutes his bowl was empty and he had almost cleared the plate of crackers.

“Is there more?” he asked when he realized his bowl was empty, his eyes meeting mine and looking hopeful.

“You can take mine,” I offered, pushing my bowl toward him.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “You have to eat too.”

“I already ate some of the crackers while I was waiting. I’m good,” I assured him as I switched his empty bowl for my full one. I could barely eat through my anxiety anyway, and he clearly needed the calories way more than I did.

“Eat like a sparrow...that’s what mom used to say,” he grumbled so quietly I only just caught the words, as he picked up his spoon and dove in once again.

“Is she still alive?” I asked gently. He paused, spoon filled with soup midway to his mouth and looked at me, a sadness filling his face.

“Gone.” He shook his head.

“And our dad? Dads’? Did we have four...were they a Quin?”

He looked at me once again, but this time his face was filled with an anger that instantly scared me. There was something I needed to know there, but I was too afraid to push him on the subject. Instead, I changed tactic.

“When is the last time we saw each other?” I asked. He was silent as he looked back to the bowl before him. I waited as he ate the last of the soup. I didn’t want to push him, but as long as he was willing, I wanted answers. So much of my life was a mystery and now I had the chance to unravel it. I wasn’t going to pass that up.

“We were five.” He finally spoke, the food all gone. He pushed aside the dishes and laid his hands flat on the table before him, staring at them as he went on, “We just moved again...someplace in Florida, I think.”

“We didn’t live here?”

“No. This is the safe house...we came here sometimes, but mom...she liked to keep moving.”

“But why? Why weren’t we living on Arcem with the Vis?” I pushed. His eyes met mine, filled with confusion.

“Because we’re twins,” he said it as though that should mean something to me, but it didn’t and I threw him back a look filled with just as much confusion. “You don’t know?”

“Know what, Noah? I grew up thinking I was human. I didn’t know anything about the Vis or the Venator until my Quin found me and told me everything, a little over a month ago. I didn’t know you existed until yesterday. I don’t know who I am or where I came from. I know absolutely nothing, so if you do, please...just tell me,” I growled, frustrated.

He took a deep breath and looked back down to his hands, now pressing so hard into the table that it shook a little beneath us.

“Mom was part of a Quin. They lived on Arcem and they were powerful. When mom got pregnant they were on a mission in France. Mom got hurt and was taken to a human hospital. They did a sonogram and...well, they found out about us...twins.”

“What is so bad about twins?” I asked.

“Vis don’t have twins...not for centuries. There were stories...a-about a pair of Vis twins hundreds of years before. Alina and Khai. They were said to be the most powerful Vis ever to exist. They almost eradicated the Venator completely, but before they could succeed they were killed, betrayed by Alina’s Quin.

“Our parents...they knew the Vis council would take us away from them...use us as weapons against the Venator, so they ran...hid in the human world to protect us.”

“But they were found?”

“Paulo...one of mom’s Quin...he hated the human world and he...he blamed us...hated us. He wanted to go back to Arcem...wanted to be the big, famous warrior, he had once been, again. He made a deal with the Venator...told them we existed and where we were.”

“Why? Why would he do that? Betray his Quin and his own children?”

“He didn’t care about anything except the power and fame he had once had as a member of one of the strongest Quin’s on Arcem. He wanted that back and getting rid of us was the quickest way.”

I took a deep breath and tried to push back the pain I was feeling, at the thought of this man who should have loved and protected us, handing us off to monsters.

“The Venator came. Mom and our dads’ fought, but they never realized Paulo had betrayed them. We were there and we saw the whole thing...saw the Venator kill our dad’s with the help of a man we had thought loved us. Mom told us to run and we did. I found a grate under one of the houses down the street and I made you climb in. You...you were crying and scared...we both were, but mom always told us, no matter what we couldn’t let the Venator get both of us. “I...I left you there. There wasn’t room enough for both of us to hide. Our gift...it’s strongest when we’re together, but we can like...pass it? I took it that day and I used it to try and wipe away the memories of our parents being killed. I just...I wanted to stop you from crying, but I didn’t really know what I was doing. We were five and we’d barely learned how to use our gifts. I think I took all of your memories, because when you looked at me you didn’t know who I was. I wanted to fix it, but the Venator were chasing us. I just had time to replace the grate and hide you, then I ran.”

He was looking at me with such guilt, but how could I blame him for anything? He had been five years old, trying to protect me in the best way he could. More than anything I just wished I could remember and feel the love I must have once had for him.

“Did they catch you? Is that how you ended up in that place, with those men hurting you?”

“No. Mom found me and we hid until they gave up looking for us. She was hurt, but she survived. We went back to get you as soon as we could, but you were gone. We didn’t know if you wandered off or if the Venator found you.” He looked to me for the answer.

“I don’t know either. I was placed with adopted parents when I was five, but I don’t know how I came to be there. My earliest memory is being brought into their house by Ted, the adopted father.”

“We looked for you, but you just disappeared and when I took our gifts, I severed the bond between us. I had no way to reach out to you. A year later the Venator found us while we were chasing a lead on you in Vermont. Mom...they killed her and they took me.”

“I’m so sorry, Noah,” I whispered, feeling the pain of the loss of a mother I had no memory of, but who had clearly loved and fought for me...for us. “So the Venator had you all these years?”

“They wanted to use my gift...our gift. We have very strong psionic gifts.”

“Psionic?”

“Psychic abilities. We can get into minds and manipulate them, see, and break shields, block other’s gifts and Venator’s elemental powers. We can teleport too, but only when we’re together.”

“That’s how you brought us here?” I realized.

“Yes. The Venator...I don’t know how...but they discovered that the bond between us would react if one of us was in mortal danger. This last month they stopped trying to manipulate my gift for their use, and focused instead on getting me close enough to death to summon you. They wanted you. I...I couldn’t let them have you.”

“That’s why they hurt you...almost killed you? To summon me?” I asked, anger filling me at what those monsters had put Noah through.

“It worked. You appeared and I knew I had to get us out of there. They can never get us, Lana. What they did...it would be so much worse if they had the power of both of us.”

“They hurt you?” It was a question, but I already knew the answer. I had seen his scars.

“They wanted to harness my gifts...use them to attack the Vis. I fought against it, but I was just a kid.”

“The bond.” I whispered as I realized what my ‘episodes’ had been. There was a bond between us. When he was hurt by those monsters, I had felt it too. Suddenly it all made sense, the pain and fear I had been blinded with so many times.

“The bond,” he nodded. “I thought it had been severed, but it hadn’t...not completely. I felt it...felt the pain every time you were hurt.”

He looked to my bare arms where a few of my scars were visible. “And you felt it every time I was tortured by the Venator.” He wasn’t asking, but I nodded anyway, tears filling my eyes.

“What happens now, Noah?” I asked as those tears escaped and slid down my cheeks. We had both been through hell and it wasn’t as though our nightmares were over. The Venator would still be hunting us. As long as we were alive, it seemed we posed way too much of a threat to them.

“Now we hide. We will never be safe out there. This house...it’s hidden...it’s safe. Mom would have brought us here when we found you, but she never got chance. We’re here now though. We’re safe here.”

“I can’t stay here, Noah. I have men who I love. I have to go back to them. They’ll be going crazy trying to find me.”

“Your Quin, you mean?” he scoffed.

“They’re not like Paulo. They’d never betray me. They love me and I trust them.”

“Mom loved and trusted Paulo. Look how that ended.”

“I know. I understand why you’re worried, but I know them. They have already saved me, Noah. They can help to keep us safe if we go to them.”

“No!” He jumped up from the chair so quickly it fell behind him with a crash, which had me leaping to my own feet and backing away a little. “We’re staying here! I am going to protect you this time.” He slammed his fist on the table with his angry words and I couldn’t stop the tremor of fear that rocked through me in response.

“Okay.” I whispered, the words shaky and uneven. “We’re staying here.” I agreed.

“Put some damn clothes on. You’re shivering again,” he growled, then he walked off and returned to the sofa lying down as he had been before.

For several moments I just stood frozen, my entire body trembling beneath me. Noah was volatile and I was trapped there with him. Deep down he seemed to care about me, but he was clearly messed up by all he had been through, and I realized I was going to have to tread very cautiously around him until I truly worked out just how dangerous he could be.

I stayed there, just watching him until I was sure he was asleep. When gentle snores filled the room I finally convinced my body it was safe to move. I cleared the plates from the table and set about washing them, as tears ran down my face.

“Please guys...please come and get me,” I whispered, more than anything needing them to come for me. I wanted to be in their arms, to feel the safety they had given me, cocooning me once again.

CHAPTER 3

JOEL

“There. That’s Henry, isn’t it?” West asked nodding to the street as a tall, dark haired man climbed out of a black Escalade. He was wearing Ray Bans and he had definitely filled out since we last saw him, but West was right, it was Henry. I had known him since I was six years old and I recognized him instantly.

We had been in Ontario for three days, tracking the other Vis and it hadn’t proved an easy task. Unlike us, the other Vis had changed their names and it had taken Malik way longer than he was happy with to find their new alias’s. He had gone back ten years to when they first showed up in Canada and found a tenancy agreement in Gabriel Packer’s name – another of the guy’s we had all grown up with.

The lease had been short and the guys had completely disappeared after they left the apartment, but Malik was able to follow the trail and find that Gabriel had changed his name to Gareth Hill. From there we had just continued to follow the trail.

West and I had set out that morning to track down Henry, who was a firefighter and, according to his financials, always grabbed coffee from the coffee shop, that West and I had been sitting in all morning, after his shift was over.

“That’s him,” I agreed as I drank the last of my fourth cup of coffee. It was all that was keeping me going, since sleep had proved completely impossible with Lana missing. The others were the same, none of us able to settle enough to sleep more than an hour at a time. We were too worried about our girl, having no idea where she was or what she was going through.

Every time I closed my eyes, all I could see were the scars all over her body and I became consumed with the fear that she was being hurt as I lay there doing nothing to stop it. Or worse still – we were too late no matter what we did because she was already gone – killed by the Venator. No. I couldn't go there. She was alive. She had to be. We would feel it if we lost her, wouldn't we? Even though we hadn't felt our bond with her since she disappeared, if she was in mortal danger it would call us to her, wouldn't it?

The bell above the door of the coffee shop jingled as someone walked in, pulling me from my thoughts and back to the task we were there to do.

“Hey Harry. Usual?” the friendly college kid behind the counter greeted Henry, using his alias – Harry - as he strode in.

“Please, but I'll take a double shot. It was a long night,” Henry replied, sounding so much older and more relaxed than I remembered him being.

“You got it.”

The kid turned his back to prepare the drink and I took the opportunity to stand and approach Henry. He turned, obviously sensing someone at his back. As soon as our eyes met his face filled with shock.

“Hey bud,” I greeted. He had been a good friend growing up, living just around the corner from me and the guys, and in all of our classes at school. His brother, Oliver, was a year older, so we didn't know him as well, and Gabriel, the last of the three, only moved back to Arcem with his family the year before the attack. His family had been permanently stationed

in Japan since he was born, returning only when Gabriel turned sixteen so he could find his Quin. The fourth male of their Quin was still missing when the attack happened, but the three of them had been tight.

“What are you doing here?” Henry asked in a hissed whisper. “We agreed....”

“I know, but we need your help,” I cut him off. We agreed to stay far away from each other, deciding it was safer that way. At least if the Venator took one of our groups out, the other would have a chance to continue our mission to protect the humans.

“The others?”

“They’re all here,” I nodded to where West had remained at the small table near the window. He was watching Henry and I, and gave a nod of greeting.

“Are we in danger? Should I warn the others?” Henry asked.

“Not any more than usual,” I replied.

“Fuck. Okay,” he nodded as though he were trying to convince himself of whatever was going through his head. “Can you follow me back to our place? We can’t talk here.”

“Mal and Gio are in our rental outside,” I nodded to the street.

“Here you go, Harry. Double shot,” the kid behind the counter called, as he turned with a takeout cup in hand.

Let's go, I told West via our link, then we both left the shop as Henry paid for his order.

“We're following him back to their place,” I told Malik, as West and I climbed into the back of the SUV which we had rented from the airport.

“Was he pissed?” Gio asked.

“Shocked,” I replied. Who could blame the guy? When we had gone our separate ways we had never expected to see each other again, but hoping they had some info on this crazy powerful Venator who had taken Lana was our last and only hope. They could be as pissed as they liked that we had reneged on our agreement. Nothing was going to stop us from doing every single thing we could to get her back.

We followed Henry as he drove out of the small town we had stayed in for the last couple of nights and further out into the wilderness of the surrounding area. Eventually he turned off of the road onto a rough track that led through the woods. Just when I was starting to wonder just how remote and basic a life they had been living, we came to a set of tall, black wrought iron gates. They opened as Henry approached them and behind them was what looked like a mountain lodge, build completely in timber, with two stories, an enormous wrap around porch and a four car garage off to the side. It was like a log built mansion and I had to admit, if they built it, I was very impressed. Down the center of the building was a section of ground-to-roof glass which was reflective from outside, so no one could see in, but which must have given the most amazing view of the forest around us from inside. Surrounding the building were raised flower beds, filled with wildflowers and

plants which were obviously well tended. As we followed Henry through the gates I realized we had left behind the rough trail that led up to the property, and were now driving on a smooth block driveway. A stone wall, about ten feet high surrounded the whole thing and I saw security lights and cameras dotted around the place. It was a piece of paradise in the middle of beautiful surroundings, while at the same time being a stronghold, where the guys were as safe as they could be.

All I could think was how much Lana would love it. When we got her back we should consider something similar. Maybe not so far out or isolated because Lana seemed to love the city, but she deserved a home like this, where she could be safe to plant roots. She deserved the best we could give her and so much more.

As we parked up behind Henry, the front door of the house opened and Oliver and Gabe appeared in the doorway, looking to our vehicle with suspicion.

“Here we go,” Malik sighed as he opened the passenger door of the SUV and slid out, the rest of us following.

“What the fuck?” Gabe growled as he saw us all heading toward him.

“They were waiting for me in the coffee shop, need our help apparently,” Henry explained as he climbed the steps which led up to the porch.

“Sorry guys. I know what we agreed, but we had nowhere else to turn. We need your help,” Malik explained.

“You better not have led shit right to our doorstep, Fadel,” Oliver growled, using Malik’s surname, just as we all used to in training so many years ago.

“We haven’t. We were careful,” Gio tried to soothe.

“Come on. Let’s head in and find out what this is all about,” Henry suggested as he bypassed his Quin mates and walked into the house.

We followed him in, passing Oliver and Gabriel at the doorway, both of them watching us with annoyance and suspicion.

Inside, their place was even more impressive than the outside. We entered the open plan living space, with a double height, vaulted ceiling, from which hung a huge modern art looking light fixture made up of polished chrome branches. The kitchen was twice the size of ours at home, and before it sat a long, glass dining table to seat twelve.

“Take a seat,” Henry said as he walked into the living area and slumped down tiredly into a gray, checked armchair.

“They’re not staying,” Gabe snapped, as he and Oliver trailed in behind us. It was surprising just how pissed they seemed to be that we were there. I knew it would be a shock us all just turning up, but I had expected a slightly warmer welcome than we were currently receiving.

“We’re not a threat, Gabe,” West spoke up as we all took seats on the overstuffed sectional sofa.

“We agreed to separate for a reason. You guys have just fucked that all up,” Oliver countered as he and Gabe stood before us, refusing to sit.

“I know what you’re saying, but we had no choice. We really needed to speak with you,” Malik said, trying to keep things civil.

“You said that already. Just spit out whatever you need to say,” Henry said. I glanced between my brothers, wondering who was going to speak up. We had no reason to distrust these guys. We had known them almost all of our lives and they were Vis, but the way they were behaving had me on my guard and I knew I wasn’t the only one suddenly apprehensive about revealing anything about Lana.

I don't like this, guys. Somethings not right. We can't tell them shit about Lana. I sent out through our link.

I agree. What if they're involved with whoever took her? West asked.

“What exactly is the problem here?” Gio asked as he too rose to his feet and squared off with Gabriel. “Why all this hostility? I get it, we were never supposed to come together again, but here we fucking are anyway. Why is that such a threat to you? We grew up together. You know us, know we wouldn’t put you at risk coming here unless we had no choice.”

Gabe, Oliver, and Henry all shared a look, seeming to share a silent conversation. For several moments there was just a tense silence as we waited for them to make the next move and hopefully reveal their hand.

“Fuck,” Gabe sighed eventually, his stance deflating some as he seemed to become less defensive and relax just a little. “You’re right,” he nodded to Gio. “We just...we’ve worked hard to be safe here. We don’t want that to get messed up.”

“We understand that,” Gio agreed as he stepped back and relaxed his stance.

“Just tell us why you came. I know we’ve been dicks, but you can trust us. You can always trust us,” Oliver added, looking to me and urging me to feel the genuineness of his pledge. I reached out for his emotions and didn’t pick up anything that would suggest he was lying. Mal was looking to me, so I gave a nod, confirming he was being honest.

“We found our fifth,” Malik declared.

“How? Where?” Gabriel asked.

“She was raised as a human and she had no knowledge of where she came from when we met her. We still don’t know why she wasn’t on Arcem that day,” Gio explained. “We’re just glad she wasn’t.”

I watched the other guys closer, reaching out for their emotions, on guard for any sign that they were anything other than trustworthy. They were currently glancing to each other and I sensed a lot of curiosity in their emotions.

“She’s definitely Vis?” Henry asked.

“Definitely. She’s only twenty-four so she hasn’t gotten her full gift yet, but she can boost our gifts to some extent already,” West replied.

“That’s amazing. Congratulations,” Oliver offered.

“Thanks man. We’re all still trying to take in how lucky we are.”

“So why do you need anything from us. You’re a complete Quin. You should already have way more power than our part Quin can have?” Oliver pointed out.

“And where is your fifth? You haven’t left her alone, have you?” Gabriel asked.

“That’s why we’re here. She was taken from us,” I admitted, feeling physical pain at having to confess just how badly we had failed her.

“Taken? How?”

“She was having these attacks. It was like a human having a seizure, but she was in so much pain as it happened. We thought it was the Venator, that they were using someone to attack and weaken her,” Malik explained. “We went back to Arcem to retrieve texts and books, to try and gather more information to stop it, but as soon as we got back they hit again.”

“They took her. One minute, she was locked in the bathroom, screaming, and the next, we got in there and she was gone. Completely vanished,” I added.

“How is that possible?”

“I think those attacks were the work of a powerful psionic power, someone trying to create enough of a link with Lana to be able to teleport her to wherever they wanted her, and now they have her,” I explained, trying to keep my temper in check. Just the thought of this fucker, whoever they were, taking what was ours from us, had me ready to commit murder.

“Have you heard of or dealt with anyone like that?” Gio asked, and we all waited with bated breath for them to give us the answer we so desperately needed.

The guys looked between one another once again, then all shook their heads, taking away the last thread of hope we had all been clinging on to.

“No. We’ve dealt with plenty of Venator, but all pretty run of the mill. Nothing like that,” Henry spoke up.

“You do realise someone with power like that could be the same someone that helped the Venator on Arcem that day?” Gabriel pointed out what we already suspected. We knew that, but we couldn’t allow ourselves to dwell on it, because someone who had assisted in the decimation of our entire people, was not likely to let Lana live for too long.

“Fuck!” West hissed, as he got to his feet and moved behind the sofa to a more open space. He started to pace back and forth as he fought to rein in his anger and frustration. I knew exactly what he was feeling without reaching for his emotions, because I was feeling just the same. Lana had been gone for days and we were absolutely nowhere in getting her back. We had nothing except a very real fear that we were already too fucking late.

The sound of the front door slamming had my brothers and I instantly on our feet and looking that way for a threat.

“It’s all good, guys,” Henry told us, as he got to his feet too and started over to the entrance hall. A tall, slim woman, with deep, red, wavy hair entered - a bag of groceries tucked under her arm. She froze in the entrance way when she looked up and found the four of us staring at her.

“What’s going on?” she asked as she looked to Henry. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his side.

“We have some guests,” he told her as he held her protectively.

This is why they were being so protective, Malik sent through the link, just as I put the pieces together myself.

“Nothing to worry about, babe. These are the guys we told you about, the other Vis. They came because they needed a little help from us,” Gabriel explained as he walked over and took the groceries from her. He placed the bag on a side table, then took her hand and pulled her from Henry. “Come meet them.”

“This is West, Malik, Giovanni, and Joel. Boys, this is Grace, our wife,” Oliver introduced.

“Wife?” I questioned. Was she their fifth?

“I’m not Vis. I’m human,” she clarified, as if she had sensed my question.

“Nice to meet you, Grace,” Gio said as he stepped forward to shake her hand. He threw her his trademark smile, and I

didn't miss the growls from the three guys now surrounding her protectively. They were very obviously, deeply in love with this woman and, clearly, feeling threatened by our presence there. They had no need to, but I got it, because I'd have felt exactly the same if one of them was smiling at Lana the way Gio was at their woman, but he didn't mean anything by it. That was just Gio – a natural charmer.

“You too. This is great. You guys must have so much to catch up on,” she said, a soft smile filling her face. “You'll stay for dinner, won't you?”

Malik looked to Gabriel for a cue, and Gabriel nodded. I didn't want to stay for dinner, none of us did. There was no lead here for Lana so we needed to leave and start on some other plan to get to her, but we had no clue where to start with that. Maybe talking further with these other Vis would get us somewhere. We needed something. Lana had been gone for too long and we were losing hope of ever getting her back. We couldn't allow that to happen. We would never give up until she was back where she belonged.

CHAPTER 4

LANA

I trudged through the snow, panting heavily, feeling short of breath after my long hike through the woods. I was exhausted, but I was also so freaking angry I could scream. I had walked for what must have been miles, and still all I could see around me, beyond that, was more damned trees!

I had been left with no choice but to follow my foot prints in the snow back to the same cabin I had now been trapped in for a week. A week! I knew my guys would be going crazy by now and I had tried everything I possibly could to get back to them, but it was hopeless and I knew it as I trudged back that afternoon. There was no form of communication in the cabin, no phone, computer, or radio. For the last three days, as soon as Noah had eaten breakfast and gone to lie down, I had left the cabin and walked in a different direction each time, just hoping to find a house or some sign of civilization, even just some clue what damned country I was in.

I couldn't stop the tears as they ran down my wind and cold chapped face, burning a painful trail down my cheeks. I missed my guys. I missed feeling safe. I had spent the entire time with Noah, feeling tense and on my guard, just bracing for him to flip out and lose it. He seemed to care about me for the most part, but after everything he had been through, at the hands of those monsters, he was volatile and he often lost his temper for no reason. He hadn't raised a hand to me yet, but I was still constantly on edge. He was basically holding me prisoner there. Yes, he was my brother, but I didn't know him, and I couldn't help the fear I felt when he was near me.

Thankfully, he was still recovering from the stab wounds, so he spent most of every day and night asleep in one of the

rooms upstairs. That was why I had been able to slip out and take these long hikes, not that they had gotten me anywhere.

I wrapped the huge wool coat, which I had found in the closet in one of the upstairs rooms, tighter around me. It was huge, clearly having once belonged to a man - maybe to one of my dad's? It had been the warmest thing I could find. I also had a wool scarf tied around my head, unable to find a hat, and a thick pair of socks on my hands, in lieu of gloves. It wasn't enough to fight against the bitter cold and falling snow, but I had been determined to find a way back to the men I loved, and lack of suitable clothing had not stopped me.

I was wearing a pair of sneakers, which must have been meant for my mom. They were at least three sizes too big, so I had several pairs of socks on with them, but none of that had been enough to keep out the wet from the foot-deep snow I was trekking through, my feet soaked and painful as the cold bit into them.

I couldn't stop the shudder of fear that ran through my body, as the cabin came into sight and I found Noah on the porch, glaring at me angrily. Every time I had been out on the previous days he had remained asleep the whole time I had been gone. Not this time though.

My fight or flight instincts kicked in and I looked around me, desperate for somewhere safe to flee to, but there was nothing. I was completely alone there and I had no choice other than returning to the cabin and facing him.

As I walked closer and closer to where Noah stood with his arms folded, and a menacing, angry look on his face, my panting breaths became even shorter, and my already trembling body shook so hard I had to tense every muscle in order to make myself move forward. I wanted to believe my

brother wouldn't hurt me, but I couldn't. I still had no idea who he was, and so far, what I had seen of him had been unstable at best.

“Where the fuck have you been?” he yelled as I drew close enough to hear him over the loud whistling of the wind. The tone of his voice was pure rage and the fire in his eyes had adrenaline surging through my body. Panicked, I once again looked around me for an alternative to approaching him. Maybe it was better to die of hypothermia in the woods than face whatever Noah was going to do.

He stepped forward and I noted the way his fists were now clenched, hanging at his sides. In that moment I realized I couldn't do it – couldn't walk myself into the middle of a situation where I'd be torn apart again. I had done it so many times with Ted and Joy. I refused to be that victim any longer.

I turned and set off running in a direction I hadn't yet explored, choosing my odds of surviving the wilds and elements over allowing myself to be beaten ever again. Maybe this direction would take me to somewhere I could contact my guys. Maybe fleeing would take me home.

Noah was yelling at me to come back, but I just ran as fast as my frozen, pain laced feet would carry me through the deep snow. I was already colder than I had ever been in my life and I knew running was a terrible idea, but I had to try.

The sun started to get lower as my slow run turned into a slow walk. I kept turning to check behind me, expecting to find Noah on my heels, but there was nothing around me but the sound of the wild wind, whipping the sharp flakes of snow into my face.

As the sun went down, the wind around me seemed to get stronger, and the snow fell faster, until I was sure I was trapped in a blizzard. Knowing I needed to stop before I collapsed, I found a little shelter behind a huge tree that had clearly fallen at some point. I collapsed down beside it, the wide trunk providing a little shelter from the wind. I curled into myself, laying in the snow, and trying to protect my face from the elements.

It wasn't long before the violent shivers, that had wracked my body for as long as I had been running, stopped and my body became weirdly still. A peace settled over me as things became clouded and distant. The wind around me quietened and all I could think about was my guys. I closed my eyes and found myself laid on the sofa at home, my head rested comfortably on Malik's firm chest, my feet warmly snuggled in West's huge hands on his lap. Gio appeared behind the sofa, leaning over to gently kiss my cheek as he smiled at me with that breathtaking grin. I reached my hand out to where Joel sat on the floor beneath me, running my hand through his soft blonde hair. When he looked up to me with those spectacular ocean blue eyes I smiled contentedly.

"I love you guys so much," I sighed peacefully. Unconsciousness claimed me then, and I didn't care because I was exactly where I'd longed to be - home.

WEST

I ripped the lumpy pillow from beneath my head and tossed it across the room. It was juvenile, but I was just so pissed. It had killed us all to eat dinner with Grace and her husbands, seeing the affection between them all, and feeling the loss of the woman we loved.

The guys had talked through everything with us, about what we had found in the books we took from Arcem and about what we had already done to try and find out who and where the fucker who took Lana could be. Unfortunately, they had no suggestions that we hadn't already thought of, and by the time they invited us to stay the night at their place we were no fucking closer to finding our girl, or even getting a lead on where she was.

I climbed out of the bed and walked across to the large picture window in the guest room Oliver had shown me to. My brothers were in the rooms next door, but I knew none of them were sleeping. I could feel their anxiety as much as I could feel my own. We were all struggling to keep it together enough to function. It was fucking us up not being able to do anything to get Lana back.

I opened the slatted blind on the window and watched the heavy snowfall outside. The thought that Lana would love the view I was looking out over, flitted through my mind. I remembered how much she had loved to watch the snow fall outside our apartment window. She'd have loved to see how beautiful the white looked in that forested area, the way it made the trees glisten with ice.

Knowing it was fruitless, I pulled on my bond with her as I had so many times in the last week, desperate to feel anything there but the silence that had greeted me repeatedly since she was taken. We had fought hard not to accept the fact that the silence could mean we were already too late - that she was gone, but it was getting harder and harder. Surely if she was out there somewhere, we'd feel her in some way?

I buried my face in my hands and took a deep breath, not allowing myself to think about what it would mean for the four of us if we had lost her. It hurt too much to even consider and I refused until the reality of it was in my face and impossible to

deny. Until that moment I was clinging to the hope she was out there, holding on and fighting to get back to us.

I returned to the bed and sat on the edge. I moved to pull on my boots. There was no way I was going to sleep any more. I had my laptop out in the car. I'd get it and continue with my research into Lana's childhood. Maybe it could give us a lead. I hadn't found anything so far, not even a birth certificate, but I wouldn't give up.

I was headed out of the room when the call hit me, like an electric shock rushing through me, then I could feel her – Lana. I could feel pain and fear and her desperate call for us to come to her before it was too late.

I braced myself against the wall, fighting to remain upright as pain ripped through me. Within moments my brothers all appeared before me, coming from the rooms they'd been sleeping in and grimacing through the same pain I was feeling.

"It's her. She's in danger," Joel explained through gritted teeth.

"It's like when Gio called out to us when we were kids. She...fuck...it means we're losing her," Malik ground out.

"We're not fucking losing her!" Gio growled.

"We have to get moving. She's not close. It's going to take time for us to travel there," I pointed out. The call was driving us to get to her and giving us the location. Montana.

"What's going on?" Gabriel appeared in the hallway, Oliver, and Grace behind him.

“Lana. She’s in danger and she’s calling to us. She’s in Montana,” Gio explained. “We have to move. We have to find her.”

Malik walked off down the hall, the pain easing enough for us to function, but the call remaining in the forefront of our minds, pulling us to go to her. He was on his cell, arranging for a private jet to be made ready at the airfield we had arrived at days before.

“We have to go with them, Gabe. You have to help them rescue Lana.” Grace said.

“No. It’s too dangerous to take you with us. We have no idea what they’re going up against, and I’m not leaving you here alone,” Gabriel argued, and I completely understood. I knew my brothers would too. We would feel the same if the roles were reversed and that were Lana.

“He’s right. We can handle this. You guys need to stay here,” Gio agreed.

“No. We need to come with you. I don’t know why, but I feel it. We are supposed to be there,” She argued, determination sparkling in her emerald eyes.

Over dinner they had explained how they met. Grace was a nurse and had met them after Gabriel had been badly injured, during a battle with the Venator, over five years ago. He had been in hospital for a few days and Grace had become rather attached to the three of them, and them to her. They had been together a year before she discovered the truth, when they were attacked by a nest of *Mutatio*, while on a road trip through the Canadian mountains.

Grace wasn't their fifth. She was human, but she accepted what they were - what we all were. Their love may not have been fated by the powers, like our bond with Lana, but that made no odds. She loved them and they loved her. They had made a family and they seemed so happy and content. I was pleased for them, pleased that despite the fact they were unable to complete the Quin destiny had laid out for them, they had found another path to make them complete. I wasn't sure we'd have ever been able to do the same had we not found Lana. Even though we had thought there was zero chance of us ever finding our fifth, we had always held out hope and never committed to relationships in the past because of that hope. We would have gone on that way inevitably without her, I was sure of it. Finding Lana had completed us in a way we never expected and that was why we had to get her back.

“Gabe's right, honey. We have no idea what we're walking into. Whoever took Lana is incredibly powerful,” Joel told her.

“I have been married to these guys for four years. I know the deal and I can handle myself. I don't need your fussing as well as theirs,” She snapped with annoyance.

“Grace...” Oliver started, but she cut him off.

“We're going. Get your shit. I have to change. I'll be downstairs in five.” With that she spun on her heel and disappeared down the hall.

“Fuck!” Oliver hissed.

“You don't need to...” Gio began, but Gabe just shook his head, stopping whatever he was about to say.

“We do. When she gets these feelings nothing will stop her,” he explained.

“And we don’t argue because she’s always right,” Oliver added. “If she thinks we need to be there, then we do.”

“You think she has some kind of gift? Like she’s psychic?” Joel asked.

“Something like that,” Gabe shrugged, then turned to Oliver. “Wake Henry and get your shit. Downstairs in five minutes,” He turned to me. “You guys have transport handled?”

“Malik’s on it. He’ll get a private charter.”

“Meet you in five then.” I nodded and watched as the guys disappeared to where ever Grace had gone.

I felt for the link with Lana again and was both relieved to feel something there this time, but terrified by how weak and filled with fear and pain that connection was. We were losing her. We had to get to her. I needed her back where she belonged – safe in my arms.

LANA

“Lana? Come on, wake up!” The sharp shaking of my body dragged me from the warm, comfortable darkness I had been enveloped in, and back to my freezing cold, painful reality.

My entire body was aching and my head pounded, rattled further by the insistent shaking that just wouldn't stop.

“Fuck Lana, open your eyes right now!” a deep voice growled. I forced my heavy eyes open, needing to know who was near me, but they would only open for the briefest second before they were dragging closed once again, reality slipping from beneath me.

“Damn it! What were you thinking? So fucking stubborn!” the voice grumbled as I felt warmth slide beneath me, then I was moving - being lifted from the wet ground, I realized. Warmth surrounded me and I cuddled into it, hoping, with my last thought, that it was one of my guys who held me; that they had come for me, finally.

CHAPTER 5

LANA

Consciousness came and went for a while. I would get a sense of being back in reality, and I could hear a voice above me, but my eyes remained heavy and tough to open. Even when they did open, it was for a moment or two at most and I was dazed and confused. Slipping back into sleep, where my guys always awaited me, seemed so much easier.

Then the nightmares came. One scene playing out after the other, all memories of times when Ted or Joy, or both of them, had torn my frail body apart over and over again. When my most played nightmare, of the night I was attacked on the streets just before I met my Quin, burst into my subconscious unbidden, I forced myself to wake.

I sat up, gasping for breath and looked around frantically, hoping more than I'd ever wanted anything in my life that I'd be back home in the guy's apartment.

"Hey, it's okay. You're alright now." I looked to the voice and couldn't hide my disappointment when I found Noah sat on a dining chair beside the bed, not one of the men I loved. I looked behind him and realized I was in the room I had been sleeping in at the cabin. Noah must have found me in the woods and brought me back.

I returned my gaze to Noah and noted the way he was reaching a hand out toward me, as though he wanted to comfort me, but daren't actually touch me.

"You...you came after me." It wasn't really a question since it was obvious he had. I took a deep breath and tried to

gain back control of my breathing.

“What were you doing out there? It’s dangerous... and the weather...you should never have been out there,” he scolded - his thoughts, as usual, all coming out in one burst of words.

“I was trying to find a way to get home. I’ve told you, Noah. I can’t stay here. We can’t. Apart from anything else, there’s only enough food to last us a couple of months at the most,” I explained as calmly as I could.

“We have to stay here. We’re not safe anywhere else.”

“We would be safe with my Quin. They can protect us. I have to go back to them. I love them.”

“No. I’ll get us food. We’ll be alright if we just stay here... stay safe.”

He moved to stand, but I reached out and grabbed his hand, stopping him. As soon as our hands connected I felt the way he was shaking, and I realized for the first time just how terrified he was. That was why he was so determined to stay there, because he was petrified he would be taken back to where I had found him, taken back to the monsters who had tried to break him.

I looked up into his blue eyes and read all of the fear they held. It hit me then, and suddenly all of his behavior – his outbursts and unpredictability made sense. I had known he was worried about us being safe before, but I stupidly hadn’t realized just how terrified he was. He was traumatized more than I had realized and I felt terrible for ever being scared of him. I should have thought more about it all. If anyone should understand fear and trauma, it should have been me, but I

hadn't. Instead I had gone into my autopilot reaction of self-defense.

“You're not alone any longer, Noah. We're a team now, right? We're stronger than anyone we could come across together, aren't we? That's what you told me. We have the strongest gift for centuries.”

“Not yet. I have to restore our bond and give you back your part of the gift.”

“Then we do that. We restore our bond,” I leaned forward, despite the pain every tiny movement caused to shoot through my aching muscles, wrapping my other hand around his so it was encased tightly in my grip. “I'm your sister, Noah. I didn't know about you before, but now that I do I am never going to let anything happen to you again. I'm going to protect you and my Quin will too. We're not alone.”

“I...I have to protect you...mom made me promise,” he whispered, tears filling his eyes.

“You will. You already are, but it can work both ways now. I can protect you too. Everything you went through, it's over. You're here and you're strong. Together we're even stronger. We have to prove that. We have to be brave and take our lives back, otherwise we let them win. You told me that we're strong enough to defeat every last one of them, so let's do that.”

“Alina and Khai were strong enough. I don't know if we are,” he corrected, referring to the last set of Vis twins that he had told me about a few days before.

“We won’t know until we try. Give me back my gift, Noah, and restore our bond.” I urged. He looked unsure for a few moments and I opened my mouth to further try and convince him. I stopped when he took one of my hands and encompassed it in his. As we sat, hands clasped, facing each other, he closed his eyes and went silent.

A gasp burst from me as I was hit with a rush of force that would have knocked me back, had Noah not held my hands. It was like a heat that raced through every inch of my body and with it came memories.

First, of a tall woman with wild blond hair and kind grey eyes. I felt her wrapping her arms tight around me and then saw her smiling lovingly to Noah and I, as she stood in a tiny kitchen mixing something in a bowl. There were also images of men. Four different men – our dads’, I recalled - playing soccer with me and Noah in a large green yard, and memories of them tucking us both into matching twin beds in a dragon themed bedroom. I relived loving kisses and warm hugs, smells of cinnamon and citrus surrounding me. And memories of Noah came next. I saw so many images of him and I playing together, and of happy times snuggled on the sofa watching movies. I felt my love for him, and for the parents I hadn’t known for so many years.

Then the horror of that last day came back, images of monsters ripping flesh from my dads’, me clinging to Noah and sobbing as blood rained down around us. I watched on, screaming as one of my dads’, obviously Paulo, sent a huge ball of fire at two of my other dads’ who were trying to shield us, killing them both instantly.

“Don’t look La-la,” Noah said as he wrapped his arms even tighter around me and buried my head against his tiny shoulder. We were so young, but I could feel the love I had for him, rushing over me like a tidal wave.

“Noah, go! Get out of here!” Our mom screaming was the last thing I heard before the memories receded and I was back in the room with Noah, my hands still clutched in his.

“You used to call me La-la,” I whispered, then the floodgates opened and sobs burst from me. Noah released my hands and wrapped his arms around me, and I went happily, needing the comfort of the brother I now remembered from so many years ago. He was still so foreign to me, after so many years apart, but it also just felt so right to be in his arms. Too much time had been torn from us, but I had him back now and I intended to make up for that time.

“Can you feel it?” he asked as we pulled apart from the hug.

“Yes,” I replied instantly. Our bond was different to the one I had with my guys. With them I could sense the way they were feeling and when we were apart it gave me a longing to be back near them unlike anything I had ever known. With Noah it was more of a physical link between us, like there was an invisible line holding us together no matter how far apart we were. I couldn’t sense his feelings as strongly as I could my guys, but I could still feel them and I had this warmth telling me he was safe. I guessed it would also tell me if that changed.

“You will need to practice using our gift. It takes time to master it,” he explained. I nodded, not in any great rush to learn how to use it anyway. The thought of manipulating other gifts or abilities terrified me.

“I will. You can teach me.”

“How are you feeling? You barely had a pulse when I found you.”

“I’m a little achy and my heads pounding, but otherwise I’m good. I’m sorry I ran from you.”

“Why did you? Are you scared of me?” he asked.

“I was, “ I admitted. “I know it doesn’t compare to what you went through, but I had a pretty tough childhood. It’s made me very distrustful of people I don’t know and when I got back and saw how angry you were...I just panicked and ran.”

“I’d never hurt you, Lana. I know I’m messed up. I tried... really tried to keep a part of me...to not allow them to destroy me, but it was so long...so many years.” He looked down, his whole body slumping in defeat and I hated it.

“Hey, “ I placed my hands either side of his face and pulled it up until his eyes met mine. “You are not messed up. You went through something messed up, but you came out of the other side. You’re strong,” I told him firmly. “And I know now that you would never hurt me. I remember you Noah – I remember who you are, how good and brave you are. I remember the way you always protected me even when we were tiny kids. I see the way you have fought to protect me now. I see you.” He wrapped his arms around me again and clung on so tight I could barely breathe, but I went with it, knowing he needed the comfort. How many years had it been since he had known kindness and safety?

“I’m scared, Lana, “ he whimpered, as deep sobs shook the both of us. “I ca...can’t go back there. I won’t survive again.”

“You’re never going back there. I won’t allow it to happen. We won’t. We’re going to destroy anyone who ever tries to take you or me ever again. It’s them who should be afraid, Noah.”

I held him for some time, allowing him to just cry. He needed to let it all go and I fully understood that. It was what I had done in the shower, the first night after Joel and West found me.

I guessed it was around twenty minutes later when he sat back and wiped at his red, blotchy face. His eyes were red too, but he looked a little lighter and he even forced a small smile for me.

“I don’t want you to think you have a sap for a brother. I don’t...this isn’t like me. I haven’t cried since I was a kid,” he told me, looking a little embarrassed.

“Well I do cry, a lot. I’m a complete emotional wreck, so I guess we might balance each other out,” I laughed, and I was relieved when he smiled.

“Thank the powers you have a Quin. I wouldn’t have a clue what to do if you start crying on me,” he joked, and I loved seeing him smile again.

“So we can go back and find them?” I asked hopefully.

“We can,” he agreed. “You’re right. Hiding here means the Venator win and we can’t allow that. We’re strong, too strong to cower and hide,” he agreed, though I heard the slight quiver in his voice. He was still terrified, but he was being so strong and I was proud of him.

“We are strong, and once you teach me to use our gift, we’re going to annihilate any Venator who dares to come near us,” I agreed.

“You need to rest for tonight. If you’re feeling strong enough tomorrow, I’ll teach you how we teleport and you can take us to your Quin.”

“Why can’t you take us now?”

“We can only teleport to places we’ve been before. I don’t know if anywhere I’ve been before is safe enough for us right now, so you’ll have to take us to the home of your Quin. We’ll be safe there, will we?”

“Yes,” I said vehemently. “The guys will keep us safe.”

“Good. Okay. Tomorrow,” he agreed, convincing himself more than me. “I’ll heat some soup. You need to eat...and you should change. I took off your wet clothes, but...well I just shoved you under the blankets then.” He stood, his face bright red, and I realized he was embarrassed about stripping me down to my panties and the t-shirt I still wore.

“Thank you for coming after me and for taking care of me,” I told him, before he could leave the room.

“You don’t need to thank me...I’m your twin. I’ll always take care of you.”

He was gone before I could promise him the same. I listened as he pounded down the stairs, then I slid from the bed. My legs were shaky beneath me and my entire body

ached like I'd done a triathlon, but I forced myself up and over to the closet, to find some more clothes from the selection that had once belonged to my mom. I pulled on a pair of black jeans, which were way too long, and a red sweater with the name of some sports team emblazoned across the front.

Once I was in the bathroom I brushed my teeth, then brushed out my hair, pulling it up into a messy bun. My face was pale and I had very obviously lost weight over the last week. I looked gaunt.

The stress had kept my appetite away, and I knew the guys would be pissed if they saw I had undone all of their good work. Resolved to do better until I got back to them the next day, I headed down to the kitchen to eat whatever Noah had prepared. Tomorrow I would be home with my guys, and Noah would be there with us too, safe. I couldn't wait.

“Take a seat. I made soup...some kind of broth,” Noah shrugged as he studied the pan on the stove, as if trying to work out what was in it. Some of the cans in the pantry had labels that were badly faded so you couldn't work out what was in them. We'd had a few mystery meals in the week – well Noah had anyway. I'd mainly avoided food for the most part.

He poured the broth into two bowls and placed one down before me, as he took the other and sat opposite.

“Thanks. It smells pretty good, “ I told him as I picked up the spoon he had laid out on the table.

I laughed as Noah started to speed eat his own bowl of soup, just as he had every meal we'd eaten since we arrived there. He was still way too thin and pale, but he seemed to have a little more energy than he'd had when we first arrived.

I was just lifting my first spoonful to my lips when a shock like sensation shot through me, making me drop my spoon.

“What the hell was that?” I gasped as I looked to Noah, but he was already on his feet and racing across the room to the window which faced the front of the cabin.

“Stay back. Someone is outside. That was a warning that somebody passed through the cloaking on the house,” Noah explained in hushed tones, as he pulled the curtains back to look out.

I shot to my feet and ran over to him, pulling him back from the window.

“They’ll see you!” I hissed, terrified.

“The building is cloaked. No one can see it or us unless we allow them to,” he reminded me. “We should be safe.”

“Should be?” I questioned.

“The only being who can get past the cloak is someone with our power, but it’s unlikely that the Venator have anything that strong.”

“And if they do?”

“Then we have to teleport out of here right now and hope somewhere I can take us is safe,” he sighed as he returned to the window and looked out again.

“Teach me how to do it now, and we can go straight to my Quin,” I pushed.

“We don’t have enough time. I have an idea of where I can take us temporarily if it comes to it,” he assured me.

“Can you see them out there?” I asked.

“No, but I can feel one of them. Someone is trying to read my mind or my emotions. I’m blocking them, but they’re strong.” I gasped when he said emotions and shoved him aside to get to the window, looking out and hoping I was right. For several moments I couldn’t see anything but the snow covered forest I had been trekking through earlier, but then I heard it, someone calling my name.

“LANA!” There was no mistaking the way Malik said my name with his unusual mixed accent, or the pissed off tone I heard in that one word.

“It’s my Quin!” I cried excitedly as I ran for the door, but Noah grabbed my arm, stopping me.

“You don’t know that. It could be a trap,” he warned as fear shone in his eyes.

“It’s them, Noah. I know their voices. That was Malik,” I assured him.

“Just wait. Let’s just watch a little longer to be completely sure...please.”

The 'please' did it and I agreed. If he needed a minute or two more to see it really was Vis and not Venator coming for us, I could give him that, even if I was fit to burst with excitement to see my guys.

"LANA!" The yell came from West this time and I raced back to the window and looked out just as he appeared, around twelve feet from the cabin. He was wearing his puffer coat and the green beanie I bought him when I was out shopping with Malik a few weeks before.

"That's West. He has enhanced strength and speed. When he uses his gift he can move so fast he disappears," I explained happily, pointing him out to Noah. "And there's Malik."

I pointed as Malik walked toward West, dressed in a thick grey wool coat, with a black scarf wrapped around his neck, and a matching black, wool hat on his head.

"His gift?" Noah prompted.

"He's...what did he call it...telekinetic!" I cried victoriously, remembering the word.

"Really?" Noah asked. I nodded and he looked out at Malik again. "That's a rare gift. He must be powerful,"

Malik and West were talking now, and looking all around them, clearly pissed that they weren't finding me.

"I should go to them. They're worried," I pointed out, desperate to run to them and to be in their arms.

“Where are the others?” Noah questioned, still looking scared and on his guard.

“They’re out there. It’s definitely them, Noah. Please...I need to go to them. I...I miss them so much,” I admitted, praying he heard the desperation in my voice.

“Okay, but we go together and you keep hold of my hand. If I feel any danger I’m getting us out of there right away.”

“Fine, but there won’t be danger. We’re safe with them, I promise.”

Noah nodded and moved over to the door. He handed me the huge overcoat I’d had on earlier and I shrugged it on as fast as I could, even though it was still soaking wet. Noah bent and pulled on a heavy pair of boots, which he’d found in a closet upstairs a few days before, and I slid into my wet sneakers. He grabbed a thinner anorak, which had been in another closet, and pulled it on.

“They’ll see us and the cabin as soon as we open the door,” he explained. “I know you want to run to them but... please just promise to stay with me and hold my hand until we’re completely sure...please.” He was practically begging and I knew how scared he was.

“I promise. I’m not going to let anything happen to you, Noah.” I wrapped my arms around his waist and gave him a quick hug, hoping to soothed his frayed nerves a little.

Noah nodded once again, then took my hand in his and opened the door of the cabin. Malik and West, who were still

stood directly in front of us, looked up at once and my eyes met theirs.

“Lana!” Malik cried, and they both started running toward me. I wanted to run too, but I could feel how hard Noah was trembling beside me, and the way he was clutching my hand so hard he was likely restricting blood flow. I had to do as I’d promised and stay beside him until he felt safer.

“Lana!” Joel’s voice came from closer and when I turned to my right I saw him running from around the corner of the cabin. Gio was on his heels and the closer they all got to the cabin; the harder Noah shook. His breathing was fast and panicked and I knew he was losing it.

“Guys stop!” I cried loudly and I was relieved when they all stopped close to the foot of the steps up to the porch.

“What’s going on, *bella*? Are you alright? Are you hurt?” Gio asked all at once as all four of them studied me hard.

“I’m good. I’m not hurt.” I assured them.

“Who the fuck is he?” West growled, he and Malik looking to Noah with nothing but murder planned in their eyes.

“Has he hurt you?” Joel asked, as he looked to where my hand was squeezed in Noah’s.

“I wouldn’t...never hurt you.” Noah whispered, as he looked to me for the briefest second, then shot his gaze back to the guys, watching their every tiny move.

“I know, Noah. It’s okay,” I assured him.

“Why can’t I feel my bond with you?” Joel asked, as though he had just realized. I looked to Noah, but he wasn’t moving his eyes from the guys. For the first time I realized he had likely been blocking my bond with all of them since he took me a week before. I would have been angry, but I knew it was just his way of trying to keep us safe.

“Noah is blocking it.” I replied, fully ready to expand on that, but the guys didn’t give me chance. In the blink of an eye West disappeared before us and I felt him grab me, tearing me from Noah’s grip. Another blink and I found myself being lowered to my feet, as arms wrapped around me tightly. I looked up and found myself at the foot of the steps in Joel’s hold, as Malik used his gift to sweep Noah from his feet. Gio formed a huge ball of fire in his hand and I screamed.

“NO!” I ripped myself from Joel’s grip, and ran toward Noah, but he was already back on his feet and holding his hand out before him. The ball of fire disappeared from Gio’s hand and Malik started yelling.

“He’s blocking our gifts! Grab Lana and get the fuck out of here!” The guys all started running toward me so I turned and held my hands out to them.

“Guys, just stop!” I cried, but before I could see if they’d actually listened Noah was scooping me up and running back into the cabin. He slammed the door closed and leaned against it as he placed me on my feet and tried to grab my hand.

“No! Noah, we’re not leaving,” I gasped as the guys started to hammer on the door into the cabin.

“We’re not safe!” he cried breathlessly.

“We are. They just don’t know the whole story. I need time to explain things to them. They think you took me and they’re just trying to protect me,” I explained frantically. Even without their gifts the guys were strong and Noah was barely keeping the door in place with his weak body.

“I won’t let you get hurt...not this time,” he growled as he fought to hold the door.

“I won’t be hurt. Just...maybe keep blocking their gifts while I explain things, okay?” I suggested, then I turned to the door, worried if the guys got their gifts back, they’d take Noah out instantly.

“Guys, stop right now!” I yelled, losing my patience with them. If they’d just stop to listen and stop being such Neanderthals!

Thankfully the banging stopped and Noah finally allowed himself to take a breath.

“Thank fuck!” I whispered, the situation warranting the use of a curse word I usually avoided. “Right, listen to me please,” I yelled.

“Lana, open this fucking door!” West growled.

“I will, if you listen to me,” I snapped back. “We’ll let you in, but you can’t hurt Noah or try to take me from him.”

“Like fuck! He’s blocking our fucking gifts!” Malik raged.

“He is and I’ve told him to continue doing it until you actually listen to me!”

“What’s going on, Lana?” Joel asked, sounding calmer than the others.

“Noah is my brother. He won’t hurt me or you, and I need you to agree you won’t hurt him either before I let you in here.”

“Your brother?” Malik repeated at the same time as Joel spoke.

“We won’t hurt him. Just let us in, honey.”

“Malik?” I pushed, wanting his agreement before I allowed them in.

“If he’s your brother we’re not going to fucking hurt him.” he grumbled.

“As long as he hasn’t hurt you,” West added.

“He hasn’t,” I assured them. I looked to Noah and hated how pale and shaky he looked. After everything he’d been through he didn’t need all of this.

“It’s all going to be alright,” I assured him as I wrapped my arms around his waist and hugged him tight. He seemed to settle a little, taking comfort from our hug. I took comfort from it too, feeling safe in his arms. It wasn’t like the safety I got from my guys. More like the embrace of a favorite blanket

or the comfort of being in a safe place. Noah was a safe place I had forgotten for twenty years, but now I had him back and I was so grateful for that.

CHAPTER 6

LANA

“Malik, what’s going on?” The foreign voice had me pausing and pulling away from my brother to listen outside. That voice I just heard wasn’t one of my guys.

“What’s wrong?” Noah asked in hushed tones.

“Our gifts are blocked. Lana’s in there and she says that fucker is her brother.” West growled.

“Well our gifts aren’t fucking blocked.” Another voice I didn’t recognize declared.

“Who is that out there with you guys?” I yelled, anxiety creeping up inside me. I trusted my Quin, but I couldn’t understand who they had brought with them.

Noah already had my hand in his and I knew he was itching to get us out of there, but I held my hand out to stop him, waiting for the reply from my Quin.

“Step back, Mal!” The second strange voice demanded and I really got mad. Noah had been through too much and I would not let him be hurt or scared any more than my guys already had.

“Malik, I swear if you do anything else to break into here before I let you in, Noah and I are going to disappear again,” I yelled, being more forceful than I had ever been in my life. “I already told you I’m safe in here. Just listen to me for once.”

There was silence for a few moments, then I heard footsteps on the porch outside.

“I’m sorry, love. We’re all being idiots and not listening, but it’s been over a week and we really thought we’d lost you. We’ve been losing our minds. I promise we won’t hurt your brother. Please, just let us in so we can see for ourselves you really are safe,” Gio pleaded more calmly.

“You still haven’t told me who is out there with you,” I prompted.

“They’re not going to hurt you. They’re the other Vis. The guys we were training with when Arcem was attacked,” he explained.

Okay, that made sense. The guys must have gone to the other Vis for help when they couldn’t find me. I took a deep breath and looked to Noah, nodding that I felt it was safe. He nodded too, but refused to let go of my hand.

Understanding his fear after the way my Quin had behaved, I allowed him the comfort of holding my hand as I unlocked the door, opening it just a sliver. As the guys flooded in I led Noah across the room and to a chair at the dining table where he had his back to a wall and could see them all before him. I was relieved when he sat, but he kept a hold of my hand.

When I looked up my guys were before me, watching Noah and I with confusion and suspicion.

“Jesus, he really is your brother,” Joel sighed as he looked between Noah and I.

“He is. He’s my twin.”

“Bullshit! Twin’s don’t exist amongst the Vis,” a deep voice growled, and the three strange guys stepped forward beside my Quin, a tall red headed woman nestled protectively between them.

“Gabe. Watch your tone!” she scolded, looking up at the tallest of the three with a frown. “Sorry about him,” she added as she looked to me with a hesitant smile.

“He’s right though. There haven’t been Vis twins for centuries,” Joel agreed.

“Which is why we didn’t grow up on Arcem,” I explained. “Our parents knew we’d be powerful, and worried the Vis council would take us from them to be used as weapons. They hid us in the human world.”

“Then how did you end up with those psychos you grew up with?” West asked.

“The Venator found us and killed our fathers’. Noah tried to hide me to keep me safe, but I was scared and I came out of the hiding place. The Venator found me and gave me to Ted and Joy,” I told them as I recalled the memories for the first time.

“Why? Why wouldn’t they just kill you?” Malik asked.

“Me,” Noah spoke up, his voice shaking and unsure. “They needed both of us...for us to fully use our gift, we both...it takes both of us. They got me a year later, but they were too scared to put us together...scared we’d take them out, so they kept me to use, and left Lana where she was in case they needed her later.”

“The venator have had Noah for almost twenty years. They almost killed him in an attempt to summon me, after they lost me when I ran from Joy,” I added.

“What do you mean? How did they summon you?” Gio asked.

“Noah and I, we have a bond too. It’s different to our bond, but it means we’re linked and when he almost died it brought me to him. We can...like teleport? Is that the right term?” I looked to Noah and he shrugged. “Something like that anyway. When Noah was bleeding out, it brought me to him and as soon as he saw me, he grabbed me and teleported us out of there and to here. He was trying to keep us safe.” I looked pointedly to the guys, begging them to try and understand what Noah had been through.

They were quiet for several moments and I could see them all thinking and taking in everything I’d told them. I decided to give them their moment and looked to Noah. He was still shaking, but he looked a little calmer.

“I’m going to make some coffee, okay?” I told him, slipping my hand from his grip. More than anything I wanted to run to my guys, but I was a little pissed with them too, and I knew I needed everything to be calm before I gave in. Noah was still terrified.

“I’ll help,” he said, but he allowed me to have my hand back. I headed for the kitchen and Noah was right behind me, his hand at the small of my back defensively.

I shrugged off the huge coat I wore and laid it over a chair as I passed my guys.

“Sit down. I’ll make coffee,” I told them.

“We don’t want coffee, Lana. We want to take you home,” Malik argued, looking at me like he was desperate to sweep me up and carry me away.

“Well right now Noah doesn’t trust you, and after your behavior out there I can’t say I blame him. You should have just listened to me,” I told them, my annoyance clear to see and hear.

“You were taken from us, Lana, and our bond was just gone. We thought you were fucking dead!” Malik cried as he collapsed down into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

“It’s been a tough week, baby girl,” West added. “We’re all wound pretty tight.”

Noah seemed calmer as he busied himself making coffee so I left him to it and went to Malik, hating how broken he looked. I put my hand on his shoulder and he looked up at me, his eyes glassy with tears. He was pale, the stubble on his face way thicker than I’d ever seen it. He looked exhausted.

“I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere,” I assured him. He wrapped his arms around my waist and buried his face against my stomach, holding me tight.

“I can’t lose you. I told you that,” he whispered.

“You’re not going to.” He looked up at me again and I leaned in and placed a kiss on his lips. “I missed you so much,” I told him. Then I looked up and reached out a hand to Joel, who was closest to me. He took my hand in his and brought it up to his lips, kissing my knuckles softly. “I missed you all so damn much,” I told them as tears filled my eyes.

“We missed you too, beautiful,” West said as he leaned in and kissed the top of my head. Gio stepped over and took me in his arms, pulling me from Malik’s grip.

“Never leave us again,” he whispered as he leaned in and kissed me with a passion that consumed me for those few moments. Knowing we had an audience, and worried about Noah I pulled back, way before I wanted to.

I returned to the kitchen, seeing Noah had stopped with the coffee and was watching us, wringing his hands nervously.

“It’s okay. They’re not going to hurt us,” I assured him as I pulled mugs from the cabinet above my head. Clumsily, I dropped one, squeaking as it plummeted toward the floor. Noah reached out and caught it, once again surprising me with his lightning reflexes.

“Good catch!” I told him with a smile as he placed it down on the counter.

“You fucker!” one of the strangers yelled and when I looked up I saw all three of them charging our way, glares on their faces. “You’re blocking our gifts too!”

“Henry...” Gio stepped in front of them, presumably referring to the one who was yelling.

“I moved to catch the cup with a little air, but there’s nothing,” Henry went on.

“I don’t know you and neither does my sister. I don’t trust you,” Noah told them bluntly.

“Everyone just calm down,” I yelled as I pushed Noah behind me.

“I agree. You guys are being ridiculous. There’s no threat here right now, so what does it matter if you can’t use your gifts? You don’t need them,” the red head agreed as she grabbed at the shirt of the guy Gio had called Henry and tried to pull him back.

“I don’t know or trust this motherfucker. He’s held their fifth captive for the last week. I’d feel a fuck ton better if I had my gift to stop him doing the same to you,” the tallest one growled.

“Gabe, stop being ridiculous. Lana just explained what happened,” the redhead snapped, clearly annoyed.

“Grace...” Gabe growled, but she just stared him down until he closed his mouth.

“Let’s just take a seat and take it down a few notches, shall we?” she said, and I couldn’t help the smile that crept across my face when they all acquiesced and did as they were told. I filled six mugs with coffee and moved to hand them out as

Noah set to work making a second pot. Malik and Gio were sat at the table with the four strangers, while West and Joel were leaned against the wall at the back of the room.

“We should make some introductions,” Grace declared. “I’m Grace and these are my husbands, Henry, Gabriel, and Oliver. I’d like to say they’re not usually quite such big assholes, but I’m not sure you’d be convinced right now.”

“Lana. And it’s all good. I’m getting used to the whole caveman side these guys seem to have,” I told her, looking to my own over-protective crazies. “And my brother is Noah,” I added, nodding to where he was struggling to make coffee without turning his back to the guys.

“I’m happy you’re safe, hun,” she told me with a smile.

Noah and I worked quietly for a few more minutes to make more coffee until everyone had a cup. When we were done Oliver stood and offered his chair to Noah, insisting he sat and I was relieved when he did, worried about how pale he looked.

“Joel, maybe you could take a look at Noah? He was stabbed and we’ve done the best we can to keep the wounds clean and dressed, but they aren’t healing as fast as I’d like.”

“Stabbed?” Gabe repeated with a look of shock.

“I’m good,” Noah whispered, his eyes flitting from me to Joel with worry.

“I’d like to take a look if you’ll allow me? I’m a qualified MD and I can heal you too. You must still be in a lot of pain?” Joel offered kindly.

“Please Noah. I’m worried about you,” I pleaded.

“Later,” Noah insisted. “Maybe.” I looked to Joel and smiled a little, thanking him for trying.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” Gabriel spoke up, once again looking to Noah with accusation.

“Gabriel,” Grace whispered, but he wouldn’t be quieted and I watched as Noah looked up and met Gabriel’s eyes.

“Yes,” he whispered in reply.

“What was you? What’s he talking about?” I asked Noah.

“Arcem. The attack. He can block gifts. I’m betting he can remove cloaking too. He helped them to find our home and block our gifts. He’s the reason we lost everyone and everything,” Gabriel hissed bitterly. Malik and Gio jumped up from their seats, the wooden chairs crashing to the ground behind them as West and Joel stepped forward too. I instantly put myself between them and Noah, but Noah stood and tried to push me aside.

“It’s okay. They should be pissed. They’re right. I cost them everything,” he told me defeatedly.

“Why? Why would you do that to your own people? Why would you stand back and help them kill innocent people? Women and tiny fucking kids?” Joel cried as I fought to stay between the men I loved and my brother.

“Guys, please. Just let him explain!” I pleaded as Noah tried to move me once again. West was right before me now and he grabbed my arm, trying to pull me away from Noah.

“Nothing can explain what he did!” Henry raged and when I turned I saw they were also all on their feet and glaring daggers at my brother. “Without him they’d have had no chance. He got everyone killed.”

“He’s right, Lana. My parents, my baby sister, everyone I ever knew was wiped out with his help...because of him!” West ground out as he tried to pull me away.

“Noah, please!” I cried, turning to him, and shrugging off West’s grip. Tears were running down my face and I was pleading with him with my eyes to tell them everything. I didn’t know why he did it, but I knew he was a good person, knew he would never have done any of that willingly. “Tell them everything...tell them why.”

“It doesn’t matter. They’re right. Without me it would never have happened. It was my fault and I...I’ve had to live with it all these years. They should get to kill me. I deserve it.” He looked so completely broken and it was killing me. I loved my guys and I completely understood why they were so angry, but there was no way I was going to allow them to hurt Noah.

“No!” I yelled. “You don’t get to give up. Tell me why you did it, damn it! Tell me now!” I shoved at him as tears ran down my face and sobs burst from me.

“I didn’t want to do it.” He gasped as he just cowered and allowed me to shove him over and over.

“I know you didn’t, so just tell me why!” I cried, relieved the guys had all stopped their advance and were paused just watching on and listening.

Noah landed against the wall with my last shove, then collapsed down to the floor, pulling his knees up into his chest and he curled into himself tightly.

“I was drugged...they used chemicals to keep me out of it...keep me from using my gift against them. It made me loopy...and then there was Hex...he could create illusions...make me doubt what was real and what wasn’t. I was so fucked up, and I...I was just a kid...I didn’t know.”

He was crying, his body trembling as hard as it had been out on the porch, once again. I fell to my haunches before him, trying to keep the pain from my face as it shot through my still swollen and messed up knee. I put my hands on his thighs, trying to soothe him. He looked up at me, tears flooding down his face. “I was in a room with you...at least...I ...I thought it was you. You were so real...and they...they were hurting you. I used my gifts...used them to remove cloaks they placed to hide you...then I blocked their gifts to stop them fr-from hurting you anymore. You were crying and screaming for me...I was so scared. I th-thought I was saving you. I didn’t know...they took me to Arcem...used Hex to make me think I was...was saving you, but I was doing exactly what they needed. Afterwards they sh-showed me what I’d done...made me walk around that place...the bodies...the l-little, tiny fucking kids!” he looked up at the guys. “I’m so s-sorry. I didn’t mean to...I didn’t know. I just...I wanted to save Lana.”

“Sshh.” I soothed as I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him against me. He was sobbing so hard his entire body shook and I was crying too, for every awful thing those monsters had done to my flesh and blood. I didn’t know who this Hex was, but he was dead if I ever came across him. I

looked up to where the seven guys towered over us, looking on with a mix of horror and anger. It was Joel who approached after a couple of minutes. He knelt on the floor beside me and placed a hand gently on Noah's shoulder.

“Noah, none of that was your fault, man. What those fuckers did to you; the way they used your gifts, it was all on them. We don't blame you for any of what happened and you can't blame yourself either,” he said softly. Noah took a deep breath and pulled out of my arms, sitting up and looking at Joel.

“I'm so sorry,” he whispered as he tried to compose himself a little.

“Don't apologize anymore, please. I already feel like shit for everything I said. Joel's right. None of this was on you, bro. They fucking used you,” West agreed.

“They're right, Noah. You can't hold onto guilt for any of that or anything else those monsters made you do,” I agreed as I reached out and took hold of his hand.

“So much for me not being a sap of a brother, huh?” he rasped, and I knew he was changing the subject because he wasn't ready to admit none of that responsibility laid with him, but that was okay. I'd just have to work on convincing him. For the moment I was just relieved to see he'd stopped crying and shaking. He sat up and wiped at his face.

“How about you allow me to take a look at those wounds now, okay?” Joel asked, and I was relieved when Noah nodded and took the offered hand. Joel pulled him to his feet and they headed off upstairs to one of the bedrooms, Joel sending me a wink of reassurance before he disappeared from my sight.

“Fuck!” Malik growled as soon as Noah was out of earshot.

“You guys can’t do that to him. He’s been through hell,” I hissed as I took a seat at the dining table, my whole body shaking beneath me. “He has more scars than I do. They tore him apart, for years. He can’t handle you attacking him like that.”

“I’m so sorry, baby. We didn’t know,” West soothed as he took the seat beside me and wrapped his arms around me.

“Well, now you do,” I countered as I gave in and wrapped my arms around his neck, holding him as I had needed since the moment I was taken.

“You’re shaking?” he pointed out.

“I’m tired. I spent the last week trying to keep Noah alive and calm, and trying to find a way to get back to you guys. It’s been a tough week for me too,” I explained.

“You’ve lost weight too, and you’re way too pale,” Gio added. I looked over West’s shoulder to glare at him.

“Just keep throwing those compliments my way, please Gio,” I growled.

“You know I didn’t mean it like that, love. We’re just worried about you,” he went on, and I gave in and snuggled back into West.

“What happened? We found you because the bond called out to us. You were in danger. We were losing you,” Malik asked, studying my face as he spoke.

“I was outside, in the snow. It’s a long story, but I guess I got dangerously cold,” I explained vaguely.

“What the fuck?” West growled as he held me even tighter.

“It all worked out. Noah found me and warmed me up,” I assured them.

“You do realize how much danger Noah and Lana are in right now, don’t you? They’re fucking twins. Last time Vis twins existed the Venator were almost completely wiped out,” Gabriel spoke up and I could have punched him if I had the energy. There was enough tension in the place, without him pointing out the obvious.

“Of course we fucking realize!” Malik snapped.

“The Venator obviously know they exist. They’ll send everything they have to either get them back, or destroy them,” Oliver added.

“That’s not going to happen,” Gio ground out.

“Gio’s right. The Venator are scared for a reason. They’re scared because they know Noah and I have the power to kick their asses into oblivion. If they come for us, then that’s exactly what we’ll do,” I declared, sitting up, wanting this conversation to be over before Noah returned.

“You’re not even twenty-five yet. You don’t have your full gifts, and no offence, but the pair of you look as though a strong wind would take you out,” Henry flippantly remarked, pissing me off. I got to my feet and glared at him as I pointed an accusing finger.

“You have no idea what Noah and I are capable of, no one does, but I’ll tell you this – after the bullshit hand life has dealt the both of us, we are a hell of a lot stronger than we look. We survived to this point and we will get through whatever comes next.” I was almost growling at Henry and the other two men who were clearly agreeing with him.

“She’s right,” Malik agreed. “And whatever they face next they won’t be alone. We’ll be right there with them.” He stood too and walked over, pulling me into a half hug. I happily buried my face into his sweater and took in his comforting, familiar smell.

It had been a tough hour and I knew whatever lay ahead was only going to get harder, but for the moment I was safe amongst the men I loved. My brother was being taken care of. We were safe. I felt I should make the most of that while it lasted.

CHAPTER 8

NOAH

I was still struggling to get my shit together as I led the way upstairs with Lana's Quin member – Joel – following close behind me.

I shouldn't have lost it the way I did, but facing the family of so many people who I had helped to destroy, was the thing to break that last thread of sanity I had been clinging to for so many years.

I still couldn't believe I was breathing. I was so sure they were going to kill me and I wouldn't have even fought them. I deserved it. The guilt of what I had been manipulated into doing that day was my greatest pain. So many Lives lost – innocent lives – because of me. The guilt of it had eaten me up since the day it happened, and if those bastards who had held and tortured me, had given an opportunity I'd have allowed the guilt to end me, for good, years ago.

But I'd never had that opportunity, and now there I was, with the loved ones of all of the people I had killed, and they were telling me it wasn't my fault. I didn't believe them. I'd never believe the blood of that massacre wasn't on my hands. It would never have happened without me and my gifts. I didn't deserve to live, and if I was honest, as fucked in the head as I was, I wasn't sure I really wanted to anymore. There was just one thing keeping me going, though – Lana. I had failed her once, losing her the day my fathers' had been killed, but I would not fail her again. I needed to be here to help her learn to use our gift. Together we could wipe out the Venator and then, when I was sure she was safe and the threat eliminated – maybe then I could find my own peace.

“Can you lie down so I can get a look at your wounds?” Joel asked as he followed me into the room I had been sleeping in since we arrived.

I turned and studied him, reluctant to put myself in a vulnerable position with a stranger. He had been understanding and patient downstairs, and when Lana’s Quin had all been losing their shit, I had noticed that he had seemed the calmest. Lana trusted these men, but as I told her, our mom trusted Paulo and that ultimately cost us everything.

“I know you don’t know me, but I swear you can trust me, Noah. I don’t want to hurt you. Quite the opposite.” He held his hands up a little as he spoke, trying to reassure me.

I did a quick check on my gift, ensuring I still had every one of the gifts of the men in this house blocked. Sure that I did, and knowing if it came to it I could take this one guy down alone, I nodded once and laid on the bed, grimacing when the movement pulled at my half-way healed torso.

“You know,” Joel began as I lifted the shirt I wore and revealed the mess that was my body – a mix of scars and the dressed stab wounds. “At some point you’re going to have to try and trust us. We’re Lana’s Quin. We’re not going anywhere, so whatever comes next, we’re going to be there.”

“I’ll trust you when you’ve proven your worthy of it,” I told him flatly.

“Fair enough.” He pulled off the dressings on all three of the wounds and looked them over, not saying anything else for a few minutes.

“These are healing pretty well, no sign of infection, but I’d like to speed the process up for you, if you’ll let me?” He looked to me for a response and it took me a moment to understand what he meant. He wanted me to unblock his gift so he could heal me.

“No. I’m good.” I sat up and quickly rose to my feet.

“My gift isn’t offensive. I can’t hurt you, Noah. I’m an empath and I have the ability to heal. That’s it. You’re the brother of the woman I love. I wouldn’t hurt you even if I could,” he said, his eyes pleading with me to believe him. I saw sincerity in him, but I was a long way from trusting him.

“I’m fine. We sh-should get back to Lana.” I pushed past him and back out into the hall. It was stupid, since I knew my gifts could overpower Joel and any gift he had, if it came to it. The problem was, I knew only too well how he could incapacitate me before I had a chance to do a damned thing. That’s what those monsters had done to me each and every time I managed to get an advantage and attempt to defend myself. I wasn’t going to make any mistakes and allow that to happen again. I had to protect Lana. I wouldn’t fail this time. It was the last thing my mom had said to me before she was brutally murdered by the Venator. I had promised to find and protect Lana and I would not break that promise.

“Noah, at least allow me to redress your wounds. You shouldn’t leave them open like that.”

I didn’t even stop to reply, just eager to get back to Lana, knowing if I was with her and it all went wrong I could grab her and get us the fuck out of there.

I ran down the stairs, and by the time I arrived at the dining table, where they were all gathered, I was breathless

and feeling panicked.

“Noah?” Lana jumped back from the guys she had been hugging and looked to me with concern. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m good,” I replied, forcing myself to stop and take a breath. She was okay, we were still safe.

“I need to redress the wounds if he won’t allow me to heal him,” Joel said as he followed behind me. “They look ok for now, but there’s still a risk of infection.”

“Why can’t you just heal him?” Lana asked as she crossed the distance between us and placed a comforting hand on my forearm.

I couldn’t take in the way her presence could soothe me, just as it used to when we were kids. She was my other half and for twenty years she had been gone. Without her at my side I had felt so lost and alone. Having her back at my side had restored a strength in me I had thought long gone.

“I offered, but I don’t think Noah’s keen to unblock my gift just yet,” Joel told Lana. She looked up at me, a mix of annoyance and sympathy on her face. I could read her like a book. She had changed a lot since we were five years old, but her facial expressions were exactly the same, as was her ability to tell me everything she needed to, by just looking at me.

“Noah...” she began, but I cut her off.

“I’m fine. He said it’s healing on its own just fine.”

“We mean you no harm. I know we got off on a bad foot, but we understand who you are now, and why you took Lana,” another of her Quin spoke up. I looked up to him, trying to remember if I knew his name.

“We should introduce ourselves,” the huge guy, who now sat at the table, announced. He was my biggest threat. Even without his gift – which Lana had told me was increased speed and strength – he could take me down in a matter of seconds and I’d stand no chance. Hell, most of them could take me down in the sorry state I was in, as I stood there. I needed to work on bulking up, and start training as soon as possible. It was already going to take me way more time than I had, to get to where I needed to be.

“I’m West,” the big guy went on.

“You already know I’m Joel,” Joel said next.

“Malik,” the broody looking guy, who had just had his arms around my sister, said with a chin lift.

“And I’m Giovanni, but I prefer Gio,” the guy, who had been trying to reassure me before, said.

“They’re good guys, Noah. We can trust them,” Lana added, looking up to me, and silently pleading with me to at least try and play nice.

“We can’t trust anyone but each other,” I returned solemnly. It was a lesson I learned the hard way, and one I would not forget.

“Well you’re going to have to at least try and trust us, because Lana is our fifth and we’re not going anywhere,” West rumbled as he rose to his feet and faced me. He was even bigger than I realized when he rose to his full height, and I had to fight not to cower.

While I had been held captive the Venator had used chemicals to fuck with me, and to stop me from being able to connect with and use my gifts. They also kept me weak by giving me the very bare minimum of food and water, then they tortured and beat the shit out of me on a regular basis in order to try and bend me to their will.

I had fought hard to remain whole; to not allow them to break me, and in some ways I had succeeded, since they had been forced to trick me into helping them any time I had used my gifts unwillingly. I hadn’t broken and I hadn’t given up, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t a wreck. Being there with Lana that week had proven how messed up I was. I had lost it with her way too many times, my emotions a mess and my mind so mixed up, I found it hard to think straight most of the time. Loud noises scared the shit out of me, and the nightmares that plagued me when I closed my eyes were more than I could handle. Having these strangers in the house also made me want to run and hide in a corner, curling into myself as tight as I could to protect myself, but I couldn’t do that. I needed to stay as strong as I could and keep my wits about me. Lana needed me to keep it together, so I was trying really fucking hard to do that.

“We should head out. It’s getting dark and I’d like to be back on the highway before that happens,” Malik said, pulling me from my thoughts. I flinched a little when I came back to myself and found that huge bastard – West – standing before me. I was hoping no one noticed, but it’s clear they all did when I looked around and found them looking to me with pity.

West stepped back, then turned and walked to the far side of the room, leaning against the wall next to one of the other guys – Oliver maybe? I wasn't sure. It was hard to keep all of the names in my panicked mind.

“Noah? Are you going to let Joel heal you before we leave?” Lana asked, still at my side. “Please,” she added with a tentative smile.

“I don't want to push you, bud, but you're going to have to unblock our gifts before we all leave here. We need to be able to defend ourselves, and you and Lana if there's an attack,” West spoke up. I started to shake my head, every single scenario of how these men could hurt Lana and I playing through my thoughts, but Lana grabbed my hands and pulled me down until our eyes were level, stopping my panic at once.

“I trust them, Noah. I know you're scared and I know why, but my guys will not betray me. I didn't grow up sheltered and trusting, the way our mom probably did. I know evil. I've seen it again and again. My instincts are good. I know my guys will protect us,” she told me, imploring me to listen. “I know it's hard, but for now, until they can prove themselves to you, you just have to trust in me. I wouldn't do anything to put you in danger again. The safest thing we can do right now is give the guys back their gifts and go with them.”

“And what about them?” I nodded to the three other men and the woman they surrounded.

“We trust them. They came to help us get Lana back, even though we didn't ask them to and they didn't have to. They're good people,” Gio said.

I didn't like it. Going with Vis who I had no knowledge of was far too big of a risk, but the alternative wasn't much

better. I could teleport Lana and I out of there, but where would I take her? I had no idea if places I had been before I was taken were safe. I also had to admit having the seven men, with what seemed like powerful gifts, working alongside me if we were attacked, would be better protection for my sister. Then there was the way she looked at them, the love she clearly had for her Quin. Since they had arrived she had relaxed more than she had since the day she appeared at the Venator facility. For the first time she seemed calm and settled. I knew I couldn't take them from her. She needed them, and I needed her.

With a sigh I gave in and lowered the block I had up against all of them, once again allowing them access to their gifts.

“If they do anything...” I began, but Lana cut me off.

“They won't,” she said. “Everything's going to be just fine.”

I was tense, ready at any moment to grab Lana and disappear, but the guys made no move to attack, all just stood watching me with a mix of pity and curiosity.

“What the...” It was Gabriel, who was sat at the table off to my right, who spoke, just as I realized what he was confused by. I had been so tense and worried I hadn't noticed at first, but I felt it now, a strange buzzing sensation in the back of my mind. The block I had put up to stop their gifts had masked it, but now I felt it, and so did they.

I looked up to the other two guys who were with Gabriel and saw them looking to me with suspicion and confusion.

“What? What’s wrong?” Lana asked, her hand gripping my forearm protectively.

I looked between the three strangers and felt a mix of terror and comfort, which was so alien.

“He’s a part of our Quin,” Henry declared. “It’s faint because he’s not of age yet, but we feel it.”

“What do you mean?” the woman asked. Grace? I was sure that’s what she’d called herself when she introduced herself to Lana. She was pretty, all that thick red wavy hair and piercing green eyes.

“Growing up we knew we were going to be a Quin. The first time we met we felt the link between us. That’s how it usually works for the guys in a Quin, they meet young and form a strong bond before they meet their fifth,” Gabriel explained. “We never understood why we were only three, but we figured we’d find the fourth guy eventually. It never happened though, then Arcem was attacked and we just assumed our fourth was dead, along with our fifth.”

“Apparently we were wrong,” Oliver said, his eyes still focused on me.

“Noah was always destined to be a part of our family,” Henry told Grace, glancing down to her with an uncertain smile, then looking back up to me.

I didn’t know how to feel. I had already resigned myself to spending the rest of my days protecting Lana until such a time as I could just check out. That had been the future I saw laid out for me, should I ever succeed in escaping. I assumed any Quin I was destined to be a part of was gone – murdered at my

hand. I never expected to find they were still out there somewhere.

It could never be a complete Quin. Grace clearly wasn't their fifth - I could sense she was a human. But the men were my bond mates and I felt a pull to be with them, comforted instantly by the knowledge that we were destined to be a team, a family. My nerves and fear around them being unknowns was fading as that buzzing sensation grew in strength, trying to tell me they were safe and to trust them.

"Noah?" Lana pulled me from my musing, and when I looked down to where she was clinging to me, she looked worried.

"I feel it. They...they're right," I agreed.

"What does that mean? You can't complete your Quin, can you?" she asked, looking to Gabriel, who seemed to be the leader of his group - our group.

"No. We don't have a fifth, but Noah is destined to be in our family. Having him with us will make us stronger," Gabe explained. "It's complicated. We never expected this to happen. We thought it would just be us. We have Grace to consider. She isn't a part of the Quin, so she doesn't feel the natural bond with Noah that we all do. She's our wife and we can't just bring another guy into our dynamic and expect her to accept it."

"Gabe, he's your family. It was meant to be. I have no idea how it will work with me, but you can't deny this if it was predestined. This is why we came - the feeling I had that we needed to be here. You were always meant to find Noah." Grace looked to me, a soft smile on her face that instantly

began to soothe my ravaged nerves. “We’ll work it all out. This is a good thing.”

“We still need to get moving,” Malik said, snapping us all back to the reality of the situation.

“I agree. We can sort this out later,” Gabriel said, but he looked to me as he spoke, sending me silent reassurance that we would talk later.

“Lana? Anything you need to grab from here, baby?” West asked.

“Just one thing. I won’t be a minute.” With that she ran off up the stairs. I felt uneasy amongst them all without her and started to fidget with the sleeves of my sweater, looking to the stairs, anxious for her to return.

“Anything you want to take with you, Noah?” A deep voice asked from behind me. I turned and found Gabriel there, a hint of a smile on his face. I knew he was trying to look less threatening and I appreciated it.

“N-no. I...I don’t think so,” I stuttered nervously.

“It’s going to be alright, brother,” he said as he very slowly moved a hand up to my shoulder, giving me chance to step away from his touch. But I didn’t. The bond between us was making me feel safer with him and so I stayed still, feeling the buzzing within me calm as we made contact, cementing the bond between us, making us exactly what he’d called me – brothers. It would take time for me to get to know and trust these guys I was destined to spend my life with, but the bond was strong and I felt it and the way it soothed me when they were close. It was telling me I could trust them and it helped to

keep me calm. “This is all so messed up, but you’re where you were always supposed to be now. We’ll figure everything else out.”

I was scared and unsure, but a part of me hoped he was right, because after everything that had happened so far in my life, having brothers I could trust and depend on sounded pretty fucking good.

CHAPTER 8

LANA

“Stop worrying, squeak,” Joel told me. “He’ll be fine. They’re his Quin, or most of it anyway. Being close to them will keep him calm.”

I looked around again to the SUV following behind us. It was dark now so all I could see was headlights. I could still feel my link with Noah, so I knew he was pretty calm, but I was still feeling bad for not being with him.

He had agreed when Gabriel had asked him to get into their car with them, seeming pretty relaxed about being close to them – a lot more relaxed than he was near my guys anyway – but I was still worried. I didn’t know those guys and I was unsure how they would react if something upset Noah and he flipped out, as he had done several times in the week I had been with him. Would they hurt him?

“They have a cell phone, right? Incase Noah changes his mind? They can call us, can’t they?” I asked anxiously, even though I was pretty sure I’d feel it through my link with Noah first if he got upset.

“Breathe, *bella*. Yes, they all have cell phones and they will call us right away if Noah needs you,” Gio reassured me. He was sat in the back of the car, on my right, and Joel was on my left. Malik was driving and West was up front. Despite my worry over Noah, being back with them all was heaven. I had missed them so much. “He is their bonded. They would never hurt him. He’s safe,” Gio added as he took my hand in his and brought it to his lips, kissing the back of it gently.

“One of my fathers’ hurt his Quin,” I admitted.

“What? How do you know that?” Malik asked, glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

“Noah told me, but he also returned my memories. He was the one to take them,” I told them. “He didn’t mean to. He was trying to protect me, but he didn’t have full control of his...or our, I guess...our gift.”

“Tell us everything, baby girl,” West said as he turned in the passenger seat so he could see me.

“I don’t remember everything. It’s like it’s all coming back to me in bits and pieces, but I remember my mom, and my dads’. Noah said that when they were forced to live in the human world to protect us, one of my dads’, Paulo, got really resentful of having to be there. He wanted to go home...to Arcem. Noah said he betrayed our family and told the Venator what we are and where to find us. I guess he thought that he’d be able to return home if we were gone.”

“Fuck,” West whispered.

“That’s so unusual, Lana. I have never heard of any Quin member betraying their Quin,” Joel added.

“Noah said the other pair of twins – Alina and Khai – that they were betrayed by Alina’s Quin,” I pointed out.

“That was centuries ago, and we don’t even know if any of that is true. They were just stories we were told when we were kids,” West countered and I nodded. Noah had said he only knew them as stories too.

“What happened to your parents?” Malik asked, always the one to push for answers.

“We were attacked. Noah and I were there and we saw the Venator and Paulo kill our dads’. It w-was bad.” I didn’t have all of the memories of that day. In a way, I felt my mind was trying to protect me from the full horror of what had happened, but I had seen flashes of the attack, of my family being heavily outnumbered by monsters, very similar to the ones that had attacked me and my guys on Arcem. I had seen myself clutching Noah desperately, crying and trembling, while looking down at the bodies of the fathers’, who I had loved very much, bleeding out on the floral carpet of our home.

“I’m so sorry, honey,” Joel offered as he wrapped a supportive arm around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze.

“My mom told us to run, and Noah dragged me away. He hid me under a house down the street, but I was so upset. He used our gift to try and block out what I had just witnessed, but he accidentally took all of my memories,” I went on.

“It’s amazing he could even use your gift at such a young age. It’s very rare for Vis to come into gifts before they’re teenagers, and even if they do, it’s usually very weak.” Gio explained.

“I think things are different with Noah and I. He said we’d been learning to use our gifts, so I think we’d had them for a while by that time,” I told them. “Anyway, before he could try and fix my memory, he had to leave me hidden, and run from the Venator. My mom got away, and found him, but when they came back for me, I was gone. I don’t remember what

happened after the Venator found me, but I obviously ended up with the Glenn's right after that."

"How did the Venator get Noah?" Malik asked.

"A year later the Venator found them and killed our mom. They took Noah and he's been there ever since."

"Twenty years at the mercy of those motherfuckers," West hissed. "It's a miracle he survived."

"We have to protect him, guys. He can't go back there," I said tearfully. I hated to think of all my brother had been through; of what those monsters had made him do, and of the guilt he carried because of it. I was determined to protect him, whatever it took. My whole Life I had been meek and it had continually made me a victim. I had never had the strength I needed to fight for myself, but meeting Noah had brought a strength out in me I didn't know I possessed. I would do whatever it took to protect him from any further harm. He had already faced more than any one person should ever have to.

"We will. We're going to protect both of you," Malik said vehemently, and the others all nodded in agreement. We sat in silence for a while then, each contemplating everything I had told them.

"Can you tell us what happened this week, honey? I'm worried about how pale and shaky you are, and you've definitely lost weight," Joel fussed when he saw me wincing when I tried to get more comfortable.

"I'm good. My knee just hurts a little from before," I shrugged. Joel stared me down, not letting me away with anything. I sighed deeply and went on, knowing it was

pointless to try and change the subject, “It was a tough week. Noah...he flips out sometimes. It’s not his fault. He’s been through so much. When he gets scared though...he can kind of lose it.”

“Did he hurt you?” West growled.

“No. He was determined to protect me and keep me safe, but I didn’t know him. Even though I knew he was my twin he...well, I guess he scared me. It made me really anxious, and that, mixed with not being able to contact you guys...it was just a lot. I could barely eat,” I admitted. “And the last few days, while Noah slept, I went out hiking in the woods, hoping to find a house or some kind of civilization, where I could call you guys from.”

“You’ve been out hiking in this weather?” Gio gasped as he looked out of the window to the heavily falling snow.

“I had no other option. Noah refused to let us leave that place, and there was no way to contact you. I just...I needed you. I wanted to come home,” I whimpered tearfully.

Gio pulled me from Joel’s hold and into his arms, crushing me against him, as much as he could with the restraint of the seatbelts.

“We’ve got you now, love. We’re not going to allow anyone to take you from us again,” he soothed. I clung tightly to him, more grateful than words could ever convey, to be back in the safety of my Quin. I loved them. There was no denying that to myself anymore. Being apart from them had proven that fact. I felt peace and safety like I had never known when I was with them, and I never wanted to go back to the hollow loneliness I had felt before I met them. They were mine and I was theirs.

In the safety of Gio's arms, surrounded by the heat of his body and the intoxicating scent of his aftershave, I peacefully drifted off into a much needed sleep. My guys had me. I knew I was safe.

"*Bella?* Wake up for me now." Gio's gentle words and the feel of his hand rubbing up and down my arm roused me from the deep sleep I had fallen into. I opened my eyes and looked up from where my face had been buried against his chest. I realized we were at the private airstrip the guys had arranged for us all to fly from.

"We're here?" I asked sleepily.

"I'm so sorry to wake you, love, but it's Noah. He got upset as soon as he saw the plane." Gio pointed to where Noah was pacing back and forth, looking wildly agitated, in front of the small private jet, which sat on the tarmac. He looked to be talking to himself, and he had his hands buried in his hair, holding his head. Gabriel and Henry were stood close by, both holding their hands out in a calming gesture, as they tried to talk to him.

I didn't hesitate any longer, shuffling myself out of Gio's hold and climbing over him, throwing myself from the SUV before anyone could stop me. It was higher up than I remembered and I landed on the ground in a heap, but in a split second I was up and hurrying toward my brother, my guys right behind me, worrying and fussing. I ignored them. I was fine, but Noah wasn't.

“Just talk to us Noah, please,” Gabriel was pleading, as I approached, but Noah wasn’t looking at him or even hearing him, it seemed. He was lost to his panic and anxiety.

I slowed down, moving more cautiously as I approached my brother, knowing sneaking up on him when he was this way was not a good idea.

“Lana, be careful. He hit out when I touched him,” Gabriel cautioned.

“He won’t hurt me,” I replied with complete confidence. At first, I had been scared when Noah got like this, when we were at the cabin, but I learned that no matter how distressed he got, he never hurt me. No matter how far he was lost in his horror filled memories, he always recognized me and came back to me.

My guys were trying to call me back now too, hearing what Gabriel had said, but I blocked them out and continued to Noah. When I was within touching distance I stopped and spoke softly, “Noah. What’s going on? Can you talk to me?”

He stopped pacing and looked at me. His eyes were unfocussed and he still held his head in his hands, but he stopped whatever he had been muttering and took a much needed breath.

“It’s not safe,” he gasped breathlessly.

“What’s not safe? The plane?” I asked as calmly as I could.

“This place! The plane! This whole fucking idea! We have to go back...have to stay safe. The cabin...we’re safe there,” he ranted, his thoughts bursting out of him one after the other, as they did when he got this way.

“I know you’re scared, but we can’t stay at the cabin forever. Hiding out there is not a life, and we have to live, Noah. After everything we’ve both been through, after everything our parents gave up to protect us, we have to live,” I told him passionately.

“They’ll come for us...they’ll never stop,” he told me as he stepped forward and grabbed the tops of my arms, pulling me roughly until I collided with his front. I had to fight not to let my anxiety take a hold, as his fingers dug into the tops of my arms. I had to remind myself that it wasn’t Ted or Joy grabbing me, but my brother who I trusted to not hurt me.

“Hey!” Gio yelled, and I saw all four of my guys charging toward us, but I held out a hand to stop them. Noah was still terrified of them and if they really scared him, he’d just teleport the both of us back to that cabin.

“I’m fine! Stay back,” I called after taking a deep breath to stay calm. I was relieved to see them stop their advance and remain where they were.

“I promised...have to keep you safe. They can never get us...never!” Noah rambled loudly.

“I know they’ll come for us,” I agreed calmly. “That’s why we have to get ready for them. I need you to teach me how to use our gift. I’m done hiding and cowering, Noah, and I think you are too. They’ve taken so much from us. It’s time we fight back and use the gifts we were given. We’re strong, right? Powerful?”

“Very,” Noah agreed with a nod.

“Then we fight back. We get even stronger and when they do come for us, we kill them. All of them.” I looked up into his eyes, trying to make him see the determination I was feeling in that moment.

“But we...we’re not strong. Right now we’re weak. If they come now...”

“If they come now, we’ll have your back. You’re our brother, Noah. We will do everything we can to keep you safe,” Oliver called.

“Us too. We would never allow anything to happen to Lana. We’ve got your back too,” Malik added.

“We’re not alone, Noah. We can face whatever comes. I know we can. I just need you to believe it too.”

“I can’t lose anyone else...I can’t...I won’t survive it,” he whispered so quietly I only just heard the words. They about broke me. I had never heard so much pain come from a person and I wished there was some way I could go back and take some of it from him.

“You’re not going to. We’ll make sure of it,” I told him firmly, lifting my hand to cup his cheek, in an attempt to soothe him. “We’re going to be okay.” He met my eyes and stared, as though he were trying hard to believe what I had said. I wasn’t so sure he had though, when I saw the fear and pain still written all over his face.

“Hey Noah,” Grace said as she approached us cautiously. “How about you let Lana go now, okay? I know you don’t mean to, but I think you’re holding her arms a little too tight.”

Noah looked to me with horror and instantly released me. I smiled at him and fought the urge to rub my arms where I was sure bruises were already appearing.

“I’m sorry...I...I didn’t mean to,” he gasped.

“I’m fine, Noah. Nothing to be sorry for,” I assured him.

Joel appeared at my side and wrapped a protective arm around me, the others right behind him.

“Joel...I hurt her...I didn’t mean to. You...you’ll heal her, right? Make it better? I shouldn’t have...”

“I’m really okay. Stop getting yourself upset. You didn’t hurt me,” I cut in, hating the guilt on his face.

“I’ll take care of her. It’s okay. We know you didn’t mean to,” Joel said.

“Just be more careful with her in future,” West added in a barely disguised growl.

“Let’s leave Lana with her guys and get you some water, okay? I have some in the car,” Grace offered kindly, taking Noah’s hand. I was surprised when he relaxed at her touch, and nodded his agreement.

“I’m really sorry, sis,” he told me, then, looking a little calmer, he walked toward Gabriel and the others, with Grace.

“I should stay with him,” I worried as I watched him walk away.

“Just let us take care of you first,” Joel pleaded.

“I’m fine,” I told them as I turned to follow Noah, but I was pulled back, and when I turned I found West had snagged my wrist.

“You’re not fine. You’re hurting. We can feel it through the bond,” he grumbled.

“Just allow me to heal you. It’ll only take a minute,” Joel added before I could argue. I gave in, knowing they never would, and nodded.

An hour later, and we were all on the plane, on our way home, to Chicago.

Noah’s Quin had agreed to come to the city with us, not wanting to leave Noah and understanding his desire to stay with me. They’d stay with us for a few days, until their work obligations dragged them back home to Ontario.

I had no idea how things with them and Noah were going to work, since I felt it unlikely Noah would leave my side for some time to come, and they all lived so far away. I guess we’d all just have to wait and see how things panned out.

I sighed contentedly as I snuggled into Malik's side. He was asleep and snoring gently. West and Gio were sat across from us, and Joel was at my other side. Across the way Noah was sitting between Henry and Grace, all three of them fast asleep too. Noah looked so at peace with his head leaned against Henry's shoulder, his hand clutching Grace's. I was both relieved and surprised by the way he seemed to be relaxing around Grace and the guys in his Quin. When we got onto the plane he had naturally gravitated to sitting with them, and I had even seen him smiling when they had been talking quietly. He was getting comfortable with them, and I knew that could only be a good thing. After everything he'd been through, he needed people in his life he could trust and rely up on. He would always have me and I knew my Quin would look out for him too, but he needed more than that, and he had it now. He was building a family and I knew from experience the power of having that at your back.

"He's good, Lana. Get some sleep. I'll keep an eye on him," Gabriel whispered when he saw me looking to Noah again. He was sat opposite Noah, his laptop open on his lap. Oliver was beside him, fast asleep with his head resting on the back of the seat.

"He's right, *bella*. You need to rest. You look exhausted," Gio agreed.

"I'm okay," I told him, forcing a smile to reassure him. "Noah's nightmares will kick in soon."

"He has nightmares?" Gabriel asked, looking between Noah and I with concern.

"Of course he does. Who wouldn't after going through what he has?" I replied defensively, feeling protective of my

brother.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just worried about him. We all are. We want to be able to help him. He’s our family too.”

“Sorry,” I acquiesced, seeing how genuine his words were. “I’m just protective of him, I guess. He’s been through so much.”

“He’s going to be alright, Lana. We’re going to take care of him. Whatever he needs, we’re here now,” Gabe assured me, and I smiled, firmly believing every word.

“He’s going to need you. In some ways he’s so strong. The fact he survived as long as he did at the hands of those monsters only proves that, but he’s just so vulnerable too. He’s dealing with trauma, and when it strikes he gets so scared. He needs to feel safe,” I explained, fully understanding my brother’s trauma because it so closely resembled my own. I glanced to Gio and once again thanked whatever power had brought him and my guys into my life. I knew how lucky I was to have them.

“We’re not going anywhere. Whatever he needs, we’ve got him,” Gabriel told me, and I nodded gratefully.

Malik stirred a little beside me, adjusting the arm he had wrapped around me and pulling me even tighter into his side. I went happily, resting my head against his chest and relaxing against him. I was still too worried about Noah, and worked up about everything that had happened, to sleep fully, but I dozed in and out of consciousness, my exhaustion winning out.

CHAPTER 9

LANA

Home. I couldn't help but sigh a little in relief when Malik opened the door to their apartment and ushered me inside.

I hadn't allowed myself to think of it as home before, so confused about my feelings for the guys and trying so hard to fight what seemed inevitable. I dare not allow myself to become too attached to the guys, in anticipation of it all being ripped away from me.

But being away from them for a week had shown me just how much they all meant to me. There was no more fighting our Quin or the feelings it stirred. They were mine and I never wanted to feel what life was like without them, ever again. I had surrendered to them and to the bond between us.

As I looked around the apartment that held so many good memories of time with the men I was falling for, I allowed that thought to settle in deep – I was home.

“You doing okay, honey?” Joel asked. He approached where I had frozen just inside the living room and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his warm body.

“Just glad to be home,” I admitted, fighting back the emotion that had suddenly rushed over me.

“Not as glad as we are to have you home,” West said as he came up beside me and placed a kiss on my forehead gently. “Longest fucking week of my life,” he added with a grimace.

“She’s home now, and safe. We’ll make sure it stays that way,” Malik spoke up. He walked past us and headed for the bedrooms with his duffel bag over his shoulder.

“Gabe, if you follow me I’ll show you to your rooms and we can get the beds changed,” Gio said as he led the other guys in, Noah at the center of their group with Grace at his side, her hand firmly clutched in his.

He was still too pale, and I could see him trembling from across the room. Driving into the city must have been a lot for him after so many years of being held captive, but he seemed pretty calm, even though it was clear he was terrified. Grace and the rest of his Quin seemed to have a calming effect on him and I was grateful for that. While I had been able to settle him after some of his episodes while we’d been at the cabin, I had also failed to do so, many other times, and I hated seeing him so scared and upset, knowing there was nothing I could do for him. It was a relief to know he had others he could be close to and lean on.

“Noah can take my room,” I volunteered as they all walked into the apartment following Gio.

“No, sweetheart. You’re keeping your room. We’re all going to bunk in West’s,” Malik replied, pausing at the entrance to the hallway and looking at me. “You guys can sort amongst yourself who’s sleeping in which of the other three rooms,” he added, looking to Gabriel.

“We don’t need three rooms, Malik. One for us and one for Noah is enough,” Grace said.

“It’s fine. We’re good in West’s room,” Malik dismissed her with a shake of his head, and turned to continue down the hall, Gio right behind him.

“Where’s Max?” I asked, looking around as though he’d jump out at me. I wished he would. I could really use the comfort of his soft fur under my hands.

“Kevin’s assignment finished early. There was too much fighting going on in the area he was working. He collected Max from the dog sitter last week and text to say he was back,” Joel explained.

“That’s good. Max will be glad to be back home,” I said, trying to hide my disappointment that my time with the amazing dog was over. I’d miss him. He’d been a great comfort to me.

“What do you want to do now, honey? Eat or sleep?” Joel asked, changing the subject.

“I’m going to make sure Noah gets settled in, then I plan to take a long hot bath,” I sighed. I was tense after the events of the last week, not to mention my entire body ached from what I had put it through, with the hiking through the freezing forest. I had been dreaming of a soak, in the huge tub in my room, for days.

“You need to eat,” West grumbled from where he now stood in the kitchen, looking into the refrigerator, no doubt to feed me.

“I will, but I need a bath first. I ache and I feel icky after all of that travelling. I just want to wash up and get back into my own clothes,” I explained, pulling at the sweater I wore to illustrate. It just felt wrong to be wearing the clothes of my dead mom. It felt too raw and emotional when I only just got back some of my memories of her.

“Okay squeak, but let me heal you first. What’s aching?” Joel asked as he led me over to the sectional in the living room and gently pushed me to take a seat.

“I’m good,” I hedged, not wanting him to use what little energy he had, on me. They were as exhausted as I was, having spent the week I was gone stressing and searching for me. They all looked as pale and exhausted as I did. “It’s just a few aches from all of the hiking I did. A long soak will fix it.”

“Her knee,” Noah’s voice came from behind me and I quickly turned to look at him over the back of the sofa.

“Noah, are you okay? Did Gio show you where you can sleep?” I asked. He was stood at the end of the hall that led to the bedrooms, pulling at his sleeves, and looking nervous. It took a few moments, but eventually he looked up and met my eyes, nodding.

“Why don’t you come and sit down, bud? West’s going to make some food,” Joel offered, pointing to the sofa across from us. Noah nodded again and tentatively walked to where Joel had indicated.

“You sh-should look at Lana’s knee. It was bad...when I saw it last, it w-was a mess,” Noah stuttered nervously as he perched on the very edge of the sofa, looking terrified.

“It’s better now. Stop worrying about me,” I told him, sending him what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

“No. It hurts. I can...can feel it,” he replied, tapping his head to indicate the link between us.

Joel turned in the seat beside me and stared me down, in the way only he could. It still surprised me how my sweetest, gentlest guy could also be the most dominant with just one stare.

“It’s not that bad,” I attempted, but he was having none of it. Before I could further protest, he had dropped to the floor and was pulling the leg of the jeans I wore, up.

“Jesus Lana, why the hell haven’t you said anything? This is huge,” he cursed as he got the baggy jeans over the swollen mess I had been doing my best to keep hidden. It did look ugly, swollen to twice its usual size and mottled with shades of purple, green, and black.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” I argued, but Joel wasn’t buying it, sending me that no-nonsense glare again.

I glanced to Noah, needing to look away from Joel’s intensity, and found him staring at my knee with horror, his face paling before me.

“I’m alright, Noah,” I tried to reassure him. His eyes snapped up to meet mine.

“My fault,” he whispered. “Should have got you help... shouldn’t have kept you there at the s-safe house for so long.”

“No Noah, it’s not your fault. I hurt my knee before I found you, in Arcem. It’s not so bad anyway. Nothing’s broken,” I tried to persuade him. Joel turned his attention to Noah too, and must have noticed how agitated and upset he was becoming.

“I’m going to fix her right up now,” he assured my brother. “She’s going to be just fine.” He placed his hand lightly over my knee and I felt his gift running into me. With a comforting tingle of heat my swollen knee deflated before my eyes and most of the worst bruising disappeared, leaving just a faint tint of purple. The pain instantly receded too and I couldn’t help my gasp of relief.

“I can’t heal all of the bruising, but has the pain eased up?” Joel asked.

“It’s gone completely. Thank you, Joel,” I sighed, then I looked to Noah. He was still fidgeting and watching me closely, but he seemed less twitchy.

“Hey Noah, how about we check out the kitchen and find you something to eat?” I said, getting to my feet and walking over to him with a hand outstretched in offering. “I think we can do better than expired soup and stale crackers now.”

“I am hungry,” he told me, taking my hand, and rising to his feet. I laughed a little at that because he was always hungry.

“What sounds good? We have steaks or I could get Gio to make burgers?” West offered as we walked into the kitchen. He held up a pack of steaks and looked to me. “He’s not a vegetarian, is he?”

I looked to Noah and he vigorously shook his head, his eyes locked on the steaks.

“Steaks it is,” I laughed.

“West, put the food down and back away from the kitchen slowly. I’ll cook the steaks,” Gio joked as he strode into the kitchen, sending me a sexy smile as he passed. “The last thing we need is food poisoning,” he grumbled light heartedly.

“I can cook a fucking steak,” West argued, but he dropped the food to the counter and headed for a seat at the center island anyway.

“Shall we sit down?” I indicated the stools beside West, and Noah nodded, walking over to take the one at the very end of the counter, furthest from my biggest, most intimidating guy. I followed sitting myself between the two and reached my free hand out to put on West’s thigh, just wanting some physical contact with him.

He smiled and placed his hand over mine, then we all sat in a comfortable silence for several minutes, just watching Gio preparing some vegetables to accompany the steaks.

“Everything okay?” I turned in my seat, not sure which of Noah’s Quin had spoken, and found Henry walking into the family room, followed by Grace and Oliver.

“Fine. I was just cooking us a quick bite. I think we’re all pretty hungry,” Gio replied casually, turning to place the steaks on the skillet.

“I’m starving,” Oliver agreed. “You hungry, Noah?” He walked up behind us and gently placed a hand on Noah’s shoulder. Noah flinched a little at the contact, but didn’t freak out or shrug it away.

“Lana says I’m always hungry,” Noah said, glancing to me with the hint of a smile and a shrug.

“That’s good. It’ll be easy for us to fatten you up,” Grace laughed, but I could see the worry in her eyes as she looked Noah over. He definitely needed to be fattened up. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on him, his frame skeletal under the clothes he wore.

“I guess so,” Noah looked down at his own body and sighed deeply. “I’m kinda thin, huh?”

“Not for long. Grace is a great cook. She’ll have you beefed up before you know it,” Henry assured him with a smile.

“I need to train too. I’m too weak. I need to be stronger and faster. I have to be ready,” Noah told them with a look of pure determination on his face.

“We can work on that when you’re feeling stronger,” Oliver agreed.

“One step at a time, Noah,” Henry added and I was relieved when Noah nodded in agreement.

“Everything will be okay. You’re safe now. That’s all that matters,” Grace told him as she approached and placed her hand over his free one on the counter. He looked up to her and smiled - the biggest, warmest smile I had seen from him since the moment I found him. He trusted her. It was written all over his face.

While a little part of me hurt that I didn't seem to have the same calming effect on him that she did, I was also eternally grateful that there was someone on this earth who gave him peace. After everything he had been through he needed that and he deserved it. I knew he loved and cared for me, just as I did him, but if I couldn't give him everything he needed, I was glad someone else could.

Startled awake, gasping for breath, tears running down my cheeks, I looked all around me frantically. It took me a moment to realize I was in my room, at the guys' apartment.

"Nightmare," I gasped out loud to myself. "Just a nightmare."

I sat up and grabbed my cell from the nightstand. It was three AM. I'd only been asleep for just over an hour.

That evening we'd all eaten the food Gio cooked, Noah happily polishing off two steaks and as many accompaniments as he could get. It had seemed to settle him, being full, and he'd happily relaxed in the lounge, between Henry and Grace, to watch a movie, the rest of his Quin with him. It had been nice to see him so peaceful he could barely keep his eyes open, and I think for the first time since I had been taken over a week before, I relaxed too.

Malik and West had gone off to the home office to wrap up some issues that couldn't wait at their company. Joel, having no option but to return to his shift at the hospital early the next morning, had gone to bed to get some much needed rest. I went for my long awaited soak, then spent some time cuddled up with Gio, watching a movie in my room.

He'd left when I started to fall asleep cuddled into his side, kissing me goodnight and telling me to get some sleep. Problem was, once he had gone and I was alone, all of the anxiety, which I had been doing my best to hold back all week, just trying to stay strong, hit me and I broke down. I had cried for some time, just letting out all of my worry for Noah, and my horror at what those monsters had done to him. I cried for my parents, for the memories, which I had gained back, of them loving and protecting us, for the hell they went through to try and keep us safe, all to no avail. I cried it all out until I couldn't cry anymore, but still I couldn't sleep. I had tossed and turned for hours until finally exhaustion must have won the battle and I dropped off.

Now I was wide awake again, the images of my nightmare – images of my dads', men I had loved so very much, being torn to shreds by a huge group of *Mutatio*. The nightmare had brought back even more of my lost memories of that brutal, soul-destroying day. I knew now why Noah had tried to take the memories from me. What I had just been forced to relive had me wishing Noah had never returned my memories to me.

Not daring to try and sleep again, and risk re-witnessing that horror, I got up from my bed and pulled on the fluffy, cream robe, that West had bought for me a few weeks before. I tied the belt around me, shivering at the cold air of the apartment. The guys liked the place to be cool, and normally I didn't mind, but after the last week in that drafty cabin I just couldn't seem to get warm.

Without overthinking it I walked out of my room and crossed the hall to West's. I needed the comfort of my guys, and as emotional as I was feeling, I wasn't afraid to go to them.

As soon as I opened the door, I heard the chorus of snores, and smiled. The room was in darkness, the light from the hall illuminating the space just enough for me to make out West and Joel in the bed, both clinging to the edges, leaving a huge gap between them. Malik lay at the foot of the bed, on a twin air mattress, one leg stretched out on the carpet. Gio was off to the side of the bed, on a matching air mattress, curled into himself tightly, looking as though he dare not move for fear of falling off completely.

Unable to sleep in complete darkness as they were, I tiptoed past them and went to the adjoining bathroom, flicking on the light and opening the door just enough to give West's room a dull glow. Once I was happy with the lighting, I went back to the door of the room and closed it as quietly as I could, then I tiptoed to the bed and climbed in between West and Joel.

“Lana?” West sleepily turned to face me, his eyes opening just a slit. “Are you okay, baby girl?” he asked as he reached out an arm for me to lie in. I happily snuggled into him, relishing his strong arm wrapped around me, making me feel safe.

“I couldn't sleep. Nightmares,” I admitted, knowing he'd understand. I had stayed with them enough that they knew about my nightmares.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked, seeming to wake more fully. His eyes locked on mine and he just waited patiently, silently offering me whatever I needed.

“I just want to sleep,” I told him tiredly. “Can I stay here with you?”

“Of course you can,” he whispered as he pulled me even tighter against his side and placed a kiss on the top of my head. “I’ve got you, Lana. Just sleep. You’re safe.”

Those were the words I needed to hear. Feeling safe in West’s hold, surrounded by the men I knew would always protect me, I finally allowed sleep to take me to somewhere warm and safe.

CHAPTER 10

LANA

“Noah. Lana and I are heading out to walk Max in the park. Why don’t you come with us, get some fresh air?” Grace offered as she walked into the living room, where Noah was sat watching a documentary about whales. He loved documentaries, we had discovered, gripped by the factual shows, and soaking up information like a sponge.

It had been almost a week since we arrived back at the guys’ apartment with him and his Quin. In a lot of ways he seemed to have settled in well. He was definitely calmer, his freak outs happening less and less often. He seemed comfortable with his Quin and he was very attached to Grace. I had gotten closer to him too, but when he was struggling he gravitated to Grace. I was good with that, realizing when I was struggling I went to my Quin, not to Noah.

He was less comfortable around my guys, keeping a clear gap between him and them, and never allowing them to touch him or even get too close, but he was getting better, able to be in the room with them and have conversations.

“Not today,” Noah replied, with a shake of his head. I wasn’t surprised by his reply. It had been the same for the last three days.

When I had bumped into Kevin and Max in the hall a few days before, he told me I could keep the key to his place if I wanted to, and use it to call in and see Max whenever he was out working. I had been delighted. I missed Max’s company and the soothing effect having him close had on me. Every afternoon since, I had been to collect Max and take him for a

walk. I had tried to coax Noah into coming with me each day, but he refused to leave the apartment.

He was terrified of the city below us. I had seen him looking out of the windows, down to the crowded street below, with fear and trepidation, several times. It was too much for him, too busy and filled with too many unknowns. I got it, because I had felt very similarly when I arrived there too, and I hadn't been through even a fifth of the terror in my life that he had been through, but I also knew he needed to find a way to cope with his fear. He couldn't spend the rest of his life hiding out in the apartment.

His Quin needed to get back to their home and their lives. They were all taking time from their jobs to be there with Noah, but they couldn't stay forever. While I was happy for Noah to stay with us, if they were forced to return to Ontario, I wasn't sure he would be. He needed them. They made him feel safe and comforted in a way I couldn't, and I worried how bad things could get for him if they were forced to leave without him.

"West and Gabriel are coming too. We'll be safe," I tried to reassure him.

"No," he snapped a little angrily. "Not today." His gaze didn't move from the TV, refusing to look at either of us.

"Okay, that's fine," Grace agreed easily. "How about I make you a sandwich before we head out? Are you hungry?"

In the last week Noah had definitely gotten some color in his cheeks and seemed to have gained a few pounds, his face not looking quite so gaunt. It was hardly surprising, since he ate almost constantly, loving every food we introduced him to,

and making up for all of those years he had been forcibly starved.

“Yes please!” He looked up at us, all tension gone, and his face now that of a hopeful child. I couldn’t help but smile at that. I loved the moments where I could see the brother I remembered from when we were kids. He was in there somewhere, under all of the trauma, anger, and fear. I just hoped one day I could pull him out again.

“Roast beef sound good?” Grace offered as she headed for the kitchen.

“With salad and pickles?” Noah asked, looking to her pleadingly.

“Of course,” Grace laughed. “And chips on the side.”

“That sounds so good,” Noah sighed sending her a warm smile. “Thank you,” he added, then turned back to his show.

I pulled out my cell and took a seat in an armchair, happy to check on my guys while I waited for Grace. Joel was at the hospital, and had been for almost the entire week, trying to make up for all of the shifts he had missed in the time I had been gone. Malik and Gio were at their offices, catching up on everything they had missed at the company. They had alternated all week with West, two of them trying to stay with me while one handled work, but they had both been needed that day and I had assured them it was fine. I had West with me, and I was comfortable with Noah now he was calmer. I was still a little on edge with the other members of his Quin, not liking to be alone with them because of my own issues and insecurities, but I liked Grace and I was getting better with the others. It would just take time. I was distrustful of men, with

good reason, and I couldn't quite seem to convince myself to relax with the strangers.

LANA: Hey. How are things there? Missing you guys x

I sent the text to Gio and Malik, knowing Joel would be too busy to check his cell. He would call me when he stopped to eat lunch. It had become our routine that week. I missed him and counted down the hours until I received those calls from him.

GIO: Boring. I miss you too. What are you up to?

LANA: Just heading out to walk Max with Grace x

GIO: Not alone?

I couldn't help but smile at that, knowing it was coming before I even got the reply. The guys had been even more over protective that week, constantly checking on me and worrying non-stop. I understood why. Everything we had learned about Noah and I was worrying, and I knew we were in danger, but for the time being at least, we seemed safe in the apartment. The Venator clearly had no idea where we were, and that bought us time.

LANA: West and Gabe are coming too x

GIO: Good. Be safe. I'll see you soon. xx

"We all ready to go, baby?" West asked. I looked up and found him striding toward me. He looked so good, in black jeans and a hugging, black polo t-shirt. Just watching the

powerful, confident way he walked toward me, juxtaposed with the gentle, loving smile on his face. The way he looked at me made me feel excitement I hadn't known before these amazing men came into my life. It was, however, a feeling I was becoming increasingly familiar with every time my guys were near me. They made me feel things I had never felt – need and lust. I wanted them to touch me. I was desperate to have their hands on me. It was shocking, because I had never felt anything like that before, but it was getting harder and harder to hold back from what my body was clearly crying out for.

“Huh?” I asked, forgetting whatever West had asked me as I just stared at him with pure want.

“I asked if you're ready to head out?” West repeated as he crouched down before me and swept my hair behind my ear. “You feeling okay?” he asked as he studied my face. The touch of his fingers on my cheeks sent a shiver racing through me, in the best possible way. I had to fight to refocus through the haze of lust, that him being that close, clouded me in.

Instead of trying to reply to whatever he just asked me, I sat forward and snaked my arms around his neck, pulling him closer until my lips landed on his. I started the kiss, desperate to have him closer, desperate for him to hold and touch me, but within moments West had taken all control. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight, pulling me in closer, as he demanded I part my lips. The kiss turned even deeper and more frantic as our tongues dueled. By the time West pulled back just a little, his eyes looking deep into mine, I was dazed and breathless, lost in a cloud of lust for the spectacular man before me. If we hadn't been sat a few feet from my brother, I was pretty sure I'd have tried to take the moment further. I was desperate to get my hands on West's skin, under all of his clothes, but I couldn't do that with Noah right there and Grace not far away either.

“What was that for?” West asked, a happy smirk on his face.

“Does there need to be a reason?” I shrugged, a little embarrassed at the way I had clearly attacked him, now the moment had passed.

“No, there doesn’t, and I wasn’t complaining.” He squeezed the arm, that he still had wrapped around me, until I looked up and met his eyes. “I love you, beautiful,” he told me.

“I love you too, West,” I replied, meaning it with everything in me.

The spell was broken when Oliver and Henry came into the room, laughing loudly with each other. They both flopped down on the sofa either side of Noah, quieting when he sent them a glare. He didn’t like people interrupting him when he was watching TV and he’d made it plainly clear that week.

“Sorry,” Henry whispered as they both quieted down.

Grace smoothed the situation over, as she appeared before Noah, placing a large plate with two roast beef sandwiches and a mountain of potato chips before him on the table. All of Noah’s ire was forgotten as his face lit up, his eyes locked on the food.

“Thank you, Grace,” he said quietly, sending her another smile.

“Where’s ours?” Oliver asked with a fake pout.

“I’m sure you two can make your own,” Grace countered playfully. “You guys okay to sit with Noah while we take Max to the park for a walk? I need some fresh air,” she asked looking between Henry and Oliver.

“Sure thing, angel,” Oliver agreed. “Go and get some air. We’ll hold down the fort for a while.”

Grace smiled and bent down to kiss them both, then she leaned in toward Noah too. She was hesitant, giving him the option to back away, but he didn’t. He sat still and allowed her to kiss his cheek.

“I’ll be back soon,” she assured him, and I loved the small smile that came across his face, along with a blush that was just adorable. I looked to Oliver and Henry, for signs they were jealous of the affection Grace was showing Noah, but they were smiling gently too, seemingly happy that Grace and Noah were getting close.

I was so grateful for Quins in that moment – grateful that my brother was destined to be with these guys who seemed to care for him so much. He had found brothers in them, and he needed that. Even though Grace wasn’t their fifth, she fit with them all so perfectly, and I was so grateful for her when she put that peaceful glow on my brother’s face.

It was Noah’s anxiety, screaming through my link with him, that woke me that night. I sat up and looked around, relieved to find West at my side in his bed. Joel was still at the hospital. Malik and Gio were on the airbeds, on the floor again, snoring gently and instantly soothing some of my panic.

Knowing something was going on with Noah – likely a nightmare – I silently slid out of the bed and tiptoed from the room.

Shivering from the cold and wishing I'd stopped to pull my robe over the shorts and cami pajama set I wore, I hurried down the hall to Joel's room, where Noah was sleeping for the time being.

I opened the door as quietly as I could, grimacing when it squeaked a little at the hinges. I peeked in and found Noah in the middle of the bed, tossing, and turning, wrapping himself in the blankets. He was illuminated by the small lamp on the nightstand, and I could see the fear on his face as he fought whatever was happening in his nightmare.

I approached slowly, not wanting to scare him anymore. Once I was close enough I gently placed a hand on his shoulder and called his name, keeping my tone calm. This had happened several times before. I felt his fear through our link, making me the first to get to him each time he was in the throes of a nightmare. Usually he would jump awake, looking lost and confused, then crumble before me for several minutes as he cried with relief it wasn't real. It was completely soul-crushing and I hated that I couldn't take his pain from him, but at least I could pull him from the nightmares and reassure him he wasn't there any longer. That he was safe now.

This time though, it went very differently. As soon as my hand landed on Noah, his eyes shot open, and in the blink of an eye he had his hand clamped around my throat, lifting me from my feet as he leapt from the bed. He slammed me so hard into the wall, that I saw black spots in my vision. My air was instantly cut off and he held my throat so tightly I couldn't make a single sound. I was lifted clean off the ground, held at

eye level with him, pinned against the wall and quickly losing the fight for air.

I reached out, clawing at the hand he had around my throat, scratching him and begging him with my eyes to realize it was me and let me go. Noah wasn't there though. He was trapped in some nightmare and completely lost to fear.

Knowing I wasn't going to get free of his strong grip and finding nothing close enough to hit out with, I instead turned inside me, reaching for my bonds with my guys and pulling on them hard, praying they would understand I needed them.

As my vision began to gray around the edges, unconsciousness looming, I heard heavy footsteps pounding fast down the hall way, West, Malik and Gio all yelling my name frantically. With the very last shred of fight left in me, I kicked out at the wall behind me, hoping the thud I made would be enough for them to hear me.

The next thing I knew, I felt strong arms wrap around me, catching me from falling to the ground as Noah's hand was ripped from around my throat.

I took in a huge gasp of air, the breath both wonderful and agony on my abused throat. Coughing and gasping for more sweet oxygen I leaned back into Gio, realizing it was him, by the faint smell of the cologne he'd been wearing earlier.

“Breathe, *bella*,” he coached as he wrapped his arms around my waist. “Just breathe.”

I tried to do as he told me, my vision still fuzzy around the edges, but Noah's cry of pain and fear had me looking up with concern.

Malik and West were holding him between them, trying to keep him held back as he fought and struggled against them with everything he had.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Grace run into the room, followed by the others.

“What’s going on?” Gabe questioned as he took in the scene.

“Let him go!” Grace demanded at the same time. She leapt over and placed herself before Noah.

“He’s having a nightmare. He almost fucking killed Lana!” West growled as he continued to fight to hold Noah. I quickly realized Noah must be blocking his gift, because he could ordinarily handle someone Noah’s size, no trouble with his strength.

Grace glanced to me, wincing when she saw the way I was fighting to breathe. I was pretty sure there were some nasty marks on my neck too, judging by the way it was throbbing.

“Noah!” she cried, looking to him and placing a hand on his chest. “Calm down now. You’re safe. We’re all here. Whatever you were seeing, it’s not real.”

He seemed to hear her calming words and stopped struggling, looking to her with a mix of confusion and fear. His eyes still looked a little glazed over, but he stopped fighting and sagged between Mal and West.

“What...what happened?” He asked, looking from Grace, to West and Malik who still held his arms.

“You were having a nightmare. Are you okay now?” Grace asked as she carefully held his forearm and pulled it from West’s grip. Malik released the other side and they both stepped back a little, looking to me with concern. I wanted to smile, to reassure them I was alright, but I was still fighting through coughs and gasps to breathe.

Noah looked over to me too, and his eyes filled with fear and horror once again, locking on my neck, which I was sure was a mess of rapidly appearing bruises and red marks. I wanted to soothe him too, assure him I was fine, but I was scared to speak, just breathing hurting my throat enough to make my eyes water.

I saw the moment all calm left Noah and was replaced by pure panic. Before I could do anything to address the change, Noah had leapt forward with that crazy speed he had inside him. He grabbed my wrist and instantly that feeling of static tingling rushed through me, and I suddenly found myself no longer safe in Gio’s arms, but crashing into a heap on a cold concrete floor.

I gasped, trying to catch a breath as I looked around me with shock. We were in some kind of warehouse. It was completely empty and mostly in darkness. There was a small amount of moonlight, shining in through a window, high up near the ceiling, illuminating the huge space around us just enough for me to make out it was empty and seemed abandoned.

“Noah!” I gasped breathlessly as I forced myself up onto my feet. It was agony to speak and I still felt as though I couldn’t breathe.

“It’s okay. We’re safe...I think we’re safe here.” He whispered as he got to his feet and looked all around him.

“We were safe there...at home. T-take us back...please,” I squeaked, unable to stop the tears that threatened. I was scared and in pain, and I had just been ripped from the only people that could make me feel safe – my Quin.

“They hurt you...and me. They were dragging me away, and your neck! I see the marks,” he accused, nodding to my neck as if it proved his point.

“No,” I croaked. “You were h-having a nightmare. I tried to wake you. You did this Noah...you h-hurt me.”

“No,” he shook his head vigorously. “I wouldn’t... wouldn’t hurt you.”

“You didn’t mean to,” I tried to reassure him. “It was a nightmare...you didn’t know what you were doing, but the guys...my guys...they were just trying to stop you and help me.”

Unable to remain standing, my legs shaking like noodles under me, I collapsed down to the floor again and wrapped my arms around my shivering body. The ground beneath me was freezing, a block of icy concrete, but I was too shaken and dizzy, from the trip there, to remain upright.

“I...I did that?” Noah asked, nodding toward me in question. I nodded, opting not to speak more than I needed to. “I didn’t mean to. I would never...”

“I know that, Noah. I know it was a mistake and I’m not mad. I just...I need to go home now, okay? I need my Quin.” I pleaded.

“They’ll be mad. They’ll hurt me,” he whispered as he curled into himself where he stood, wrapping his arms around his body. I wanted to go to him, but I didn’t have the energy.

“They would n-never hurt you, Noah,” I sighed. “They understand what happened...know what you’re dealing with. We need to go back. Your Quin and Grace will be worried too.”

I jumped hard when a door was rattled further down the warehouse, someone clearly trying to get in. Noah and I instantly went silent and looked to the sound.

“Check in there. I felt the power surge from somewhere around here. It had to be fucking Vis!” a gruff voice called loudly, followed by more shaking and rattling of the door into the warehouse.

“Venator!” Noah gasped, terror gripping him as his whole body began to tremble violently.

“We have to get out of here now, Noah!” I growled quietly, reaching my hand out toward him, but he was frozen in fear, looking into the darkness with horror.

I took as deep a breath as I could and fought my way to my feet, pleading silently with my legs to keep me upright.

Facing Noah I grabbed both of his hands and looked into his eyes, pleadingly.

“Please Noah. We’re not safe here. You h-have to take us back...please,” I whimpered, fighting back any more tears.

Down the warehouse there was an almighty crash as the door had clearly given way under the force of the monster trying to open it. Noah and I gasped in unison, and I tensed my whole body, ready for whatever was coming next.

Static and heat enveloped me as I was once again surrounded by the Power Noah was using. I landed hard on the floor, this time on soft, warm carpet. We were back in Joel’s room.

“Lana!” Malik yelled and I just glanced up at him before my stomach rolled. It seemed teleporting twice in such a short time was more than I could handle.

I ripped my hands from Noah’s grip and fought to get up, but my legs would not cooperate.

“Baby, are you okay?” West asked as he wrapped his arms around me and picked me up.

“Bathroom...please!” I cried urgently. Thankfully West understood. He dashed through to the bathroom and planted me before the toilet bowl, just in time for me to hurl up the entire contents of my stomach.

The pain of throwing up with my throat as sore as it was, was more than I could handle, and when it was over I collapsed into a ball on the cold tile floor, sobbing and shaking.

“Lana?” I looked up and found Noah in the doorway, watching me with worry. Malik, Gio and West were in the bathroom with me, surrounding me.

“Just go Noah...please. Go,” I croaked, the sound barely coming out, but he heard me. He nodded once, his face filled with guilt, then turned and left, his Quin and Grace going with him.

“Tell us what you need, sweetheart,” Malik said, kneeling on the floor beside me and pulling my head to rest in his lap. I reached up, grabbing his arm and holding onto it tight as I just cried.

“Let’s get her back to West’s room and into bed,” Gio suggested, and instantly Malik had me scooped up into his arms. He walked me through to West’s room and laid me in the middle of the bed. Gio slid in behind me, wrapping his arms tight around my waist and pressing my back into his front.

“Call Joel. We need him to heal her neck. It looks bad,” Malik ordered and I heard West’s pounding footsteps leave the room.

“We’ve got you now, Lana. We won’t let him do that again,” Malik soothed as he perched on the bed at my other side and ran his hand over my forehead gently. “He’s never going to hurt you or take you from us again.”

I knew none of what just happened was Noah’s fault. He had been terrified, trapped in a nightmare, and just doing what he thought necessary to protect himself and me, but it didn’t make it any easier to deal with the trauma it was all bringing back, and the realization that if those Venator had been a little quicker getting in that warehouse, we both could have been

taken again, or killed. Noah had risked my life more than once that night, even if he never intended to.

Unwilling to talk and cause any more pain to my battered throat I caught Malik's hand in mine and pulled until he realized what I wanted. He laid down in front of me, opposite Gio and I, then shuffled forward until his front was pressed into mine, his arms wrapping around me above Gio's. Relieved, I sighed and allowed the last of the fear and tenseness to leave my body. I was sandwiched between two of my champions. I was safe.

A few minutes later West joined us, laying on the bed behind Mal and leaning up on his elbow so I could see him. He soothingly ran a hand over my hair.

If it weren't for the throbbing pain in my neck and throat I may have dozed off, but the pain was enough to keep me awake.

I flinched, tensing with fear when the door to West's room opened a while later, terrified Noah had returned. I wasn't scared of him. I just wasn't ready to face him and deal with everything that happened. Not yet.

"Easy love. It's just Joel," Gio assured me. The bed dipped below me and when I turned a little, I saw Joel crawling toward me from the bottom. He was dressed in slacks and a grey button down, now badly rumpled from a long shift.

"Hey pretty girl," he greeted with a gentle smile my way. Just the sight of him after so much drama had me crying, silent tears running down my cheeks, and before I knew it I had been pulled from Gio and Malik and found myself in his lap, wrapped in his arms and pressed into his body.

“It’s okay, sweetie. You’re going to be alright,” he soothed as he rocked me comfortingly. He leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to my lips, then lifted my head a little until he could see my throat.

“Fuck!” he hissed. “Noah did this?” He was looking to the others for the answer and they all nodded sadly.

“He d-didn’t mean to,” I croaked, then grimaced at the pain it caused.

“Don’t talk, baby. It sounds so painful,” West said as he reached over and took my hand in his, squeezing it reassuringly, telling me he was with me.

“I’m going to heal what I can, okay? I don’t think I can fix everything, but it should help,” Joel told me as he put his hand gently over my injured neck. I nodded, trusting him completely and desperate for some of the pain to stop. I felt the heat of his gift brush over me. Instantly some of the pain lessened, breathing and swallowing becoming a lot easier.

“How’s that?” he asked. He pulled his hand away and studied me.

“A lot better. Thank you,” I told him with a sniffle. My throat still hurt but it was manageable now.

“I’m sorry I can’t heal everything, but it’s complicated when the injuries are all internal. There’s bruising and swelling I can’t get to.”

“I’m okay now. My throat is just a little sore. I can handle it,” I assured him. “Good excuse to eat ice cream,” I added with a weak smile.

“We’ll get you all the ice cream you want, *bella*,” Gio said, brushing his hand down my arm soothingly.

“Some one going to tell me what the fuck happened?” Joel asked, as he looked between the guys.

“We’re not entirely sure. Lana called out down the link and when we found her, Noah had her pinned to the wall, choking the life out of her,” Malik explained, looking seriously pissed. They all looked pretty pissed come to think of it.

“He was having a nightmare. I tried to wake him and he... he just flipped out. He had me by the throat before I could utter a sound,” I recalled. My voice still sounded pretty hoarse and the words still grated, causing discomfort, but the worst of the pain was gone.

“Where did he take you when he teleported?” West asked.

“He took her? Again?” Joel gasped, a shudder racing through him beneath me.

“I don’t know. It looked like a warehouse. They were there...the Venator. We heard them...they almost found us,” I told them, my body trembling harder at just the thought of those monsters finding Noah and me.

“You could have been killed.” Malik growled. “I’m going to kill him.”

“It’s not his fault, Mal. He was terrified. He d-didn’t know what he was doing,” I defended. I was mad with Noah too for putting me through that, but I got that it wasn’t his fault.

“Maybe not, but from now on you keep a distance from him. You’re not being left alone with him for any reason, and until we’re sure he won’t whisk you away, you stay at least arms reach from him.” Gio said firmly, and I didn’t argue. Noah had terrified me that night, and even though I didn’t blame him, it would be a while before I felt safe with him again.

“Do you think he’s okay?” I asked as I looked to the doorway.

“I don’t give a fuck right now,” Malik grumbled.

“He’s with Grace and his Quin. They’ll take care of him,” Joel assured me.

“Come and lie down now, love. You need to rest. We’ll all stay with you,” Gio said, offering me his hand. I took it and allowed him to lead me back to where I had been laid, in his arms, before. West took his place before me this time, sliding his arm beneath my neck, and pulling me into his front. Joel laid behind Gio and reached over, placing a hand on my hip. Malik somehow squeezed in behind West, and his hand came over the top of my head, his fingers gently combing through my hair, and lulling me into sleep.

“I love you guys,” I mumbled when I was half asleep.

“We love you too, *bella*, more than we can ever say,” I heard Gio reply before sleep consumed me.

CHAPTER 11

JOY

“Please!” I cried desperately. “I already told you...I don’t know where she is!” My voice was strained and getting weaker with every protest, but the demons weren’t listening to me.

It had taken them a month to track me down, eventually catching up to me just outside Texas. I’d left three days after that little witch, Lana, ran, realizing it was only a matter of time before the monsters who forced her upon us, came to check she was still where they put her.

I had seen them before, during the years we kept her, periodically driving past our farm or stalking her as she set out to school. She never knew they were there, but I’d recognized them, recognized the devil when he was near my door.

I never should have let her run, but at the time I hadn’t cared. My husband was dead. My son was dead. Without Ted I had no money coming in, and no one to run the farm. I knew it was only a matter of time before I lost the house. It was all her fault – that evil, venomous little bitch! I told Ted the day he brought her into our home that she would be the end of us and I had been right. She had brought us nothing but misery and I wanted her gone.

Now I was paying for that mistake. These monsters were furious she was missing, and my death was inevitable. I knew that. They were going to kill me. I had been so right – Lana was going to be the end of our family.

“Lie!” the demon growled as he towered above me. I was tied to a chair, in a room that seemed clinical. The walls and floor were tiled entirely in white and there was a disinfectant smell that surrounded me. They had knocked me out when they found me, and the next thing I knew I had woken in that room, tied to that chair.

“It...it’s not! I have no idea wh-where she is...please...I don’t know anything!” I stuttered, my entire body trembling in fear. I had been there for hours, demons, all in human guises, questioning me and torturing me with their dark magic when I didn’t give them what they wanted. If I knew where she was I’d have told them a million times over, but I had no idea.

“But you should know, shouldn’t you, Joy? You were paid to know where she was at all times. You were paid to keep her with you. You failed,” he said, his tone chillingly calm as he opened his hand out flat between us. My eyes widened in horror as a snake of water rose from his palm and started to weave it’s way toward me. “She is very valuable to us and you lost her,” he went on.

“Worse than that. She let her go,” the second demon who stood in the room added. This one was a woman and she was propped against the back wall, just watching with the hint of an amused grin on her perfectly painted red lips. Her hair was the color of fire and hung down her back in long waves. She was dressed in black leather, and her figure was the perfect implement to lure unsuspecting, god-fearing men to the devil himself. On the outside she was beautiful, but it was all a disguise, just hiding the evil within.

The snake of water wound itself around my neck and squeezed tighter and tighter until my airway was cut off completely. I struggled, but it was useless. Darkness began to creep in around the edges of my vision. Just when I thought

that was it, it was all over, the demon closed his palm and the water disappeared.

I gasped in huge lungful's of air, coughing and fighting to breathe once again, but I was barely given a moment to recover before the red headed woman stepped up, wrapping her hand tight around my throat, and glaring down at me.

“Last chance. Tell us everything you know and I'll kill you quickly,” she hissed. Before I could open my mouth to plead once again, that I didn't know anything, the door to the room flew open and another of the monsters stepped in.

“Enough! She knows nothing of use. Kill her,” he ordered. “We don't need her anyway. Luther just picked up a trail on the male's gift. We already sent a team to retrieve them.” With that he left the room, slamming the door behind him and I knew it was over. I was going to die.

The male demon picked up a hunting knife from the table of implements at the side of the room and turned to me with a gleeful glimmer in his eye.

Swallowing my fear, I accepted my fate. My last thought - I told Ted that evil, demonic bitch he brought into our home would destroy us all, and I had been right.

CHAPTER 12

LANA

The guys were all still with me in bed when I woke up late the next morning. I knew they were worried about leaving me alone after what had happened the night before, and I understood that. I wasn't eager for them to leave me either if I were honest. He hadn't meant to, but Noah had really shaken me and I was scared to be alone with him again. That didn't take away my worry for him though, and when I woke that morning, with a clearer head, I knew I needed to check on him. If he was up to it, we also needed to have a conversation about how we moved forward. I didn't blame him for what had happened. I understood. I'd had my own share of nightmares where I woke up swinging and trying to defend myself from whoever had been attacking me in my sleep.

Noah had very good reason why he had done what he did and I wanted to be there every step of the way to help him deal with that, but we needed to discuss it. We needed to lay some ground rules to keep us all safe until Noah was more stable.

Resolved to check in and make sure he was doing alright that morning, we all got up, showered, and dressed. I noticed the way the guys rotated between staying in my room and going to West's room to shower and change, making sure one of them stayed with me and I appreciated it. I was still nervous and shaky after the night before and I was glad to have them at my side.

"Have you seen Noah?" I asked nervously when Malik walked back into my room. He had been the last to get ready, staying with me while the others all finished up before he went off himself. I stood in my room, nervously pulling on the sleeves of the purple hooded sweater I wore. It was one the

guys had bought for me at Navy Pier on our day there. It had a pink heart on the front and flowers twisting down the right sleeve. It was so cute and I had instantly fallen in love with it when I saw it. Of course the guys noticed and bought it, despite my protests.

“No. I think they’re all in the kitchen though. I heard voices when I walked in here,” Malik told me as he approached and wrapped his arm around my back, pulling me into a hug.

“If you’re not ready to face him we can just head out for a while. It’s perfectly understandable if you need some space today,” Gio told me. He was stood off to my right with West and Joel at his side, all of them looking to me, patiently waiting to do whatever I wanted them to do.

His offer was tempting. Noah had almost killed me the night before. I dreaded to think what would have happened if I couldn’t call the guys through our bond the way I had. I wasn’t sure how it would feel to face him again that morning, but I couldn’t just run away.

“No. It’s okay. I need to face him. It wasn’t his fault and I know he’s feeling really guilty about what happened,” I told them. I could feel Noah’s guilt through our link. I had been feeling it mixed with his distress all night. It was only adding to my own anxiety over the whole thing and I needed to do something to ease it all.

“We understand,” West said as he reached out and took my hand in his. He lifted it to his lips and placed a gentle kiss on my knuckles. “Just keep a little distance from him, okay? For us? We can’t handle him taking you again.”

“I will,” I assured them. I realized it would be a while before I felt safe enough to be within arms reach of Noah again after what happened.

“Come on then. Let’s get some breakfast before West gets hangry,” Joel joked as he led the way out of the room. We all followed, Malik keeping one arm wrapped around my back and West clinging tightly to my hand.

When we walked into the living room, Grace was in the kitchen cooking something and Oliver was pouring coffee. Gabe was across the room by the front door, on his cell, quietly talking, and Noah was sat at the counter in the kitchen. Henry was at his side with an arm around him, quietly saying something.

“Good morning,” I greeted as happily as I could muster. The guys took my cue and we all moved towards the kitchen.

At the sound of my voice Noah looked up, and I gasped at how exhausted he appeared. He was so pale and his eyes were red and swollen. Clearly, he’d been crying and I felt terrible. After everything that had happened to him, he shouldn’t have to go through this too.

“Noah,” I instantly started to move toward him, all of my previous caution forgotten, but Malik stopped me, keeping me at his side, the counter between Noah and me. I turned to Malik to argue, but when I saw the worry on the faces of my guys I stopped myself. I had been taken from them again the night before and I understood how scared they had to have been. I needed to remember that.

“I’m so...so sorry, Lana,” Noah rasped, his voice almost completely hoarse. “I didn’t mean to...to hurt you.”

“I know that. It wasn’t your fault. You were stuck in a nightmare,” I tried to reassure him.

“That’s what we’ve been trying to tell him all night,” Henry spoke up as he looked to me, his eyes filled with worry and exhaustion.

Noah looked away from me, burying his face in his hands, and his shoulders shook with silent sobs. Henry wrapped his arm even tighter around him in an effort to comfort him, but I couldn’t stand it any longer. My brother was hurting and I couldn’t keep the distance the guys had asked for.

I looked up to Malik and pleaded with my eyes for him to understand, but I didn’t wait for his permission or acceptance. I pulled from his hold on me and rounded the counter as fast as I could, pulling Noah from Henry’s arms, and wrapping my own tightly around him. He was shaking so hard against me, and it broke me.

“It’s okay, Noah,” I tried to soothe him as tears ran down my cheeks. “Everything’s alright. I don’t want you to upset yourself about this anymore. Do you hear me? It wasn’t your fault, and I’m fine.”

“I c-could have killed you,” he gasped breathlessly.

“Noah, please just take a breath and try to calm down,” I pleaded, terrified for the state he was in, both physically and mentally. He was barely holding on and I knew it. I could feel it.

I looked up to Grace, who was watching us with terror on her face, and implored her to do something. I was way out of my depth. I could barely handle my own emotions. I had no idea what to do to help Noah.

Thankfully, he seemed to hear me, because he lifted his head, resting it on my shoulder and took a deep breath in. I continued to hold him, rubbing a soothing hand up and down his back as he gained back some control of himself.

“I love you, Noah,” I told him quietly when he seemed calmer. Memories rushed through my mind, returning to me one by one. I saw us playing together in a park, felt Noah at my back, steadying and encouraging me as I shakily climbed, what seemed like the sky-high steps, on the jungle gym. I saw us stifling laughter as we hid in a closet, one of our dads’ playfully growling like a bear as he tried to find us. I saw Noah holding me as tight as he could, trying to keep my eyes from the massacre, as Venator stole our family and our innocence from us. Even when we were tiny children he had always been there; always been my protector.

“I love you too,” he replied as he pulled back and rose to his full height. He seemed calmer as he looked down at me, placing his hands on my shoulders.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see how tense my guys were. I could feel their fear through our bond. They were terrified I would be taken by Noah again, but they were holding back for me, because they knew I needed this.

“That’s why I have to go,” Noah went on.

“Go?” I gasped.

“I can’t risk that happening again. I can’t be here with you when I’m so messed up. I could have got us both captured by the Venator last night.”

“We were talking all night,” Oliver cut in. “We all agreed that Noah needs some time to heal. He can do that better in Ontario. We live in a small town where he can ease himself into life a little more slowly.”

“And we’re going to find him a therapist he can talk to. He won’t be able to discuss everything of course, but they will be able to help him deal with his PTSD,” Grace added as she circled the counter and came to Noah’s side, placing a supportive arm around him.

“This is what you want?” I asked, looking to him. I was shocked he’d leave after how determined he’d been to keep us together at the cabin.

“No. I don’t want to leave you. We’re stronger and safer together, but...I need this. I need to find a way to get myself together, and I need to know you’re safe while I do that. You’re not safe as long as I’m close...not when I’m like this.”

Tears filled my eyes at the realization he was right. He did need to go. He was terrified in the city. I hadn’t even been able to get him to leave the apartment. He needed time and space to heal. Oliver was right – some small town in Ontario would be a lot easier for Noah to feel safe in. He had his Quin and Grace, and he trusted them.

“I’ve already called my manager at the hospital and arranged some leave for a few months. Gabe works from home and Ollie and Henry are on shifts so someone can be with him at all times. We’ll take care of him,” Grace assured me as she placed her free hand on my forearm, sending me reassurance.

“I know you will,” I agreed tearfully. I knew they cared for Noah. I saw it in their faces when they looked at him. The guys saw him as a brother, and I was pretty sure Grace was falling for him and him for her. I knew they’d care for and protect him. I just hated that I couldn’t be the person he needed.

“I’m sorry La-la,” Noah whispered, pulling my gaze back to his. “I should be here. We need to train and get ready for the Venator, but I can’t. I’m not strong enough right now, and I’m so sorry for that.”

“You are the strongest person I have ever known, Noah,” I told him firmly. “You have nothing to be sorry for. After what you’ve suffered it’s a miracle you’re still here. You do whatever you need to do and don’t worry about me. I’m going to be just fine.”

“We’ve got her. We’ll keep her safe,” Gio assured him.

“I just need some time...I can be better than this,” Noah told me.

“I don’t need you to be better. You’re my brother. I’ll take you as you are, no matter what, but I understand that you need time, and that’s okay. You don’t have to feel guilty for doing what’s best for you. Just keep in touch with me, okay? I only just got you back. I can’t lose you again,” I pleaded.

“I will,” he agreed.

“We all will. We’ll call and let you know how things are going,” Grace added.

“You need to take our gift,” I told Noah and he instantly started shaking his head.

“No. I can’t. If you’re attacked...”

“If I’m attacked I won’t have a clue how to use it anyway,” I countered. “Plus I have the guys. We’re a full Quin. I can boost them if I need to, and they’ll protect me. You need our gift to protect yourself and your family in case you guys are attacked.”

“She’s right, Noah. You need your gift for now, at least until you both turn twenty-five next month,” Malik agreed.

Noah looked from my guys and to each of his family, all of whom nodded, except Gabe who was still on his cell. At their agreement, he backed down.

“Okay,” he gave in. “For now, but if you’re attacked I need to know. If, or when they find us, we need to be together to protect ourselves.”

“We’ll be in touch if there’s an attack, and you guys do the same. I think we’ll have time before the Venator track either of you down though,” Malik pointed out.

“I agree,” Gabe said as he strode toward us. “That’s what I told Noah. We have time for him to get stronger. The Venator have no idea where either of you are, and no means to track you. If we’re all careful, we should be safe for a while.”

“So you’re good with this plan?” Joel asked him.

“Whatever Noah needs. Clearly being in the city isn’t helping him and after last night, he isn’t going to be relaxed here with Lana. He’s too afraid he’ll hurt her again,” Gabe looked to me with understanding in his eyes. “I think some peace and country air could do him a lot of good.”

“When do you head out?” West asked.

“I have a flight arranged this afternoon, and a contact is creating some fake ID for Noah.”

More tears escaped at the thought of Noah leaving so soon. I was so confused. Part of me – the five year old part, who loved her brother more than anything or anyone in the world – wanted to wrap her arms around him and never let him go. But the older, wiser part of me understood Noah needed to do this. He needed time to find himself again, and to heal. If he stayed I’d be afraid that what happened the night before could happen again, and I didn’t want to be fearful around him. Part of me knew it was for the best if he left for a while. But he was my family, and I didn’t want to let him go, not after he had already been taken from me for so many years. I wanted him close, where I could take care of him and protect him.

“It won’t be forever. I’ll come back when I’m better,” Noah told me as he wiped a tear from my cheek with his thumb, his eyes locked on mine.

“You better. I lost you for twenty years, Noah. I’m not letting it happen ever again,” I told him tearfully.

“Neither am I,” he promised. “As soon as I’m strong enough I’m coming back to train you, then we’re going to take out every Venator on this earth.”

“Deal,” I agreed with a nod and a shaky smile.

“Let’s sit down and have breakfast together before we go,” Grace suggested. We all agreed and I took Noah’s hand, leading him to sit at the table with me.

He had to go. I knew that, but it wasn’t going to make it any easier to say goodbye. I had lost so much – my parent’s, my memories, so many years of my childhood, Harrison. Letting Noah go too, when I’d only just gotten him back felt so very wrong, but I had to, at least for a while.

I had to keep on reminding myself I wasn’t losing him. He was going with people who were destined to be his family. He’d be safe and cared for. I could still speak to him and be there for him when he needed me. I knew giving him this time would make him stronger so that when I got him back – when he was ready – we’d be stronger too. Noah wasn’t the only one who had healing to do, and I resolved to work on myself while he was off doing the same.

CHAPTER 13

LANA

A week had passed since Noah and his family left and returned to Ontario, and in that week me and my guys had found a new ‘normal’.

Joel was back into the full swing of his role at the hospital, his shifts back to the crazy schedule he had worked when I met them all, almost two months before.

The others had been crazy busy at the office. Most of the time one of them was able to stay home with me, but on the occasion when they’d all been needed there, I’d simply gone with them. They refused to leave me home alone and I wasn’t arguing, since I felt better when I was with them.

I had been pretty low since Noah left, blaming myself in part for him having to go. If I hadn’t have reacted so violently that night, and told him to go, maybe he wouldn’t have gotten so upset and felt the need to leave. The guys had argued with me when I confessed it to them, but I knew I had reacted badly to the situation that night with Noah, and my guilt over it wouldn’t leave me.

I missed him. Having him close had been like getting back a part of myself I hadn’t even realized I was missing, and now I felt like I had lost that part again, though this time I felt that loss greatly. We had spoken on the phone twice and he had sounded good - better. He liked the house his Quin had because it reminded him of the cabin, isolated and surrounded by woodland. He had even ventured to the store in the small town with Grace once, and dealt well with the trip. It seemed being out of the city, and away from the huge swarms of people that populated it, had done him good. He had his first

appointment with a therapist too, and while he admitted it had been awkward and uncomfortable for him, he had agreed to go back. His quin had come up with a story to keep the Vis element secret, that Noah had been held captive by abusive foster parents for the last twenty years. It gave Noah the ability to disclose the abuse he suffered, while maintaining the secrets we were required to keep from humans.

Gabriel had spoken to Malik and assured us that Noah seemed to be a little calmer there. It was a start and I was so happy he felt more comfortable. I just wished I could be with him, helping him.

“Earth to Lana,” West laughed, pulling me from my thoughts. I looked up and found him stood before me, a playful smile on his face.

“Sorry,” I sighed as I forced a smile.

“You were miles away,” he told me. “Everything okay?”

“I was just thinking,” I replied. We were at the offices, Malik and Gio both having meetings that morning, and West needed to look at a glitch in the system, or something like that. I couldn’t remember specifics because I hadn’t really been listening as they all spoke at breakfast that morning. I’d just dressed when they told me I needed to go with them, and blindly followed them to the car.

For the several hours they’d left me that morning, I’d sat on the sofa in Mal’s office, with the E-reader Joel bought me clutched in my hand, not reading a damned word of the book I uploaded over a week ago.

I couldn't stop thinking about Noah, worrying about how he was and if he was safe, so far away. What if the Venator attacked and took him again? How would we find him? Would we even be able to get him back? I couldn't bear for those monsters to get hands on him again, not after everything they'd already put him through.

I squeaked as strong arms wrapped around me and lifted me into the air, tearing me from my all consuming worries once again.

“West!” I cried when I realized he had me in his arms and was carrying me out of the office.

“You're worrying too much. I need to distract you,” he declared as he strode from the office and called the elevator.

“I'm fine. Put me down,” I told him, but I couldn't help the small smile on my face as I sank into the comfort of his hard, warm body, surrounded by his amazing scent of citrus and spicy aftershave.

“Nope,” he replied stubbornly. “We're going out to lunch.”

“What about the problem you needed to fix?”

“It's fixed. Now I'm free to spend the rest of the day with the most beautiful woman in the world.” He had me cradled in his arms, bridal style, and I felt overwhelmed when he looked down at me with so much love and adoration. I wished I could see the version of me, which he clearly saw, when I looked at myself in the mirror.

“And what am I going to do in the meantime?” I asked playfully.

He growled and freed up one arm from around me, using it to tickle me mercilessly. It was just what I needed to pull me from the funk I was in. After West finally gave in and we wrapped up in our coats, we walked from the office building a few minutes later, hand in hand. I felt a lot better, still marveling at the way he had been able to turn around the mood I’d been in, so easily.

“What do you feel like eating?” he asked as we headed down the busy street. I still hated the crowds in the city, nervous with so many unknown factors crowding around me, but with West I knew I was safe. People cleared a path for him, intimidated by his size, but even if they didn’t, I knew my big growly protector would never allow anyone to hurt me.

“I don’t mind,” I replied. “You pick. You guys always pick the best food.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” West said, a smile on his face as he turned and pulled me behind him across the street. We walked two blocks before West stopped and ushered me into what looked like a French patisserie.

I couldn’t help the excited gasp that slipped from me when I walked in and saw the displays in the long, glass cabinet before me. The shelves were filled with the most beautiful, intricately decorated cakes and desserts.

“West! So good to see you,” the man who was working away behind the counter called as soon as he looked up and saw us. He was tall and very thin, with a graying goatee beard and small wire framed glasses. I guessed he was maybe in his

early sixties, but when he smiled I noted a twinkle in his eyes. He was very friendly and welcoming.

“Hey Jean. How’s business?” West asked.

“I can’t complain,” the man replied – Jean? That’s what West called him. “What can I get for you? The usual?”

“You know it,” West laughed. “But can I get two servings please? This is Lana, my girlfriend. I thought I’d introduce her to the best lunch in the city.”

“It’s about time you settled down with a pretty woman,” Jean told him, then he looked to me and smiled even wider. “And you, my dear, certainly are pretty.”

“Um...th-thanks,” I stuttered nervously as a blush spread up my cheeks. I wasn’t sure where to look after his compliment.

“Shy too, huh? You’ve got yourself a keeper there, West,” Jean remarked as he turned and headed into the back of the store. “I’ll just be a few minutes with your order,” he added, then he was gone.

I looked back to the counter, trying to hide my blush from West. I wasn’t used to compliments and I wasn’t sure what to do with myself.

“Which one would you like? I can’t help you because I think every dessert in here is equally delicious,” West chuckled as he appeared behind me and molded himself around my back, wrapping an arm around my waist.

“You can’t eat any of those,” I protested, turning in his arms, and looking up at him. “They’re like little works of art. It would be such a waste.”

“They’re meant to be eaten, baby girl.” He wrapped both of his arms around me and pulled me tightly against his front. “You have to pick one. We can’t leave ‘Benedict’s’ without dessert,” he told me as he gazed down at me, the gleam in his eyes making me suddenly very hot all over.

I couldn’t stop myself from reaching up on to my toes, in an attempt to reach his lips. When I came at least a half a foot short, West crouched down enough to complete the distance between us. As soon as he kissed me, my arms wrapped around his neck, holding him even closer to me. I kissed him hard and fast, throwing the desperation I was feeling for him into that moment, unable to stop myself.

I wasn’t sure if it was the bond between us, or if it was my desperate, neglected libido, but since I got back to the guys, after what happened with Noah, I couldn’t seem to keep my hands off of them. My body was begging for more than the few kisses and light caresses we’d shared; screaming at me to take things further. The issue was that I had no idea how to make things move on. I’d never done any of this before. My kisses with my guys were the first of my entire life and I was clueless when it came to understanding what needed to be done to move things to the next step.

Jean appearing behind the counter again, broke up our moment before I could think and panic too much more about it.

“Here we go, love birds,” he said as he placed a white paper bag on the counter, already filled almost to the top by the look of it. “What else can I get for you?”

“Give me a mixed box for the guys and I’ll take an apple tart to go with lunch,” West replied. He turned me in his arms and once again molded himself to my back, as he pointed to the glass display and said, “Pick the one you want to try, baby.”

Picking was easier said than done when they all looked so good. I’d have happily had any of them, just to look at and admire, but as always, the chocolate caught my eye. I pointed to a tiny chocolate gateaux which was topped with a mouthwatering frosting and what looked like the most intricate chocolate lace work.

“I’ll try one of those, please,” I replied, looking first to West, then over the counter to Jean.

“Excellent choice,” Jean told me as he carefully picked out my dessert and packed it into a small box.

As Jean settled another paper bag down on the counter beside the first, West rearranged me, settling me in one of his arms, and freeing his other so he could pull his wallet from the pocket of his jeans.

“Anything else I can get for the beautiful couple?” Jean asked.

“Don’t temp me. I already have to work out for an extra hour every time I visit your place,” West told him. He stepped forward and handed Jean his credit card, then he grabbed both bags in his free hand.

“Well, enjoy. And make sure you bring your beautiful lady back to see me again,” Jean handed West back his card, after scanning it over the terminal. West skillfully grabbed it in the hand already filled with bags, and slid it into his pocket, then he led me out of the store and back out into the sunny, but bitterly cold street.

We walked back to the office hand in hand, a comfortable silence between us. It felt good to get some one on one time with West. So much had happened in the last few weeks and it had just been chaos. It was nice to be in a lull where I just got some time to breathe and get to know my Quin.

When we were inside the building, West led me straight up to his office and once we got rid of our coats and hats, we got settled on the leather sofa in there.

“I guarantee this is going to be the greatest grilled cheese you ever ate,” West announced as he pulled a white box from one of the paper bags and handed it to me. He also handed me a bottle of sparkling water.

“Grilled cheese?” I laughed. “You ordered grilled cheese from that fancy patisserie?”

“Try it before you mock,”

Intrigued, I opened the box and found two halves of a fancy looking grilled cheese. It had cheese grilled on the outside and on the inside.

“I’ll admit, it does smell really good,” I confessed as my mouth watered.

“It’s the French version of grilled cheese. It’s called ‘Croque Monsieur’. I found ‘Benedict’s’ a few years ago and I’ve been going back every week since. I wasn’t joking when I said it’s the best lunch in the city,” he explained. “Try it,” he urged as he nodded to the half I held in my hand.

It smelled so good, and he didn’t have to tell me twice. I took a huge bite, and groaned as my mouth was filled with the salty goodness of cheese, along with something smooth and creamy. The cheese stretched a little and I knew I looked far from elegant, but who cared?

“Oh that’s good!” I exclaimed with a full mouth, making West chuckle.

“Told you,” he declared, as he too dove in, and thankfully, didn’t look any more elegant than I did as he wound up with strings of cheese on his stubbled chin. We both giggled as we ate the amazing food. It was such a simple moment, just the two of us grabbing lunch, but it was so relaxed and care-free that it made it feel that much more special. For the first time in weeks I smiled fully and didn’t worry about any of the other things that had been circling us all. I just set it all aside and focused on West and the great time we were having together.

Once we finished the sandwiches I sat up and cleared away the trash. It was the most I had eaten all week and I felt better for it, my stomach comfortably full for once.

I had crossed the office to throw the packaging in the trash can, and as I turned and walked back toward West I felt that desire building within me again. I couldn’t help but admire how amazing he looked as he sat watching me. He was reclined back on the sofa, his arms stretched out across the back of it. He was in black jeans and a black t-shirt, with ‘Visbyte’ printed in white letters on the front. The lazy,

relaxed smile on his face was what really called to me and as I walked back toward him, a need like I had never known overtook me.

My walk toward him changed, and I began to stalk confidently, one thing on my mind – touching him everywhere.

If the look on his face was anything to go by, I took him a little by surprise when I approached him, and without an ounce of hesitation, swung one leg over his thighs, climbed into his lap and straddled him.

“Is this okay?” I asked, suddenly a little less sure.

“Always, baby girl,” he replied as he wrapped his arms loosely around my waist, just circling me, but not trapping me. It was amazing the way they all understood what I needed without me needing to say a word. It was a part of why I was so sure that what we had, our relationship; our Quin, was so right. Even though we’d only known each other a couple of months, they just understood me. It felt as though they had known me all of my life.

I couldn’t hold back any longer. My body was begging me to move – to get closer. I put my hands on his chest and leaned in until our lips pressed together. West cradled my face in his hands and took back some control as he deepened the kiss. Our tongues tangled and I wrapped my arms around the back of his neck, snaking my hands up into his hair. West’s hands moved from my face to my back and he pressed my body tighter into his.

“West,” I squeaked when we broke the kiss. I was panting and my body was on fire. I don’t know what I wanted from him. I just knew my body was desperate for something and I

wasn't sure how to tame it. I was squirming on his lap, every part of me alive and desperate for more.

"It's okay, beautiful," he soothed, his voice sounding a little raspy. "I've got you." He wrapped his huge hand around the back of my head and pulled me in for another kiss. This time it was completely in his control and even wilder and more frantic than the last.

As he held me in place, kissing all logical thought from me, his other hand slid under the hem of my sweater and I felt the pads of his calloused fingers skim up my right side very slowly.

The electricity that shot through me at the mere touch of his hands on my skin, had me pulling away from the kiss and gasping.

"You tell me to stop if you need to," he whispered, then he was kissing my neck, short little pecks moving further and further down until he met the neckline of my sweater, then he moved back up to my ear again and started all over. I nodded to acknowledge what he had said, but I was incapable of words as my senses were completely overloaded with sensation.

I placed my hands on his wide shoulders and held on, as I lifted my head to give him better access to my neck. His hand which had been slowly working its way up my body beneath my sweater, was now at my bra, torturing me as he circled the edge of the fabric over and over.

His other hand was on my skin too, this one under my sweater at my back, holding me in place on his lap and making me feel so safe with him in that moment.

Just as I was sure I was going to have to beg him for more, the door to his office opened loudly and we both froze in place, West's hands dropping from beneath my sweater.

"Shit!" Gio exclaimed. I looked to the door and saw him half turned, a hand over his eyes. "Sorry. I didn't realize...I can come back later,"

"No, it's okay," I assured him as I climbed from West's lap and straightened my sweater, hoping my face wasn't as flaming red as it felt. "You can come in," I added when he just stood frozen in the doorway.

"Is that from Benedict's? If it is you better have food for me in there," Gio declared as he strode into the office, focused solely on the white bag at our feet.

"Not that you fucking deserve it after storming in here without knocking, but yeah, I got you guys dessert," West replied as he lifted the bag up and began pulling out the white boxes. He handed the first one to me, sat the second beside him on the sofa, then pulled out an even bigger box which he handed to Gio.

"Have I told you you're my favorite brother?" Gio asked playfully as he opened the lid of the box just enough to peek inside.

"Yeah, yeah. Just make sure Joel and Mal get some of those too."

"What did you get, *bella*?" Gio asked as I opened the small box I held. I turned it and showed him the beautiful, mini,

chocolate gateaux inside. I was still of the opinion it was far too pretty to eat, but the delicious smell of chocolate was quickly changing my mind on that.

“Chocolate,” Gio chuckled. “I should have known.”

“It was a tough decision. Everything in that counter looked so good, but chocolate won out,” I shrugged with a smile.

“Of course it did,” Gio said as he turned to West. “Did you ask Jean if anything contains nuts?”

My face dropped as I looked to my little cake and realized we hadn't. Did that mean I couldn't eat it? The devastation must have been all over my face because Gio sent me a reassuring smile.

“Fuck. No. I didn't even think,” West gasped as he took the box from my hands instantly. “How could I forget?”

“It's fine. I forgot too,” I tried to reassure him and not look as crestfallen as I felt, that my cake was taken from me. It had looked so good. Stupid allergy!

“Call him now and find out what Lana can have. If there's nothing here I'll take her back to pick something she can eat,” Gio directed.

“There's no need. I'm full anyway. You guys eat the cake,” I protested. There was no way they needed to go to all of that trouble. I'd just need to be more careful about asking next time. It was going to take some getting used to, checking everything I ate. I was lucky the guys had been so careful on my behalf up to that point.

“You think the grilled cheese was good? Do you have an EpiPen here? Mine is in the car,” West fussed, looking to Gio with panic.

“I have one in my desk, but Lana looks fine,” Gio said calmly. “Do you feel alright, love?”

“I’m fine. I don’t think they put nuts in grilled cheese,” I joked, placing what I hoped was a calming hand on West’s thigh.

“You’d be amazed what has traces of nuts in, but I think if you’re feeling good, the grilled cheese was fine,” Gio added.

“I’ll go call Jean and check. Stay with her just in case,” West snapped, and before I could protest anymore he left the office.

“You do need to start being more careful, love. Every time you eat out you need to confirm everything you get is safe for you to eat,” Gio warned me as he took the seat West had just vacated and took my hand in his.

“I will,” I agreed. “I just completely forgot about it.”

“It’s easily done, especially when chocolate is calling to you,” he sighed as he pulled me in closer by the hand he held, then wrapped his arm tight around me, tucking my head under his chin. I snuggled into him. “Just try to remember though, okay? We couldn’t stand it if we had to watch you go through that reaction again. It was terrifying.” He kissed the top of my head. It was such a simple, but touching gesture and it made me feel so adored.

“I will. I promise. I don’t want to go through that again either,” I agreed easily.

“It’s nice to see you smiling. You’ve seemed really down the last few days.”

“I’m sorry. I was just worried about Noah. I hate that he felt he had to leave because of me. We only just found each other and now he’s gone again,” I admitted.

“Firstly, he didn’t leave because of you. He left because he needed somewhere quieter and calmer than the city, to recover, and because he didn’t trust himself to be safe around you. None of that is on you, it’s on Noah. And secondly, he’s not gone. We know where he is and you can pick up the phone and speak to him whenever you like. We can go to him if you need to. He’s in your life. He just needs a breather for now, that’s all.”

“I know. You’re right, but I can’t help feeling like I’ve failed him. He needed my help and I was useless,” I sighed defeatedly.

“You did what you could for him, Lana, but it wasn’t you he needed, love. He needs his Quin and I think he realized that the night he hurt you. That’s why he agreed to go with them. The bond between brother’s in a Quin is so strong. It will help him to feel safe enough to heal and get stronger.

“In the mean time you’re exactly where you’re supposed to be too – here with us getting stronger yourself and strengthening our Quin.”

“You’re right,” I agreed again. “But I don’t think I can stop worrying about Noah.”

“Of course not. He’s your brother and he’s been through so much. Just try to have faith that Grace and his Quin will take care of him though. You can’t make yourself ill with the worry. You need to take care of yourself too,” he advised.

“Jean said the grilled cheese was good and so is the chocolate cake, but the apple tart and several of the desserts in the other box contain nuts,” West announced as he strode back into the office.

“So I can eat my cake?” I asked happily.

“Yes,” West nodded. “But we should throw the others out, just to be safe.”

“No way!” I cried. “We’re not throwing those beautiful desserts in the trash. You guys can eat them.”

“I agree. It would be sacrilege to throw away anything from Benedict’s,” Gio said as he gave me a little squeeze, then rose to his feet. “I’ll put them in the staff kitchen with a sign for the staff to help themselves.”

“Fine, but take this too.” West held out the small box which contained his apple tart. “I’ll head back to Benedict’s on my way home and pick up a box that are all safe for Lana. We can eat them tonight after dinner.”

“You guys are crazy. There’s no reason you can’t eat them,” I pointed out.

“If we eat them and kiss you, or even breathe on you, it could be enough to trigger your allergy,” West explained. “We’re not taking that risk.”

“We’re never taking any risks where you’re concerned, love. You’re way too important to us,” Gio added. I had to fight to hold back the tears that instantly filled my eyes. It was so hard to accept how dramatically my life had changed. I had gone from having absolutely nothing and no one, living on the terrifying streets with no prospects or even hope for my future, to living with four amazing men who loved and cared for me more than I ever would have believed possible. I knew how lucky I was, and I would never take that for granted.

CHAPTER 14

LANA

“Morning honey.” Joel greeted from the kitchen as I walked into the living area. For someone who just finished an eighteen hour shift, he looked way too bright eyed.

“Morning.” I groaned, exhausted from another restless night. Noah had been gone for two weeks now, and I still worried about him. When we spoke on the phone he seemed better, happier, but he was anxious about the Venator and when they would attack us, and that had me anxious about it too. I worried they would attack Noah and take him again, all while I hid and did nothing to stop it.

“You want some coffee?”

“More than life itself.” I plonked my tired body down in a stool at the center island and rested my head on my arms on the counter.

“Another tough night?” Joel asked as he filled the coffee pot with water.

“Yeah. These nightmares are killing me.” I admitted, not bothering to lift my head. My usual nightmares of Ted and Joy, or the recurring one of me being attacked on the streets, now had some new additions. The new nightmares featured the Venator attacking me and my guys, or me and Noah, and they were brutal and violent. I was waking up to my own screams even more than before and it really was draining me.

“I’m heading to bed once I eat. Why don’t you come and lie with me for a few hours, see if you can sleep some more?” I almost cried in relief at the offer. The guys slept with me some nights, and when they were there it really helped with the nightmares, but I was embarrassed to ask them to stay with me if they didn’t offer. I was a twenty-four year old, who slept with a nightlight and had nightmares. Admitting I was scared to be alone too, was just too much. So the night before I’d gone to bed alone and I’d barely slept a wink. Laying with Joel would allow me to actually sleep, I was sure of it.

“Yes please, Joel. I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you too, beautiful,” he said, and I felt him lay a kiss on the top of my head.

“I’ll make you tea instead if you want to sleep more, okay? Caffeine will keep you up.”

I forced myself to look up and sleepily smiled at him, grateful for his thoughtfulness.

“Where are the others?” I asked. I remembered they had a big meeting that day, but didn’t expect them to be gone already. I had promised them I would stay with Joel, too tired to head to the office for the third day that week. I enjoyed going there and helping the guys with their work, but I just wanted a day to lounge around at home for once. I wanted to go and see Max. It had been almost a week since I last went to Kevin’s and I was missing my furry friend.

“We passed at the door. They wanted to get to the office early to prep for the big meeting this afternoon. They’ll be home for dinner.”

“Family dinner then, if everyone’s home?” I asked hopefully. It seemed like forever since we all got to eat together.

“Sounds like a plan. We can order from the Italian later if you like?”

“Actually, I want to cook something. I saw this recipe I want to try out,” I confessed. It had been on the food network late one night when I couldn’t sleep and I had been dreaming of it ever since.

“Absolutely. Cook it for 6PM and I’ll text the guys to make sure they’re home for it,” Joel said with a huge grin, instantly making me feel brighter.

“Thanks,” I returned with a grin of my own.

After Joel and I ate a quick breakfast we headed through to his room. I crawled straight into his bed, while he went to take a quick shower.

He was dead on his feet by the time he stumbled back into the bedroom, dressed only in a pair of navy blue shorts. His hair was still wet from the shower and, as half asleep as he was, he looked so damn cute.

“Come and lie down, before you fall down,” I laughed, lifting the comforter, and patting the space beside me.

“Don’t need to tell me twice,” he sighed as he rolled in and instantly wrapped his arm around me, pulling me so I lay draped half on him and half on the mattress.

“You need to sleep,” I told him, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do with my body pressed against his. He smelled so good and with his skin touching mine, those electric sensations, which only my guys could trigger within me, were going crazy.

“I will, but I want you close. I don’t get enough time with you like this,” he told me sleepily. He was right. Out of all of my guys, I saw Joel the least because of his insane shifts at the hospital. I missed him and wished it were different, but I understood he needed to focus on his career at that point. Once his internship was over, in a few months, things would settle down and I would get more time with him. Until then I’d just have to make the most of moments like the one we had right there.

“I’m not complaining,” I assured him as I burrowed even tighter into him.

“I love you so much, Lana. You know that, right?” he asked softly. “I know I’m not here as much as the others. I wish I could be, but...” I cut him off, propping my head on my elbow over his chest and looking down at him.

“I know, Joel. It doesn’t matter how much you’re here or not here. I completely understand you have to work and I’m so proud of what you do,” I told him firmly. “I know you love me. I love you too.” I bent down until my lips landed on his, and we shared a languid, lazy kiss. “Now sleep,” I ordered when I pulled away and settled back into my place half laid on him, my hand settled on his chest.

“Night honey,” he whispered and moments later I heard his gentle snores. Minutes later, with my hand over his heart, the calm rhythm lulled me into sleep too.

CHAPTER 14

LANA

“This was such a good idea, Lana,” Joel remarked as we walked down the street, hand in hand. We’d both woken about an hour before, after sleeping most of the day away. Joel looked a lot better for the rest, and I felt better too, not a single nightmare hitting as I’d laid safely in Joel’s arms.

When Joel started looking for food I suggested we take a walk to the coffee shop across the park for a bite to eat. For weeks Joel had done nothing but work and sleep. I decided it would do him good to get a change of scenery.

Now we were three blocks from home, halfway through the park, with the bright sun shining down on us. Despite the fact it was a cold day, with a dusting of snow on the ground, the sun was out in force and shining bright.

“I do have them occasionally,” I joked. “Seriously though, you spend too much time working and sleeping. We need to try harder to do other things when you have free time.”

“I completely agree. I don’t have a lot of spare time, but we could be making much more of that I do have.”

When we walked into the small coffee shop, which I had visited once previously with Mal, the place was quiet, just a few tables taken.

Joel and I ordered coffee and sandwiches for late lunch, then chose a table beside the window, which overlooked the park. We were quiet as we ate, just enjoying food, which was

really good, and our time together in that lovely, cozy, picturesque spot.

“How’s Noah? Have you spoken with him?” Joel asked once we were finished eating.

“Yeah, I called him last night. He sounds good, actually. He likes the little town they live in. He’s been out to the store with Grace a few times, and he even went for beers with Henry and Oliver a few nights ago. They taught him to play darts, which he enjoyed.”

“That’s great,” Joel agreed. “Sounds like he’s doing good.”

“He is. I think seeing the therapist has helped. He’s seeing her a few times a week now he’s more comfortable. Grace and the guys have been amazing too.”

“You miss him?” It wasn’t really a question, but I nodded anyway.

“It’s weird, because for twenty years he was gone and I never once missed him, or even had a memory of him, but now that I have my memories back, and I feel our link...I miss him a lot. It’s like he’s a part of me now and I hate that part being so far away, especially when he might be in danger,” I tried to explain.

“I completely understand, but try not to worry too much. Noah is powerful and he has his Quin too. They’ll have his back if it comes to it,” Joel told me. “But for now they should be pretty safe anyway. It’s going to take a while for the Venator to track you guys without you using your gift. Right now, as far as we know, that’s the only way they can get a trace on either of you.”

Noah and I had told everyone about the Venator outside the warehouse, the night Noah had panicked and teleported me to that place. We had explained what we heard them say, about tracking us from our gift. Malik and Gabriel had reasoned that a gift as strong as Noah and I teleporting, would likely leave a signature a powerful Venator would be able to track. The only reason they hadn't followed us to the cabin was because the signature was cloaked, just the same as the cabin, and so the trail to us would have died before they followed it anywhere near to us.

That left us with the issue that if Noah and I used our gift to protect ourselves or the people we loved, we could be leading the Venator right to us, but we'd have to deal with that when it came to it. We'd need to learn to create cloaks to cover our gifts, but as yet Noah didn't know how to do that. For now, as long as we stayed off of the radar, we were safe.

"You're right. For now we're safe and Noah's doing better. I'm going to make the most of that," I agreed. I had four guys I was falling hard in love with, and my brother and I were safe. There were going to be a lot more hardships down the road, so why not appreciate the reprieve while I had it?

"Good plan," Joel agreed with a smile.

"Come on. Let's take a walk around the park before we head home. We should make the most of this sunny day," I said as I shrugged on my coat and pulled on my hat. Joel did the same, and once we were both on our feet, he took my hand in his once again.

"It might be bright, but it's still freezing." Joel stopped a few steps away from the café and rubbed my hand between both of his. "Do you have your gloves? Your hands are already

freezing.” I nodded and pulled my hand free so I could grab my gloves from my pockets and pull them on.

“What about you?” I asked when he took my gloved hand and we continued into the park. It was quiet, not many people choosing to be out when it was so cold and slippery underfoot, but I was pleased about that. We practically had the place to ourselves and it made the walk all the more enjoyable. “Where are your gloves. Don’t you have to protect your hands? They’re your money makers.”

“True,” Joel laughed. “But I forgot my gloves, so I guess you’ll just have to keep me warm.”

I saw the heat in his eyes when he glanced over at me, a playful, sexy smile on his face.

That was all it took to have me feeling inexplicably hot. I glanced around me hurriedly, praying no one was close enough to stop me doing what I was desperate to do. Thankfully there was no one in sight in the huge green area around us, so I didn’t hold back as I stopped and placed myself before Joel. I reached up and put my hands on his shoulders, and instantly he had his hands on my waist, lifting me into his arms so I could wrap my legs around him, clinging to him tight as my lips crashed down over his.

The kiss was all consuming and I forgot about where we were and who may be watching. I forgot about the cold and any nerves I may have once had about being intimate. All there was for me in that moment was Joel, and the passion ever-growing between us.

Joel’s hand gripped the back of my neck, pulling me even tighter against him, forcing our mouths together even more violently. My hands were running over his head, down his

neck and to his shoulders, moving constantly, needing more than I could take in the middle of a park.

“Joel,” I whispered as I pulled back to get a much-needed breath in. He pushed my head aside a little and continued his kiss, this time trailing them down my neck as far as he could go and sending a shudder of desperation through me. “I...I need more. Take me home...please.”

“You sure? We don’t need to rush this,” Joel said as he pulled back and studied my face.

“I’m sure, Joel. I want more with you. I’m ready.” I looked into his eyes as I spoke, wanting him to see the truth in every word. I was done waiting. Done trying to work out at which point in our relationship it was acceptable to want the things my body was pleading for. I loved my guys. We were destined to be together. How could any of what I wanted be wrong?

“Fuck,” Joel hissed as he set off walking again, this time with my clinging to him. “Why do we have to be so damn far from the apartment?”

“Put me down and we can run there,” I laughed, but Joel just clung to me tightly and stepped up his pace, power walking through the park.

“If only I had West’s gift,” he grumbled, making me laugh again. I sat up in his hold and wrapped my arms around his neck, trailing kisses down the side of his face and behind his ear.

“Honey, we’re not going to make it home if you carry on like that. I’m going to wind up lying you down right here in the snow; screw the on-lookers.” I couldn’t help the heat that

raced through me at the cave-man quality of the way he growled those words and at the notion of him laying me down and taking me right there. I wasn't keen on the idea of on-lookers, but I was keen on Joel getting down to it right that moment and screw the delay of getting home.

We were almost to the gates of the park when we heard a scream from close by.

“What was that?” I gasped as Joel held me tighter and looked around him.

“I don't know, but I should check it out. I want you to call 911 and then run back to the apartment building. Don't stop until you're locked in the building, okay?” He set me down on my feet.

“No. Not okay. I'm coming with you,” I declared stubbornly. No way Joel was walking off into unknown danger alone. I knew there wasn't a lot I could do to help him, but I wasn't leaving him.

“Lana...”

“No. I'm not leaving,” I told him flatly. “We need to move. Let's go.” Before he could protest I took his hand and pulled him the direction we had heard the scream come from. It was over in a more secluded part of the park, where there were densely packed trees.

As we approached, Joel stopped me, pulling me behind him and taking the lead as we continued forward. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust as the light turned from bright sunlight to the thick shadows of the woodland.

We heard another sound, this time a much weaker whimper and Joel turned, heading right for it. We moved between the trees as quickly, but quietly as we could, and after several minutes we came to the scene, the source of the scream and whimper a young woman. Joel yanked me back so we remained hidden behind a huge tree trunk.

I couldn't help the gasp that slipped free at the sight before me, but I didn't allow anything else to escape for fear of the monsters spotting us.

There were two of them – *Mutatio* - currently in their beast forms. They were looming over the woman on the floor and it was very obvious from her grey skin and the sheer amount of blood all around her, that she was dead. They had ripped her open, her torso a mass of torn flesh and rivers of blood, which flooded to the snow covered earth below her.

“We have to go. I can't take on two, and the girl is already dead. There's nothing we can do,” Joel whispered so quietly I barely heard it.

“Are you sure? You can't heal her?” I asked, already knowing the answer. The poor woman was already gone, killed so brutally for the enjoyment of monsters. She was so young, likely the same age as me, give or take, and her life was over. I was fighting to hold in the contents of my stomach, horrified by the gore playing out in front of me, but I pulled it back, needing to keep Joel and I from being the next victims of these monsters.

“It's too late, squeak. Let's go. We'll call the others and they can try and track these two,” Joel nodded to the two monsters, who had now transformed back into men while I had looked away. One was as tall as West, with pale, milky skin

and jet-black hair, which was slicked back perfectly. He wore a navy suit with a baby-blue shirt beneath.

The other was a little shorter, but bulging with tightly packed muscle. His hair was a rusty color and cut short to his head. He was pale too, and dressed in stark contrast to the other one. He wore baggy jeans and a t shirt that was so tight to his muscles it looked as though he spray painted it on.

As they both bent down over the woman, the red head with a knife in his hand, I allowed Joel to lead me away. I wouldn't be able to maintain control over my reaction if I was forced to witness anymore of the horror unfolding.

We barely moved a few steps before the tall, suited *Mutatio* appeared before us in a blur.

“Leaving so soon?” he sneered as he blocked our path. I turned behind us and found the red head there, blocking us in that direction too.

Joel turned so he could have an eye on both of them, and moved me behind him. I could see him trying to weigh up his options, but they were limited. These two guys were huge, and Joel didn't have a gift he could use against them. It wasn't like he could feel their emotions until they dropped dead.

I placed my hand on his shoulder and gave him every bit of my boost that I could, while maintaining enough to keep me upright and able to run. I wasn't sure it would help him to fight hand to hand, but I figured it couldn't hurt him. There was no way we were getting out of there without a serious fight.

Joel struck out before I even saw it coming, launching himself across the space and doing some crazy martial arts type kick. The red head was caught completely off guard and he flew backwards, landing hard on his back.

“Lana, run!” Joel bellowed as he launched himself toward the suited guy, both now running at each other. They met with an explosion of fists on flesh and for several moments that sound, along with pained grunts had me frozen in place.

I knew Joel wanted me to run, but there was no way I was leaving him. Instead I just stood, watching for any opportunity I could take to jump in and help. I checked on the red head, and saw he was getting to his feet.

Joel was holding his own in the fight with the suited guy, but he wouldn't last long against two of them.

Without giving it too much thought I picked up a huge, thick tree branch which lay in the snow and I swung it on my shoulder as I stalked toward the red head, who was now back on his feet.

As soon as I got close, his dark eyes shot up and met mine as he glared.

“You,” he hissed. “You're Vis. You're the one they've been searching for.” As if that realization was all of the motivation he needed, he stood tall and pulled a gun from the small of his back. “You're going to earn me a big payday,” he grinned as he pointed the gun at where Joel and the other Venator were still scrapping.

“NO!” I screamed as I realized the gun was pointed at Joel, but it did no good. The bullet tore through Joel's stomach and

he crumpled to the floor. I screamed as I dropped the branch I was clutching and ran for him, but the red head was beside me in a flash, and he clamped his arms around me so tightly they were like iron bands holding me against him.

“JOEL!” I screamed again as I turned and saw him laid on the ground. His eyes were closed and his face was bloody from the fight. The suit wearing Venator he had been fighting kicked him and grinned, as I screamed and fought with everything in me to get to Joel.

“What’d you do that for? I was having fun,” the suited one pouted.

“Leave him. This is the little bitch Hex is offering a huge reward for. We’re about to be rich,” They both looked to me and leered with satisfaction, but I ignored them. All I could focus on was Joel and the fact that he wasn’t moving a muscle. I couldn’t even see the rise and fall of his chest. My world imploded around me as I continued to fight to get to him, but all to no avail. The grip on me was too tight.

As they started to walk away, toward the entrance of the park, which Joel and I had been headed to, police sirens broke out and I saw flashing lights through the trees. Knowing it was my chance I kicked my legs as hard and violently as I could, smashing my heavy snow boots into the shins of the monster that held me. He gripped me so tightly, in an attempt to stop me, I was pretty sure I heard my ribs crack, but I didn’t stop. I was like a wild animal, doing anything I could to get free and back to Joel before it was too late. I refused to even think it could already be too late.

I reached behind me and wrapped one arm around my kidnapper’s head, then reached with my other hand

awkwardly, stabbing blindly, aiming for where I guessed his eyes were.

When I hit the bullseye, he roared in pain and dropped me as he fought to get my claws from his eyes. As soon as I dropped to the floor I screamed with everything in me as pain shot through my body. Pushing it back, I scrambled to my feet and set off running toward the cops, knowing they were my only hope of scaring off the Venator. The guys had told me that there was one common rule between Venator and Vis. Don't reveal what you are to humans, which meant these two couldn't get caught with the body of the girl they had mauled.

“Fuck! Get her!” the red head growled.

“No. We have to get out of here!” his partner argued. I heard retreating footsteps through the brush and turned to see them fleeing in the opposite direction.

I didn't even stop to think it could be a trap, or to think logically in any way. All I could think about, as I turned and ran back the way I had come, was getting to Joel.

“Joel!” I cried when I got back to him and found him on the ground just where I had left him, blood pouring from his stomach and pooling in the snow all around him. He was so pale and lifeless, and fear like I had never known ripped through me at the realization I could lose him.

I collapsed to my knees beside him and ripped my scarf from around my neck. I balled it up and pressed it to his stomach, then screamed as loud as I could for help. The cops were close. They had to be able to hear me.

“Joel, please don’t leave me.....please just hold on.” I sobbed as I leaned over him, both hands pressed to his stomach, blood pouring out through my fingers. “Joel, you have to work with me here.” I pleaded as I put my hands, one on his stomach and one on his forehead. Joel said I was a conduit for their gifts. Maybe I could channel Joel’s gift to heal him. It was my only option. I had no idea what I was doing or if it was even a possibility, but I had to do something. He was bleeding too much. I was going to lose him.

He was out cold, and I knew before our bond, a person had to be conscious and open to the gift, to be healed by Joel. That may be an issue, but they were all stronger now that we were a complete Quin. All I could do was hope. It had to work. I couldn’t lose Joel.

I held my hands over him for a moment and tried to picture his gift channeling up into me and then back into him, yet nothing happened. It wouldn’t work. I was going to lose him! I was crying and trembling, unable to get myself together.

“JOEL!” I screamed. “I love you.....please don’t.....don’t leave me.....leave us.”

Suddenly, as if desperation was key, my hands heated up and a static feeling raced through me. Before my eyes, Joel’s bleeding slowed down, and his breathing became louder and a little faster. It was working, but I was draining fast and I knew it. I already gave Joel most of my juice and what was left wasn’t enough. I tried to tug on my bond with the others, to call them to me, but I was too weak even for that.

I managed to heal Joel enough for the bleeding to stop, but by then I was completely drained and as limp as a wet dish towel. There wasn’t a bit of juice left in me and I knew all I could do was wait for help and hope Joel held on.

Joel's breathing held steady for the few minutes it took the cops to find us.

"Ma'am, I'm going to need you to step back and raise your hands," a gruff voice commanded. I turned enough to see two cops stood behind me, with weapons pointed my way.

"I can't. Please, he needs help," I cried, scared to move my hands in case the bleeding restarted. "He's been shot. Please, call for help."

"Where is the shooter now Ma'am?"

"He...he ran away. Th-that way. There were two of them," I nodded in the direction the Venator had run. I knew they were long gone. The cops would never catch them, so what was the point in lying?

"Okay. EMT's are en route. Are you hurt?" the officer asked as he lowered his weapon and came to crouch opposite me. More cops appeared and I could hear them all moving around, looking at the dead woman who lay a few meters from us, while others were sent to chase down the monsters who had done this.

"I'm okay. Please just help Joel." I whimpered. I could feel blood running down the side of my head and I had no idea why it was there, but I just swiped it on my shoulder and kept my hands pressed to Joel's wound.

A few minutes later EMTs arrived and ran straight over to us.

“What have we got?” a woman asked as she knelt beside me.

“He was sh-shot,” I gasped, my voice shaking so much I barely got the sentence out.

“Are you his girlfriend?” She asked as she started pulling things from the bag she had with her. I nodded. “What’s your name?” She grabbed a huge stack of gauze pads and indicated I should let go, then she pressed them down over where I’d been holding my scarf.

“Lana,” I whispered. I watched on as her partner, a young, thin guy, ripped open Joel’s t-shirt around the wound.

“Lana. We’re going to do what we can for your boyfriend now, but we need you to step back, okay?” she explained calmly. I nodded and stepped back. I was swaying and I knew it, exhausted and in a ton of pain from fighting to get free of that monster. I was also pretty sure I was in shock.

I almost lost Joel. There was a chance I still could. This couldn’t happen again. Noah had been right. We needed to be stronger. I needed to be, and I also needed to learn to use my gift so I could protect my guys. I was never going to allow this to happen again. The Venator had taken so much from me. They weren’t taking any more.

I sat in a cubicle in the chaotic ER. It was hectic and noisy, not a good mix on top of the anxiety that already had a firm grip on me after what happened. I was struggling to keep a grip on myself with no one I trusted nearby. I had been trying to call out to the guys through our bond, the whole way over in

the ambulance with Joel, but I was still too drained, and somewhere, in the chaos, my cell had fallen out of the pocket of my jeans.

Joel had been stable the whole way to the hospital and was now in surgery to remove the bullet. I had cried and refused to leave him, but in the end I had been given no choice, and was dragged to this awful room, surrounded by chaos. It was the first time I had been anywhere so busy and noisy, alone since the guys found me. That fact, mixed with the mess I was from the fight with the Venator, and my rising panic attack, had me clinging to the very edge of sanity.

“Miss Glenn?” a male asked from above me, startling me so badly I jumped enough to cry out in pain at the movement. When I looked around I found a tall, dark haired man, a decade or so older than me. He had kind, pale, blue eyes and smiled apologetically at having made me jump.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said and I was pretty sure his accent was British. “I’m Dr Simmons. You came in with the gunshot victim?”

“Y... Yes. H-he’s my b-boyfriend,” I stuttered.

“Word is you saved his life.”

“Is he going t-to b-be alright?” I asked.

“He’s in surgery, with a very good surgeon friend of mine. He’s in good hands. I was told you have some injuries. Can I take a look?”

“I’m fine.” I said hurriedly, not wanting him to come a single step closer. I just felt so vulnerable and I wasn’t ready for a perfect stranger to even get close, let alone touch me.

“I understand you’re shaken. What you experienced must have been terrifying, but you are safe now. I only want to see if there is anything I can do to help you get more comfortable,” he offered, and he did seem friendly and kind, yet I just knew there was no way anyone except my guys was getting close to me. If he even took another step I was going to lose it.

“I...I’m okay. I just...I need a phone and a number,” I whispered, trying to sound like I wasn’t such a complete wreck.

“Did you lose your phone in the ambulance?” Dr Simmons asked, and I nodded. He smiled, then turned and left. I let out a sigh of relief that he had gone, then gasped as he immediately returned, this time coming even closer to me. I tried to shuffle back away from him, and he froze a few feet from the bed.

“It’s alright. I won’t come closer. I just...the EMT’s handed this in.” He held out my cell, and I jumped forward to snatch it from him. I started unlocking it, ignoring the doctor, just needing to call the guys. “Do you have someone who can come to be with you?” he asked, startling me again.

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll leave you to call them, but I’ll be close by if you need anything, okay?” I nodded once, then looked back to the cell as he disappeared from my cubicle.

I cried, unable to hold in the tears as the line rang after I hit Mal's contact. I was so desperate to hear his voice, to hear any of them. Thankfully he answered on the fourth ring, making me sob even harder.

"Hey, sweetheart. I was just thinking about you," he greeted, sounding so happy and carefree. For several moments I just froze, silent, unable to voice what had happened. "Lana?"

"Malik...." I whimpered.

"Lana? What's wrong?" he asked urgently.

"Malik," I squeaked through my tight throat. "It's Joel...he w-was attacked...he was shot."

"Lana, I can't understand you, sweetheart. Deep breaths and tell me where you are," Malik instructed. I took a couple of deep breaths and tried again.

"W-we...we're at the hos-pital. Joel...he was shot." The words were barely out before I was sobbing hysterically again. The pain, the exhaustion and the fear were all just too much.

"Lana, I need to know where you are. We're coming, but I need to know which hospital?" Malik asked calmly. I looked around, having no idea where I was. I hadn't paid attention as we drove in, too concerned with Joel.

"I...just a second." I whispered, as I forced myself to stand, crying out as I straightened up.

“Lana! Are you hurt?” Mal yelled. I took a deep breath and moved toward the curtain, the same way the doctor had left a few minutes before.

“I’m okay,” I replied as I opened the curtain. I was relieved when I found the friendly looking doctor right outside, writing on a chart.

I handed him the cell phone without a word, then turned and struggled back to the bed, too exhausted to try anymore. I wanted Joel and nothing else mattered to me.

CHAPTER 15

MALIK

“Lana?” I yelled, getting more and more anxious. I hit loudspeaker and put the phone on the conference room table, in front of West and Gio, who were both anxiously waiting too. We had been working on a plan for a new client, after our meeting that morning, but it was all forgotten now.

“Hello? Who am I speaking to?” a male voice asked. Was he British?

“My name is Malik Fadel. Joel is my brother. Can you tell me what’s going on?” I demanded, trying to keep some sense of calm in my voice.

“My name is Doctor Matt Simmons, at Chicago General. Your brother was brought in with a bullet wound,” he explained concisely.

“How bad?” I asked as I glanced to the others and saw my terror reflected in their faces.

“Bad enough. He’s in surgery. The bullet has caused significant damage, and we expect him to be in surgery for some time yet, but he is stable for now.”

We all let out a sigh of relief that Joel was pulling through, but I also saw the worry on my brother’s faces for Lana. I picked up my cell and turned off the speaker, signaling to the guys for us to get rolling. They all followed as we raced for my SUV.

“And Lana?” I asked.

“She has some cuts and scrapes. I also suspect she has bruised or broken ribs, but she’s extremely anxious and no one has been able to treat her, as yet.”

“Okay. We’re heading over now. It’ll take us around ten minutes. Please don’t approach Lana until we get there. She’s dealing with PTSD, and she’s not great with strangers. After what she’s been through today her anxiety will be an issue. I’m hoping I can convince her to allow you to treat her when I arrive,” I explained, hating the idea of Lana being so scared and alone.

“I understand. I’ll try to keep things quiet around her until you get here.” Dr Simmons said, allowing me to breathe a little. At least he seemed to understand what Lana needed.

“I appreciate that. Thank you,” I hung up then, needing to get to Lana and Joel, to see for myself that they were both safe. Who had done this? I had never known the Venator to use guns. It didn’t fit with their need to create as much fear as possible, but who else would shoot my brother? Had he just been unfortunate? Caught in a random shoot out? Even we couldn’t be that unlucky, could we?

“Mr. Fadel?” a British accent asked, as we all ran into the ER. I looked up to see a doctor in green scrubs. I guessed he was in his early forties, and he appeared to be as friendly as he sounded on the call.

“Malik, please. Are you Dr Simmons?” I asked as I shook his hand.

“I am. I just checked on the status of your brother. He’s still in surgery, but holding stable for now. There was some internal bleeding, but things look good as they stand.”

“Thank you. And Lana?”

“She’s in there,” he nodded to the cubicle in front.

“How is she?” West asked. The doctor looked up at his huge, intimidating frame, and then back to me, warily.

“We’re all brothers. We grew up together,” I explained, understanding his wariness. Lana had been assaulted and not one of us was a small guy.

“And Lana is your other brother’s girlfriend, correct?”

“She’s with all of us. We have a poly-relationship,” I said indignantly. The doctor studied each one of us again, then looked to West.

“She’s badly shaken and, from her limited movement, I’m assuming she has several bruised, or possibly fractured, ribs. As I said, she hasn’t let me near to check her over though. You said she suffers from PTSD?”

“She was the victim of violence throughout her childhood and teens. She got out around three months ago. She’s still adjusting.”

“Then I’d say she’s doing remarkably well. I’ll let you go to her, but please, try to encourage her to at least get some x-

rays. We need to get her some pain relief as soon as possible.”

“I will,” I agreed.

“Thank you.” The doctor said, then with a nod, he left and went over to the nurses station.

“Let’s go,” I ordered, and we all headed to check on our girl, hoping the whole time, that Joel remained stable and pulled through for us.

LANA

I heard heavy footsteps approaching my cubicle from outside in the hall, and I shrank into a ball and tried to hide, as best I could with the limited movement my damaged ribs caused. I was laid on my side, hidden under the stark white sheet when the curtain was pulled open. I held my breath, afraid to make a sound, lost in terrifying memories of pain and fear.

“Lana?” Malik’s voice startled me from my trance and I looked up just as the sheet was pulled back from my head. I blinked through the blinding light and found Malik, West and Gio surrounding the bed.

“Joel!” I sobbed, telling them what happened and mourning his absence all at once, with that one word. I sobbed hard and tried to brace my agonizing ribs with my hand as I racked with each cry.

“He’s doing good, baby. The doctor just told us, things look really positive,” West assured me as he crouched down so his face was level with mine.

“It’s m-my fault. The Venator...they recognized me. They sh-shot Joel so they c-could take me.”

“They recognized you?” Gio questioned.

“They just knew...that we were Vis. They knew who I w-was. Said Hex had a reward out for me,” I explained.

“How did you get away from them?” Malik asked. He was somewhere above me, but I wasn’t sure where because my eyes were clamped shut again, the light hurting my eyes. West was still crouched in front of me, brushing a soothing hand through my hair over and over.

“The cops...someone must have heard the screaming and called them. Th-there was a girl. They k-killed her,” I told them, tearfully. “They...the Venator...they panicked when the cops got close. I fought and they dr-dropped me. They ran... but Joel and that girl...they murdered her.”

“Thank the powers you got away,” West whispered as he took my hand in his and squeezed it, as though he needed to reassure himself I was really there.

“I h-had to tell the cops there were two guys. They went after them...but they were long gone. Is th-that okay? I d-didn’t know what to do,”

“You did everything right, love. It’s all going to be alright,” Gio assured me.

“Joel was dying. I used h-his gift, pulled it into me and used it to heal him. I couldn’t...I wasn’t strong enough to fix

him, but it helped...I think it helped, didn't it?"

"You used Joel's gift? You actually healed him?" West gasped, clearly shocked.

"I didn't know if it would work, but I h-had to try. I don't know though...if it helped?"

"It helped, sweetheart. He's going to be fine, I'm sure of it," Mal replied, settling me somewhat with the conviction in his words.

"I tried to call through our bond...o reach you guys, but I was so drained. I couldn't," I explained, my words slurred a little through sheer exhaustion.

"You did good, baby girl, so good," West whispered, still stroking my wild hair back against my forehead, gently.

"We need to know where you're hurt sweetheart, need to check there's nothing serious going on," Mal said, pulling me from my peaceful moment with West.

"I'm okay. It's just bruises mainly...my ribs."

"Which side, Lana?" Gio asked as he appeared beside West. I smiled at him a little, but it must have been obvious it was forced.

"Hey." I whispered as he stepped up to me. He winked in return, then stood over me and lifted the bottom of my sweater a little. I had already shed my coat, which had been most covered in blood, but it was still all over me. Joel's blood.

I heard the guys collective gasp when they lifted my sweater, and I knew from experience I had some bad bruising from that monster squeezing me so hard, he crushed bones.

“Jesus, love. This is not okay. You need x-rays. These ribs must be cracked. They could puncture a lung,” Gio cursed.

“I just want Joel,” I whimpered, wishing he was there to make everything better.

“I know, baby. We all want him to be here too. He’d have you all healed up in no time, but he’s still in surgery, and even when he comes out, he may be out of commission for a while, so we need to do what we can to take care of you the human way, okay?” West explained. I hated the thought of Joel being laid up, but I also knew, if he was, I wanted to be there to help him, which meant getting myself more mobile.

“Will you guys stay with me?” I asked weakly.

“Every second,” West agreed.

WEST

An hour later Lana was fast asleep, having taken some fairly potent pain meds. She had been for x-rays, which had showed two cracked ribs. They had been bandaged and she was being kept for observation overnight, since she was so sleepy, the doctor worried she’d taken a hit to the head. She did have a cut on the side of her temple that suggested the same, though she didn’t remember hitting it in the chaos. We knew it was because she was drained too, but couldn’t explain

that, so just agreed. It wouldn't hurt to have her settled in a bed while we waited for news of Joel.

Malik had flashed the cash and worked his city contacts to ensure Lana had a private room, up on the fourth floor of the hospital. She had instantly calmed when we got her to the quieter space, and Gio had laid with her, soothing her into a much needed sleep.

Now we all sat in chairs around her bed, waiting to hear about Joel, who had been in surgery for hours. We were desperate to know he was alright and to see him for ourselves. The whole situation was so fucked up and I was seriously pissed with myself for leaving Lana and Joel alone. One of us should have stayed with them. Joel's gift wasn't a defensive one and while he could hold his own in a fight, he never stood a chance against two gun toting Venator. We all should have anticipated this and made sure Lana was safe.

Joel and our girl now lay in hospital beds, hurting, because we hadn't been fully prepared for every scenario. It was a stupid mistake and one I wanted to beat the shit out of myself for.

"Anything?" I quietly asked Malik, who was using his cell to check local news for any reports of the police catching the two Venator. We knew it was highly unlikely they would be caught by humans, but Lana had given good descriptions of the two, in her statement to the police, before she passed out. She had recounted to them that she and Joel happened upon two men murdering the girl, and Joel had tried to intervene.

The cops had left, happy with her statement and confident they'd catch both men, with such good descriptions. We knew the truth. Humans stood no chance against Venator, but we were monitoring the news just in case.

“Nah, not yet, but even if they did catch them it wouldn’t hit news right away anyway. As soon as I get my computer I can hack police databases and look for the report.”

“I can’t believe they saw Lana and now they’re out there. We need to find them before word about her spreads,” Gio whispered, not wanting to wake her.

“Agreed. If the Venator find out where she is, they’ll send everything they have,” Mal agreed. It was only a couple of weeks until Lana and Noah turned twenty-five. If we could just hold out until then, we’d be so much stronger and in a better position to protect Lana.

Before we could go on, the door to the room opened and a doctor in green scrubs quietly entered.

“Are you Joel Hawken’s family?” he asked, brushing his blonde hair from his eyes.

“We are. Is he alright?” I asked with terror. We couldn’t lose Joel. We couldn’t lose anyone else. We already lost too much.

“I’m Dr Jack Reed. I operated on your brother. I wanted to let you know that he’s out of surgery and downstairs in the ICU. He came through the surgery well and I’m confident he’ll make a full recovery,” the doctor explained kindly.

“Thank fuck,” Gio sighed.

“He’s in the ICU?” I asked cautiously.

“It’s just a precaution. If all’s well tonight, he’ll be moved to a regular room tomorrow and likely ready to go home in a few days. He was very lucky. I have no idea how that young lady controlled the bleeding, but she saved his life.”

“Can we see him?” Malik asked.

“Yes, but just two at a time, and only for a few minutes. He’s been through a lot today. He needs rest.

“Incidentally, I met Joel a few months ago, at a conference in New York. He seemed like a great guy. I’m very relieved he pulled through. I’m sure he’s one hell of a doctor. We need more like him.”

“He is a great guy,” Mal agreed with a nod. He stood and moved over to the doc, shaking his hand. “Thank you Dr Reed, for everything.”

“My pleasure. I’m sure I’ll see you downstairs over the next few days.” He gave us all a nod, then left the room.

“What a fucking day,” I sighed as I dropped my head into my hands and allowed myself to breathe fully for the first time.

“He’s going to be okay. They both are. Let’s just be grateful for that,” Gio sighed and of course, he was right. No matter what happened, as long as everyone I loved was alive at the end of it, I could find a way to deal.

LANA

By the time I woke up the next morning, Joel was out of surgery, had spent the night in the special care unit, and been

moved to the room beside mine.

West, who had been there when I awoke, assured me he was doing well and had awoken during the night, pissed as hell he got shot, and out for revenge. I fought to go right to him, needing to see him, but West and Gio wouldn't let me go anywhere until I had eaten something and changed from my blood covered clothes, which I still wore.

I forced down the croissant and OJ West brought for me, in record time, then hurried to the bathroom to clean up and change into clothes, which one of the guys had been home to collect.

Looking in the mirror in the bathroom had been startling. My hair was wild, my face paler than ever before, and my eyes were ringed with red circles, from crying. I had blood up my arms and all over my torso both on, and under my sweater, and I couldn't stand quite straight because of the pain in my ribs. I was a state, that was for sure.

I cleaned up as best I could with the washcloth, that the guys packed for me, and a sink filled with warm water. My face remained pale and blotchy, but there was nothing to be done about it, so I carried on, brushing my hair, and quickly throwing it up in a knot on top of my head. I changed into jeans and a hooded sweater, throwing the blood soaked clothes into the trash can, knowing the blood would never come from them. I pulled on my shoes, then hurried out to the guys, desperate to see Joel. I moved too fast though and had to pause, gasping as I stopped just inside the room, in agony.

“Easy, love. No running for you right now, okay?” Gio warned as he approached and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, supporting my weight.

“I’m fine. Let’s just go...please. I need to see Joel,” I pleaded, looking between he and West. Mal was next door with Joel.

“Okay, but you take it slowly. You’re injured too, remember?” West said firmly, making me feel like sticking my tongue out at him childishly. Thankfully, I refrained.

“I’m good.”

“And as long as you are, you can sit with Joel. The first sign you’re in pain, or too tired, and we take you home, got it?”

“You’re bossy today,” I snarked as I scowled at West.

“I’m taking care of you. Someone has to. Lord knows you don’t bother,” West grumbled as he led the way out of the room, with my overnight bag in his hand.

“Bossy and grumpy apparently.” I whispered, teasingly, to Gio, making him chuckle as he helped me walk next door.

Malik stood right inside the door of Joel’s room, and as soon as I entered, he instantly engulfed me in his arms and held me gently. I hadn’t seen him since the night before and it felt good to be in his arms.

“You scared me, sweetheart.” He whispered as he held me, then stepped back and looked me over, top to toe. “You’re too pale. You need rest.”

“I *need* to see Joel. I almost lost him yesterday,” I whispered as I reached up and brushed a hand over his stubble covered chin.

“He’s asleep. He woke up for a while earlier, but the drugs knocked him out.” I nodded once, then accepted his offered arm and let him lead me to where Joel lay in the bed, looking a lot better than I expected him to. He had some color, and seemed just to be sleeping. There were no tubes everywhere or beeping machines. Just one I.V running to his arm. He looked peaceful and rested and my rapid heartbeat instantly calmed.

“Sit down, baby girl,” West encouraged as he pushed a chair right up behind me. I sat with a wince, but the pain settled a little once I was fully seated.

“He looks good,” I whispered.

“The doctors are amazed with how well he’s doing. I think the healing must have accelerated his recovery. His wound is already closing and his labs are, apparently, perfect. They said he may go home as early as tomorrow, which is great, since he’s done nothing but complain each time he wakes up,” Mal explained. I nodded and took Joel’s hand. I zoned out as the guys all chatted about what the doctor had said, when he checked in on me that morning. I wasn’t interested in that though. I was fine, that was all I needed to know. Joel was what mattered, and I longed for him to open his eyes and throw me a smile.

As if he heard my thought, his eyes fluttered open and he turned his head, looking right at me. He smiled and my tears escaped, silently trickling down my face as I smiled back at him.

“Jeez, I missed you Joel.” I whispered.

“I’m so sorry, honey.”

“Sorry for what? You got shot.....by someone trying to take me! It’s me who should be sorry,” I cried.

“I should have protected you better. You were hurt and could have been taken because I failed.” His voice was slightly hoarse and he sounded to be in pain. I hated it.

“You did protect me, Joel. I wasn’t taken. I’m right here and I’m fine. I’m just so thankful you’re here with me. I thought...I was sure you were going...t-to...” I couldn’t, couldn’t say those awful words. I needed him, needed all of them too much.

“Deep breaths now, baby. He’s okay. You’re both gonna be just fine,” West reassured me as he held his hands on my quaking shoulders. I took a couple of deep breaths and fought to calm down. West was right, we made it, that was all that mattered.

“Maybe we should get you home to rest, sweetheart? You look so tired,” Malik suggested.

“No!” I cried. “I want to stay here with Joel.”

“Lana, there’s no way that’s happening. You’re dead on your feet, and in pain. West is going to stay the night with Joel, and we’ll come and see him again tomorrow, when you’ve slept some more.”

I looked to Joel; my eyes filled with tears. I didn’t want to leave him. He was the one who helped me sleep best, the one

who got me through the scariest nights. I couldn't go home and sleep without him close by, not knowing the nightmares that would haunt me after almost losing him. I needed to be with him, because I knew the second I tried to sleep without the pain meds I'd dosed up on the night before, the monsters would be coming to get me over and over in my nightmares.

"Don't make me go, Joel." I whispered, so only he could hear me. "The monsters will come as soon as I close my eyes. They'll come for me. I'm scared. I want to stay with you. They can't get us if I'm here with you." The tears were falling faster now and I was shaking through fear and pain.

"Malik, have them page Jack Reed for me please," Joel asked without taking his eyes from mine.

"On it," Mal said and I heard the door to the room open and close.

"Everything's going to be okay, Lana. I promise you, beautiful. No one is coming for you, awake or asleep." he whispered as he reached his hand out to me. I clutched it tightly and went willingly when he pulled me up onto the bed beside him. He wrapped his arm around me, pressing me into his side and I happily cuddled up to him.

"I want you to close your eyes and sleep for a while now. I'm right here. I've got you," Joel promised. Completely exhausted and emotionally wrung out, I gave in and closed my eyes, feeling safe with him. Before I knew it, I was out. My exhaustion won the battle.

JOEL

“She’s exhausted. Did she sleep last night?” I asked in a whisper as soon as I was sure she was asleep.

“Yeah, but only because of the pain drugs. She was really anxious and upset before that, plus she drained herself healing you. She’s in pain too, two cracked ribs.” West explained. I still couldn’t understand how she had used my gift. What we were all wondering was, could she use all of our gifts in the same way? If she could, she was more powerful than anyone knew.

“She’s fragile right now, really fragile. We all need to be very careful or she’s going to shatter. She’s been through too much,” I cautioned. I could see how much she was struggling, how scared she was to close her eyes. She’d been struggling to sleep since the night Noah attacked her, when he’d been trapped in his own nightmares. It had brought back a lot of her past for her and I’d noticed her looking more and more tired ever since.

She was sinking, and we were all trying to be what she needed to keep her afloat. Problem was, I wasn’t really sure we were. She needed real help, counselling or therapy, something to get her through the hell she had experienced. I also knew she wasn’t ready for that yet. She wasn’t at a point where she could trust a stranger enough to be shut in a room with them. We needed to do what we could to get her to that point though, while trying to keep her whole in the process.

“Joel, everything ok in here?” Jack Reed asked as he strode into the room, looking as he had at the conference I met him at a few months ago, photoshoot ready in a grey tailored Armani suit, sharp white shirt and not a damned hair out of place.

“I catch you on your way to a meeting?” I asked with a grin. No one who had a shred of common sense would come to work in a hospital in that outfit, not without good reason anyway.

“My daughter has a music recital today. She plays the clarinet, and this is her first performance. Me and my husband were ordered to dress, and I quote ‘fancy shmancy’ by the little madam this morning,” he laughed.

“First music recital? Better take ear plugs,” West joked and I knew he was thinking of his younger sister, Lena, who used to play piano terribly when we were kids. She was the sweetest kid, but completely tone deaf. The image of her tiny body sprawled on the cream carpet of their childhood home, covered in blood, briefly flashed through my mind, but I pushed it back.

“I won’t keep you then. I just want to know your opinion on me going home this morning,” I asked.

“You’re healing well, incredibly well and your vitals are in good ranges, so technically I guess you could go home. You were shot yesterday though, Joel. I have never seen anyone heal the way you have, but still, I would be more comfortable with you staying one more night.”

“Our girlfriend, she’s having a hard time. I’m worried about how fragile she is right now. She needs to be home resting, but she wants to be with me. I’d like to go home with her and do what I can to keep her calm if it’s possible. I’m feeling good. Haven’t had pain meds since last night and the pain is manageable.”

“We could admit your girlfriend, maybe even get her a bed in here?” Jack offered.

“Thanks, but she’s a trauma victim and she’s not good with strange places. Getting her home is the best option for her right now.”

“Well I can’t, in good conscience, discharge you, but I have some experience with trauma victims, and I know how much of a balancing act it can be. So, if you really feel you need to go home, and you were to leave AMA, I’m pretty confident you’d be good, as long as you rest and don’t exert. I wouldn’t agree at all if you didn’t have the training and family support you do. I presume I would get a phone call right away if you noticed anything untoward, correct?”

“If that would be alright with you, I’d appreciate it, thank you,” I agreed gratefully.

“You have my number. Call me night or day if you need anything,” Jack said kindly. I nodded and he turned to leave.

“Oh, and Joel, give me a call when you finish your internship. I’d be very interested in having you on my team, if you’re planning on staying in the city.”

“I will. Thank you,” I agreed, completely dumbstruck. He nodded and left the room while I sat completely in shock. Had he just offered me a job? Working with a great guy like him, in the city I had come to love was a dream opportunity and not one I’d be missing out on.

“That’s great man. You just got a job from being shot,” Gio joked.

“I met him before I got shot, asshole!” I jibed back. I attempted to hit out, but couldn’t reach him without jostling Lana.

“You sure about leaving against medical advice?” Mal asked from where he’d been stood in the corner.

“I’m feeling good, and Lana, she’s on the edge. I want to be with her. I know you guys could handle it, but getting her to leave with me stuck here, it’s going to hurt her and we can’t afford to upset her any more. We need to do everything we can to keep her settled and stress free until she’s feeling stronger. She’s been put through way too much. There’s only so much one person can take before they break.”

“You’re worried she’d what? Do something stupid?” Malik asked quietly.

“I hope not, but I don’t think we can rule it out. She’s been through so much, losing Harrison, the attack on the streets, then finding out about us and Noah. She just got all of her memories back and some of them were horrifying. This on top. It’s too much. We need to keep her close, that’s for sure.”

“Then we keep her close. One of us with her at all times. We lay with her when she sleeps, we stand outside the bathroom when she’s in there. We take it in turns and make sure we’re aware at all times. You only sleep when you’re not with her and know someone else is, understood?” Malik ordered and we all readily agreed. Whatever it took to keep her safe, we would do it. We would not lose her.

CHAPTER 16

LANA

I jumped awake, feeling rested, but panicked about where I was. I looked around hurriedly and realized I was home, in my bed, in my room.

“No!” I cried. They brought me home. I wanted to be with Joel.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” I looked up and found West sat in a chair beside my bed. He smiled and leaned toward me.

“You brought me home,” I whispered tearfully.

“You were exhausted, Lana. You didn’t stir once the whole way home.”

“I wanted to be with Joel. He shouldn’t be stuck there alone. What if...if the Venator go searching for him?” I cried as I lay staring angrily at West.

“Honey, I’m fine. I’m right here,” I looked up hurriedly and found Joel in the doorway to my room, freshly showered, his hair still wet. He was dressed in shorts and a dark blue muscle tee. He looked perfect, as always, and I was lost for words.

“But...you...they said you had to stay,” I floundered.

“I had a chat with my doctor and he agreed I could come home with you, as long as I get some rest. I was just coming to

lay with you,” he explained and I burst into tears again. This crying thing was really getting ridiculous, but I just couldn’t seem to keep a grip on my emotions.

“Am I that bad?” Joel joked as he walked toward me and slowly lowered down onto the bed. “You want me to go back to the hospital where you don’t have to look at my ugly mug, is that it?” he asked playfully and I gently hit out at his leg, careful to avoid anywhere near his wound.

“Don’t Joel! You have a perfect face. I’m just so glad you’re here,” I whimpered, smiling through the tears. “Thank you. I know you came home early for me and I really am very grateful. I know it’s selfish, but I need you.”

“I’m glad you need me, honey. There’s nowhere on earth I’d rather be, than here with you.” He pulled me into his side and kissed the top of my head. “Think you can sleep a while longer with me?” he asked. I nodded and allowed him to pull me down to lie against his side. I resisted a little at first, not wanting to hurt him, but he positioned me half on him and half on the bed, just as we had slept before, then sighed in contentment, so that convinced me I wasn’t hurting him and allowed me to relax.

“Thank you for not dying,” I whispered as we laid in silence, West watching over us from the armchair beside the bed. I guessed he was there because they were worried about Joel’s injury, and I was glad they were taking care of him.

“Thank you for saving my life,” he whispered back. “Rest now. The guys are all here and I’ve got you. You’re safe.” It was all I needed to let my bone deep exhaustion take over once more.

CHAPTER 17

LANA

The next few days were quiet. Joel was too weak to heal me or himself. I tried a few times to channel his gift or to boost him, but I was too weak to do either, too.

The guys were worried about another attack, with those two *Mutatio* on the loose, and aware of not only who I was but also a general location of where I now was, too. My guys had been going out in pairs to try and track them, while also ensuring someone was with Joel and I, but so far the pair of *Mutatio* had proved to be elusive. That meant that my Quin were constantly on edge, just waiting for the next attack. The atmosphere in the apartment was tense and I hated it. I wanted back the fun and relaxed way things had been between us all before. But I understood why things couldn't be that way. Now that those two *Mutatio* had recognized me, it was extremely likely that they would report the information back and before long many, many more of those monsters would be coming in search of my Quin, my brother, and me.

“Lana?” I jumped at the sound of my name, and turned to find Joel approaching, looking worried. I guessed it wasn't the first time he had called me, but I'd been so deep in my head, that I hadn't even heard him.

“Sorry. I was lost in my thoughts,” I told him as I stepped away from where I had been staring hard at nothing in particular, out of the window. “Are you alright? I thought you were resting?”

“I couldn't just lie there anymore. I got bored,” Joel replied. As he arrived before me he opened his arms and enveloped me in a hug, pulling me tight into his front.

“You need to rest. It will help you to heal,” I argued, but it was weak. We both knew how relieved I was to have him holding me. Ever since I found my Quin, I just felt so empty and lost when I was without at least one of them. They had told me it was down to the bond between us, driving us to be with one another as much as possible, but I knew that at least part of it was also just me. I had been alone in my life for so many years. Now that I had men I loved and who loved me, I hated to be away from them.

“I’m good, honey. I managed to heal myself a little this morning. My wound is almost closed up and I’m feeling stronger. I’d like to try and heal you too if you’ll allow me?”

“There’s no need, Joel. It’s just bruising and it’s healing pretty fast now,” I told him, not wanting him to use up the little strength, he gained back, on me. My ribs still hurt, but it was nothing I hadn’t lived with before. I could handle it.

“You forget I can feel how much pain you’re in,” Joel countered, and when I glanced up to his face he was staring me down, knowingly. “Just let me try. I doubt that I’ll be able to heal everything, but I’d like to take some of the pain away if I can,” he added. I wanted to argue more, but the determination on his face was clear to see, and I knew any further debate would be a waste of breath. Instead I nodded, and I felt Joel’s tense body relax a little against mine. He had been worried about me, and my giving in had helped ease that. It made me feel less guilty about the energy I knew he was about to expend on me.

He slid his hand from where it had been wrapped around my waist, up to my side where the worst of my bruising and pain was. Within a moment I felt the familiar, soothing heat spread across the area and a moment later the sharp pain, which I had been living with for days, had eased massively.

“That’s so much better,” I sighed with relief, looking up to Joel’s face again and smiling. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied, then he closed the distance between us and landed his lips on mine for a quick kiss. When he pulled back he released his arms from around me and took my hand. “Come on, I need coffee, and you need to tell me what you were thinking so hard about. I don’t like how worried you looked when I walked in here,” he said as he pulled me toward the kitchen.

“It was nothing, Joel,” I assured him as I climbed onto the stool at the counter he had led me over to.

“Lie,” he declared. I remained silent as he set to work on the coffee, just watching him and contemplating how much, of the utter panic going through my mind, I could tell him about.

He set the coffee machine running and then turned to me expectantly.

“I guess I’m just worried. Those Venator know where I am now, and they’re going to come for me. I just...I’m so scared you guys will be hurt trying to protect me,” I admitted.

“That’s not going to happen,” he assured me as he approached and leaned over the counter until his face was right before me. “We have been dealing with Venator for years, and that was before you, before meeting you gave us the additional boost to our gifts that we now have. The guys are amazing with their gifts. Whatever comes, they can stand their ground against, and my gift gives us an early warning system so we can be prepared for an attack. No one is going to be hurt or lost, Lana. We have this.”

“I just hate how useless I am. Apparently, I have this all powerful gift that could do some serious damage, and because I don’t know how to use it, I can’t do a damned thing to help if we are attacked.”

“That’s not on you. There’s nothing you can do about that until Noah is ready and strong enough to train you and give your gift back,” he pointed out. “And if we are attacked, you’re hardly useless. You can boost all of us and give us more juice to fight, plus we have to test this new theory that you can somehow channel our gifts. If you can do that, you’ll be very useful.” He was referring to the way I had channeled his gift to heal him after he was shot. The guys had a theory that I could do that with each of their gifts, somehow mimicking what they could do, but I had been too weak so far, to test the theory.

“I want to start the fight training we talked about. I want to know I can at least handle myself if it comes down to it,” I told him firmly. They had been putting me off beginning the training for weeks. No more.

“We will, as soon as you’re healed.”

“No. No more delaying. I want to start today. You just healed me. My ribs don’t even hurt now,” I countered. I was determined. “We can’t put it off any longer. We could be attacked at any time. I just want to be as prepared as I can be.”

“Prepared for what?” West asked as he strolled in, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, all sweaty from the workout he’d just done in the home gym.

“Lana is worried about us being attacked. She wants to start self-defense training today,” Joel filled him in.

“Not when you’re hurt,” West decreed with a shake of his head.

“I’m not hurt. Joel just healed me and I’m fine,” I argued.

“I didn’t heal you completely. We can feel that you still have pain.”

“He’s right, we can,” West agreed, and I almost growled in frustration.

“Guys. I spent most of my childhood beaten and bruised, and I had to work through it every damned day! A little pain has never stopped me, and I won’t allow it to now, not when it matters the most.”

“What’s the hurry, all of a sudden?” West asked.

“I don’t know, West. Maybe the hundreds of monsters who are going to stop at nothing to get their hands on Noah and I, any time now,” I replied dryly.

“We can handle whatever comes. We’ll keep you safe,” West pledged, and I knew he believed it, but they hadn’t seen what those monsters had done to Noah, just to bring me to them. I knew the lengths the Venator would go to, in order to get what they wanted.

I opened my mouth to argue, but was cut off by the buzzer, indicating someone was downstairs, at the front for us.

“Is this it?” I gasped, panicking.

“I don’t think they’ll ring the buzzer, sweetie,” Joel laughed as he headed for the front door. He and West were laughing, but I didn’t miss the way West followed him to the door protectively.

I stayed where I was, trying to calm myself after my initial, crazy panic. Of course the Venator wouldn’t ring the damned buzzer! I was losing my mind.

“It’s the cops, baby girl. They’re coming up. They need to speak to you,” West told me as he returned to the kitchen and walked right over to me.

“Why? I already gave them my statement. What more can I tell them?” I asked, my panic returning quickly.

“It’s going to be alright,” West reassured me as he took my hand and squeezed it comfortingly. “Just tell them the same as you did before. Joel and I will stay with you.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “I can do that.”

As Joel allowed the police into the apartment, I followed West and took a seat in the living room. He set me right in the center of the sectional and took the seat to my left, my hand still firmly gripped in his.

“Please, take a seat,” Joel offered as he led the two officers into the living room. He took the seat at my other side and wrapped an arm around my back.

The two cops who sat opposite us were both male, and pretty young looking. They weren't the two detectives I had given my statement to while I was in the hospital.

“Thank you for speaking with us, Miss Glenn,” One of them spoke up. He looked around the same age as me, and he was tall and very thin. He had thick blonde hair that hung just a little too long. He smiled to me in what I thought was supposed to be reassurance, but it just came off as forced. “I’m detective Joseph, and this is my partner detective Harrington.” He nodded to the slightly shorter man who sat beside him. He was much stockier, his frame almost bursting from the navy, ill-fitting suit he wore. He had closely cropped dark hair and dark eyes that were way too focused on me, for my liking.

“We have been assigned to the case you were involved in,” detective Harrington added. “We just wanted to go over your statement again and make sure there was nothing you could add.”

“I’m pretty sure I told you everything that happened in my statement,” I told them, reluctant to go through it all again. I had been a state when I gave the first statement, worried sick about Joel and terrified in the hospital. What if I told them something completely different? Would I make them suspicious of me? The last thing we all needed was the police looking into us.

“I understand, but this investigation is linked to three other, very similar murders. It’s important that we stop these two before they strike again,” detective Joseph said.

“You think you’re dealing with serial killers?” West asked.

“We can’t confirm that, but it’s a possibility.” Harrington nodded.

“That’s why we need to be sure we have every detail,” Joseph went on. “Miss Glenn. Do you think you could walk us through everything that happened again?”

I took a deep breath and reached out to place a hand on Joel’s thigh, needing the contact, then I once again told them what I had told them before, hoping my stories matched. I stuck to the truth as much as possible, leaving out only the parts about the men really being monsters, and them trying to take me. I gave the same descriptions of the two monsters with as much detail as I could remember, and detailed Joel being shot, which for me was the toughest part to relive.

By the time the detectives were satisfied with my account and finally left, I was exhausted. I had been so tense and anxious throughout the whole thing, desperate to not mess it up.

“You doing okay, baby?” West asked when he returned to the living room from showing the cops out.

“I’m good,” I replied, though the words sounded shaky and I knew it.

“I need to take a shower. Why don’t you come keep me company?” he offered, and I agreed easily, jumping to my feet, and taking his extended hand. I wasn’t ready to be alone and one on one time with West sounded perfect.

West led me to his room, and through to the adjoining shower room. I leaned back against the vanity, feeling exhausted as he reached in to set the shower running, then he

was before me, wrapping me in his arms loosely as he looked down at me.

“How are you really doing?” he probed.

“I’m okay. It was just hard...remembering Joel being hurt. I...I really thought I’d lose him, West,” I admitted shakily. “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost any of you.”

“We’re not going anywhere, beautiful,” he promised. “Tell me what you need right now.”

“You,” I confessed boldly. “I need you.”

“Then I’m yours.”

I watched on as West released me and took a step back. He pulled his t-shirt up over his head, casting it aside, displaying his beautiful built, perfectly sculpted body. His skin had an olive tone and he had a smattering of body hair down his chest, which I itched to run my fingers through, just to know how it felt.

Then he took off his shorts and stood before me in nothing but his boxers. He really was perfection, with perfectly defined muscle all over. He was so big, every inch of him wide and hard, and yet I knew without question I was completely safe when I was with him.

“Are you going to join me?” he smiled as he took both of my hands in his and pulled me to him. I was so close I could feel the heat of his body. Without hesitation I nodded and started to unbutton the shirt I was wearing. The guys had seen me partially clothed before. They’d been with me when I

changed several times. But this felt different. I was stood before West, stripping off my clothes while he just watched on. The heat in his eyes could not be missed though, and it spurred me on. I didn't allow myself to over think anymore as I quickly stripped off to my underwear and bra.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” West declared, his voice almost hoarse. He ran a finger under my bra strap and looked to me with question. “You sure you're ready?”

“I am,” I replied confidently. “Maybe not for everything, but I want more with you, West. I'm ready.”

West nodded, then his lips were on mine, kissing me into a state of wonderful haze. His hands ran down my arms, leaving behind a trail of goosebumps, then reached around and unsnapped my bra, pulling it loose and letting it fall to the floor. As my breasts were exposed to him I shuddered, and he pulled me in close, like he thought I was cold. The feel of my tingling nipples pressed to the heat of his firm chest set me alight. Not wanting to delay anymore I pushed off my panties, and kicked them aside, the whole time cuddled against West.

“Let's get you in the shower and warmed up.” He released me and instead took my hand. He reached a hand into the shower cubicle, under the water to check the temperature. It was filled with steam when he ushered me in, and under the warm spray. West stepped in and pressed against my back, wrapping his arms around me, one around my waist and the other just above my breasts. His touch on my bare skin had little electric sensations shooting through my body, and I felt the need to press my thighs together when heat rushed to my core.

“This okay, baby?” he asked softly. I couldn't have stopped myself, if I had wanted to, which I most definitely did

not, as I turned in his hold until I was facing him. I reached up as far as I could, needing more. Thankfully, he understood and in a blink he had me lifted up. I wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck, clinging on as my mouth crashed into his.

The kiss was wild and desperate as I clung tightly to him, relishing the way my center was pressed into his body as his hands cupped my ass. He stepped forward a little, placing us both under the warm spray but never breaking the kiss between us.

Suddenly, any worry I had before, that I wasn't ready for this next step, was gone and all I could feel was the driving need for West. The kissing and touching wasn't enough. I needed more and my fears were long forgotten.

“West! Please...I need you,” I cried.

“But you said...” he began, looking a little unsure.

“I don't care what I said. I want this West, with you. I'm ready.”

“You're sure?”

“Completely,” I assured him. He looked into my eyes, and must have found whatever he was looking for. A sexy smile spread on his face and I returned it, filled with burning need, and excited anticipation.

“Stay right here,” he told me as he set me on my feet and turned, stepping out of the shower. I watched through the glass as he reached into a drawer in the vanity and pulled out a

silver packet. A condom. I realized. At least one of us was thinking straight.

“Better to be careful,” he told me as he returned to the shower and placed the packet on the shelf beside us. Before I could even think of a reply, I was back in his arms, his lips pressed against mine. One hand cupped my ass again as I wrapped my limbs around him and hung on.

His kisses moved from my lips, down the side of my neck and to my chest as his free hand found my right nipple and toyed with it, sending sensation through my body, like I had never known.

“West!” I cried when the sensation within me felt like it was going to drive me insane. “More! Please...I w-want more.” I didn’t even quite know what I wanted. I just knew what he was doing wasn’t enough.

“I’ve got you, baby girl,” he whispered as he backed me up to the wall, the cold tile startling me as my back hit it.

West’s hand moved from my nipple, down to my center and I cried out in relief and exhilaration as I felt him touch me exactly where I had been crying out to be touched.

“Easy, Lana,” West soothed as he continued to give me exactly what I needed. “If you say stop, everything stops, okay?”

“Please don’t stop,” I gasped as the sensations within me began to build to something that felt completely wonderful and terrifying all at once.

“Just let it happen, baby,” he whispered as he pressed kisses down my neck once again. Those kisses caused a sensation overload and I allowed what I had been fighting to hold back, to just go. As that huge wave of overwhelming feeling crashed over me I cried out West’s name and clung tightly to him.

“I’m here. I’m right here,” he soothed as he slowed his ministrations, bringing me down gently until I came back to myself, realizing just how hard I was panting and clinging to him.

“So fucking beautiful,” he said as he kissed me chastely. “Are you alright?” he asked as he looked over my face.

“Yes,” I panted. “But I want more. I want you, West.”

“We don’t have to. We can...” I cut him off.

“No. I want this, if you do too. I love you, West. I don’t need to wait any longer,” I assured him, with a confidence I wasn’t sure I had ever felt before. These men, my Quin, they gave me that confidence. The trust I had in them made me feel stronger.

“Never doubt that I want you, Lana,” West growled as he picked up the condom from the shelf and skillfully opened it while keeping me held up against him.

He slid it over his length, and I couldn’t help my minor panic about how long and wide that length was.

“W-will it hurt?” I squeaked, feeling anxious suddenly.

“I’m gonna go slow, and you’re good and ready, so no, it shouldn’t,” he replied with an understanding smile. “And if it does feel uncomfortable, you tell me and we’ll stop, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

He nodded, then adjusted me in his arms until he lined himself up with my entrance. He paused there as he leaned in and trailed kisses up my neck. Instantly I was lost once again to my need and lust, my worries gone and my desperation for more, the only thought my hazy brain was capable of.

As he slowly slid into me, the initial burst of pain gave way to something else. Something good. Overwhelming sensations ran through me, making me feel things I had never known. I moved my hands to his shoulders, clinging tightly onto him, becoming lost and completely overwhelmed with how good every single inch of him felt. I forgot where we were, forgot every worry and concern. All there was in that moment was the two of us, and it was heaven.

“Lana?” He ground out.

“So good,” I moaned, realizing he was checking in with me. “More...please.”

His lips crashed down over mine as he completely devoured me, thrusting harder and harder as I cried out in utter delight. Feeling lost to the moment I began to lift myself up and down to meet his thrusts, discovering it was even deeper and faster, when I did. I was chasing my climax now, no longer scared of what was to come. I wanted it. I was desperate to feel that wave crash over me once again.

“WEST!” I cried, completely lost in him. Nothing and no one but him and I existed in that moment of utter perfection. I cried out again as wave after wave of pleasure crashed within me, leaving me a sagging mass in West’s arms.

A moment later a guttural growl ripped from him as he found his wave, then we just clung to each other, pressed against the tiles, both out of breath and boneless. I had no idea how West was even keeping us upright.

“Baby? You doing okay?” he asked after a few moments.

“Good. I’m all good,” I gasped, sounding as out of it as I still felt, I was sure.

“I love you,” he kissed the top of my head.

“I love you too,” I replied dreamily. It was the single greatest, most peaceful moment of my entire life and I never wanted it to end.

CHAPTER 17

LANA

“Lana? You almost ready, sweetheart?” Malik called. I studied myself in the full length mirror and frowned. I was struggling to decide if I was happy with the reflection that was staring back at me.

I was wearing the faux leather trousers, which I bought when I was out shopping with Malik so many weeks before. They fit me like a glove, and paired with the strappy, very fitted, very small top, I had chosen, I looked kind of bad ass. I had more skin on display than I had ever shown in my entire life, with my arms and shoulders bare. The top covered me at the front, but the back was made up of straps that crisscrossed. The outfit was definitely sexy, which was the look I had been attempting to go for. The strappy black sandals I wore helped. They had a wedge so I could actually walk in them, but the heels were high, which did wonders for my short legs. The issue for me was my scars. I could see some of them and I had never once in my entire life gone out in the world with them on display. There were several on my bare arms, others poking out from the edges of the top, just below my shoulders and also, if anyone looked close enough, they would see the patchwork below all of the straps on my back.

I was torn. A huge part of me wanted to switch out the top for the black chiffon shirt, with full sleeves, which I had been debating between, but I had chosen to buy the strappy, sexy top for a reason. The guys had made me feel differently about my scars. I was no longer ashamed of them, or not as much as I was previously anyway. The guys had told me I should be proud of those scars because they just proved what I survived. When I had chosen that top I had been trying to channel those thoughts and be brave. Now, as I stood there, I wasn't feeling so brave.

I was just so worried I'd disappoint or embarrass my Quin. They were taking me out that night. It was my twenty-fifth birthday and they were determined we should do something special to mark it.

It had been a month since Noah and his Quin left, to return to Ontario and for that entire month we had all been very tense and stressed. I had done nothing but worry about Noah, despite the fact I spoke often with him, and each time he seemed to be doing better and better. He attended therapy twice a week, and he had built good bonds with his Quin mates. Best, and most crucially of all, he and Grace were getting closer and closer. He really seemed to have fit in with his new family seamlessly, and I was so relieved about that. It didn't stop me worrying about him being so far away though. I was terrified the Venator would take him again, and if they did, I was too far away to do anything to stop them. The terror consumed me, manifesting in nightmares so real, I was afraid to sleep.

My Quin were just as stressed and sleep deprived too. They had been on a mission to catch the two Venator who attacked Joel and I, to stop them from spreading word of where I was. They had been out trying to hunt them down night and day for the first two weeks. When that didn't work, they realized it was likely too late to stop the Venator from talking, since the news had probably been shared already. Then they all just went into hyper-overprotective, never leaving me alone to go anywhere and constantly on guard for an attack.

All of that, along with constant contact from the detectives who were also searching for their 'serial killers', and thought Joel and I had some key piece of information we hadn't shared. It had been a very long month and I agreed with the guys completely when they told me, that morning, that we

were going out to let our hair down and have some fun. We definitely needed it.

“Lana?” Realizing I had completely zoned out, I looked round with a start and found Gio leaned on the doorframe to my bedroom. He looked amazing in black jeans and a black button down, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. It was a casual look for him. He was almost always in a suit. But, holy hell, did he make it work.

As I took in this sexy, dangerous-looking version of Gio and tried not to drool, he was checking me out too. I had to fight not to cover the scars I could reach on my arms and below my shoulders, feeling very conscious of what his reaction was going to be.

When he just stood silently staring, a slight scowl on his face, I couldn't hold back any longer. I reached up and pulled my hair, which I had left down and styled into loose curls, over my shoulder nervously.

“I...I have a shirt. I c-can change,” I told him.

“Don't you dare,” he growled as he stood and strode toward me. “You look amazing. I was just contemplating how many men I'll need to maim or kill tonight for looking at you.” He stopped before me and ran a finger under the strap over my shoulder. Just the barest touch of his finger against my skin had goose bumps erupting all over.

“You're sure?” I asked. “My scars...”

“Are beautiful. Every inch of you is spectacular,” he told me as he bent down and placed a trail of soft kisses over the scars that poked out from my top, just below my right

shoulder. The contact had me lighting up like the fourth of July and all I could think about was Gio, making me feel the way West had in the shower two weeks before and several times since.

The other guys had been more cautious about taking things further. We had moved forward, with a lot more kissing and touching. There had been some very hot and heavy make out sessions, but they always stopped it before it got anywhere, telling me I wasn't ready. I had tried to convince them I was, even asked West to talk to them, but they were hesitant to say the least.

“Gio...” I gasped, the need within me rising to that peak once again, but before I could demand what I wanted and needed more than my next breath, we were interrupted.

“Lana! We need to go, baby,” West bellowed, breaking the moment.

“He's right. We do need to go. I got distracted,” Gio smiled and took my hand, then pulled me from the room. When we walked into the living room the others were all near the door, pulling on boots and coats.

“Oh crap!” I gasped quietly when I saw them all. I was screwed! They all looked and smelled amazing, and I was already burning with need. Ten minutes with them and I was going to self-combust. There was no way I would survive a whole night in public.

“Fuck!” West cursed as he looked up from tying the laces of his boots and met my eyes. “We're going to spend the whole fucking night committing murder.”

“What? Why?” Malik asked as he turned from where he had been facing the door as he pulled on his grey, double-breasted coat, and looked all around. He froze when his eyes landed on me, then, very slowly a huge grin spread across his face.

“Lana, you look beautiful,” Joel spoke up, and I looked past Mal to where he stood. He was dressed in dark navy chinos and a baby-blue button down. He had tamed his wild hair with some product, and it gave him a more preppy look that I was totally in love with.

“Thanks,” I replied, feeling overwhelmed by the way they were now all looking at me.

“I changed my mind,” West rumbled as he crossed the room and approached me. “We should stay home. The things that outfit is making me want to do with you, are not appropriate for me to do in public.”

“I agree. You look so fucking sexy, sweetheart,” Malik added.

It was exactly the reaction I had hoped for when I chose the outfit. I had wanted them all to see me as a woman. I wanted to take away the notion, they seemed to have, that I needed to be protected and sheltered. I understood why they felt that way, of course. A lot had happened since they found me, and I hadn't exactly been at my strongest. I still wasn't and in some ways I welcomed the way they protected me, but I didn't need them to protect me from themselves. I trusted them and I loved them. I was ready for the next steps in each of our relationships, and I was hoping I could show them that.

“Thanks,” I repeated, this time with a little more confidence. “But we're not staying home. I was promised fun

and dancing.”

“And that is what you’ll get, love.” Gio assured me, as he pulled me free from the arm West had wrapped around me, and toward the door. He grabbed my coat and helped me into it, then shrugged on his own, as Joel took my hand and led me out of the apartment, the others close behind.

It was a risk, and I had questioned the guys earlier about it. We were under threat from the Venator, who definitely wanted me either dead or as their prisoner. It was likely they had information I was in the city, and maybe even worked out who Joel was by now. It was why the guys had been so worried for weeks and why we had stayed holed up in the apartment for the most part. But the guys had told me earlier that day that we couldn’t just hide out forever. We had to live our lives and if the attack came, they would handle it. It terrified me to head out, but I knew they were right. I had spent my whole life hiding and cowering. It had to end. I had to start living.

Noah and I were always going to be under threat as long as there were Venator on the earth. We couldn’t just hide away. We had to stand up and fight. Besides, it was my birthday. The guys assured me I would have come into my full gift-boosting abilities that morning, though I hadn’t felt any different. I had kind of been expecting a lightning bolt strike, or a whole body glowing experience, but there had been nothing, which apparently was normal. The guys had received their full gifts the morning of their twenty-fifth birthdays without any drama or ceremony.

I had wanted to test it, to try boosting them that morning, but the guys wisely pointed out it was better to conserve all energy in case we were attacked.

“Stop worrying,” Joel scolded from my side as we stopped to wait for the elevator. “We’re having fun tonight. No stressing about anything.”

“Okay,” I agreed with a smile. How could I not be happy, surrounded by four amazingly hot, kind men who loved me and who I loved? I decided he was right, screw worrying about any of the drama hanging over us. It was my birthday, the first I had marked since I was five. I was going to just let go and have some fun for as long as I could. Whatever happened, would happen and I’d face it then, and not before.

“West!” I yelled over the loud music, looking to him from where I stood on the dancefloor. I was wrapped in Joel’s arms as he attempted to lead me away. I had exhausted him. We’d been dancing for a while, and we were both a little breathless and very hot, but I wasn’t ready to stop yet.

It had been such a great night so far. The guys took me to several bars in the city. We’d had fun trying different cocktails and they’d even tried to teach me to play darts in one of the bars. Then Gio had suggested we come to the club, which we had now been in for the past few hours and I had loved it the second I walked in and heard the pounding bass of the music.

The multiple cocktails I had enjoyed had eased my anxiety over the number of people packed in the place with us, and I had just let go of everything and devoured every spectacular moment I had spent on the dancefloor with my guys.

I’d worn them all out now, all except West who was stoically determined he did not dance, but I wasn’t ready to give up. Dancing with my guys, my body pressed against theirs as they moved like I never even imagined they could,

had felt amazing. I wanted that with West too, and I never wanted the night to end.

“You don’t give up, do you squeak?” Joel laughed, right into my ear so I could hear him. I looked up at him and smiled as I shook my head.

“Never,” I told him. “Besides, I don’t want to leave the dancefloor. This is the most fun I ever had!” I may have been a little tipsy and slightly over the top in my excitement, but it didn’t make my statement any less true. I had never known fun like I’d had that night.

“I just need five minutes, honey, please. Have mercy,” Joel playfully pleaded. I reached up, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him down until his lips landed on mine. The kiss was brief, but hard and desperate. Dancing with my guys had me needing a whole lot more, but since we were surrounded by strangers I knew the kiss would have to suffice, at least until I got home.

“Go,” I told him as I pulled back. “But I’m staying right here.” Before he could argue I pulled away from his hold and turned to where West sat with the others at a tall table beside the dancefloor, drinking, talking, and watching me. I raised my arms above my head and started swaying to the beat with abandon. I didn’t care what I looked like, or what was going on around me. All I could feel was the amazing sense of freedom dancing gave me, and the heat of the eyes of the men, I loved watching me.

When Joel arrived at the table with the guys, there were a few heated words between he and West, then West was striding toward me. I locked my eyes on his and we maintained a heated stare as he came toward me, a scowl on his face.

“About time, Mr. Grumpy!” I yelled when he reached me. I held out a hand, wanting him close so he could dance with me, but he stopped about a foot away and planted his feet. He crossed his arms and just stood beside me looking intimidating as hell, glaring at anyone who dared to be on the floor anywhere near me.

“West,” I laughed as I stepped forward and pressed against his front, wrapping my arms around his waist. “What are you doing?” He relented and unfolded his arms, wrapping them around me.

“Making sure none of these motherfuckers get close to you,” he growled close enough to my ear that I could hear him over the music.

“Let’s dance,” I said as I looked to him with a fake pout.

“Don’t dance,” he rumbled, but I still wasn’t giving up. I turned in his arms and pressed my back into his front, then I started moving, pressing against him with every move of my body, reaching back and running my hands on any part of him I could reach, as I just went with the music.

I’d love to say he started moving with me, but he was determined, if nothing else, that he was not dancing. He did however put his hands on my hips and hold me as I moved. It felt pretty amazing and I just enjoyed having his hands on me, and his hard body pressed to mine.

After several songs I was exhausted and starting to sweat from the heat of so many people all around us. As much as I was enjoying myself, I needed hydration.

I pantomimed ‘drink’ to West and he nodded and took my hand, leading me through the dancing mass, and over to the table where the others sat.

“I thought West was going to have to carry you off of that dance floor, love,” Gio chuckled as he pulled out a tall chair at his side. West helped me to climb up and as soon as I was seated, I leaned to the side and into Gio.

“It’s so much fun. I love dancing!” I told him enthusiastically.

“We love watching you dance. So fucking hot.” Malik called to me across the table, and the heat in his eyes as he looked at me, had me getting hot for a whole other reason.

“Here, honey. You need to stay hydrated,” Joel said as he appeared at my side with a bottle of water, breaking the moment Malik and I were locked in.

I smiled as I took the ice cold water. I unscrewed the cap and downed half the bottle, needing it even more than I’d realized.

West and Joel took the free seats to my other side and opposite beside Mal, and I couldn’t help looking around at them all and thinking to myself just how lucky I was. To be able to call just one of them mine was far more than I was worthy of. To have all of them, to call all four of them mine, it was crazy, but so damned wonderful. Not for one moment, in the years that I spent with Ted and Joy, did I ever dare imagine I could feel a fraction of the contentment I did in that moment. Being with these guys, my Quin, it was just so right. They were made for me and I felt that as I looked between them. They were everything and I was so amazingly lucky the day I found them.

“We have a gift for you, sweetheart,” Malik said, pulling me from my musing. I looked to him and realized he was holding out a small cube wrapped in deep purple paper and topped with a sparkling bow.

“A gift?” I was a little taken aback. I hadn’t expected them to give me a gift. They had already given me so much since I met them, not to mention the amazing night they had given me for my birthday.

“It’s from all of us,” Gio added.

I reached out and took the cube from Malik, feeling a strange mix of excitement and anxiety. I hadn’t been given a real, wrapped gift like that, since I was a tiny child, and it felt kind of overwhelming.

“Thank you,” I told them as I admired how beautifully it was wrapped.

“You have to open it, baby girl,” West chuckled. It seemed a shame to ruin the pretty wrapping, but I could see they were all eager for me to open it.

I pulled off the bow, setting it carefully on the table. It was too pretty to throw away. I wanted to keep it. Once the paper was torn away I found a black leather box. When I opened it up I couldn’t contain my gasp.

Inside was the most beautiful ring, a band set with four sparkling stones in a row. They glittered in the lights of the club and I realized they had to be diamonds.

“Quin’s used to have a ceremony on Arcem, kind of like a wedding, but we can’t do that. A human wedding also isn’t possible with five of us, but we wanted you to have something to show you our commitment,” Malik explained as I looked between the beautiful ring and the beautiful men around me, tears rapidly filling my eyes.

“We love you Lana, so much. Maybe one day we’ll have some kind of ceremony to tell the world your ours, but until then we’d love you to wear this ring as a reminder of our love,” Gio added.

“It...it’s so beautiful,” I told them tearfully. “I love you too, so much.” I turned to Gio and reached up for a kiss. The others all came to me, each holding and kissing me for a couple of moments until I was a gooey, crying, emotional mess, but in the best possible way.

Malik, who had kissed me last, took the box from my hand and pulled out the ring.

“May I?” he asked, nodding to my hand. I smiled and held my hand out to him, feeling even more emotional as he slid the ring onto my wedding finger and it fit perfectly.

“We each picked a diamond and had it set by a jeweler,” West told me as I admired the sparkling stones on my finger.

“I love it. Thank you, all of you. This means more than you can know,” I said as I tried to hold in any more tears. For someone who had spent so many years with no idea who I was, where I came from and feeling completely unwanted and unloved, the commitment from the guys was everything.

“You mean everything to us, baby. We will always do all we can to show you that.” West leaned in to kiss the top of my head as he spoke.

“You already show me that, with everything you do. You make me feel safe, content, and loved in a way I never thought I’d get,” I told them all, speaking loudly, needing to be sure they all heard me over the music. I needed them to know how they had changed my whole life for the better. How they had given me hope for a future I had never been able to see before them. Yes, we faced danger and unknown challenges from the Venator, but as long as they were by my side I felt able to face whatever came. They gave me strength and made me feel brave. I needed them to understand that they had given me everything. I just hoped I gave them something in return.

“Us too, honey. The day you came into our lives was a miracle and I thank the powers for it every damn day,” Joel said and I couldn’t contain the smile that spread across my face. I was so filled with happiness I thought I may burst, and it felt wonderful.

CHAPTER 18

MALIK

“Shouldn’t we be...like, immune to alcohol or something? In the books the not-human creatures aren’t affected at all by alcohol. This seems unfair!” Lana questioned as we walked down the street from the club, back to the car.

We had stayed at the club until it closed. Lana hadn’t wanted to leave until the staff turned all the bright lights on and basically threw us out, and none of us had the heart to deny her. She had been so amazing on that dancefloor, all of her worries and anxiety gone as she just moved to the music and smiled. She had looked so fucking sexy too in that jaw-dropping fucking outfit, her hair wild around her beautiful face as she just relaxed and let free. She wasn’t the only one who never wanted that night to end.

“Not human creatures?” Joel laughed. “That the technical term for what we are?”

“You know what I mean,” she persisted. “Like shifters and vampires and stuff. They have like fast metabolisms or something and they can’t get drunk.”

“Well I’m afraid we have the same metabolisms as humans, and therefore can get drunk,” Gio told her. She was so fucking cute. I was having a hard time keeping my hands off of her as she smiled again, just like she had been doing all night. Of course we’d seen her smile before, many times, but it was different that night. I was guessing it was a mix of her feeling sexy and confident in her outfit, and the fact she had just allowed herself to not worry for one night and just relax. The results of that mix on her were spectacular. She was glowing and I knew we were all resolved to do everything

necessary to see her as happy as she was that night, every damned day.

“I kinda realized that when I fell over nothing on the way out of the club,” she laughed. She was definitely a little tipsy, but she was so damned sweet with it. She was still stumbling a little as she walked now, even with Gio’s arm wrapped tightly around her, but we had her. We’d always have her.

“You have a good birthday, babe?” I asked.

“The best,” She replied as she glanced down to the ring on her finger. Our ring. I knew it was likely a little wrong, but the sense of pride I felt when I thought about the fact she was wearing our ring on her finger, that she was ours, was off the scale. “Thank you for making it...” Whatever she was about to say was cut off as a dark shadow passed over us from above. Lana cried out in fright as we all looked up, knowing exactly what we would find.

“Shit!” West hissed as all four of us closed in around Lana.
Mutatio.

“How many?” Gio asked.

“I see three,” I told my brothers as I pressed my side into Lana, needing to feel she was there and safe.

“It’s going to be okay, baby girl,” West told her and I looked round, realizing she was likely panicking. I should have known better. Our girl was tougher than that. She wasn’t even looking above to the threat. She had her hands pressed to Gio and West, already doing all she could to boost them and prepare them for what was to come.

“Sonofabitch!” Gio gasped as he swayed a little. West wobbled too, and I worried as I looked to Gio to explain.

“She definitely came into her full gift today,” he added, and before I could question him further, Lana moved her hands one to me and one to Joel.

A huge rush of heat washed over me a second later, and I felt the slam of power Lana was sending to me, hit me hard. It filled every inch of me and I felt a little off balance for a moment. Then I just felt completely wired, attuned to every tiny sound and movement around me, my entire being rippling with my gift.

“These *Mutatio* are so fucked,” West growled and I completely agreed. The boost Lana just gave us, made any gift we used before feel like child’s play. We were a hundred times more powerful now, and it felt so fucking good to know we could protect our girl.

“Squeak? How do you feel? Are you drained?” Joel asked with worry, and I quickly looked to Lana for the answer, but she didn’t have time to reply.

We all stepped forward, keeping Lana behind us as the three *Mutatio* crashed to the road with an earth-shaking boom.

They were in their beast forms, but it didn’t matter. The power rippling through me was bursting to be set loose and I knew these monsters didn’t stand a chance.

“Give us the girl,” the biggest of the three, who stood in the center, demanded.

I didn't even waste my breath replying. Instead I shot out my hand and channeled my gift into lifting the three monsters and launching them as hard as I could, into the building opposite us.

All three flew back and crashed so hard into the brick building that they went through it, the brick wall crumbling to the sidewalk around them.

"Ho-ly shit!" Joel gasped.

"Did my gift work?" Lana asked anxiously.

"Yeah babe. It definitely worked," I grinned. I turned to Joel and spoke through the link. *Keep her back. We've got this.*

West, Gio and I started to move toward the crumbled wall to finish off those fuckers, but stopped when Lana's voice came through our link.

I can do that too now guys. No more secret squirrel conversations. I couldn't help but turn to smile at her. She was too fucking cute. She'd be the death of me. *It works right? You can hear me?*

Yes, love. We can hear you. It works. Gio told her.

Now just be good, and stay with Joel while we finish this. West added.

Fine, but be careful. She was pouting as I took one last look at her, and I knew I was grinning like an idiot as the three

of us continued onward, to finish off these fuckers so we could get Lana home and out of danger.

We each moved for one of the three holes now in the building opposite us and as we got closer, the three *Mutatio* began to move, shaking off the debris all around them, and getting to their feet.

A part of me wanted to play around, test just what exactly me and my gift were now capable of, but a bigger part knew we needed to end this fast and get Lana to safety before more followed in search of her.

I saw the flash of light from my right as Gio created a fireball. When I glanced to him, I was shocked to find it floating above him, about ten times bigger than any I had seen him create before.

Stay back. I think I got this. He sent down the link and both West and I stepped a few paces backward in response.

Don't take out the building. There are apartments on the upper floors. I warned. Gio just smiled as he launched the fireball toward the *Mutatio*, who were now on their feet and climbing out through the wreckage of bricks and debris. I watched in wonder as Gio's fireball split into three as it neared them, and one third of it engulfed each of them in flame. The *Mutatio* roared in pain for several seconds, then completely disappeared with a small cloud of smoke. That was one of the best things about our enemy. When they were dead, they disappeared completely, taken to the powers for Evil in the underworld, leaving behind no evidence to be discovered.

That was too easy. I kind of wanted to try out my gift with Lana's boost. West moaned as we turned away from the wreckage and headed back to Lana.

West, stop wishing trouble on us and get back over here. Lana demanded and I couldn't help but laugh when I looked to her and found her with her hands on her hips, looking stern.

"I think you might get that wish actually," Gio said as he pointed down the street, to where six huge guys who screamed '*Mutatio*' were headed our way.

"Oh, this just got fun," West declared as he cracked his knuckles, then in a flash he had disappeared.

"Fuck! He could have waited for us!" Gio growled as we set off running to where West had reappeared before the six guys. I launched two into the air and back at least fifty feet as Gio reached up to the sky and sent a bolt of lightning down on the head of another. I watched as West ran through the others hitting out and sending them flying into the air with the barest hit. The boost to our powers from Lana, now she was of age, was more than we could ever have imagined and with it, her and Noah, I knew we were going to complete the Vis mission. The Venator were toast.

LANA

"We should go with them," I panicked as I watched my guys run at the six men who I knew were hiding monsters under those disguises.

"I think they have it handled," Joel laughed as Gio held up a hand and called down lightning from the sky! I agreed when I watched Malik and West toss the others around like rag dolls.

“My boost is stronger now, huh?” I asked. It was crazy watching the guys use their gifts, especially on top of how all of the alcohol I drank that night was making me feel. It was sending my head for a loop. Very trippy.

“More than any of us ever imagined, honey. I can feel your power coursing through me. It’s crazy,” Joel explained. He reached out to steady me when I stumbled a little, then pulled me into his side. “Come on. The guys have that handled. Let’s get you in the car to wait. You’re freezing.”

We started down the street to where the guys had parked the black, company escalade when we arrived there earlier.

Joel was just opening the passenger door for me to climb in, when I noticed the movement behind him.

“Joel!” I cried, but it was too late. One of the three men who had come up behind us, hit out, sending Joel flying into the air. He landed a few feet away with a grunt as the three men closed in on me.

My Vis instincts must have kicked in because out of nowhere my hand went out in front of me and, with no thought process whatsoever, the word just slipped out of me.

“Stop!” I demanded and to my utter amazement the two on the outer sides just stopped in place, looking as though they were frozen.

It didn’t seem to work on the one at the center though - a huge beast of a man, standing at least as tall as West, if not a little taller, with a body packed with muscle. He had shoulder length black hair and his skin was almost golden. It was his eyes that scared me though, pure black and focused on me.

“Interesting,” he commented. “You really are a powerful little thing, aren’t you?” But not powerful enough, it seemed, since my command hadn’t stopped him, only his acquaintances.

“Stay back or you’ll find out,” I warned as I stepped back away from him, only to be stopped by the guys’ car, which I had forgotten was at my back.

“I’m not as weak as them. It’ll take more than a command to stop me,” he sneered.

“How about this then?” I looked up at the sound of Joel’s voice, and found him back on his feet and stalking toward me and the Venator, his hand held out in front of him. Within a moment the Venator cried out and gripped his head between his hands, clearly in a lot of pain.

“Joel!” I cried when he reached me. He had a cut on his forehead and blood was trickling from it.

“I’m good,” he assured me.

“How are you doing that?” I asked when the Venator cried out even more loudly, his face now so red he looked as though he may explode at any moment.

“My gift grew too. I can use people’s emotions against them now. I don’t know how I knew I could do it, but I’m multiplying the rage and anger inside him so much it’s more than he can handle,” he explained.

“That’s amazing!” I cried. It was such a relief to know Joel had a gift he could use to protect and defend himself. I never wanted any of my guys vulnerable to being hurt. From what I had seen that night, since I turned twenty-five, and our Quin was completed, that was no longer a concern I needed to have.

“You guys okay?” Malik asked as he appeared beside me. He didn’t have a mark on him, no sign he and the others just fought back six monsters.

“We’re good,” Joel assured him.

“What’s wrong with them?” Gio asked as he and West jogged over and we all stood before the three incapacitated Venator, two just frozen in place and one writhing on the ground in pain.

“I told those two to stop. I think I got my gift from Noah this morning. I somehow controlled them. The other one said he was too strong for me to control him, but Joel got him,” I explained.

“Joel?” West questioned.

“My gift grew. It seems it’s become offensive now,” Joel told him.

“Pretty cool, brother,” Gio remarked as he held out his hand. Instantly a ball of fire appeared in his hand.

“Keep that one alive. I want to know what he knows,” Malik ordered, nodding to the Venator on the ground. Gio agreed before launching his fireball. I gasped as it split into two, hitting the two frozen Venator perfectly and taking both

out. With a small puff of smoke and a strange tingling feeling brushing over me, they were simply gone, disappeared completely.

“Can you keep him down, but allow him to talk?” Malik asked Joel.

“Maybe I could block him?” I offered.

“We can’t risk you blocking all of our gifts right now, love. We need to practice where it’s safe first,” Gio warned and I completely agreed. He was right. I really had no idea what I was doing with this newly given gift. I needed to talk to Noah.

“I’ve got it,” Joel assured us and instantly the Venator on the ground stopped moaning and looked up at us.

“Tell us what you know,” Malik demanded. He bent to grab the man on the ground, but a brick wall suddenly appeared between us and the Venator, ten feet high and the length of the entire street.

“What the...?” West gasped.

“It’s an illusion,” Gio spoke up. My instincts were already kicking in once again, a need within me driving me to hold out my hand. I focused on the wall and it crumbled before me until, poof! It was gone and there was the Venator, crawling down the street, clearly still in agony but keen to escape.

“Good work, beautiful,” West told me as Gio and Joel ran to grab our illusionist and drag him back.

“What’s your name?” I demanded as I charged over to them. I was pretty sure I knew based on the illusion he threw up, but I wanted to be sure.

“Fuck you!” he spat in reply.

“Answer her question!” Joel raged as he and Mal held the Venator up between them. He must have caused more pain because the Venator screamed out and grabbed his head again.

“Hex!” he cried. “My n-name’s Hex!”

Those words filled me with instant rage. This was the monster who had hurt my brother, the one Noah had been so scared of, he only dare whisper the name. This was the monster who used his sick illusions to fool my brother into helping destroy the Vis – my people. Thanks to this monster the men I loved had lost their families and everything they knew. This monster had caused my brother’s complete undoing. I saw every scar on Noah, as anger and rage consumed me, relived every terror filled nightmare I had heard him suffer, remembered the complete devastation, guilt, and self-hatred I had heard in Noah’s voice as he told the guys he was to blame for Arcem and resigned himself to them all killing him because of it. This monster tried to break my brother. Thankfully, he had failed. Noah was too strong to be broken by a monster like Hex. Time to repay the favor.

I can’t really say what happened next. All I know is that I was filled with pure rage on behalf of my brother and my guys for everything this ‘Hex’ took from them. My eyes were locked on those black, evil orbs when a feeling like I had never experienced burst from me. It felt like power surged from me. I heard my guys yelling, but not what they were saying. Something warm and wet splashed all over me and

then there was just a very sudden darkness. All of the anger and rage was gone and there was only peaceful nothingness.

When I woke up I was laid in my bed at the guy's apartment, sandwiched between two huge, warm bodies. I looked up and found Joel pressed to my front, his arm wrapped around my waist and holding me against his hard body as he quietly snored away.

As carefully as I could, not wanting to wake him, I turned onto my back and looked to my other side where I found West, his head propped up on one hand, his beautiful eyes looking down at me with a gentle smile on his face. He too had an arm wrapped around me, just above Joel's.

"Hey." I whispered. I had no idea what happened the night before. The last thing I remembered was Hex, telling us that was his name and then...nothing.

"Hey, beautiful."

"What happened? How did we get here?" I asked.

"You used too much power and passed out on us," he explained.

"How? I thought that wouldn't happen once I was twenty-five? Did I boost you guys again?"

"You don't remember?" he asked, as Joel began to stir behind me.

“No. Not everything. I remember Hex. Did he tell you guys anything?”

“No. We didn’t get chance to ask,” West told me and I didn’t like the way he was trying hard not to look into my eyes.

“West, just tell me. Did I do something with my gift? I didn’t get anyone hurt, did I?” I asked with concern. Before he could reply I sat up and looked around for Mal and Gio. “Where are the others? Are they alright?”

“Breathe, honey. We’re all fine,” Joel told me as he sleepily sat up and wrapped his arms around me.

“Then what happened?” I asked again as I tried hard to recall what went on. I remembered feeling all of the anger toward that monster, for what he put Noah through and for what he cost my Quin. I had never known rage like it. “D-did I do something to that Venator? Hex?” I asked shakily.

“He was a monster, Lana. He deserved exactly what he got,” West rumbled beside me.

“And what did he get? What did I do?” I wasn’t sure I even wanted to know the answer.

“You are so powerful, Lana. It was amazing,” Joel told me.

“Guys! Just tell me...please.”

“You blew him up. I don’t even know how it worked. Just...one minute he was there, the next there was just blood and debris,” West answered and I wished he hadn’t.

“Oh God!” I cried. I had killed him and not just any old, simple death. I had made him explode! How had I done that?

“He was going to die anyway, baby girl. No way we were letting him go. He was responsible for the massacre of our people...our families. He deserved it and much more,” West reminded me, but it didn’t help. That person the night before, that angry hate-filled woman, wasn’t me. I don’t even know where she came from and to find out I had lost control and killed that monster...it was too much.

“Lana? You ok? You don’t look so good,” Joel asked as he studied me.

I opened my mouth to tell him I was fine, but words were not what came up, and I clamped a hand over my mouth as I leapt up and ran for the bathroom.

I got over the toilet bowl just in time, as I started to vomit again and again. Eventually there was nothing left to come up but bile, but that didn’t stop my body from making me repeat the action over and over until I was completely wrung out. It wasn’t until I allowed my body to try and collapse to the floor that I felt arms wrapped around me, holding me against a firm chest. I looked behind me and found Joel holding me to him, his legs encircling me on the cold tile. West was stood above him, holding my hair to one side, and soothingly rubbing the back of my neck.

“I’m sorry.” I whispered, embarrassed.

“No apologies,” Gio said as he appeared from nowhere, with a wet washcloth and a glass of water. I reached for both, but he bypassed my hands and knelt before me, wiping my face with the cool cloth, and making me feel a little better. He handed me the water glass next and watched as I took a few tentative sips. When it seemed to stay down I handed him back the glass and he smiled gently to me.

“You feel steady enough to get up?” Joel asked from behind me.

“I think so,” I agreed, though I felt completely exhausted and just the notion of rising was not a fun one. I wondered if the exhaustion was more than just the vomiting. Making a man explode had likely used a lot of my power. I was probably pretty drained.

“How are you feeling?” Joel asked as he led me back into my room. I sat on the edge of the bed with relief. My legs were shaking beneath me.

“Achy and tired,” I replied honestly.

“You expelled a lot of power last night. It will take a while to get it all back,” Gio explained, he and West stood before me looking concerned.

“I’m okay.” I whispered, the lie sliding from my tongue with ease.

“No, you’re not, but you will be. In the meantime we’re going to take care of you,” West said firmly, calling me on my bullshit.

“How about a shower? You can get cleaned up, then I’m sure Gio will delight in making you pancakes for breakfast?” Joel offered with a smile.

“Breakfast?” I looked to the window with confusion. I had slept all night? I really must have been exhausted.

“It’s almost ten, love,” Gio told me and I was completely shocked. I had slept for hours!

“I guess I should take a shower then,” I agreed.

“Ok Honey. I’ll grab you some clothes, just tell me what you want.” Joel stood, and strode to my dresser.

“Yoga pants?” he offered as he held up my favorite navy blue pair, and I nodded. I watched as he gathered the rest of the clothes I wanted, then carried them to the bathroom and put them on the counter, just inside the door.

I listened as he turned on the waterfall shower and in seconds steam was billowing from the bathroom door, tempting me to the warm water.

“Come on Honey.” Joel said, and I took his outstretched hands, allowing him to help me from the bed and slowly into the bathroom.

“I’m going to wait right outside the door, so if you need me, just call, okay?” he said as he led me to hold onto the counter beside the sink to steady myself. “Don’t close the door though, okay? You’re shaky and I want to be able to get in if you need help,” he explained.

“Will.....would you stay?” I asked nervously. “In here with me? I just...I don’t want to be alone. You could face the wall and just talk to me...if that’s ok?” I was still trying to come to terms with what I had done the night before. It wasn’t me; it couldn’t have been. I wasn’t capable of such devastation, and yet I had done it. I was scared of it happening again if I was alone, scared of that hate-filled side of me coming back out.

“Of course I’ll stay.” He agreed with a smile and not a hint of annoyance at my child like request. I nodded just once, gratefully, and he slowly turned and looked at the wall. I started to strip out of the huge t-shirt, one of the guys must have put me in the night before. Underneath I was naked and stained with blood, so much blood. I couldn’t help the small cry that escaped with my horrified gasp. What kind of a monster was I, to have done this?

“Lana, you with me over there?” Joel asked, snapping me from my spiraling thoughts..

“Blood...there’s blood all over me.” I whispered.

“Shit! Sorry, I should have warned you. We wiped away what we could last night, but there was so much.” I looked down at it, smeared all over my torso and down my arms. It covered my thighs too and this was just what they couldn’t wipe away? What the hell had I done to Hex? What had my guys been forced to watch me do?

“Joel!” I cried as a sob burst free once again. He was there in an instant, wrapping my naked body in his arms and holding me tightly, just as I needed in that moment. I didn’t care that I was naked, or that I was a huge mess. I just needed him, needed to feel that I wasn’t alone.

As I managed to calm a little, Joel let one of his arms drop and started to remove his sweats and tank as he held me with the other. I clung to his bicep, tears still flowing, but the sobs now turned to hiccups.

“Come on beautiful, let me help you,” he whispered as he ushered me into the shower and then climbed in behind me in nothing but his boxers. He closed the glass door and then turned to me. I didn’t need the invitation of his opened arms to collapse against him under the spray. We stood like that for a long while, the water cascading down over the both of us as I clung to him with everything I had, too scared to let go.

“I’m sorry Joel.” I whispered when I felt strong enough to speak.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. I want to be here, Lana. I want you to cling to me, to all of us when you need to. We always want you to turn to us, honey.” He pushed my wild hair back from my face, then tilted my head up to look at him. “You don’t need to feel bad for what happened though. West was right. Hex deserved a far worse death than you gave him, and you were protecting us. Trust me, if he’d had a chance, he’d have killed all of us and taken you. You did the right thing,” he assured me. I knew it was the truth and it wasn’t even the fact I murdered Hex that was scaring me. It was the fact I had allowed it to happen; that I’d had no control to stop it. It was what came next time I was that angry, that scared me half to death.

Not allowing the thoughts to take over anymore I clung tightly to Joel and tried to calm down. The thought I was in the shower with one of the hottest guys on earth, one of my guys, wasn’t lost on me, but I wasn’t in the frame of mind to appreciate or exploit the moment. I just needed the comfort he was supplying, to get me through. Nothing else but feeling him close, mattered.

“I’m scared about what comes next, Joel,” I admitted.

“You’re not alone. You have us, all of us and we will fight any battle we have to, in order to keep you safe. You belong to us now Lana, and no one is ever taking you from us again.” He whispered comfortingly.

“I can’t lose you...any of you.”

“You never will. We’re not going anywhere, I promise squeak. Now, close your eyes, let all of this fear go and relax while I work on getting rid of this blood,” he commanded gently, and I instantly submitted to his demand, needing some peace.

I stood, my body leaned back against his as he gently massaged shampoo into my hair and rinsed it through several times. I did as he had said and let go of my worries and fears, concentrating instead on the feel of his hands rubbing over my arms and my stomach, rubbing soap in circles over my body and soothing me, as if by magic.

By the time he was done and he turned off the water I was in a place of bliss and feeling pretty spaced. I felt him wrap me in a towel, but didn’t want to open my eyes and break the wonderful spell he had me under.

I held onto my peace until the very last second, but when he lifted me from the shower, my eyes shot open in a moment of panic and I was brought back to reality, although feeling better than I had before.

“You’re okay, honey, I got you,” Joel whispered as he placed my feet on the tiled floor and looked down at me with a smile. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” I whispered. “Thank you.”

“Anytime and I mean that. I will do anything you need, always.” He kissed the top of my head and I felt the love radiating from him, flowing into me, and fighting just a tiny part of the darkness within. “Now, can you manage here while I run and change, or do you want me to help?”

“I’m okay...I can manage,” I replied.

“I’ll only be a few minutes and West is still out there if you need anything. Leave the door open a little for me though, yeah?” I nodded and he smiled. I watched as he gathered his clothes from the floor, then hurried from the bathroom, leaving the door open a few inches behind him.

Exhausted, I sat down on the edge of the tub and tried to focus only on the task at hand, getting dried off and dressed. My mind fought to stray, pulling back thoughts of what I had done the night before, but I fought it. I dried off as fast as I could, then hurriedly pulled on the matching panties and bra Joel had pulled out for me. As soon as I had them on, I grabbed my pile of clothes from the counter and fled from the bathroom, terrified and anxious at the way my mind seemed not to be my own.

I fled into the bedroom and ran straight into a brick wall. It wasn’t until I started to fall back, arms flailing and clothes going flying all around me, that I realized it wasn’t a wall, but Malik. He reached out and grabbed me before I neared the floor and I clung to his shirt as he pulled me up and against him.

“Steady there, sweetheart,” he chuckled as I got my feet under me again. He had one hand holding my bare arm and the other wrapped around my waist. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.....yes, fine,” I replied, though it sounded far from convincing. I walked around him and gathered up my clothes, pulling them on to busy myself.

“Ready for breakfast?” Joel asked once I was dressed, and when I turned, I found him in the doorway, now dressed in jeans and a grey sweater. I nodded, even though the thought of food turned my stomach.

“Come on, sweetheart.” Malik prompted as he took my right hand and pulled me up. He led me to Joel, who took my other hand, then we all walked together to the kitchen.

“Hey, love.” Gio greeted. I turned and found him right behind me, a smile on his face, but worry in his eyes. I couldn’t stop myself from letting go of Malik and Joel, and throwing myself into his arms. I needed to feel him close to me.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“Just because I wanted to,” I shrugged as I pulled back and gave him a smile.

“No arguments here,” he smiled in return. “You hungry?”

“Not really,” I admitted.

“Well it’s a good thing that I made your favorite then. I’ll need pancakes to tempt you.”

“Thanks Gio, but I’m not sure how much I can eat. I just feel...after last night...I guess it scared me,” I told him, as he led me into a seat beside Joel at the counter, and handed me a cup of coffee.

“There’s nothing to be scared of, beautiful. You used your gift, just as you were supposed to. You didn’t do anything wrong,” West told me as he appeared in the kitchen and took a seat at my other side.

“I know that, but it’s how it happened,” I tried to explain. “It was like I...I lost control. I just got mad...really, really mad, and then...boom! I don’t even remember exactly what happened.”

“You drained every ounce of energy you had. That’s why you blacked out,” Malik told me from where he stood pouring more coffee.

“That monster did unspeakable things to Noah, love. It makes sense that he made you so angry. We were all pretty fucking angry too, knowing what he did to our families and our home,” Gio reasoned. “As for feeling out of control, that’s just because you don’t know how to use your gift yet, and so it took over, working to protect you instinctively. It’s the way our gifts work. It won’t feel like that once you know how to use it.”

“You just need some practice,” Joel added in agreement.

“Then I need Noah,” I told them. “He’s the only one who knows how to use our gifts fully. I need him to teach me.”

“Do you think he’s ready?” West asked.

“Not to come here. It’s too busy for him, but maybe we could go there?”

“And if he hurts you again, or worse, takes you from us?” Malik questioned.

“He won’t. You’ve spoken to him and his Quin. He’s a lot better now,” I reassured him. “Plus, I’ll be careful until we know for sure. I won’t be alone with him to start with. Please Mal. I need this. I need to know how to use these gifts. I can’t have them going all haywire like they did last night. I know Hex deserved to die, but the thought that I...that he died that way because of me...it’s too much. I can’t...” I couldn’t even go on. Just the thought of all of Hex’s blood had my stomach turning again.

“Okay. I’ll call Gabe after we eat and see what we can arrange, but until we know for sure Noah is more stable, we’re not staying with them. I’ll arrange somewhere close by we can stay,” Malik compromised.

“Thank you!” I cried as I jumped down from the stool and ran to him, wrapping my arms around him.

I told myself everything would be fine once Noah trained me in my gifts. I was powerful and so were my guys and my brother. Powerful enough to keep us all safe and to take out the threat that was hanging over us. Maybe there would be a happy ending at the end of the very long dark road I had travelled. Maybe. As long as I had my brother in my life and

my guys at my side I could face whatever came next. That much I knew for sure.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to read the second part of Lana and her guys' story. I can only hope that you enjoyed reading about them all, as much as I have enjoyed writing about them. This is the second book in the 'Visions of Evil' series and will be followed by one more in the series.

If you could spare a couple of minutes to leave me a review, I would be incredibly grateful, even if it's just a few words to tell me what you most enjoyed.

Thank you,

Kerry

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