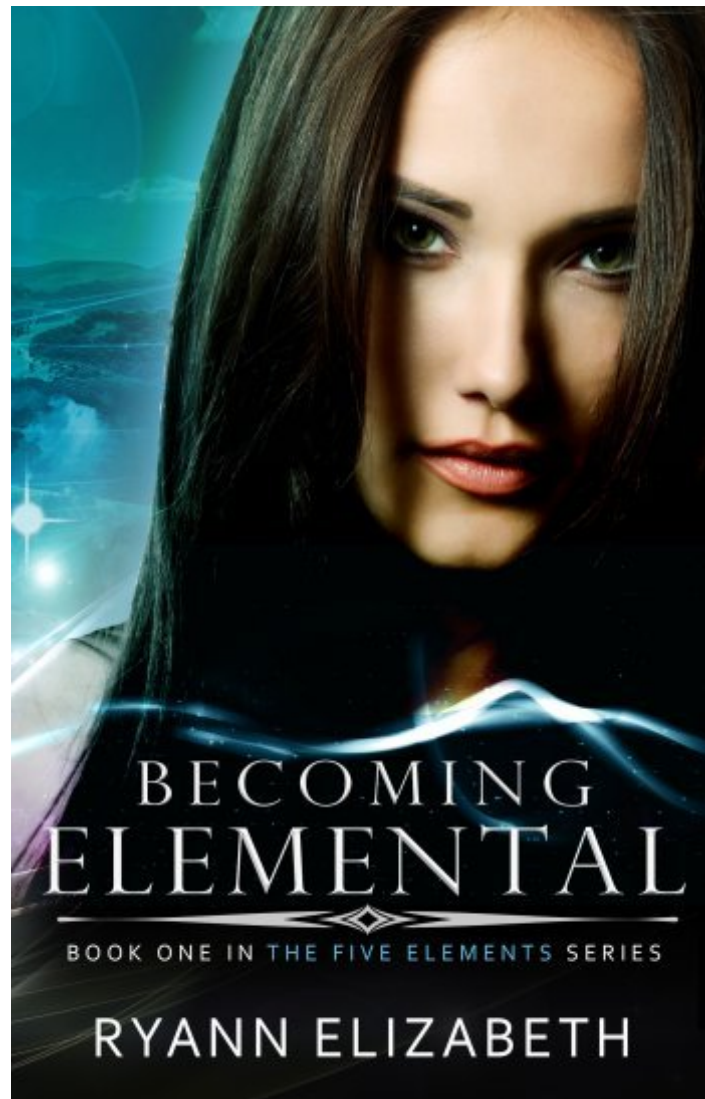




BECOMING ELEMENTAL

BOOK ONE IN THE FIVE ELEMENTS SERIES

RYANN ELIZABETH



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ELEMENTAL

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**To the best person I know,
my mom.**

Prologue

I swear, if something else goes wrong today, I am going to throat-punch the next person I see, I thought as I turned to see my best friend walking toward me. Well, maybe not the first person I see.

“Bre, why are you soaking wet?” Callie asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe because I decided to get out of bed this morning?” Things like this happened to me all the time. I was just trying to get some water from the drinking fountain and it wasn’t working. I tried and tried and as soon as I was completely frustrated and about to give up, it came shooting out like a cannon. Now I was completely soaked. Several other students had been around to witness my personal shower of humiliation.

Unfortunately, this was not unusual for me. My entire life had been filled with awkward, and most times unexplainable, situations. My name is Breanna Hunter and I am a magnet for crazy. Not just crazy situations, but crazy people, too. One day last summer when Callie and I were hanging out at the lake, a homeless-looking guy wandered out of the woods and just stood there staring at me. We decided to leave after about fifteen minutes of this, when he came up to me and said the weirdest things. He rambled on frantically about how he had been waiting for me and I would save our people. What in the world? We quickly ran to my car and left. A few weeks later, I was at a local coffee shop and someone abruptly turned around and ran right into me with a *very* hot cup of coffee. We collided and the coffee should have ended up all over me, but for some strange reason it ended up all over them. It seemed to bounce off of me and back onto them. They had to go to the hospital with second-degree burns. Yes, this was my life, and it had been for as long as I could remember.

I was so glad to make it to the last day of my senior year, as high school had not been kind to me. Being five foot three with plain, straight brown hair, you would think it would be easy to go unnoticed. I tried to keep to myself, but it never seemed to work out. I consistently wound up in the middle of some catastrophe and there always seemed to be several witnesses. At least I had my best friend Callie. She made high school bearable. She was my sanity. Callie was short like me at five foot four, but we were completely different in looks. She had beautiful, light brown skin with jet-black hair; she got her looks from her Japanese parents.

Callie and I had been best friends since elementary school. I was the weird kid that no one wanted to be friends with, and Callie had just moved here from Japan with a funny accent that no one could understand except for me. We hit it off on the first day we met and had been best friends ever since.

I had just finished my last final and was ready to get out of there. Callie and I were heading to the local spa for manicures. I had been looking forward to it all week!

As we walked down the hall toward the parking lot, I asked, "How do you think you did on the Chemistry final?"

"Good, I will probably end up with a B in that class. But it doesn't matter, because we have already been accepted at Appalachian State. North Carolina, here we come!"

Callie and I were heading to the same college. We both wanted to get out of the Midwest and decided on the mountains of North Carolina. I was looking forward to going somewhere no one knew me or the insane things that happened to and around me. I couldn't wait to start over somewhere new.

As we stepped off the curb into the parking lot, I felt a chill run down my spine. I suddenly had the overwhelming feeling someone was watching me. A sense of dread immediately overtook my entire body as I frantically looked around to find who was causing it, but no one seemed to be paying me any attention. I looked to a group of students huddled near the gym entrance, but they just seemed to be talking to each other and weren't even looking our way. A couple of teachers near me

were discussing their plans for the summer. Everywhere I looked, I couldn't see anyone even acknowledging our existence.

"Bre. Bre!" Callie yelled and snapped me out of my panic-induced trance. I looked at her bewildered face with wide, scared eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so. I just had an eerie feeling that someone was watching me."

Hand on her hip, she said, "Well, they can watch us leave to get mani-pedis. Let's go!"

Callie and I finally reached my car and got in. I was lucky enough to have a pretty sweet ride. For my seventeenth birthday, my parents bought me a brand new Mustang GT. It was solid black with a tan interior. I loved it. My dad owned the local Ford dealership, so I got to pick out anything I wanted. My car was my baby. My parents wouldn't let me have pets and I was an only child, so I bonded with my car. Yes, I knew that was weird, but it was beautiful. I even talked to it sometimes. I had not gone so far as to name it, but I was thinking about it. It would definitely be a girl name and very badass.

"High school is finally over!" I yelled to Callie. We high-fived and started toward the spa. The two of us chatted about the upcoming summer and how we wanted to decorate our dorm room. Callie wanted pink everything, but I hated pink. I was more of a navy blue kind of girl. We were about a mile away from the school when Callie unbuckled to grab her yearbook from the back seat.

"I have to show you what Ian wrote me in my yearbook. I think he might actually like me," Callie said. She had been in love with Ian since middle school. He was a cute, but quiet guy. I told her hundreds of times to just go and talk to him, but she never did. She was talkative and outgoing with me, but like me, she tried to stay out of everyone else's way.

She was leaning into the backseat to grab the yearbook when, out of nowhere, a red pickup truck abruptly changed lanes and hit us head on. I had no time to react or try to get out of the

way. One minute, he was in his lane driving normally, and the next he swerved into my lane and hit us head-on. I screamed as my face slammed into the airbag.

Dazed, I saw the deflating airbag in front of me, but could only hear ringing in my ears. It took me a second to comprehend what had happened. I reached up and felt a small bump on my forehead, but otherwise felt okay. I turned to Callie and asked if she was okay. She was still half in the front seat and half in the back. She didn't answer me and I could see that she was covered in blood. Shit, I forgot she wasn't buckled in. *Oh no, no, no. Callie!* She had to be okay. She was the only one, besides my parents, who cared about me. She understood me when no one else did.

"Callie! Callie! Callie!" I screamed her name over and over again.

She never responded.

She never would.

My best friend was dead.

My heart was broken.

Chapter 1

4 months later...

I started at Appalachian State University in September. Coming from the Midwest with zero mountains, Callie and I had wanted something different and North Carolina was definitely different. It took me a little while to understand what some of the people were saying, but by October, I thought I had the hang of it and started using some of their slang myself. *Y'all* was my favorite new word, even though I couldn't say it with a southern accent. I had also stopped saying *pop* when ordering a soft drink, and I was convinced that sweet tea was the nectar of the gods. But you would never catch me in a sundress with a bright floral pattern. EVER. Everyone here was really nice and the weather was great. I was glad I decided to come, but I almost hadn't.

I spent the entire summer locked in my room reading books and looking at pictures of Callie and me. Yes, I wallowed. My parents tried their best to comfort me, but nothing helped. I considered not starting college in the fall, but Callie's parents came over one night and told me that I had to go. They said I had to do it for me and for Callie. What else could I have said to that? So here I was.

As I sat in the university library staring at my Algebra book, I started to think about Callie again. She hated math. She was always jealous that I picked up on it so quickly. For some reason, it made total sense to me. I missed her so much. The memorial they had for her at the graduation ceremony was nice, but they didn't know her like I did. She would have hated

the red roses they put out for her, though; she always thought red roses were pretentious. It had been really hard to sit through the memorial and then the graduation ceremony. If Callie had been there, we would have been whispering to each other and making fun of everyone. But she wasn't there, and I sat through the whole thing remembering over and over what had happened three days before.

Callie wasn't moving or answering me. I tried to turn to see her face in the back seat, but the freaking seat belt was still fastened. I fumbled to release it, my hands shaking the entire time, but I finally got it off of me. I turned to her and touched her arm. I was scared to try to move her in case she had a neck or spinal injury. "Callie, it's Bre. Can you hear me? Callie...Callie!" I screamed at her to answer me, but she didn't. She didn't even flinch when I screamed her name.

I turned to look for someone to help and saw the man getting out of the red pickup that hit us. He was barely injured. He stared at me with a menacing look; if he could, I think he would have killed me with that look. He looked at me one more time and ran away, leaving his truck in the middle of the road. Several bystanders watched him run off with confused looks on their faces and then started coming toward us. My car door opened and a man I didn't recognize started talking to me. I saw his mouth moving, but couldn't comprehend what he was saying. Everything he said was gibberish. I put my head in my hands and started to cry.

After a few minutes, I noticed that I was out of the car and sitting on the curb. How did I get here? I looked at what was left of my car and wondered how I survived. The paramedics were there and they were trying to help Callie. They put her in the ambulance and took off. Another paramedic was walking over to me and I saw his mouth moving, but didn't really hear or understand why. I finally figured out that he was asking how I felt. He took me to the second ambulance and checked me out.

I asked the paramedic working on me if Callie was okay. A sadness showed on his face and I knew.

I found out later at the hospital that she had died instantly. She broke her neck when the truck hit us. She never stood a chance.

I awoke with a start to a high-pitched, whiney voice speaking over the intercom. "The library will be closing in ten minutes. Please make your way to the exits. We will reopen tomorrow at 8:00 am." Holy shit, I must have fallen asleep. If the library was closing, then it must have been close to ten o'clock. Crap, I would have to walk back to the dorm in the dark. Since the accident, I didn't drive. I knew deep down that it was not my fault, but I felt like I should deprive myself of my love of driving and beautiful cars as punishment for being alive when Callie was not. Survivor's guilt they called it. Whatever.

I made it a point to never be alone outside after dark. The man that killed Callie could be lurking around the corner. The police could find no trace of the man and the truck had been reported stolen earlier that day. I hadn't seen him since the accident, but I knew he was out there. Had he done it on purpose? Was he after me? I wasn't taking any chances, hence, never being outside alone at night.

I shoved my books into my backpack as quickly as possible and headed to the exit. It took me about fifteen minutes to get to my dorm from the library. I walked briskly toward my dorm, trying to stay on the paths with the most light. Something caught my eye to the right in the bushes, but I told myself I was just imagining things as I walked faster. Out of nowhere, the breath was knocked out of me as someone tackled me to the ground. I hit my elbow hard on the pavement. The attacker wrapped his arms around me and I noticed someone else walking up to us. The second man grabbed my arm and hauled me up to my feet. The first man continued to hold me to him as he also stood. They were both about six feet tall with dark brown hair and tattoos. They looked similar, like they could be brothers. After I caught my breath, I started screaming as they both started to drag me into the wooded area off the path. One of them covered my mouth with his hand, so I tried to bite him while kicking and hitting anything I could. "Stop trying to bite me, you little bitch." As they continued to drag me away from any possible help, he

said, “I don’t know why the boss wants a little girl so bad and why he sent both of us to get her. This is such a waste of our time.”

I was in full freak-out mode and my body started to shake. My chest started to feel tight. A pressure was building inside me and it felt like I might explode – then it was like I actually did. The guys who were manhandling me moments ago were now twenty feet away from me, knocked out cold beneath a tree.

What in the hell? I quickly decided to analyze it later and get the hell out of there. As I ran back to the path leading to my dorm, I saw another man running toward me with my backpack. *Not another one!* I ran faster.

“Wait, I wanted to make sure you were okay and give you your backpack. I’m not going to hurt you,” he said from behind me.

I made it to the entrance of the dorm and saw several others around. At least if he tried to kidnap me or kill me, I had several witnesses. I stopped to catch my breath and turned to look at him. He was the most beautiful guy I had ever seen. He was more handsome than any model or movie star – turquoise eyes, sandy blond hair, and beautifully tanned skin. I thought I might be in shock and was hallucinating this perfect man in front of me. I shook my head to clear it and figured out he was speaking to me. *Wow, I tend to zone out a lot when people are speaking to me during a trauma. I really should work on that, considering my history.*

I looked up into those blue eyes and asked, “What?” He looked as baffled as I did as he continued to stare at me. I asked again, “What did you say?”

As he handed me my backpack, he said, “I asked you if you were okay.”

“Yes, I think so. I’m not really sure what just happened.”

“Here’s your backpack,” he said as he handed it to me.

I wasn’t sure if I could trust him, but he wasn’t attacking me, so yay! I took it from him as he asked my name. I told him and asked his.

“My name is Chase. What happened back there?” he asked.

Chase. Mmm, it fits. I would totally chase him down! Good Lord! What is wrong with me? I just got attacked by two crazies and I am flirting with a stranger in my head. I swear, I wonder about myself sometimes!

“I’m not sure. I was walking back to my dorm when these two men tackled me to the ground and started to drag me into the woods.”

Chase looked at me, cocked his head, and asked, “How did you get away from them?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I said to him. All of a sudden, his demeanor completely changed. He looked pissed. He narrowed his eyes at me and grunted, “Huh.”

I had no idea what to tell him. How could I explain what I didn’t understand? In the past, I tried to explain the lunacy in my life to friends and they just thought I was crazy. Callie was the only one who knew and didn’t care. I had stopped telling anyone, including Callie, when abnormal things would happen to or around me. I certainly wasn’t going to try to come up with something for this complete stranger, no matter how decadent he was. *Good grief, there I go again. Focus, Bre!*

“I will find out what you are hiding and you will not like it when I do.” He then turned around and walked off.

What the what? How dare he threaten me like that! He has no idea what I have been through in my life. I was just attacked and he threatens me? What the hell is wrong with him? Guess the stereotype holds true: the more beautiful you are, the more of an asshole you are.

I made it up to my dorm room, locked the door, and pushed my desk chair against the handle. After checking the locks on the windows, I collapsed on the bed. Thoughts continued to circle through my mind about what happened. What was going on? Why did I keep getting attacked, and why had Chase turned from concerned to angry in seconds? I decided then and there not to dwell on it. I would probably never see him again anyway and that should have made me happy. Who needs a

golden surfer god with an attitude problem in their life? Mind made up, I got up to take a shower. Hopefully, the hot water would wash away the awfulness of the day.

I packed up my bathroom stuff and headed toward the freshman community bathroom on my floor. I had to share a bathroom with other girls, but I didn't have to share a room. Callie was supposed to be my roommate and for whatever reason, they never assigned me another one.

After my shower, I crashed in my bed and fell asleep almost immediately. Right before I drifted off, I thought, *Tomorrow has to be better than today, right?*

Chapter 2

I was still on edge the next morning as I made my way to my first class. It was Wednesday and that meant Algebra and Biology. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday classes were my favorite. I was great at algebra and I loved anything having to do with science. As I made my way to my desk in my algebra class, I felt someone staring at me. I looked around and saw Chase sitting in the back. He wasn't in this class before, was he? No, I would have noticed him. He was glaring at me again. What was up with him? I tried to ignore him and sat down and pulled out my book.

As the professor was explaining how to multiply polynomials, I snuck a peek at Chase. He was still staring at me with a hateful look on his face. I turned back around quickly. I didn't understand why he hated me so much. Was he friends with the guys who attacked me? The week could not get any weirder.

Finally, the class was over, so I grabbed my backpack and headed toward the door. I didn't see Chase and assumed he went out the other door. As I exited the math building, I saw him. He was standing with four other guys, each one hotter than the next. I quickly turned to walk the opposite way even though it wasn't the direction of my next class. Luckily, I had an hour before my biology class and could take the long way.

From behind me, I heard my name being called, but I ignored it and walked faster. Someone grabbed my arm from behind and spun me around. I was now face-to-face, well face-to-chest, with what looked like a big, scary biker. I started to struggle out of his hold when a brown-haired guy who looked like a professional *GQ* model walked up. "Breanna, we are not here to hurt you. We just want to talk to you," the brunette guy said.

I relaxed a little, because what else could I do at that point? I was surrounded by five of the most beautiful men I had ever seen. Aside from being distracted by their looks, the fact that there were five of them towering over me made struggling pretty pointless. I turned in a circle, looking at all of them. In addition to Scary Biker Guy, who was also gorgeous upon closer inspection, with his jet-black hair and dark brown eyes, there was the one with brown hair and kind, sea green eyes, Chase, a guy with blond hair and extremely light blue eyes, and one with brown hair and what looked like gold eyes.

The one with kind eyes also had dimples, which I could now see as he smiled at me. “Breanna, we just want to talk to you. Sorry if we scared you,” he said while glaring at Scary Biker Guy. Scary Biker Guy just shrugged.

“Okay,” I said. “What do you want to talk to me about? The fact that I was attacked last night and Surfer Dude over there threatens me right after? Or the fact that he has not been in my algebra class until today and all he did the entire time is glare at me? Or do you want to talk about the fact that Scary Biker Guy over there just grabbed me? Hmm, what topic would you like to discuss? Because I am open to any of them.”

“First of all, let me introduce myself, my name is Bryce Hampton and these are my friends. Chase, you already know. Scary Biker Guy, as you called him, is Harrison. Then there is Mason and Carter,” Bryce said. Mason was the one with the really light blue eyes. I didn’t even know it was possible to have eyes that light. I wondered if he wore colored contacts. The one with the gold eyes was Carter. *What is up with these guys having such beautiful eyes?*

Chase stepped forward, still glaring at me, and said, “What are you and what are you doing here?” Bryce gave him a look, but didn’t say anything.

“My name is Breanna Hunter and I am a freshman here,” I said. “I thought we covered this last night? Or did you forget about being an asshole already?”

“Oh no, I remember. And trust me when I say I enjoyed every second of it,” Chase said through gritted teeth. Bryce pushed

him back and stepped in closer to me.

“I’m sorry about Chase. He tends to get a little aggressive when he meets someone he doesn’t know. Where are you from and why can’t we tell what you are?”

Are all of these guys mental? What in the world is he talking about? What I am? These guys were crazier than I was and I needed to get the hell away from them.

“I am a normal person just like everyone else and I would appreciate it if you would leave me alone!” I yelled at them. I tried to walk away, but Chase stepped in front of me, stopping my progress.

“Just answer the question,” Chase growled.

“I did!” I said as I threw my hands up. “I have no idea what you want me to say.” I started to get really loud and others were noticing. Apparently, we were getting more attention than they wanted, because they backed off a little.

Bryce looked at me and said, “I’m sorry again if we scared you. We just don’t understand what’s going on. We’ll leave you alone now. Again, I’m sorry for scaring you.” Each of them gave Bryce a frustrated look, but they all walked away from me and toward the parking lot. I continued to stand there staring after them, looking confused and bewildered, because I was. *What in the hell was wrong with them?* I walked to my biology class in a fog.

After biology class, which I paid no attention in, I wandered to the courtyard to grab lunch. While eating and not tasting my club sandwich, Bryce sat down next to me. “Ugh, what now?” I asked as I threw my hands up.

Bryce didn’t look mad or irritated at all. He looked really sweet and adorable, smiling at me with those heaven-sent dimples, and I couldn’t help but relax a little. “I wanted to speak to you without all the guys around. I thought it might be a better way to approach you.”

“You think?” I said sarcastically.

“Chase told us what happened last night. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I am fine.”

“I’m glad. Can you tell me your side of what happened?”

“Sure, if it will get you to leave me alone.” He smirked at my statement. “I was walking back to my room from the library when two guys tried to drag me into the woods. I pushed them away and ran to my dorm. Chase caught up with me and gave me my backpack that I had dropped. The end.”

“So you just pushed two grown men away from you and ran?”

“Yep, that about sums it up.”

Bryce narrowed his eyes and said, “There is more to this than you are saying. How did you really get away from them?”

“I just told you. I pushed away from them and ran.”

“Chase said he saw them fly through the air and then get knocked out against a tree. Can you explain that?”

I hadn’t been sure Chase was close enough to see that, but apparently he had been. I had no idea how to explain it, so I lied, “Chase must have been hallucinating, because there is no way I could have done that. I really just want to put this behind me, so can you please drop it?”

“Breanna, please be honest with me. Trust me when I say I will understand. We have more in common than you think.”

“I really don’t know what else to tell you. What I told you is what happened.” I was starting to get really nervous. I could tell he knew I wasn’t giving him the whole story. I had hoped things like this would stop happening since I moved across the country, but I guess I wasn’t that lucky. Sadly, I would always be the weird girl.

“Breanna, I really need you to be honest with me. I can tell you are scared, but I can help you. There is something different about you, isn’t there? And you have no idea what it is? Am I right so far?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. I am a regular girl trying to get through her first year of college.”

“You are more than that and you know it,” Bryce said with accusing eyes. “Chase saw you throw two adult men about twenty feet, knocking them out completely.”

Blushing, I looked up at him, “Again, I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Yes, you do. I don’t know why you are lying about it. We are Elementals and know about the supernatural world.”

WHAT? Elementals? What in the world is that? I was about to start freaking out.

“Relax. Let me explain,” Bryce said as he placed his hand on my arm. “Elementals are similar to humans, but we have gifts that they do not. There are earth, air, water, fire, and animal Elementals.”

“So you are saying you’re not human?” I whispered. *This guy is off his rocker! Wow, his hand is so warm on my arm. It’s really soothing. He has such strong hands. Focus, Bre!*

“Yes, that is exactly what I am saying. This is not the place to discuss it, though, with so many human ears around. I guess you weren’t raised in a supernatural environment, huh? I will tell you everything, but not here. Come to our house tonight and I will answer all of your questions.”

“I am not going to your house alone! You really are crazy if you think I’ll do that!”

“Well, then I guess you will never know how you can throw grown men through the air and many of the other unexplainable things that have probably happened in your life,” Bryce said while shrugging. He had my attention and he knew it.

“I don’t have a car, so there is no way for me to get there anyway,” I explained.

“Don’t worry. Between the five of us, we have seven cars. One of us can drive you,” Bryce countered. “I promise that you will not be harmed in any way. You will be able to leave whenever you want and we will answer any questions you have. If we wanted to kidnap or harm you, we could have earlier today. Aside from Harrison grabbing your arm and Chase being a

royal asshole, no one did anything to hurt you. We will be on our best behavior, I promise,” Bryce said while holding up three fingers.

“You were in the boy scouts?”

“Ha ha! After my heartfelt promise and telling you that you are not human, you focus on me holding my fingers up. You crack me up!” Bryce said while laughing hysterically.

“It’s not that funny.” I fake-glared at him. “I guess I am just used to being different, so while the whole supernatural thing is a surprise, it’s not totally out of my realm of possibilities and that is frightening.”

“Come to the house and let us explain. We can help you,” Bryce pleaded.

He had such an earnest look on his face that it made me want to trust him. And, he was right about the fact that they could have taken me plenty of times over the last twenty-four hours. *What do I have to lose? I need to know what is going on with me.* “Okay, I will come to your house, but you will not manhandle me or yell at me.”

“Deal!” Bryce said enthusiastically. “You are done with classes for today, right?”

“How do you know that?” I asked accusingly.

“Chase investigated you last night after meeting you. As I will explain later, we can sense other Elementals and Chase couldn’t sense you. He thought you might be a demon. Any time we have encountered one of them, they have attacked and tried to kill us.”

“You can sense Elementals? What does that even mean? And is *demons* a euphemism for something?”

He looked directly in my eyes and said in a really serious voice, “No, it’s not.”

A chill ran down my spine, because I could sense he was telling the truth. “Oh, okay,” I said, sounding more normal than I felt right then. “Yes, that was my last class of the day.”

“Great! Do you want to come over now? I have my car here and can drive you,” Bryce stated.

“Sure, I guess.” My head was telling me I should be more nervous than I was at that moment, but everything else about him made me feel safe. There was something about him that felt right. Maybe I was losing my mind.

“Follow me.” We headed toward the parking lot and I was curious about what kind of car he had. I believed what kind of car you drove said a lot about you. We continued walking through the parking lot until he stopped at the passenger door of a silver 2016 Aston Martin V8 Vantage.

“Holy shit! This is one of the most beautiful cars in the world. I have always wanted to ride in one of these,” I almost screamed at him.

Bryce just chuckled and said, “I guess you get your wish today!” He closed my door after I got in, walked around the car, and ducked in.

“Well, if I am getting kidnapped or killed today, at least I’ll be doing it in style!” I said jokingly.

“There you go, looking at the bright side! There is hope for you yet!” Bryce said, showing those damn dimples again.

Chapter 3

We arrived at what could only be described as a mansion. The two-story, gray limestone house looked like a small castle. The entryway was gated, with a circular cobblestone driveway surrounding a beautiful fountain just past the gate. Off to the right was an enormous garage that looked like it could hold ten cars. I guess with seven cars between them, they needed the space. Bryce parked in the third bay of the garage and got out. I followed his lead and walked with him toward the house. As we entered the two-story foyer with light gray marble floors, I was shocked by the grandeur of the house. In the back of the foyer, there was a stunning wooden staircase that led up to curved balconies on either side. There was a crystal chandelier that had to be at least fifteen feet tall. I would hate to be the one to clean that!

We veered off to the left and around a corner into the kitchen. It was a chef's delight. There were white marble countertops with dark hardwood floors and beige cabinets. The island had to be at least ten feet long and four feet wide. The room looked massive, but felt cozy. Once I lifted my jaw off of the floor, I noticed that all of the guys were sitting around a large round kitchen table. Chase gave his usual glare before walking out of the room. I looked to the others and noticed that they looked intrigued and confused, but not menacing. Even the scary one, Harrison, I think it was, looked somewhat approachable. Well, as approachable as a hot, scary biker guy can look.

Bryce led me over to one of the chairs and I sat down. All of them were staring at me with strange looks on their faces. "Uh, hi again," I mumbled.

Bryce started the discussion. "I guess Chase is not going to join us. Breanna, I am going to tell you some things that will sound crazy, but everything I say is true, okay?"

“I’m listening.” My heart was about to beat out of my chest. I wasn’t sure if it was because I was afraid of what Bryce was about to say, or because I was surrounded by four really hot guys.

“As I told you before, we are Elementals. I am an Earth Elemental and can manipulate the earth. I can do little things like making plants grow larger up to creating small earthquakes. Mason is a Water Elemental, which means he can manipulate water. He is able to make the water do whatever he wants. Harrison is a Fire Elemental and Chase is an Air Elemental. Carter is an Animal Elemental. He is able to connect with animals and take on some traits of his spirit animal. We have a community of Elementals that is ruled by our King and his council called the Elders. Elementals have regular human jobs, like police officers, that help keep us hidden. We also have some in the government to keep an eye on things. All Elementals are trained at a young age to protect our people. Demons attack our community to steal our gifts and we fight them. Going to college and acting like normal humans helps us blend in. We thought you were an Air Elemental like Chase, but we can sense other Elementals and we cannot sense you. So that most likely makes you a witch or a demon.”

“A demon?” I yelled. “I am out of here. Bryce, please take me home. You are the hottest and craziest guys I have ever met.”

“Just wait a second,” Bryce said while laughing at me.

“It’s not funny. You guys are talking about controlling the elements, and demons and witches. You are insane. Please just take me home,” I pleaded.

“Calm down. Part of being an Earth Elemental means that I can sense dark magic and you do not have any inside of you, so you are not a demon. That would leave you being a witch, but witches are taught magic and usually have to do spells. You couldn’t have done what you did without someone teaching it to you or conducting a spell. So I don’t think you are a witch either. Have other unexplainable things happened before?” Bryce asked.

“Maybe,” I said, reluctant to elaborate. They all looked at me expectantly. “Fine! Things like that happen to me all the time. I remember one time when I was really young, I was swimming in the lake and I started to sink. I was sure I was going to drown, but all of a sudden I was pushed to the surface. I looked all around to see who saved me, but there was no one close to me. My dad was frantically swimming toward me, but he wasn’t near enough to get to me,” I admitted. “Another time, I got lost in the woods and it felt like the forest showed me the way back. I just figured I had a really great sense of direction, but if that was the case, I wouldn’t have gotten lost in the first place.”

“I have an idea, but I think we should test it out before I tell you,” Bryce said, looking like he was deep in thought.

“What do you mean ‘test it out’?” I asked warily.

“Just trust me. We won’t do anything that would harm you. I just want you to try a few things. This could tell us what you are. Mason, get a glass of water and show her what you can do.” Mason looked at him like he was crazy, but he proceeded to get up and get a glass. When he came back to the table, he looked at me and smiled. All of a sudden, Mason’s eyes seemed to glow and the water in the glass started to rise. The water rose out of the glass and hovered above it. It formed into a heart shape, then, just as quickly as it had risen, it sunk back down into the glass. At the same time, his eyes turned back to their normal ice-blue color.

“Wow! That is incredible and a little freaky,” I said.

“Thanks, Breanna! You should see what I can do with a pond or lake full of water!” Mason said proudly.

“I would love to see that someday. But please call me Bre. Breanna is only used when I am in trouble,” I said, smiling. Seeing Mason do something so amazing was wonderful. I couldn’t remember the last time I really smiled.

“Now you try it,” Bryce said. The others, including myself, looked at him like he was crazy.

“Bryce, you know only bonded Elementals can have more than one gift,” Carter interjected.

“What is a bonded Elemental?” I asked, curious.

“Bonded Elementals are Elementals that have bonded to each other and can now share gifts. Unlike human relationships, we usually have more than one life partner. Most of the bonded are groups of three, but I’ve heard of others that consisted of four or five members. I’m not sure if there are really five members, though. It could just be a myth,” Bryce said.

Shocked and probably a nice shade of red, I asked, “Are some of you guys bonded to each other then?” Hysterical laughter boomed throughout the room as each of the four guys started laughing so hard they cried. “Did I say something wrong?”

“We are not bonded to each other or anyone else,” Bryce said once he got his laugh-cry under control. “We have not found our bonded yet and all of us are straight.”

“How do you know someone is your bonded?” I asked.

Harrison answered, “You will feel a certain pull to them, like an attraction. Then, once you become intimate, you will begin to bond and show signs of being able to use their gift. To complete the bond, you have to be extremely intimate, if you know what I mean,” he said while waggling his eyebrows up and down. It was so cheesy and funny-looking coming from such a tough-looking guy, I couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

He acted like I hadn’t just burst out laughing and continued with his explanation. “For example, if I bonded with a Water Elemental, I would be able to move the water in that glass. Right now, all I can do is catch it on fire.” And that was what he did. The glass of water that Mason had used before was now on fire and Harrison’s eyes were glowing orange.

“Oh my God! That is amazing! You guys are incredible! All I do is create chaos and destruction,” I lamented.

“I think you’re wrong,” Bryce said. “Try to make the water move.”

“Concentrate on the water and will it to do what you want,” Mason said.

I stared at the water in the glass and felt like an idiot. I tried to concentrate on it, but I was distracted by all of them staring at me. “Stop staring! I can’t think when you are all looking at me,” I said. They all looked away except Mason. He sat down beside me and said, “Just relax and only think about the water. Think about how cool and refreshing it is. Think about how it sloshes in the glass. Feel the movement of the liquid and how it flows.”

I relaxed by listening to his soothing voice. He should do books on tape. He has a wonderfully deep and flowing voice, kind of like water. *Huh, makes sense.* All of a sudden, the water started to move back and forth in the glass, slowly at first. It sloshed from one side to the other. It started to slosh back and forth, faster and faster. My heart was racing watching it move like that. *How exciting!* Then, *bam*, it flew out of the glass and all over Harrison. *Oh shit! He’s going to kill me.*

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to do that!” I said. The guys, including Harrison, didn’t say anything. They just stared at me like I was an alien. I jumped up to grab a towel to dry him off, hoping he wouldn’t actually kill me. I handed him the towel and he took it, still staring at me. I looked around the table and everyone was still staring.

“What? Have you never seen someone spill water before?” I asked incredulously with my hands on my hips.

Bryce spoke up. “There has never been anyone that can have more than one gift before being bonded, ever. And your eyes glowed white, not blue like most Water Elementals. Let’s make sure you really are an Air Elemental, too, and not just a Water Elemental. We need to make sure what Chase saw was really air.”

“Let’s see if she can handle fire first. But since that is how you handle water, we should probably go outside to try this,” Harrison said, winking at me.

I understand why he is a Fire Elemental. He is making me melt with just one look. Good grief, I am such a cliché. But damn, Scary Biker Guy is scary hot! Focus, Bre!

Chapter 4

As we walked outside, I got really nervous. I had a feeling that I would be able to manipulate fire, too, because I had done it before. I just hadn't realized it at the time.

I was about nine years old when my parents and I went camping in Badlands National Park. The weather turned extremely cold one night after the sun went down. Dad started a fire, but it was so small that it wasn't helping much. He left to go get more wood while my mom prepped for dinner. I sat alone by the campfire, holding my hands as close as I could to try to warm up. It was freezing. I was shivering and wishing the fire was larger to help warm me up faster. All of a sudden, the fire shot up in the air. I stood and backed away from it. The blaze was taller than I was. As I stepped back, the fire started to dwindle back down to a more normal size. It scared me so bad that I'd avoided fires ever since.

That had been my first encounter with fire. I knew that whatever Harrison asked me to do, I would be able to do it. I just hoped it was not like with the water. You can't just wipe fire off of someone with a dish towel. Once we were outside, Harrison lit a candle. "Let's start small, just in case."

He held the candle in front of him and with glowing eyes, made it grow several inches taller and then made it dance around. It was mesmerizing. After a few minutes of that, he controlled it back to its regular size. "Now you try it," he said. He handed me the still-lit candle. "Just like you did with the water, focus on the flame and will it to do what you want. Start small and just try to get it to move back and forth."

I focused on the candle's flame, watching it flicker in the slight breeze. I thought about how it was slowly swaying from side to side when Harrison did it. I thought about how magical the slow dance he made the flame perform was. Suddenly, the flame started to move back and forth. I thought maybe it was

the wind, but it was moving in the direction I was thinking. *This is so exciting! I can control fire!* Next thing I know, the fire is shooting up into the air about 3 feet. I dropped the candle and the flame caught the lawn on fire. Harrison stepped forward and started to get the fire to die down when out of nowhere, a large bubble of water came splashing down on top of it, dousing the flames.

“I figured you might need it, so I was ready,” Mason said smiling.

“Well, she is definitely a Fire Elemental, but her eyes glowed white again,” stated Harrison. Just then, Chase walked up, looking grumpy as ever. *Maybe I should call him Oscar instead of Chase. Oscar the Grouchy Elemental. That fits!*

“Show me your air gift,” Chase, aka Oscar, said.

“I’m not sure how,” I replied.

“You knew how to do it the other night when you were throwing those guys into a tree. Do what you did then,” Chase barked.

“I don’t know what I did! All I know is that there were two men dragging me into the woods and I started shaking and felt a pressure build up inside me and then I felt like I just exploded. I don’t know how I did it, it just happened. Just like everything else around me. It always just happens!” I was screaming at him at this point. He stepped toward me with that menacing look on his face and I was frightened. He grabbed both of my arms tightly and I freaked. This time I didn’t feel any build up, he just went flying backwards and landed on his ass. The other four guys burst out laughing.

“She gave you what you asked for!” Harrison said between laughs.

“Yeah, she did exactly what she did the other night, just like you told her!” Bryce said at the same time, while bending over from laughing so hard. Tears were streaming down his face.

“Bre, please don’t ever leave. I have not had this much fun in a long time!”

“I’m glad I can be your entertainment,” I said, and smiled a little at Chase still sitting on the ground with a dumbfounded look on his face.

“Her gifts become larger and more out of control when her emotions are high,” Carter said as he looked sheepishly at me. “When those men were attacking her, she was scared and her air gift came forward, like with Chase just now. When she was trying to move the water, she got excited and that was when the water flew all over Harrison.”

“Sorry I missed that. At least I’m not the only one she is taking it out on,” Chase grumbled.

“Again when she got excited about the flame, it shot up in the air. Her gifts are affected by her emotions. Ours are, too, but we have been working with them our entire lives and can control them better,” Carter said. “Remember when you were young and your gift was out of control sometimes? It’s the same with Bre. She has never had anyone teach her how to control her powers or her emotions, so they go haywire when she is excited or scared.”

“I almost burned my house down when I was five years old,” Harrison said. “My mother wouldn’t let me play with my toys until I cleaned my room. I was so mad that I caught the carpet in the living room on fire. Luckily she was also a Fire Elemental and put it out quickly, but I understand exactly what Bre is going through.”

“We need to work with her, teach her to control her gifts. We also need to figure out how in the world she has more than one,” Bryce stated. “Bre, would you like to try Earth? It should be less destructive than fire.”

“Ha ha, very funny. Maybe I will create a huge hole in the earth to swallow you up!” I said, laughing at Bryce.

“Don’t joke, you probably can! But let’s try something a little easier,” Bryce said as he picked up a potted plant. “Like I told you, one of the ways I can use my gift is to grow things.” As he spoke, the plant started to get bigger and his eyes glowed green. It grew from a foot tall to three feet tall.

“Wow, Bryce! Can you do that with all plants? What about vegetables? You could end world hunger! Just grow lots of food and give it to the homeless and those in poverty. No one would be hungry again! That is amazing!” I exclaimed.

With a downtrodden look, Bryce said, “We can’t show our gifts to the humans. If they found out about us, they would want to perform tests on us. What they found would scare them and they would see us as a threat. Eventually, they would try to control us. We are a lot stronger than humans and it would not end well for them if they tried.”

“Oh, that sucks! I do agree that human nature can be destructive. I understand what you are saying, but what a shame it is. The good you guys could do with your gifts is limitless,” I said with a sadness in my voice. “Maybe one day.” I looked up and saw Chase was staring at me. He didn’t have his usual scowl, which confused me. “Do you have something else mean to say Oscar?” I said, looking at Chase.

“Oscar?” he questioned.

“Yes, Oscar the Grouchy Elemental. That is my nickname for you!” I replied.

For the third time today, all four of the others burst out laughing. “Bre, seriously, please stay with us. I have laughed more today than I have in months. You can have my room. I’ll sleep in the basement if it means you’ll stay,” Bryce proclaimed.

I blushed again from Bryce’s statement and when I looked at Chase, I saw he was grinning. It made his beautiful face even more beautiful. It took my breath away at how a smile could light up his whole face. If he would just keep his mouth shut, I could deal with being around him. *Fat chance of that happening!*

Bryce came over to me, still holding the plant. “Same as before with the others. Concentrate on what you want the plant to do and will it to do that.” I concentrated on the plant before me and felt a small connection to it. I softly coaxed it to grow. It grew its leaves even bigger and stretched its stalk even

higher. I could feel the plant thriving. It was one of the most extraordinary feelings I had ever felt.

“I did it! Oh my God, I could feel the plant growing. It felt wonderful! Thank you, Bryce!” I exclaimed.

“You are welcome. That was amazing.” As he stepped back to put the plant down, I looked over at Carter. He seemed to be the quietest of them all.

“Carter, can you tell me how you use your gift? What does it mean to be an Animal Elemental?” I asked.

Carter took my hand and walked me toward the forest lining their huge back yard. “Come with me. I will introduce you to some of my friends,” he said hesitantly.

I didn’t understand why he seemed so shy about showing me his gift. Everyone else was thrilled to show me what they could do. Maybe he was not as skilled as the others. I couldn’t imagine what was going to happen. Slowly, creatures of all kinds arrived the edge of the woods. There were a deer, a wolf, a squirrel, several birds, and a chipmunk. I took a step back when I saw the wolf. “Don’t be scared. I am communicating with him and he will not hurt you. Relax and let the connection happen.” I trusted him and closed my eyes and thought about all of the beautiful animals before me. Faintly, I started hearing voices. The more I concentrated on them, the more I could hear.

“She is beautiful, Carter.”

“Is she your girlfriend?”

“He he he he. Carter has a girlfriend.” Different voices were starting to come into focus.

“Hello.” I said in my head as I opened my eyes. Suddenly, each of the animals and Carter looked at me in astonishment.

“Can you hear me?”

“Yes.” I heard in Carter’s voice, but his lips didn’t move.

“Yes!”

“I can hear you.”

“Clear as day!”

Each answer was in a different voice. The animals were speaking to me! I thought the connection I had with the plant was wonderful, but this, this was beyond my wildest dreams. I had always loved animals and now I could speak to them! If I did nothing else in my life, I could die happy after experiencing this. *“Hello, everyone. My name is Breanna Hunter. But please, call me Bre. That’s what my friends call me. I am delighted to meet all of you!”* I said to them in my head.

The deer stepped forward and bowed its massive head, *“Greetings, Bre Hunter. My name is Sebastian. It is a pleasure to meet you.”*

“Thank you,” I thought to him.

The birds chirped out loud and I understood them, *“Bre, it is an honor to meet you. Any friend of Carter’s is a friend of ours.”*

Again, I said, *“Thank you.”*

The squirrel and chipmunk scurried closer to me. When they were right below me, I knelt down. *“Bre, is Carter your boyfriend?”* the chipmunk asked in a cute little voice that sounded like a toddler.

“I just met him today, but I am hoping he is my friend. He seems really nice. Do you think he will be my friend?” I asked.

“Oh yes! Carter is a wonderful friend. He comes and talks with us all the time. He even brings us treats! Isn’t that right, Roco?” the little chipmunk replied.

“Chip is right. Carter is the nicest person I know. He truly cares for the animals, unlike others that only care that we can help them,” Roco said.

“You guys are just the cutest creatures I have ever seen. Thank you for speaking with me and maybe you can put in a good word for me with Carter, Chip,” I whispered.

“You got it!” Chip answered.

As they walked back to the woods, I noticed the wolf was pacing back and forth anxiously. *“Are you okay? Is there something I can do?”* I asked him.

“No, there is just another predator heading this way and I prefer to be the only one in the area. I do not recognize the smell and it has me worried,” the wolf said. When a two-hundred-pound wolf is worried about another predator, I tended to get a little anxious.

“Can you tell what it is? What should we do?” I asked, looking at Carter. Just then, a huge, and I mean huge, black cat jumped in front of me. The wolf started toward the cat, growling louder than I thought possible. The panther, I had figured out now that it was all but standing on my feet, turned to the wolf and let out a cat roar. It was deafening.

“Whoa, everyone calm down. Panther, can you hear me?” I asked.

“Yes, I can hear you. No need to get your hackles up, wolf. My name is Mea and I am Breanna’s spirit animal,” the panther turned to me and said.

“My apologies Mea. I was merely trying to protect her; I did not realize. Please accept my sincere apology. My name is Brutus and I am at your service,” The massive wolf said while bowing to Mea.

I looked over at Carter’s astonished face. His eyes were glowing gold and his hands had turned into thin claws and he looked ready to attack. I guess that is what they meant by him taking on some traits of his spirit animal. The others had just gotten to us after running from the house.

“What is going on?” Chase asked.

“Apparently, Bre’s spirit animal is a panther. I have never heard of someone with a panther spirit animal. This is extraordinary. I guess she is definitely an Elemental, just with all five gifts,” Carter stated as his hands went back to normal.

“Thank you, Brutus. I accept your apology and appreciate you keeping watch over Breanna. You are a noble and honorable wolf,” Mea said as she bowed her head slightly. *“Breanna, I*

thought it was time to introduce myself. I have watched over you since you were a child. I have been waiting for the day that you would be able to comprehend our connection. Luckily, you met these men and they were able to explain our world to you."

"You have been watching over me?"

"Yes, you are my chosen Elemental. I wasn't sure how to approach you and explain any of this to you. I'm not exactly small and unnoticeable. You meeting these men was fortunate for us. Because you seem to be handling all of this so well, I decided you were ready."

"Trust me, if you knew what was going on in my head, you wouldn't think that. I am freaked out, scared, excited, nervous, and a little nauseous," I said with a little smirk.

"Once you have had time to come to terms with your new reality, I will come back and we will discuss what it really means to be an Animal Elemental," Mea said before she circled me a couple of times and then walked back into the woods, followed by the rest of the creatures we spoke with today.

"Goodbye, everyone. It was wonderful meeting you. Thank you!" I said as they left.

After they disappeared into the woods, I ran to Carter and jumped on him, hugging his neck. He spun me around. "Thank you! That was the most extraordinary thing I have ever done. I can't believe I spoke to animals. I can't thank you enough for that. I will never forget what you did for me. Thank you, Carter!" I said breathlessly.

As Carter put me back down, he said, "You are welcome, but I didn't do anything. You did it all yourself."

"No, I would never have been able to connect with them without you. You are remarkable. This is by far my favorite gift; if I had to pick one, this would be it. You are so lucky to have had this ability your entire life. I can't wait for you to show me more. Would you do that?" I asked quickly. I was out

of breath. Today was a lot to take in and I wouldn't have wanted to miss a second of it.

"Of course I will. It would be my honor," Carter said, blushing. I looked over to the others and noticed each of them had a thoughtful look on their faces. They seemed like they were really pleased with something. Guess they think it is cool that my spirit animal is a panther, because it is!

As we started back toward the house, my stomach started growling. I blushed as everyone looked at me. "I didn't eat much today with everything that was going on. Bryce, can you take me back to campus?" I asked.

"Let's order pizzas!" Mason said. "What kind do you like, Bre?"

"Mmm, pizza sounds great! I like hamburger and extra cheese, but will eat pepperoni and bacon, too," I replied.

"Great! I will call it in," Bryce said.

Chapter 5

While we ate, everyone was quiet and I thought about everything that had happened throughout the day. How would I just go about my regular day tomorrow knowing all of this? Now that I knew what I could do, I was pretty sure I would soon blow something up. That was just how my life went. Before I spiraled too low, though, Bryce cut into my thoughts, “Bre, we need to set you up on a training schedule. You will need to work with each of us to develop and control your gifts. I think you need to work with Harrison first since that is the gift that can get you into the most trouble.”

“I agree. Can you come back on Friday to start training?” Harrison asked between bites.

“Yes, but someone will need to pick me up. I don’t drive,” I replied.

“You don’t have a car or you don’t drive?” Chase asked.

“I don’t drive,” I said.

“Why? Has no one ever taught you?” Carter piped in.

“I can drive, I just don’t,” I said. I knew what was coming next and I dreaded it. I had just met these guys. How could I tell them the most horrible part of my life? I already felt a connection to each of them – well, except Chase – but I wasn’t sure I was ready to spill my guts about the worst day of my life yet.

“Why don’t you drive?” Mason asked. There it was, the question I had been able to avoid for four months. Bryce said that Chase investigated me already, so he may have already known. If not, I’m sure he would have figured it out eventually. I should probably get it over with. I just really hated the look I always got when people talked about the wreck.

“I don’t drive, because the last time I did, my best friend died,” I blurted out.

“What? How?” Bryce asked.

“My best friend Callie and I were leaving school on the last day of our senior year and we were in a head-on collision and she died,” I said.

“So the wreck was your fault then?” Chase asked.

“Not directly. A man hit us on purpose and I think he was trying to kill me. He was driving normally and at the last second before he would have driven past us, he swerved into our lane and hit us. He then walked off, leaving his truck in the middle of the road. I was okay, but my best friend was dead. I may not have wrecked the car, but I know he was after me and got her instead. So her death was my fault,” I said shakily.

“No, it wasn’t! The man that hit you on purpose is the one that killed her, not you,” Carter said as he came and sat next to me. He put his arm around me to comfort me. All it did was make me want to cry.

“I used to love driving. I had the most beautiful Mustang GT I got for my birthday. I have not been behind the wheel since that day,” I said.

“That is insane. You are insane,” Chase yelled at me.

“Tell me how you really feel about me, Chase!” I yelled back.

“You have survivor’s guilt. You feel guilty that your friend is dead and you are not. It is not your fault that she died. The man who hit you is to blame. You shouldn’t deprive yourself of something you honestly love because of a murderer,” Carter said as he squeezed my shoulder.

“I know. That’s what my shrink said when my parents made me go for therapy after the wreck. I know in my heart that I did not kill her, but every time I think about getting behind the wheel, I start to panic. I almost didn’t come to university either. Callie’s parents had to convince me. Why do I get to experience this and she doesn’t? He was after me and she paid for it,” I confessed. “Let’s talk about something else. Why do you think I have all five gifts when no one ever has before?”

All of them paused in thought before Bryce said, “Honestly, we have no idea. We have never heard of anything like this. No one has ever been born with more than one gift.”

“What about asking the Elders you spoke about. Shouldn’t they know?” I questioned.

They all looked at each other with grim faces. “We are not sure we should tell them about you yet, at least not until we know more. We are afraid of how they will react. They may see you as a hope for the future, that children can be born with more than one gift; or they will see you as a threat. We really don’t know what you are capable of yet,” Bryce answered. “For now, I think we should work with you to control your gifts before we talk to anyone about you.”

“Obviously someone knows something about her if they tried to kill her and kidnap her,” Carter said. “We need to teach her how to defend herself in case she gets into trouble again.”

“Well, that will definitely happen again. Story of my life,” I replied.

“Let’s just take it one day at a time and see what happens, then make a decision,” Bryce said. “Bre, are you ready to go? I can take you home.”

“Yeah, today has totally wiped me out,” I said.

Bryce drove me back to my dorm and left; I was back to being alone. I had forgotten what it was like to be around people who cared about me and who I cared about. It had only been four months, but I had gotten used to being alone. I did not want to get used to it again. It made each day harder. I made a promise to myself then and there that I would make more of an effort to meet people and make friends. Once I could control my gifts, I wouldn’t have to worry as much about crazy things happening and might be okay around others.

After taking a long, hot shower, I collapsed in my bed and fell asleep immediately. I dreamt of driving my Mustang on a long windy road. I had the windows down and the radio blaring; it felt wonderful. I looked to my right and Chase was in the car

with me. He was smiling at me, really smiling. I felt lighter than I had in months. I felt like I could breathe again.

Chapter 6

Thursday seemed to drag on forever. I had English, European History, and Computer Science on Tuesdays and Thursdays; those were not my favorite classes. Computer Science was okay, but English and European History bored me. I made it to all of my classes, but thought about the guys and my gifts the whole time.

I had five elemental gifts and I was going to train with five of the most magnificent men I had ever seen, even if Chase was still being an asshole, but I was sitting there listening to a professor drone on about the changes in agricultural production and organization in the 1400s. I thought my life was strange before, but it was just plain insane now.

I finally made it to Friday and Algebra and Biology. I was so excited about seeing the guys again and learning to control my gifts that I rushed through my Biology lab and finished early. I rushed through it so I could be waiting outside for Harrison and Carter to pick me up. I left class and walked to the parking lot where I promised to meet them. I was about twenty minutes early, so I sat on a nearby bench to wait. I tried speaking to the birds in the tree above me. *“Hello. That is a beautiful song you are singing today,”* I thought to them.

“Thank you,” I heard. I was so caught up in speaking to the birds that I didn’t notice the “brothers” from the other night walking up behind me.

One of them covered my mouth and started to drag me away. I was not going to let this happen again. I kicked and hit any body part of theirs I could reach. His hand slipped a little from my mouth, so I screamed for help. I looked around, hoping someone would see us and come to help, but there was no one around. “We have been looking for you. We don’t appreciate you knocking us out the other night. We will not make the

mistake of underestimating you again. Just come with us quietly and you won't get hurt," the one holding me said.

I continued to thrash around, trying to break free of his hold. The other one looked at me with glowing yellow eyes and said, "Our boss wants you. And what he wants, he gets. Stop fighting and come with us. I don't want to hurt you. Well, actually I do, but the boss says to bring you in unharmed if possible. But if it's not possible, just bring you in in any condition."

Carter's eyes glowed a golden color. Maybe this guy was an Animal Elemental, too. The yellow-eyed brother's hands changed into claws. They were not like Carter's, though; his were more like talons. This guy's hands looked like hairless paws with long, sharp claws. He grabbed my arm and I saw a thin trail of blood where one of his claws scraped me. They continued dragging me away from the parking lot where I was supposed to meet the guys.

I was in full panic mode. I tried to think of how I could use one of my gifts to get away from them when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Harrison and Carter running toward us. Harrison's hands were glowing with fire and Carter's hands were back to talons. I could see both of their eyes glowing. "You are in for it now, assholes," I mumbled into his hand. Just then, claw-man got hit with a fireball from Harrison. He stumbled and released me. The other "brother" also released me, turned toward Harrison, and got hit with a fireball. Each of them then had yellow, glowing eyes and claws instead of hands. Harrison and Carter didn't even slow down as they engaged the brothers. Carter attacked the brother that was holding me with his talons and Harrison punched the other one with his fist of fire. Yes, I said fist of fire. *My boys are badass. My boys? When did I start thinking of them that way? I have known them for two days. I really think I'm losing my mind.* The guys were punching and slashing at each other as I slowly backed away. I saw Carter get sliced across his chest and I gasped. I really wish I knew more so I could help them. I thought back to what the guys taught me about concentrating and willing things to happen. I saw a tree nearby and thought about the branches extending and wrapping themselves around

the brothers. I felt the essence of the tree and willed it to do what I wanted. Suddenly, the tree's branches extended and grabbed them in a tight wooden prison. Carter and Harrison just stood there, looking dumbfounded. The brothers were hanging below the tree, wrapped up tight like a present.

"We can't leave them like that, the humans will see," Carter said.

"I can't believe someone hasn't seen us already," Harrison said as he stared at them. As he said that, the brothers started hacking away at the branches to release themselves. I thanked the tree for its help and we ran to the car. As we got in the car, I saw the brothers finally get loose and watch as we drove away.

"Bre, are you okay? You're bleeding," Harrison said as he looked to me in the back seat, concern showing on his face. He removed his shirt and leaned into the back to press it to my arm.

I completely forgot about the bleeding and was in awe of his sculpted chest filled with tattoos. I followed them down to his stomach and what had to be an eight-pack.

"Bre," Harrison said to get my attention.

"Oh, ah, yeah, I'm fine. It's just a little scratch. Carter, are you okay?"

"Yep, I'm fine. Just a little scratch," he said with a smirk I could see in the review mirror. I smiled back at him. "We heal faster than humans, so by tomorrow I will be as good as new."

"Really? We heal faster? I guess I never really paid attention to how fast I heal compared to someone else. Do we have any other super powers I don't know about?" I asked.

"Well, we don't age as quickly as humans. Most Elementals can live up to three hundred years or more. We start aging a lot slower once we get to be about twenty years old," Harrison answered.

"Wow! That is crazy. I have no idea what I would have done without you guys. Thank you, and not just for today, but for being there and helping me when you didn't have to. I

appreciate how you are setting up training sessions and teaching me about a life I am a part of, but know nothing about. Thank you,” I said.

“Of course, we love a good challenge. And you are definitely a challenge!” Harrison said, laughing. Hot scary guy has a sense of humor. Who knew?

We arrived back at the “little castle” as I like to call it. Harrison and Carter told the others what happened and how I used the Earth element to get us out of there. “She was badass. We would be a lot worse off if she hadn’t done that. I can’t even imagine how extraordinary she is going to be once we train her,” Carter exclaimed. He was always so sweet and encouraging to me that I just wanted to curl up in his lap and snuggle.

After they finished telling the story of my most recent crazy afternoon, I went outside to train with Harrison. He started with a candle again and worked with me on how to control it and my emotions. “When you start to feel excited or scared, concentrate on your connection with the fire,” he said.

“But I don’t feel a connection with it. I felt something with the plant and the animals, but not with fire, water, or air,” I replied.

“Hmm, that’s interesting. What do you feel when you connect with plants or animals?” he asked.

“I don’t know, I feel the energy or the essence of them. I feel what makes them alive. Air, water, and fire are not alive; they are things, not beings. Does that make sense?” I asked.

“Wow, I have never thought about it that way. I’ve always thought about fire as alive; it is something that moves, has heat, and is tangible. It is a part of me and I am a part of it,” he said while producing fire in his hand without using a flame.

“How did you do that? I was wondering how you had fists of flame when you were rescuing me. I thought you must carry a lighter around so you can always have fire with you. I didn’t know you could create it out of nowhere,” I said.

“Fists of flame, huh? I like that! Maybe I can come up with a superhero name from that,” he said. “Once you can control the fire better, we will work on you creating it without a flame. For now, let’s just make sure you don’t burn the house down when you get pissed at Chase.”

“Speaking of fists of flame, you guys got there just in time today. Thank you,” I said.

“We wouldn’t have if it wasn’t for Carter. He heard you scream for help with his bird hearing and we came running,” he said.

“Bird hearing? Oh, is that his spirit animal? That makes sense with the gold eyes and talon hands. What kind of bird?” I asked.

“His spirit animal is a hawk. He can hear and see as well as a hawk and as you saw, his hands can transform into talons,” he replied. “By the way, thank you for the way you acted the other day with him and his animals. It was really nice of you to make him feel special.”

“Oh, it was wonderful! I loved every second of it. It was the most thrilling thing I have ever done. I felt so connected with them and that brought such a sense of peace inside of me. Don’t get me wrong, I think the other four gifts are great, but feeling that connection to the animals was extraordinary!” I said excitedly.

“I forget that you didn’t grow up in this life. Animal Elementals are looked down upon by most in our community. They do not see them as being true Elementals. They think that a true Elemental has to be literally ‘of the Earth.’ Plants and soil are ‘of the Earth’ as well as water, air, and fire. They see it as animals were put on the Earth and are not ‘of the Earth.’ They are treated as second-class citizens and are not allowed to bond with Elementals of any other type.”

“That’s awful! What a wonderful gift it is to be able to connect with and partially become one of these beautiful creatures. Those people are insane. I would choose to be an Animal Elemental any day. Don’t get me wrong. Earth, air, water, and fire are cool and very useful, but you have no idea the feeling

you get when interacting with the animals. I spoke to a panther and a wolf! I will eventually be able to use the traits of a panther, whatever that means. I wish you could experience it. You would love it!" I excitedly said.

He smiled at me in a way that made me sigh. He was scary-looking, but only because of his jet-black hair, tattoos, and the fact that he was at least six-and-a-half feet tall. When I really looked at him, I could see he was extremely handsome in a rugged sort of way. His chin looked to be chiseled out of granite with slight black stubble, and his broad shoulders and muscular chest were asking to be touched. *I wonder if they are as hard as they look. Whew, is it getting hot out here?*

We continued to work for a couple more hours and I was getting a lot better, but was exhausted. He decided I'd had enough and left to take a shower. Before he left, he yelled over his shoulder, "Wanna stay for dinner? I'm cooking lasagna."

I raise an eyebrow at him. "You cook?"

"Yes, I cook. Just because I have tattoos and a motorcycle doesn't mean I can't cook. I make a mean lasagna," Harrison responded defensively.

"Whoa there, Harry. I wasn't implying you can't cook because you have tats and a bike, I was implying you can't cook because you are a guy," I countered.

He looked at me and cocked his head. "Bryce is right, you are funny, and you will be good for us. We tend to forget to laugh and enjoy life. You make us lighter and give us a purpose. I am going to enjoy having you around."

I smiled a real smile at him; it was nice to be wanted. In the short time I had known the guys, I cared very deeply for them. I had only known them for two days, but I couldn't imagine what my life would be without them. "I would love to stay for dinner. Thank you for asking." He smiled and turned back into the house.

Chapter 7

I was not ready to go inside yet, so I wandered around the property. I started walking toward the garage to see what other types of cars they had. I had seen Bryce's Aston Martin and the Land Rover Carter and Harrison picked me up in today, but I hadn't seen what the others drove. I wondered if I could tell whose car was whose. The first one I saw was a very large and tall black pickup truck. It looked like one of those monster trucks you saw on TV jumping over things. I bet that was Harrison's. Yep, I must be right, because a solid black Harley with chrome accents was parked right in front of it. Further down, I noticed the hood up on what looked like a Shelby Cobra. No way, it couldn't be. I walked closer and Chase came out from around the corner with grease stains on his shirt and hands. "Oh, sorry. I didn't know you were here. I'll get out of your way," I mumbled as I turned and walked away.

"No, it's okay. Do you want to see it?" he asked.

"Hell yes! It's a Shelby Cobra, right?" I asked.

He chuckled and said, "Yes, it's a 1965 Shelby Cobra Convertible, and she is my baby."

"She is beautiful. I used to call my Mustang my baby. I miss it," I said.

"I'm glad you came in when you did. I need some help. Can you start it up for me while I watch the engine?" he asked.

"It's been having a little trouble starting and I want to see what happens."

"Um, sure." My heart started racing and I immediately felt sick to my stomach. I had to remind myself that all I was only starting it, I wasn't driving it anywhere. Slowly, I sat in the driver's seat and pushed the clutch in. I turned the key and she roared to life. The engine had a deep rumble that I loved. I really didn't understand those people that drove Ferraris. I got

that they were pretty and sleek, but that whiny engine sound drove me crazy. It seemed fake and electrical to me. Not like this beauty. She was a medium blue with a white racing stripe down the middle and one roll bar behind me. The engine was rumbling so hard that the seat I was sitting in vibrated with its power.

“Rev the engine for me,” Chase ordered. I did as he asked and closed my eyes, enjoying the sound and feeling. I thought about how it would feel to be driving down the road with the wind in my hair and the car taking the turns with a squeal of the tires. I remembered the dream I had about Chase and me riding in my car. I started to blush thinking about how happy we were and how beautiful he was in the dream. But it had only been a dream. As soon as I thought that, Chase closed the hood and climbed into the passenger seat.

“What are you doing?” I asked, startled.

“I just need you to drive it around the block to make sure there are no ticks. It won’t take a second,” he replied and then looked forward at the driveway like he was just expecting me to start driving.

“Chase, you know I don’t drive. I’ll ride with you while you test it out, but I am not driving this car,” I said, starting to get out. Chase placed a hand on my shoulder in a gentle and not-so-Chase way.

“Bre, I understand survivor’s guilt, because I went through it and still do. My sister was killed by a demon. I was the older brother at eleven and was supposed to be watching her, but I didn’t. She wandered into the woods and, from what we gathered, was taken by a demon. She just disappeared. About a week later, we found her body and...and I’m not going to go into the details, but she was dead. I was distraught. She was only four at the time. I should have been watching out for her,” he said as he roughly ran his fingers through his hair. “I should still be watching out for her. After that day, I wouldn’t get close with anyone. I even distanced myself from my best friends, well, at least I tried. They never gave up on me, no matter how mean I was to them. They made sure I knew it was not my fault. They also made sure I didn’t go into a deep

depression like my mom did. I owe them my life. If it wasn't for them, I don't think I would be here today. It took me years to forgive myself and I was unhappy that entire time. Don't take as long as I did to find happiness again. You did nothing wrong and you did not kill your friend. Enjoy what life has to offer and to hell with everything else."

"Chase," I said as I placed my hand on his, "I'm so sorry about your sister. What a horrible thing to deal with at such a young age."

He looked at me with those sad but hopeful blue eyes. "I am sorry for treating you the way I did when I first met you. I was just afraid, I guess. But I should have known you weren't a demon. You have such a sweet and caring way about you. If I had taken two minutes to speak with you or observe you without jumping to conclusions, I would have immediately known you were one of the most thoughtful and sincere people I have ever met."

I almost fainted from his words. Was this really Chase, the one who threatened me over and over? How could he be this sweet when he was so venomous before? I decided to forget the past and start fresh with him. "I forgive you," I said.

Chase looked up at me with a new hope in his eyes. The sadness seemed to have dulled some and a light was coming through. "Thank you. I am not sure I deserve it, but thank you." He stared at me for so long that I thought he might lean in to kiss me, but he let go of my hand and turned toward the driveway again. "Onward James!" he yelled.

I was scared.

I was scared of driving again and I dreaded the guilt I would feel afterwards. And I was scared to drive this really freakin' expensive car. What if I wrecked it? He would definitely not kiss me then. *Get it together, Bre. He was not going to kiss you. Or was he? Ugh, again, what is wrong with me?*

I took a deep breath and thought, *I can do this. What happened to Callie wasn't my fault. I am a good driver. I will go slow and just a little way down the road.* "Okay, but just around the

block. It's been a while and I am scared to death to wreck your car," I said shakily.

"You'll be fine. I trust you," he said while looking me straight in the eye.

"Here goes nothing." We moved slowly around the fountain and out to the road. I looked left and right about five times before I finally pulled out onto the road. I shifted into second and then into third and fourth. Okay, I was doing alright. 45 mph was a good speed. We drove like that in silence for about five minutes down the road.

"Let's turn around here and head back," Chase said. I let out a long breath that I didn't remember holding and slowly turned around in someone else's driveway. We were heading back at my 45 mph when Chase said, "Gun it. I need to make sure she sounds clean at higher RPMs."

"What?!" I screeched. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, now hit it!" he yelled. "See how fast you get her up to before the house."

Terrified of wrecking his car, but thrilled to be given permission to drive it like it should be driven, I downshifted and hit the gas. We rocketed down the street as I hit 50, then 60, and the next thing I knew, we were going 80 mph. My hair was flying everywhere and I was smiling like a little kid. I quickly glanced over at Chase and he was smiling and laughing, just like the dream I had, but it was even more beautiful. I quickly looked back at the road and noticed we were getting close to the little castle. I slowed down as we pulled into the driveway. I parked in the same bay we had come out of and turned the engine off. I looked at Chase and it took my breath away. He was magnificent when he smiled. He looked at me and said, "I knew you could do it. How do you feel?"

"Wonderful! I haven't felt this free in a while. I feel like I can breathe a little better and I only feel a little guilty. Callie knew I loved cars and driving. She would be happy for me right now. Thank you, Chase," I said.

“You’re welcome. Thank you for your forgiveness. It means a lot to me.” I literally swooned when he said that and looked at me that way. “Let’s go inside and see if Harrison has started dinner yet. He is a phenomenal cook.”

We entered the house to a mouthwatering smell. Chase led me into the kitchen where Harrison was finishing up dinner. “Oh my God, that smells amazing. Harry, you can really cook!” I exclaimed. All of a sudden, all four of the other guys looked at me in astonishment. They all tensed up and then looked at Harrison. “What did I say? I was complimenting him.” They didn’t respond.

Then Harrison said, “They are scared I am going to attack you for calling me Harry. I don’t let anyone call me Harry. They never call me that more than once, at least.”

“Oh, Harry. I’m sorry, should I not have called you that?” I joked. The other four cringed at my question. I swear I didn’t know what it was about these guys, but I really loved pushing their buttons, especially Hot Scary Biker Guy and Oscar the Grouchy Elemental. Slowly, Chase made his way over to me and stood a little in front with his back to me. *What is that about?*

They all looked at Chase, confused like I was. “Don’t worry, Chase. I am not going to attack her. I actually kinda like her calling me that,” Harrison said while winking at me. That wink could stop traffic. *Whew, is it getting hot in here? Must be the oven heating the kitchen up. Stop lying to yourself, Bre. It’s the hot surfer guy standing in front of you protecting you from the Hot Biker Guy winking at you.*

The moment died down and we all sat around the enormous island chit-chatting while Harrison finished cooking dinner. As soon as he was done, we dug in and devoured the delicious lasagna.

“So how did the training go today, Bre?” Bryce asked.

“It went well, I think. I feel like I have a little more control over it, but I still need a lot of work.”

Harrison confirmed, “She did great. She still has some trouble with control when she gets excited, but it’s only her first day. I will have her throwing fire balls within a week!”

“That’s great! Mason and I will pick you up tomorrow morning and we can train you on Earth and Water. I know a great spot where no one will be around,” Bryce said. “Then on Sunday, you can work with Carter and Chase.”

“That sounds great!” I replied.

“We also need to look into who keeps trying to kidnap you. You said it was the same guys as the night you met Chase?” Bryce asked.

“Yes, they look like brothers. They said something about ‘the boss’ wanting me. They were both animal shifters, I don’t know what kind, but they each had similar claws. The claws reminded me of badger claws,” I answered.

“Yeah, one of them looked familiar to me, but I can’t place him,” Harrison interjected.

“I have never seen them before,” Carter said.

“Chase, look into it and see what you can find out,” Bryce instructed.

“Will do. Plus, Bre, we need to figure out who your parents are. Elementals are only born of two Elemental parents. The man that raised you is your stepfather, right?” Chase asked.

“Yes, my mom told me that she met him when I was two. She never talks about my father, just says he is not in our lives and she is fine with it,” I answered.

“And she never talked to you about Elementals? Did she ever show any gifts?” Chase asked.

“No, never. She knew at an early age that I was different, but we never talked about it. Eventually, I just hid it from her as best I could.”

“I know this may be an uncomfortable question, but could your mom have adopted you?” Chase asked.

“No, there is no way. We look like sisters,” I responded sternly.

“Okay. Don’t worry, I will look into it and see what we can find out about your father,” Chase said.

“Good. Chase has some work to do, and Bre, you need a good night’s sleep. You will be busy tomorrow!” Bryce said.

“Harrison, can you take Bre home? I have a call to make about a mission.”

“Mission?” I asked.

“Remember how I told you we’re trained to fight demons? Well, we are members of the Stratos Team, which is kind of like the humans’ Navy SEALs, but we fight demons. If there is demonic activity in an area, we are called in to take care of them. We also investigate things that can affect our community. Chase is a master at the computer and does research for the missions, among other things, and I am team leader and organize our operations. All of us are trained in military fighting and tactics,” Bryce replied.

“Wow. Navy SEALs, huh? That’s impressive. How often do you get called in?”

“Not too often, but at least a couple of times a month,” Bryce replied. “Now, off you go. Get some rest.”

Harrison and I walked out to the garage and climbed into his monster truck. I could barely get in, it was so tall. “Good grief, Harrison. Is this thing tall enough? Boys and their toys.”

Harrison chuckled and got in on the other side. “So I see you and Chase made up.”

“Yes, it was a misunderstanding and we are good now. He even let me drive his Cobra.”

“What?! He barely lets us ride in it, much less drive it.” He paused for a second, then said, “I thought you didn’t drive.”

“I think he felt bad about how he acted with me and was trying to make it up to me. He tricked me into the driving part. He said he needed to listen to the engine and just wanted to go around the block.” I purposely didn’t talk about Chase’s

conversation with me about his sister. I knew they all knew about it, but that had been a personal conversation between the two of us.

“Well, I think that is great! Good for you!”

We chatted about nothing important on the way to my dorm. When we arrived, Harrison dropped me off at the entrance.

“See you tomorrow, Bre!”

“Bye, Harry.” I smiled as I walked away. Those guys were already worming their way into my heart. Each of them was special to me in their own way. It was wonderful to feel connected to someone again. After Callie’s death, I had been afraid I would never get close to anyone again. But they were barging their way in, and I loved it.



“How can you let one little girl get away?” he screamed at them. “She is a tiny little thing and she keeps kicking your asses! You are both useless!” He raised his hands filled with fire, ready to kill both of them where they stood. His right-hand man, a mage, also stepped forward.

“We were prepared for it just to be an Air Elemental, not an Air Elemental with her two bodyguards, which by the way, one was a Fire Elemental,” one of the brothers, Nick, said timidly. They were scared of the boss, but were even more scared of the mage. They had seen firsthand how he could work black magic that could kill a person where they stood. He had also reduced grown men to crying toddlers with his mind control; they never recovered. Dresden was the most powerful mage they had ever seen. He had been helping the boss by using mind control to get Elementals to do what he wanted. He was evil incarnate.

“What? Who is helping her? No one is supposed to even know about her. Did you recognize them?” the boss asked as he lowered his hands.

“I recognized the Fire Elemental; it was Harrison Greywell,” Owen, the other brother, said. “He threw fire balls at us and attacked me while the Animal Elemental went after Nick. We were handling them fine. It wasn’t until we were wrapped up in the branches of a tree that we were bested. I don’t understand how that happened? I didn’t even see an Earth Elemental around.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll let you know when I need you again. You can go,” the boss said while shooing them away with his hand. Once they were out of the room, he spoke to the mage. “She is learning about her powers. Do you think the boys are teaching her? How did they find out about her? She

has been sheltered from all of this her entire life and now she is able to best my two best goons – twice!”

“It has to be. There is no way she could have figured that out on her own. Do you want me to go get her?” Dresden asked.

“No, let’s leave her with them for a little while and see what happens. If we are unable to transfer her power to me, then having them training my newest weapon for me will suffice,” the boss said.

“As you wish.” Dresden nodded.

Chapter 8

Saturday morning, I woke up excited. I was going to train with Mason and Bryce today. They were taking me to a river hidden in the woods one town over. It was about a two-hour hike from the road, so we would eat a picnic lunch at the river. I was ready to be around nature and learn more about my water and earth gifts. Carter suggested I try to communicate with the animals on my way there. Mason pulled up in front of my dorm in his silver Mercedes E-Class. It amazed me that these guys had such expensive cars. I could see Bryce in the front passenger seat and waved at them both. I opened the back door and slid in. The seats were a soft gray leather that I could curl up on and sleep for days. “Hi, guys!” I greeted them.

“Hey, Bre!” they said at the same time.

“Okay, I have a personal question for you if you don’t mind,” I said.

“Sure. We will tell you just about anything, especially if it is something embarrassing about Chase!” Bryce teased.

“How do you guys have such a nice house and cars? I never see you work,” I questioned.

Bryce laughed and said, “Like I told you before, we can live up to three hundred-plus years. That gives you time to accumulate wealth.”

“How old are you?” I asked.

“We are all between nineteen and twenty-one,” Bryce answered. “Our parents fund us for the most part right now. I’m not sure about the others, but my parents are around one hundred. They were smart with their money and I benefited from it. Most Elementals are very wealthy.”

“Yeah, my parents are about eighty,” Mason said.

“Oh. Wow, it is really weird to think about a twenty-year-old having one-hundred-year-old parents. Guess that is something else I need to get used to.”

As we drove to the next town, we chatted about school and my life before college. They told me about some of their missions fighting demons. I shivered at the thought of them fighting demons. “That is terrifying. I can’t believe you do that. How do you kill a demon?” I asked.

“There are several ways to do it. The most effective way is to chop its head off, but to do that you have to be close and have a sword. We don’t carry swords with us on a regular basis, but if we are out hunting them, we always have them. You can also use your gift to kill them. I can use rocks and boulders to knock them out or injure them enough to kill them. Harrison can build a fireball big enough to kill them if he has enough time to build it before they are on him. Chase can use air to slam them into things hard enough to kill them, or at least knock them out to then cut their heads off. It is very difficult to kill a demon, they are very resilient. If you ever encounter one, run,” Bryce explained.

“Not a problem. Demon equals Bre heading in the opposite direction as quickly as possible,” I said.

We arrived at the pull-off for the hike to the river and parked the car. We gathered our lunch and water, then put it in a backpack that Bryce carried. As we began the walk, I tried to concentrate on the animals around me and speak to them. A cute little rabbit was just off the path and I spoke to it. A little further down the trail, I spotted a deer and we had a short conversation. It was amazing that I was able to do that. I finally felt hope again. How could I be in such a dark place when I had light all around me? I sent a little message in my mind to Callie. *I love you, Callie. I am so sorry you died because of me. I wish you were here to experience this with me. I am finally able to start enjoying life again. I know you would want that for me. You always wanted good things for me. I also wish you could meet my new friends. First of all, they are hot! Secondly, they are really nice and are helping me with my crazy. You would love them and how they take care of*

me. I miss you so much it hurts, but I will do my best to make you proud and live the life you should have had.

“Bre, are you okay?” Mason asked.

“Yes, I was just thinking of Callie and how she would love this. You guys would have loved her and she would have loved you. I just miss her,” I responded.

Mason slowed down to walk beside me, “I’m so sorry about your friend.”

“Thank you. Being around you guys these last few days has made me feel so much better. I cut myself off from everyone after she died and being around you guys has made me see that I can’t live like that anymore. You guys make me happy. The other day was the first time I had laughed in months. I feel better when I am with you, lighter,” I said.

Bryce also slowed down to walk beside me and put his arm around my shoulders. “Well, you know I love having you around. You are my sole source of entertainment now. You are the only one who can douse Harrison with water and not get hit. You are also the only one that Chase has let near him except for us, and we were kids when we became friends. Speaking of which, I saw him stand in front of you when you called Harrison ‘Harry’. Seems he has come around.”

“We spoke right before dinner last night and we now understand each other. He is a great guy with a big heart underneath all of that grouchiness,” I said.

Bryce busted out laughing, “By the way, I love your nickname for him. Oscar the Grouchy Elemental! Ingenious!” We continued to talk as we made our way to the river. When we finally arrived, we rested and took a drink of water. I was excited to work with Mason. I hadn’t had much time with him these past couple of days. Wow, to think it had only been a few days since I met the guys and now I couldn’t imagine my life without them. I just hoped I never had to.

After resting a little while, Mason walked up to me and held his hand out for me to take. “Let’s get started, pretty girl.”

Blushing, I took his hand and walked over to the river with him. His hand felt nice in mine. I looked up at him and saw him smiling down at me. I couldn't help but smile back, and his ice-blue eyes darkened a little when he looked at me. He ran the other hand through his hair and released my hand. "Let's get started. Remember when you moved the water in the glass the other day? Well, this will be the same except on a much bigger scale." He looked at the river and his eyes started to glow blue. The river water lifted up and swirled in a tornado form about fifty feet wide. It moved faster and faster until it looked like it could take out a tree and anything else that got in its way. He then slowed it down and eased it back into the river where it came from.

"Wow! Mason, that was amazing. How can you control that much water?" I asked.

"It doesn't make a difference how much there is. It's about willing it to do what you want. It feels the same when I control ten ounces of water or 1,000 gallons," Mason replied. I thought about that for a minute.

"I guess I am thinking about it wrong. I think that handling a lot of water would be heavy, whereas moving a glass of water would be light, so it would be easier," I said.

"You can't think about it like that. You are not actually lifting the water with your body, you are doing it with your mind. Heavy or light doesn't make a difference when it is mental. You made a tree's branches longer to entrap those guys and made a small plant grow. Did you use more energy for the tree?" he asked.

"No, I guess I didn't. I never would have thought about it like that. Thank you, Mason. I'll see what I can do," I said nervously. "We probably should have brought some towels just in case." Mason and Bryce both chuckled at my remark. "I'm actually serious. Well, here goes nothing." I walked over to the river, trying to feel its energy. I didn't feel anything, but continued to concentrate on it. Nothing. "The water doesn't feel like the plants and animals do. I can't feel the energy or essence of the water, because it is not alive like they are," I said, frustrated.

Mason walked over to me and said, “Close your eyes. Concentrate on the trees and plants around you. Feel the energy they give off. Let it surround you.” I did. “Now, find the energy of the animals around us, feel the energy they give off. Air and water are not alive like plants and animals, but they give life. They are the essence of life, so they have an energy. Now, concentrate on everything around you. Do you feel the air, trees, plants, animals, water?”

I tried to block everything out except his voice. He was so close to me that I could feel his breath on my ear. Tingles ran down my arm and I swayed into him and his hypnotic voice. *Concentrate, Bre!* I steeled myself to focus on the task and not how close he was. Finally, I started to feel everything around me. I could feel the large oak to my right and the pine tree behind me; the oak felt old and weathered and the pine felt new and fresh. I expanded to areas beyond them and felt a bird, a blue jay, I think, with her four hungry babies. There was a chipmunk scurrying around a few yards away. I then concentrated on the area where the water should be and it was like a void. I didn’t feel anything from it. I tried to relax and think about what Mason said about it being life-giving. I thought about how the water, the trees and plants, the air, and the earth itself were all connected. Slowly, I started to feel something in the river; it felt like light, flowing clouds of sparkles. Crazy, I know, but that was apparently how water felt to me. It felt so light, like cotton candy, and I could pick it all up with one hand. Mason gasped beside me and Bryce said, “Holy shit, Bre!” I opened my eyes to see that the entire river as far as the eye could see had been lifted up into the air. There were fish flopping around on the empty riverbed below and I began to panic.

“Relax. It’s okay. Close your eyes again and relax. Continue to feel the connection to the water and start to lower it back down. You can do this, just breathe,” Mason instructed. I tried to relax, but I was worried about the fish. I didn’t want them to die. *Okay, I can do this.* I thought about the sparkly cotton candy water and raised my hand toward it. I thought about it lowering back into the riverbed slowly. I thought about how light it was and how I wanted to softly lower it back down. I

had never concentrated so hard in my life. “You did it!” I heard Mason shout. I opened my eyes to see the river back to the way it was. Mason turned to me and hugged me tight. “You did great! I can’t believe you lifted the entire river into the air! I have never seen anything like it. You are amazing, Bre!”

“Thank you, but I thought you said that it didn’t matter how much there was, that it was a mind thing?” I asked.

“Yes, well, there are limits to what most Elementals can do, but not you apparently,” he said.

“Well, that doesn’t scare the shit out of me at all, Mason,” I said sarcastically. “You told me I could lift any amount of water I wanted to and I did. Now you tell me that it’s not normal to be able to do that.”

“Not really. Most Water Elementals can control large amounts of water, but not an entire river. This river is at least fifty yards wide and over one hundred miles long. I have no idea how much of it you picked up, but it was as far as I could see,” Mason replied excitedly.

“Bre, it doesn’t matter how much you lifted, you controlled it, and that is huge progress. You may be more powerful than any Elemental we have ever met, but you are figuring all of this out very quickly. You can do this,” Bryce said encouragingly.

“But I don’t want to be the most powerful Elemental. I can barely make it through a day without something crazy happening. Now that I know what I can do and how powerful I am, I know my crazy will shoot through the roof!” I said.

“Don’t worry. We will be here with you to help you. You are not alone in this. We will do everything we can to figure out why you are so powerful and how you can possess all five gifts. You are not getting rid of us,” Mason said, looking at me with the most hopeful ice-blue eyes. I couldn’t help but believe him when he looked at me that way.

Bryce walked up and put his arm around my shoulders. “Yep, you are stuck with us. We need someone around to keep Chase

in line!” We sat down to eat lunch and relaxed a little. I still needed to train with Bryce and I was nervous.

“So Bryce, what are we going to work on? Please don’t tell me that I will be growing trees bigger. I’m afraid I might make it reach a mile in the air and take out a plane!” I kind of jokingly said.

“Wouldn’t that be crazy? You are flying in a plane and look out the window to see a tree as you go by. Ha! I would love to see peoples’ reactions to that!” Bryce said while laughing.

“I’m serious. It scares me that I might hurt someone, specifically one of you. I already lost my best friend. I can’t lose you guys,” I said solemnly.

“Don’t worry. We are tough and we will teach you to control your gifts. Just trust us,” Mason said. I was still worried that I would hurt or even kill one of them, but the best way to avoid that was to train. I had to do this.

Chapter 9

“Okay Bre, let’s do this!” Bryce said and my stomach rolled. I shouldn’t have eaten, because now it was sitting in my stomach like a rock. “I thought we could work on moving boulders; they are great for knocking out demons.”

“Really? You want me to move boulders? I never thought I would hear that sentence in my lifetime, much less have it not be a joke,” I said. Bryce walked over to me and pointed out a large rock near the river.

“I know you keep hearing us say ‘concentrate’, but that is exactly what you need to do. All gifts are controlled by you and your mind. A boulder is of the earth and can be controlled just like a tree or the entire river you just picked up,” Bryce said.

“Ha ha!” I replied.

“Sorry, I am still shocked by how powerful you are. I want you to concentrate on the rock I pointed out and lift it into the air just like the water. But try not to move the entire mountain if you can,” Bryce joked.

Sadly, it really wasn’t a joke to me. I was nervous again and willed myself to relax. After a few deep breaths, I looked at the rock he wanted me to move and tried to feel its energy. It felt dense, but light. I lifted my hand toward it and lifted it up. The rock started to shake a little and I wavered. *Concentrate! It is just like the water, light like cotton candy.* The rock stopped shaking and started moving upwards. I lifted it about twenty feet and it hovered there. I made a circular motion with my hand and it spun in a circle.

“Look, I can spin it around!” I said as I turned to the guys and smiled. I forgot about controlling it and heard a loud crash. While I was gloating about my control over the rock, I forgot

about actually controlling it. “Oops.” They both smiled at me and shook their heads.

“What are we going to do with you?” Bryce asked while laughing at me yet again. “That was great. Next time, we will work with the land and see what damage you can cause.”

Bryce and Mason spoke quietly while I looked out over the trees and saw the majestic mountains in the background. I thought about how wondrous the earth was and how I was able to connect with it. I was in awe of the beauty around me and I felt more connected than ever. A thought came to mind and I wondered if I could do it. I could connect with several of the elements at once, so why shouldn't I be able to control more than one at a time? I thought back to Mason creating that heart with the water from the glass and I wondered if I could do it, too. I lifted some of the water from the river, not the entire river this time, and created half of a heart shape. Then, I motioned to the nearby oak branches to create the other half. Together, they formed a perfect heart shape. It made me smile. Now I just need a flaming arrow through the middle.

“How are you doing that?” Mason asked.

“That shouldn't be possible,” Bryce said.

I remembered to continue controlling the elements and motioned for them to return to where they came from. I turned back to the guys and asked, “What shouldn't be possible?”

“No Bonded Elemental with more than one gift can use more than one at the same time,” Bryce replied.

“Why not? I can feel all of them at once, so why can't I use all of them at once?” I questioned. Bryce and Chase looked at each other, contemplating my statement. Before they could form a response, a loud crash sounded behind us.

“Demon!” Mason yelled.

“What?!” I questioned as I looked toward the crash. Standing there staring at us with glowing red eyes was my worst nightmare. It was a lizard-looking being with two arms and two legs, just like a human, but that was the end of the similarities. His entire body was covered in dark brown

reptile-like skin and his hands and feet were webbed. His hands also had long claws that looked razor-sharp. He was at least six-and-a-half feet tall and had teeth like a piranha. It hissed at us and started toward me. *Oh, hell no! I almost get kidnapped, TWICE, I get in a head-on collision that was intentional, and now a freakin' lizard man is trying to kill me? No freakin' way!*

Bryce and Mason both ran to me and stood in front of me. "Stay behind us. We will take care of it. They both pulled out long daggers that had been strapped to their legs and started circling the lizard guy. He slashed out at them with his claws and continued to hiss. There was drool coming from the corner of his mouth and it was disgusting. Bryce stepped toward him with his dagger held out and tried to slice his chest while Mason approached him from behind. The lizard man knocked the dagger out of Bryce's hand while Mason got a slash in across the demon's back. It howled in pain, which gave Bryce time to recover his dagger. Again, Bryce and Mason circled the demon, waiting for the right moment to strike. The demon became impatient and lunged at Mason. It barreled toward him with its claws out. Mason created a water tornado which threw the demon into the nearest tree. Immediately, Bryce had the tree wrap its branches around it and tighten. It was locked in for only a few seconds before it broke free and charged Bryce. It backhanded him across the face and the force of it threw him several feet away, knocking him out. Mason stepped in behind the lizard guy and sliced him across the back again. Lizard guy flinched, but Mason must not have sliced deep enough, because it didn't slow down. It turned and picked Mason up by his neck, throwing him into a tree and knocking him out. Lizard man turned his flaming red eyes toward me and hissed, "He wasss right, you are more than a normal Elemental. You will be the tassstiest treat I have ever had. I can't wait to sssink my teeth into you before I kill you ssslowly."

I froze in shock. This was a real demon and it was talking about eating and killing me. When the guys spoke about demons, I never thought I would actually see one in person. My entire body locked up and I couldn't move. I was frozen in

fear as it came near me and raised its clawed hand to strike me. I cowered in fear and covered my face with my arms while turning away from it, waiting for the death blow. All of this happened in seconds, but it felt like hours. Just as his clawed hand was about to swipe at my face, a power like I have never felt before filled me and something exploded out of me. I looked up to see what appeared to be a curved white force field of light pulse out of my entire body, throwing lizard man away from me. I looked at where he hit the ground and saw Bryce and Mason recovering. The demon recovered too quickly for my liking and stalked toward me. The entire front of his body, including his face, looked like it was melting. When it was a few feet from me, Bryce jumped on its back and sliced clean through its neck. As Bryce landed on the ground, the demon burst into a pile of ash.

I sunk to the ground in a rush of tears. Bryce and Mason ran over to me, kneeling down to see my face. “Are you hurt?” Bryce asked. “Did he cut you anywhere?”

“No,” I said, sobbing. “He never touched me.”

“Mason, gather everything up and let’s get her home,” Bryce commanded.

We walked back to the car in silence, because I wasn’t saying much. They continued to ask if I was okay and if I was hurt in any way. I kept telling them I was fine, but they kept asking. I didn’t want to talk. I just wanted to get the hell out of there. We finally made it back to the car and began the drive home. Mason called Harrison to inform him of what happened. They wanted to have a family meeting to discuss the events and to try to figure out what was going on. Someone was trying to kidnap or kill me and I had no idea why. Exhausted from the training and from the attack, I laid down in the back seat and fell asleep.

Chapter 10

I woke up in a bed I had never seen before. I was in a huge, black four-poster bed with a fluffy white down comforter. I looked around the room and saw that it was neat with minimal furniture. In addition to the bed, there was a dresser and a chair, but nothing else in the room. Everything was black and white; the walls and a rug covering the dark hardwood floor were white, while the dresser and chair were black. There was a framed black and white abstract painting above the bed that had a small splash of red. The red was the only color in the entire room. I looked for the bathroom, because I was about to pop. After finding it and relieving myself, I quietly walked out of the bedroom and found a long hallway with several doors on each side. To my right looked to be the balcony from the entryway, so I headed that direction. As I descended the stairs into the massive foyer, I heard the guys talking.

“Then, this wall of white light came out of her and threw the savra at least ten feet. When it stood back up, the entire front of its body was partially melted away. I have never seen anything like it. I jumped on its back and sliced through its neck like it was butter. The skin is usually thick and extremely hard to cut through, but this was soft and easy. Whatever she did with that white light was disintegrating its skin,” Bryce explained to the guys. “If she hadn’t done whatever it is she did, she would have been dead. Mason and I were just recovering from being knocked out and there is no way we could have gotten to her in time.” I could hear the sadness in his voice. I longed to wrap my arms around him to comfort him, but I wanted to hear how everyone would react without me being in the room. I was afraid they were getting sick of having to save me. I brought nothing to the table except for problems and pain.

“We are lucky she could do that, because she told us that she froze. She didn’t even try to fight it. She wasn’t prepared for

her first demon to be a savra. We should have taught her about the different types of demons, so she wasn't so shocked when she saw it. Maybe if she wasn't so shocked at seeing the lizard-like demon, she would have defended herself with one of her gifts," Mason said. "I have never been so scared in my life. I care for her and don't want anything to happen to her. She is one of the best things that has happened to us. Not only is she powerful and fun to train, she is also kindhearted and thoughtful. Not to mention, she keeps us laughing!" Mason's words touched me. I was becoming connected to these guys and didn't want to leave them, but I also didn't want to be a burden all the time.

"She definitely does that!" Bryce agreed. "We need to figure out what is going on. How can she be almost kidnapped twice and attacked by a savra within days of each other? Someone is out to get her. I just don't understand why they try to kidnap her one minute and try to kill her the next. It doesn't make sense."

"Maybe there are two different people behind it," Harrison stated. "You're right, it doesn't make sense that they would try to kidnap her and kill her at the same time. It has to be two different people."

"Why are so many people after her?" Carter asked.

"That's what we need to find out!" Chase yelled. "And one of us needs to be with her all the time. She is not safe alone. She needs to move in here and someone needs to go with her to all of her classes. We need to train her harder and teach her about the different types of demons. She cannot be caught unaware again. We messed up by not teaching her enough about the dangers Elementals face."

My heart was breaking for Chase; he was relating my attack today to his sister's. I walked into the family room and over to Chase, who was pacing the floor while continually running his hand through his hair. I placed my hand on his arm and looked him directly in the eyes. "It's not your fault. How could any of you have known we would be attacked in broad daylight in the middle of the woods? There is no way you could have known. It is not your fault," I said as I turned to the rest of the guys.

My hand was still on Chase's arm and I wasn't sure if it was for his comfort or mine at this point. "You guys have done nothing but protect and help me. I am alive thanks to Bryce and Mason. They are the ones who defeated the lizard man, not me."

"Bre, you protected yourself with your light. I don't know how you did it, but you are the one that saved yourself. I was just lucky enough to come to in time to finish it off. It was dying when I jumped on it. Whatever you did with that light was killing it," Bryce said.

"What did you feel when the light came out of you?" Carter asked. Carter always either knew what I was feeling or asked. He seemed to be more in touch with my emotions than I was.

I walked over and sat on the couch beside Carter to answer, "I'm not sure. I froze when the lizard man came at me. I was paralyzed with fear and couldn't move at all." Carter held my hand and looked at me with his soulful eyes while I talked.

"He started to swing his claws at me and I covered my face with my arms expecting to get sliced to bits when a powerful burst of power filled my entire body. I felt more powerful than I ever have before. Then, the power exploded from me like when I used wind to knock Chase down. But this time it was a white wall of power. I could see it coming out of me. It felt strong and...ummm...this is going to sound silly."

"Nothing you can say will sound silly, because it's how it felt to you. Just tell us. The more we know, the more information we can use to figure this out," Carter said.

"It felt strong and good," I whispered.

"What do you mean 'good'?" Chase asked.

"It felt... The only way I can describe it is... Bryce, remember when you told me you couldn't sense any dark energy in me and that is how you knew I was not a demon?" I asked.

"Yes," Bryce answered.

"I would guess that is how it feels to me, but the opposite. It was light and refreshing, like a deep cleansing breath, or like getting a big hug from someone you love that you haven't seen

in a while. It felt comforting and well...perfect." I smiled a little and looked at Carter. "I know it sounds silly and doesn't make any sense, but that is how it felt to me." I looked at the others and each of them had a slight smile and a wistful look on their face. I thought to myself, *This is what it felt like, my boys all together with me, safe and happy – perfect.*

After we discussed who was going with me to classes and the fact that I would be staying with them for a while, we traipsed to the kitchen for dinner. I was starving and whatever Harrison cooked smelled delicious.

"Harry, I think I have a new favorite comfort food, thanks to you," I said as we began eating. Harrison had fixed a savory pot roast with little red potatoes and carrots.

"Awe, Bre, you're making me blush," Harrison said. "I'm really glad you like it. I figured you needed a hearty meal after the day you had." He was exactly right.

After everyone finished eating and cleaning up, Harrison asked, "Bre, we put you in my room earlier. Will you be okay in there for tonight? I know there is not much in there, but the bed is really comfortable."

"I should have guessed that was your room, and yes, it will be fine. The bed felt like it was made of clouds. Thank you for letting me stay in there," I replied. "Since I slept so well, I'm not tired at all. Anyone up for a movie?"

"Yes."

"That sounds great!"

"A movie sounds perfect."

"Yes."

"We haven't had a movie night in months."

"I guess that's a yes. What movies do you guys have?" I asked as I walked toward the couch in the family room.

"Bre, come this way. We have a theatre room. We should have given you a tour of the house already. We will definitely do that tomorrow," Bryce said. We all moved down the hall and past the kitchen, past what looked like a library and a couple

of other rooms with closed doors to the end of the hall. Bryce opened the door to a huge room with high ceilings and a movie screen. There were ten movie theatre chairs that were nicer than the ones in real theatres. There was also a red popcorn machine on wheels that looked very professional.

“Oh, can we have popcorn? This place is amazing!” I said, gawking.

“Sure, why don’t you go pick out a movie and I’ll start the popcorn,” Bryce said. “Harrison, get some sodas from the fridge.”

Mason walked me over to the huge selection of movies on the side wall in a beautiful mahogany built-in. There must have been over a thousand movies there. “They are organized by genre. This section is action, this one is thriller, here is horror, and this section is sports-related,” Mason said while pointing out where each genre was located.

“Don’t pick out a girly movie!” Chase yelled.

“Awe come on Chase, I had my heart set on The Notebook!” I giggled as I responded. I really wasn’t in the mood for a movie like that, but I just couldn’t pass up the chance to annoy him.

“Ah man! I hate those kinds of movies,” Chase replied.

I looked at Mason, “Do you even have romance movies? This looks like all action and adventure movies.”

“No, we don’t, but now that you are here, we should order some and make him watch!” Mason laughed. He said it nonchalantly, like he hadn’t thought twice about me being here in the future. He wanted me here, and he had no idea how that made me feel. To him, what he said was no big deal, but to me, it meant the world. I couldn’t imagine my life without these guys now; they meant everything to me.

I looked over the movies and saw exactly what I wanted, The Avengers. You really couldn’t go wrong with a Chris Hemsworth movie. I could watch anything he was in – Chris was my celebrity crush. Even though these guys could give him a run for his money in the looks department, Thor was the perfect man/God ever. Mason walked over to the DVD player

and put the movie in. I went over to Bryce and grabbed a bag of popcorn. Harrison patted the chair next to him and handed me a soda. Carter sat on my other side. "I hope you enjoy the movie, Chase! I picked it out just for you!" I taunted.

"If you hadn't been attacked by a demon today, I wouldn't be letting you get away with this," Chase grumbled.

As the movie started, I turned to watch Chase's expression. He looked morose at first and then grinned from ear to ear. That was what I was looking for. He was positively magnificent when he smiled. He looked over at me, smiled even bigger, and mouthed "Thank you." My whole body tingled and I blushed. I quickly smiled and nodded back to him before turning around. One smile and my entire body was on fire. *How does he do that to me?* And the crazy part was that it wasn't just him. Whenever Bryce showed his dimples, I could barely breathe. When Harrison winked at me, I felt like it was just for me, our special thing, and I melted. Carter was so perceptive and made me feel like he was always protecting me. His shy, sexy glances at me made me want to jump him. And then there was Mason; his ice-blue eyes seemed to see right through me into my soul. I felt like he knew how badly I wanted him. How could five completely different guys turn me on so much? Granted they were all hot as hell, but didn't normal people just appreciate an attractive guy and only become attracted to the one they really wanted to be with? I was equally attracted to each of them and that felt wrong in my head, but right in my heart and everywhere else. It didn't matter, though. One day, they would each find their bonded and I wouldn't be in their lives any longer. Even if they and their bonded were okay with it, I couldn't stand it. I couldn't imagine anyone kissing or touching any of my guys. A feeling of heat and rage consumed me and I felt like I was about to explode. *Calm down, Bre. No one is here to take the guys away from you. We are all here together enjoying a movie. Everything is alright. Breathe.*

I finally calmed myself down enough to enjoy the movie. I wasn't sure where that had come from; I had never been a jealous person. Although, I had never had anyone to be jealous about. Oh, well, thoughts for another night.

The movie was as great as I remembered. After the movie was over, Carter said, "Great choice, Bre!"

"Thanks, I love that movie. Thor is the hottest, sexiest superhero ever! I would have his babies," I said jokingly. All of a sudden, the room became deathly quiet and everyone had an "I want to kill someone" look on their faces.

"My favorite part was when Hulk sucker-punched him in the face!" Chase all but growled. There was a chorus of "me, too" from everyone. Whoa, it got serious in here quickly and I had no idea why.

"I think everyone is tired, so let's head to bed," Harrison said. "Bre, come with me and I'll get you something to wear to sleep in until we can get your clothes from the dorm." I followed him out of the theatre room and up the stairs to his room. He sifted through his closet and handed me a black Metallica t-shirt.

Shyly, I said, "Thanks." I went into the bathroom to change, still trying to figure out what changed the mood after the movie. Everyone seemed to be having fun while watching it. After changing into the t-shirt that was long enough to cover my knees, I walked back into the bedroom.

"I figured it would be huge on you. It looks good, though," Harrison said. "Sorry for the mood change in there. Everyone is really tired from today. Don't think anything about it, okay?"

"I guess, I just don't understand what happened," I said.

"Don't worry about it, it wasn't you. It's just something us guys need to work out," Harrison replied.

That confused me even more, but I was too tired to worry about it right now. "Harrison, would you please stay with me for a little while? I have trouble getting to sleep sometimes and I would feel more comfortable if you were here."

Harrison rubbed the back of his neck and said, "Uh, yeah, sure. I guess." I crawled into bed and watched him. He looked very uncomfortable.

“Harry, don’t worry. I don’t bite...at first,” I said teasingly. He looked even more uncomfortable after hearing that and he grabbed the chair from the corner, dragging it toward the bed. “No, come lay with me. I feel tiny in this huge bed.” He stopped dragging the chair and walked around to the other side of the bed. He removed his shoes and slid under the covers with all of his clothes on. I turned on my side to face him and he did the same. I looked into his eyes and relaxed; he made me feel safe. “Thank you for giving up your bed for me twice now. You’re right, it is the most comfortable bed I have ever been in. It feels like I am sleeping on a cloud.”

He looked at me thoughtfully and said, “You are more than welcome. I would do anything for you.” He slowly reached up and moved some of my hair behind my ear while staring into my eyes. I couldn’t breathe, wondering if he was going to kiss me. He took a deep breath and exhaled loudly, “Bre, get some sleep. We have another big day tomorrow.” I felt disappointed, but a little relieved. If I got involved with one of them and their bonded showed up, I would be devastated. I needed to keep my friendships with them platonic. However, I needed to figure out how in the hell to do that when I was undeniably attracted to all of them. I took one of his hands and held it with my own under my head and closed my eyes. I was so relaxed with him there that I drifted off in no time.

Chapter 11

We developed a routine over the few weeks following the savra attack. I trained with my gifts and in martial arts every day. They believed that I needed to be able to protect myself with or without my gifts. They also taught me about the different types of demons and there were a lot of them. Most we could recognize on sight since they didn't look human, but some of them looked exactly like humans. Those were usually the smarter and more devious ones. I was still unsure how to tell if they were a demon or a human. Bryce said he could sense them, but none of the others could and that terrified me. In the midst of all that, I still kept up with my classes.

I had also been rotating sleeping in the guys' beds. Each night, whoever's room I was sleeping in would lay with me until I fell asleep. Tonight, I was in Bryce's room. I loved having one-on-one time with them each night. Bryce's walls were a light blue-gray color and he had a black four-poster bed with a white comforter. All of the color came from what I hoped were replicas of Monet's paintings and a blood red comfy chair. There was also a desk with a couple of computers and several monitors.

Bryce rolled over in the bed to look at me. "What are you thinking about so hard?" he asked.

"Nothing special, just how different each of you guys are. Each of you is so different from the others, but you get along so well."

"We have known each other since childhood. I don't remember a time that they weren't in my life. We have always been inseparable. We went to school together, we trained for the Stratos Team together, and now we live together. They are as close as brothers to me."

"I envy that. I am an only child and since I'm strange, I didn't have a lot of friends. Callie was really my only friend growing

up.”

“I’m sorry. But now you have us! We will be your family.” He looked into my eyes with such tenderness when he said it. These guys had taken me in, taught me, and protected me. I felt like such a burden to them sometimes, I wished there was something I could do for them. “Why the long face? I thought you liked being with us.”

I rolled to my back and huffed out a frustrated breath. “I do, I just feel like all I am is a hardship for you guys. You have to train me so I don’t get killed or kidnapped, you have to follow me to all my classes, again so I don’t get killed or kidnapped. Each of you gives up your bed so I have somewhere to sleep; I just feel like such a burden to you.”

Bryce lightly touched my chin to make me face him, “You are not a burden at all. If anything, you have brought us closer together. We don’t want anything to happen to you. All of us care about you. You have brought humor, fun, and a sense of wonder back to us. We take for granted our gifts and use them to defeat the demons, but you remind us how special our gifts are. You show us what a great privilege it is to have these amazing gifts. You even make Chase bearable. No one has been able to do that for ten years. You are the best thing that has ever happened to us.”

I was shocked by his words. He made me feel special and like I was actually contributing to the group. “Bryce, you make me feel special. Thank you.”

“You are special. You’re our girl.”

I blushed at his words. He might have thought what they do for me was no big deal, but for me, it meant the world. I really wanted to find a way to give back to them. We needed a family day and I knew exactly what we should do! Bryce held my hand, rubbing circles with his thumb, and I drifted off knowing what I needed to do.

The next morning, I woke up alone, as usual. The guys never stayed all night with me; they were always gone when I get up the next day. But that works out in my favor this time, because I had a little covert mission I needed to complete. I jumped

onto Bryce's computer and pulled up the perfect website. After I ordered everything, I skipped downstairs to see what fabulousness Harrison had cooked up.

When I reached the kitchen, there were no wonderful smells like I was used to. I looked at Bryce in question.

"Harrison and Chase had to leave last night on a mission, but they should be back in a couple of days," Bryce answered my silent question. "We have cereal if you want, or I could try to make you something."

"No, thanks. Cereal is fine. What are you up to today?"

"I get to go to class with you today. It's Wednesday, so that's Bio and Algebra?"

"Yep," I answered just as Mason and Carter walked in.

"Morning guys."

"Hey, Bre," Carter said and then looked at Bryce. "Harrison on a mission?"

"Yes, he and Chase left around midnight last night. They should be back by Friday, though. It's a close one," Bryce answered.

"Soooo, do you guys have any plans for Saturday?" I inquired.

"None that I can think of," Bryce said.

"Nope, nothing," Mason answered.

"Me, either. Totally free," Carter said.

"Well, keep Saturday open. I have plans for us," I said.

"What are you up to?" Bryce asked through narrowed eyes. "I assume it has something to do with you being on my computer this morning."

"Oops. Yeah, that was me. I just needed to order a couple of things and used your computer. I hope that's okay." I smiled sweetly at him.

"Of course it is, I just wanted to mess with you," Bryce replied. "So what did you order?"

“It’s a surprise, so don’t look at your history. I want to have a family fun day and it would ruin my surprise you knew ahead of time.”

“Okay, I won’t look.”

We all finished our breakfast and Bryce and I headed to my class. I wondered if the other students thought it was weird that I had different guys with me each day sitting in on my classes. The large lecture classes weren’t a problem since there were at least a hundred people, but they must notice in the smaller classes like biology. *Oh, well. I’ve never cared what others thought of me before, so why start now?*

Thursday and Friday went by way too slowly for me. I was excited about the family day on Saturday, but the days always moved slower when any of the guys were out on missions. I worried the entire time they were gone. I was sitting outside on the patio alone and reached for my phone. I probably shouldn’t bother them, but I needed to know they were okay. I texted Harrison and Chase separately: *Everything okay? Will you be back tonight? I have something planned for tomorrow with the family.*

They both replied immediately.

Chase: *Yes, we will definitely be back this evening. What do you have planned? It’s not a romance movie marathon, is it?*

Harrison: *Yep, we’ll be back on Friday. Please tell me you aren’t cooking for us. ;-)*

I replied to Chase first: *How did you know? You spoiled the surprise. Please don’t tell the others, I don’t want to ruin it for them.*

Then, I replied to Harrison: *How did you know? You spoiled the surprise. Please don’t tell the others, I don’t want to ruin it for them.*

Ha, served them right. Secretly, I loved that they felt comfortable enough to pick on me like they did each other. It made me feel like I was really a part of their family. Plus, it allowed me to mess with them right back.

Chase replied: *Awe, come on Bre, I'm out here fighting for your freedom, and you want me to come home to girly cry movies?*

Harrison also replied: *Well, at least let me help. I saw that burnt grilled cheese you tried to hide the other day. How do you burn grilled cheese?*

I again replied to Chase first: *But it feels good to have a good cry once in a while. You will thank me for it after, I promise. Now get back to work!*

I then replied to Harrison: *The grilled cheese was fine after scraping off some of the burnt part, thank you very much. I am cooking and you will like it. Now get back to work!*

Chase: *You better be glad you are cute!*

Harrison: *Yes ma'am.*

I laid my phone down and thought about how happy I was. I felt like the luckiest girl in the world. Now, if I could just stay alive and not get kidnapped, things would be great!

□□□

I woke up early Saturday morning and gathered all of my deliveries. Amazon was the best – two-day delivery and I was in business. Harrison and Chase made it home safely last night and went straight to their rooms to crash. I stayed in Mason's room while he slept on the couch. I felt bad for kicking them out of their rooms, but every time I tried to sleep on the couch, they just picked me up and carried me to one of their rooms. I had given up after the fifth time.

I unpacked everything and laid it out in the dining room. We never used this room, so I figured they wouldn't walk in while I set up. I was so excited I couldn't stand it. I hoped they loved it as much as I thought they would. Once everything was laid

out, I headed to the kitchen and found Harrison frying my favorite – bacon! I walked over to him and hugged him from behind. I had gotten into the habit of it since the first time Bryce and Carter went on a mission. I worried the entire time they were gone and couldn't hold back when they walked back in after being gone for three days. I knew I surprised them, but I just felt so relieved when they came in that I had to touch them to make sure they were real.

"I'm fine, little one. No need to worry," Harrison said as I squeezed him tight.

"I know, but I still worry. I can't help it." Harrison smiled and started to fill a plate for me. I took it and joined Bryce and Mason at the table.

After a few minutes, Chase walked in and I dropped my fork, walked up to him, and hugged him. He was stiff for just a second and then hugged me back. "I missed you," I whispered. He squeezed me a little harder and released me. I returned to my place at the table.

"So what horror do you have planned for us today? Harrison seems to think you are cooking for us, but Chase thought we were watching a romance movie marathon. I think you are messing with both of them. At least, I hope so!" Bryce said.

"As soon as Carter gets in here, I will tell you. And you will love it!" I replied.

We had just finished breakfast when Carter came in from outside. "Everything okay?" I asked.

"Yes. Chip just wanted to talk and talk and talk. I had to bribe him with treats so I could come in. He kept asking about you, Bre. You should go see him soon," Carter replied.

"I will!"

"Okay, Bre, tell us what you have planned for today. Chase is about to drive me crazy trying to guess and praying what you told him is not true," Harrison said.

I was so excited and really hoped they would love it as much as I did. "Okay, come with me into the dining room." We all got up and made our way there. I waited until they were all in

the room and could see the table. I lifted the tablecloth I had covering everything and yelled, "Paintball Tournament!" I looked around at the guys and saw each of their eyes light up with excitement.

"Paintball? Hell, yeah! We haven't done this in years! Harrison, I am going to cover you head to toe in pink paint!" Chase said, laughing.

"Bring it!" Harrison said.

"Bre, this is amazing!" Carter said.

"Hell, yes!" Mason said.

"You bought all of these?" Bryce asked.

"Yes, I did, and with my own money. Since I eat here, I haven't spent any money in weeks, so I splurged a little. Do you like it?" I asked.

"Bre, this is great!" Bryce said while picking me up and spinning me around. "Thank you."

I blushed from his gratitude and smiled. "I'm heading up to put on my Lara Croft attire." I went upstairs and put on my green military-looking pants and a black tank. My hair went up into a ponytail and I was done.

When I got downstairs, the guys were suiting up. They looked like real military. Each of them had on black cargo pants and a black t-shirt that fit them like a glove. I had to stop and hold myself up in the doorway – they were magnificent. If I was a demon, I would run the other way when I saw them coming. *Holy shit, they are hot. Maybe I will let them catch me and make me their prisoner. Bet I would like their kind of torture. Get it together, Bre. These are your friends.* I wiped the drool off my chin and tried my best to suit up without getting distracted. It was really hard.

"Okay, boys. First round, no gifts. Second round, anything goes. Sound good? Bryce, Harrison, want to pick teams?" I asked.

I ended up on Bryce's team along with Chase, and we strategized before getting to the woods in the back. "Okay,

Bre. Chase and I will cause distractions and lead them to us and you sniper them. Climb up into a tree with thick foliage and pick them off one at a time,” Bryce said.

“Got it!” I replied.

We ventured into the woods and with a little help from Chase, I climbed a tree and waited for the others to walk by. I couldn’t help but smile thinking about how excited and happy they seemed when they saw the paintball guns. I was so lost in thought that I almost missed Carter walking directly under me, looking for someone to shoot. I aimed and hit him in the center of his chest. “Gotcha!”

He looked up to where I was perched in the tree and huffed. “Dang it, Bre. You are so tiny that no one can see you up there.”

“I think that’s the point, Carter. You are out until the next round” I said, laughing. Carter walked back to the lawn to await the next round and I saw Harrison come around a tree slowly, using it as cover.

“I know you are here somewhere, Bre. I heard you laughing. Guess you got Carter, huh? I won’t be as easy.” He seemed to be looking around trees and bushes for me, so I could tell he had no idea that I was *in* a tree. I waited for him to expose himself and shot.

“What was that, Harrison? Seemed pretty easy to me!” I laughed at him with blue splattered paint on the front of his shirt.

“Good grief! How did you even get up there? I guess I’m out,” Harrison said, sounding defeated.

In the distance, I heard Chase and Bryce. “Damn it, Mason. It should be considered cheating for you to even have a gun,” Chase said.

Since I no longer had Bryce and Chase to bring Mason to me, I climbed out of the tree and went looking for him. I was not as stealthy as they were and was making all kinds of noise. Suddenly, Mason came at me from behind and wrapped his arm, the one not holding the gun, around my stomach.

“Gotcha,” he said softly in my ear. Electricity shot through my body from my ear down to my toes. Was it wrong that I didn’t mind him finding me? I leaned back against him a little and sighed. “Are you okay?” he asked.

I would have loved to stay like that forever, but my competitive side wouldn’t let me. “Actually, I think I sprained my ankle when I jumped down from the tree.” I stepped away from him a little and pretended to limp. “Can you look at it? I think it might be swelling.” I looked at him with a pitiful, puppy dog look and he fell for it.

He placed his gun on the ground and knelt down next to me. “Sure, did it twist when you landed?”

As soon as he knelt down, I shot him in the arm. “Nope, not at all! You’re out! I win!” I yelled.

“You cheated!” Mason said. The rest of the guys walked up to us, laughing.

“Technically, she didn’t. She didn’t use any Elemental gifts, just her female ones,” Bryce said.

Mason laughed and said, “Well, I fell for it hook, line and sinker.”

“Next round, anything goes, gifts, whatever,” I said. “Same teams?”

“Yep,” Chase and Bryce said, beaming over the win.

We all separated into our teams and got ready to start. “So what’s the plan this time, Bryce?” I asked.

“Well, as you can tell, Mason is the stealthiest and the best shot, so I think we need to take him out first this time. We should stay together and use earth for cover and air for distraction. Again, we will be your cover and you can shoot them, but be quick, because they don’t want to lose again,” Bryce said.

“Okay, let’s do this,” Chase said.

We built up the leaves in the trees in our area for better cover, and Chase planned to confuse them with movement in a bush away from us. We heard someone slowly walking our way, so

Chase moved the air around the bush. They seemed to be heading toward it, but then out of nowhere, Mason hit Chase and Bryce with a water bubble, knocking them down, and aimed his gun at me. I heard paintballs hurt, so I lifted my hands to cover my head before he shot me. The ball smacked an invisible barrier around me and splattered. I looked to Mason in astonishment. He looked as surprised as I was and lowered his gun. Not one to ignore an opportunity, I lifted my gun and shot him center-chest. Chase and Bryce laughed and then took cover as Harrison came out from behind the bush and shot at them. Carter then came from behind and shot all three of us in quick succession. "We win!" Carter yelled.

Tired and covered in paint, we all strode back to the house to clean up. "That was cool what you did with the protective bubble. Did you use air to stop it?" Mason asked.

"I have no idea, I was afraid that the paintball was going to hurt, so I lifted my arms to shield my face and it just happened. You'll see that things just happen to me a lot," I replied.

"We'll get you trained so that won't happen again unless you do it on purpose. Don't worry, I have a feeling you will be a badass once we are done with you," Mason said.

I could handle being a badass for once.

Chapter 12

After a particularly hard martial arts training session with Harrison the next day, I decided to take a walk near the woods. I wanted to see if Chip or Rocco were around. I hadn't seen them in a few days and missed talking with them. I had even remembered to bring some treats for them. As I got closer to the edge of the woods, I relaxed and opened my senses to the creatures in the area. I didn't feel Chip or Rocco, but I felt a very powerful animal. I started to panic a little, but willed myself to relax. I saw Mea slowly coming out of the underbrush, looking as beautiful and deadly as before. *"Hi, Mea! It is great to see you,"* I thought to her.

"Breanna, it is wonderful to see you, too. How have things been going?" she asked as she proceeded closer to me. I leaned down and felt her coarse, black coat. She was stunning and I was in complete awe of her.

"Good. The guys have been working with me on my gifts and teaching me to defend myself using powers and martial arts. Apparently, I am a magnet for people trying to either kill me or kidnap me," I replied.

"You are very special and other Elementals will try to steal your power, use you for your power, or try to kill you, because you are seen as a threat. You will need every bit of strength you have, along with the support of your men, to get through what is coming. I will do everything I can to help you, starting with our bonding. We will need to bond to not only become connected, but also to allow you to use my strengths." Mea said.

"What is coming?" I asked warily.

"I do not know specifically what threats there are, but I do know it will be the hardest thing you will ever do. You must have faith in your men and especially in yourself," Mea stated. *"Place your hand on my head and think of only me and our*

connection. Feel what I am feeling, immerse yourself in our connection.” I tried to block out everything else and concentrate on Mea and our connection. She felt so wise and powerful, quick and stealthy, strong and agile. I could feel her protectiveness of me and her joy at being selected to bond with me. I felt her strength of mind and body. Slowly, I started to feel different. I heard sounds all around me that hadn’t been there before. I could hear the guys talking inside the house, which was crazy since it was so far away. I looked to the house and could see inside where Carter and Mason were talking. I could see Mason’s mouth moving. I looked to the sky and saw a hawk flying overhead. I could make out his individual feathers. I felt a change in my hands and saw that they were now powerful claws. I lifted my hand from Mea and looked at my new paw; it had razor-sharp claws. *“How do you feel?”*

“I feel powerful and I can hear and see everything,” I said.

“We are now bonded. You will be able to use my strengths for yourself. You will be able to see and hear far more than before, and you will have immeasurable strength and agility. Panthers are very stealthy and now so are you. You will be able to sneak up on your enemies and now you have powerful claws that can help you defend yourself. We are also connected mentally; if you need me, all you have to do is access our connection and call for me. I will always come if I am able,” she said. I crouched down and hugged her around the neck. If someone would have told me a month ago that I would be hugging a lethal panther, I would have thought they were crazier than me!

“Thank you, Mea. I appreciate everything. I am very excited to see what I can do,” I said.

“You are very welcome, Bre. I will go now, but I will be back to check on you. Connect with me if you need me. Goodbye, Princess,” she said as she walked back into the woods.

Princess? What a sweet nickname! I ran back to the house to tell the guys about what had happened, but as I walked in, I could feel something was different. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but whatever it was, it wasn’t good. I was about the enter

the family room where I heard the guys talking and had extended my claws for them to see, but instead saw a woman hugging Bryce. Her back was to me and I couldn't see her face, but I could see that she was at least six feet tall with long, black hair and legs that stretched for miles. Fury enveloped my entire body. *Who is this woman touching my man?* I started shaking with rage and could see a white light starting to form between my hands. It was the same white light I had created against lizard man, just in a ball form like Harrison's balls of fire. Suddenly, Chase grabbed me around the waist and hauled me into the library. He shut the door and whispered to me.

"Calm down, Bre. It's not what you think. Calm down, she's just an old friend from primary school," Chase said while still restraining me. I relaxed a little and the white ball disappeared, but I was still enraged. *What is wrong with me? I am not even dating Bryce, but I can't stop the feelings of possession I have over him. How dare she hug him!* I started to get angry again and my hands started to glow white. Then, bam! Chase kissed me, hard.

He had my face in both of his hands and was kissing me. After the shock wore off, I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him back. His lips felt so soft, but hard at the same time. My entire body felt limp and I struggled to stand on my own. He slowly pulled away and looked at me while still holding my face in his hands. He looked unsure, so I smiled at him and said, "Well, that's one way to get my mind off of it!"

Chase smiled and released me, "I thought you might like a distraction." *Mmmm, he can distract me any time. Holy shit! Chase just kissed me. Did he only do it to distract me or did he really want to? It felt real, at least for me.*

"Um, yeah, that works," I mumbled. I still couldn't think straight and if I didn't sit down soon, I thought I might pass out. I walked over to a chair and sat down, waiting for an explanation. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Alexis Boginskaya. She is originally from Romania, but moved to the States when she was really young and attended school with us. Elemental children attend an all-

Elemental school until college. We have known her since kindergarten,” he explained.

“Why is she here?” I asked. I tried not to sound angry, but I doubted I was pulling it off.

“She is in the area looking at the college. She is thinking of attending next semester and wanted to see what we thought about it.”

“How long will she be here?” I asked.

“Um, well, she said something about hanging out for a couple of weeks to check out the college and catch up with us. She asked if she could stay with us,” he said the last part so quickly that I almost missed it.

“She is staying here?”

“Yes, we really didn’t have a choice. If another Elemental asks for your help, it is disrespectful to deny them,” Chase said.

I was freaking out. She couldn’t find out about me, so I guessed I had to stay at the dorm again. After the first couple weeks of me staying over and displacing the guys from their rooms, they had ordered a bedroom suite for me and put it in one of the empty bedrooms. I had been staying in there for the last few days. I loved my room; they let me pick out everything. I chose a medium-colored wood king sleigh bed with a navy blue and white floral comforter, and we painted the walls a light blue. I had a matching dresser and a navy blue chaise that I loved to read in. There was also a desk with a white fabric chair for studying. I was looking for accessories earlier, but hadn’t quite decided what I wanted. It was starting to feel like my room. Now I would have to go back to the dorm and sleep in that crappy, tiny, hard bed alone. I would probably never sleep again. Ever since I fell asleep in Harrison’s room with him lying next to me, each of the guys had done the same every night. I could fall asleep so much easier when they were there. They never stayed the entire night, but knowing they were there when I drifted off made me feel safe and secure. It was also when I could talk to them privately and get to know them better. It was our special time.

I started to feel anxious and began wringing my hands. Chase took my hands and started rubbing circles with his thumbs.

“Don’t worry, we will get this figured out. We told her Carter had a human girlfriend that lived with us and went to the same school. That way, you can still stay here, but you will have to stay in Carter’s room each night. She will have to stay in your room,” Chase said.

“What?! I don’t want her in my room!” I yelled.

“Wow, possessive much?” Chase said, laughing. “It’ll be fine. There is really nowhere else she can stay unless you want her bunking with one of us.”

“Oh, hell no!”

“That’s what I thought. So you didn’t like her hugging Bryce, huh?”

“No, I did not,” I replied.

“Seems a bit over the top to try to kill her before you even meet her, though. What was up with that?”

I pressed my forehead into my hands, “I don’t know, I just snapped. I saw her hugging him and my entire body became enraged. I actually might have killed her if you hadn’t dragged me away. I honestly don’t know where that anger came from, but it hit me like a ton of bricks. What is wrong with me, Chase? Bryce and I are just friends. I shouldn’t act like this.”

“We have been talking and we think we might know what’s going on, but we need to talk to you about it as a group. Once Alexis leaves, we will have a family meeting and figure all of this out. For now, don’t worry about it, but try not to kill our guest.”

“I can’t promise anything,” I said. “By the way, the reason I was coming to see you guys is because I saw Mea today. She and I bonded.” I looked at my hands and watched them change to claws. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“Very cool! Your eyes have changed, too. They are glowing white again.”

Since I was enhanced with Mea's strengths, I could hear the conversation in the family room. They were talking about old times and how Bryce and "Alex" had been boyfriend and girlfriend in third grade. My hackles started to rise again and I breathed in and out slowly to calm myself. I willed myself back to normal and could no longer hear what they are saying. "Chase, I'm not sure I can do this. I could hear them talking and started getting angry again. We need to figure this out quickly, because I might hurt her."

"We don't want her to know anything about you. She needs to believe you are human. Don't show her any of your gifts and definitely don't try to kill her with your ball of power or your claws. That would definitely give you away as not human. We will have to stop training you on your gifts while she is here, but we can continue with martial arts. Girls take that all the time for self-defense. Okay, we need to get in there so you can meet her, are you calm?"

"As much as I can be. Let's get this over with. I will just try to stay away from her as much as possible."

Chase and I walked into the family room and I saw Alexis sitting next to Bryce, patting his leg as she told him a story about her younger brother. *Ugh, Amazon Bitch*, yes I had already nicknamed her, *better get her claws off of Bryce or she will see mine and I promise mine are sharper*. Everyone looked up as we walked in and I sat next to Carter.

Carter introduced us, "Alexis, this is my girlfriend Breanna. Bre, this is Alexis, our childhood friend. Alexis is in town to check out the university." I stood and reached out my hand to shake hers and she did the same. Too bad I couldn't whip out my claws – now *that* would be the perfect handshake for this intruder. She was beautiful and exotic-looking, the exact opposite of plain ol' me. She had big, expressive brown eyes and a huge rack. Ugh, I hated her already. I sat back down next to Carter and felt everyone looking at me.

Bryce broke the silence and asked if everyone wanted to order a pizza. After we decided what to get on the pies, Bryce asked if I would go with him into the kitchen and help him order. It seemed like a silly request, but I followed him into the kitchen.

He pulled me to the corner furthest from the family room and whispered, "I'm sorry, Bre. I had no idea she was coming. We will get her out of here as soon as possible. Did Chase explain that you are Carter's human girlfriend?"

"Yes, he did. Bryce, you are going to think I am crazy, but I'm not sure I can be around her. I know you saw me create that ball of power and almost try to kill her. Something is not right with me. I can't stand her touching you. I asked Chase what was wrong with me and he said you guys have an idea, but wanted to discuss it as a family after she leaves. I'm not sure I can make it that long. Maybe I just need to focus on my training and stay away from her."

"We do think we know what is going on, but Chase is right. It needs to be a family discussion. Hang in there and we will get her out of here as soon as possible." He stepped closer to me and touched my hand. Tingles started to travel from my fingers up my arm. He intertwined our fingers and looked into my eyes. I was lost. We were staring at each other, leaning closer and closer, when a throat cleared.

"Sorry, I was looking for the bathroom," Amazon Bitch said. Bryce immediately dropped my hand and walked over to lead her to the hall bath. That bitch was going to be a problem.

After dinner, I needed to get away from her. I swore she was trying to get a rise out of me, because she kept touching each of the guys, well, except Carter. I saw her playfully hit Mason on the arm when he said something funny and she grabbed Harrison's hand when he was talking about how hard his sister's labor was with his nephew. I guess if I wasn't in the situation I was in, it would have been normal contact, but I'm not normal. After several minutes of the torture, I left to work out. We have a workout room in the basement of the house and it was stocked with everything you could think of. My favorite was the punching bag; it helped me relieve stress and at that moment, I was stressed. I wrapped my hands like Chase taught me and started slow. I pictured Amazon Bitch's face and I started to hit harder and faster. Chase and I had been working on adding my air gift to my punches to give them more power, but it hurt my hand when I did. However, now I have claws

and they were probably tougher than my hands. I tapped into my connection with Mea's powers and my hands turned into paws. I started punching harder and harder with the panther strength and then I added my air gift. I thought about Amazon Bitch and how she kept touching my guys and I became even angrier. I hit the bag with all of my panther power and my air gift, and it flew through the air, landing in a heap against the far wall.

"Wow, how did you do that?" Carter asked. I must have really been concentrating if I didn't even hear him come in.

I turned to him, still connected to my panther power, and lifted my claws into the air. "I bonded with Mea today and then added a bit of air to the punch. Well, maybe a lot."

Carter walked over to me and hugged me. "Bre, that is great! Let me see your paws. Nice! You will be really powerful with these along with your other panther traits." He looked me in the eyes and said, "Your eyes are glowing white. It's beautiful." He stared at me for a little longer and walked over to the bag. "The bag looks fine, but the ceiling will have to be repaired. You ripped the chain right out of the ceiling and took some of the ceiling with it. I have never seen someone do that. Chase is going to be jealous. It's getting late, do you want to come up?"

"Yeah, I guess I should now that I don't have a bag to punch," I said, smiling. "Can I take a shower in your bathroom since I am staying with you?"

"Of course."

We walked upstairs and into his room. He closed the door behind us and walked over to the closet. "Chase brought all of your things in here. I hope you don't mind staying with me."

"No, I don't mind at all. I'm actually excited about it," I said, still smiling. Carter smiled at me and showed me where my clothes were. I grabbed a tank top, sleep shorts, and underwear. "I'll just take a quick shower."

After the shower, I went back into Carter's room and found him making a pallet on the floor next to the bed. "Why are you

doing that?" I asked.

"It's where I'm sleeping," he replied.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous. We are sleeping in the bed together. You are my boyfriend after all," I said cheekily.

Carter blushed and puts the blankets away. "Are you sure about this, Bre? You don't have to. Alexis won't know either way."

"Of course I'm sure. You have already laid with me in my room, so what's the difference?" We got into the bed and turned to face each other like we normally did when he was in my room. I looked at his gold eyes and thought about what a great person he was. He was the most thoughtful of the five and he had an uncanny knack for knowing exactly what I was feeling.

"Don't worry about Alexis. The guys want her out of here as soon as possible." Case in point, he knew I was worried about her and he was trying to make me feel better about it. I just wanted to hug him for always worrying about me and my feelings, so I did. I slid forward and laid my head on the bicep of the arm under his head and put my arm around him. He felt so good. Just like the others, he made me feel safe and cared about. He snuggled closer to me and wrapped his other arm around me. I sighed in contentment. What a perfect end to a crazy day. *A girl could get used to this*, I thought as I drifted off.

Chapter 13

I woke up still surrounded by Carter's arms and it was perfect. I didn't understand why the guys never stayed all night with me. They laid in the bed to help me get to sleep, but always left at some point. A girl could get a complex about something like that. I looked up to see him looking at me and smiled.

"Good morning, handsome."

"Good morning, beautiful." Carter always knew what to say.

"Any plans today, maybe knocking out some walls instead of ceilings?"

"Ha ha, very funny. I figured I would train some with Harrison and maybe get out of the house to go see a movie. Wonder Woman is out and I am dying to see it," I said.

"Mind if I tag along to the movie?"

"Of course not. I would love if you went with me." We got up, even though it was really difficult, and got ready for the day. We headed down to the kitchen and inhaled the best smell in the world – bacon. Harrison had been cooking breakfast every morning for all of us. The smell almost made me forget about the intruder – almost, but not quite. She was sitting in "my" chair and twirling her hair at Chase. It made me feel a little better that he was barely paying her any attention. Good grief, was she going to flirt with all of them? Then a horrible thought came to mind. What if she was supposed to bond with one of them or two of them? A shiver ran through my entire body and I felt like I might throw up. I poured a glass of water to keep my hands busy and sat beside Carter.

"Good morning, Breanna," Amazon Bitch said.

"Good morning," I mumbled. I didn't even look at her when I spoke.

"Looks like someone is not a morning person," she said. I didn't even acknowledge her comment. I just kept drinking my

water with my head down. I was afraid that if I looked up at her, I would punch her in her pretty face.

“Here you go, Bre,” Harrison said while bringing me a plate of breakfast goodness.

“Thanks, Harry.”

“Harry? I thought you hated when people called you that. The last time I remember someone doing it, you didn’t say a word and just punched them in the face,” the intruder said.

“Well, Bre is special and she can call me whatever she wants,” Harrison replied while winking at me.

“Hmm. Looks like Carter and Bryce aren’t the only ones that think she is special. You might want to watch out for this one, Carter. Seems you aren’t the only one to catch her eye,” Alexis commented while smirking.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I questioned.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just interesting that you are Carter’s girlfriend, but were holding hands with Bryce last night and calling Harrison pet names today. Add that to the fact that you live here and it makes a girl wonder.”

“Makes a girl wonder what?” I looked directly at her for the first time today. Amazon Bitch wanted her ass kicked today it seemed.

“Nothing, I’m just messing with you.” She waved a hand in the air, acting like what she said was no big deal. Each of the guys looked at one another with worried looks.

“Bre is my girlfriend, but is close friends with everyone here. Don’t make it out to be something it’s not, Alexis. You are a guest here and will treat her with respect, or you won’t be a guest here any longer,” Carter said to her through narrowed eyes and a clenched jaw.

“Oh, Carter, I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just joking with her like us girls do, right, Breanna?” Alexis said.

“Whatever.” *Amazon Bitch. I really wish I could punch her like I did with the bag last night. If we weren’t trying to hide what I am, she would not be standing right now. Breathe, Bre.*

“Well, what are everyone’s plans today?” Bryce said, trying to change the subject.

“I was hoping *Harry* could help me brush up on my self-defense technique a little and then Carter and I are going to see Wonder Woman. It’s about time there’s a girl superhero that is the lead in a movie,” I replied.

“Sure, Bre, I have some time to train today. Wanna get started in about an hour?” Harrison asked.

“Yes, that sounds great,” I said. After finishing up with breakfast, I went upstairs to change into workout clothes. I then made my way outside to where Harrison preferred to train and saw the intruder, also in workout clothes, talking to Harrison. *Oh, shit. She’s going to train with us. How am I going to hide my gifts? I am going to have to act completely like a human...or am I? Then again, this might be fun.*

I walked out smiling and ready to kick some Amazon Bitch ass. Harrison looked at me, smiled, and cocked his head to the side in question. Then he shook his head, realizing why I was so excited. I pretended to not notice and started stretching. She was almost a foot taller than me, but slender. *I can take her.* He started us out separately, doing drills of basic moves. He continued with this for a while and I was starting to get bored. I was ready to hit something, well, someone. Alexis must have been getting bored, too, because she complained, “Harrison, enough with the drills. Let’s see what she’s got.”

“Okay, but you asked for it. Bre is pretty good,” Harrison replied. I smirked at him and tried to contain my excitement. I really needed to concentrate and make sure I wasn’t showing any of my gifts, but a little extra oomph in my punches wouldn’t hurt. He faced us off against each other and told us to begin. She struck first with a punch, followed quickly by a kick. I blocked them both. She was pretty quick, but nowhere near as fast as I was, even without my gifts. I aimed a punch at her right side on her ribs and added a tiny bit of air to it. My aim was dead on and she let out a sharp breath, taking a step back. I could see her eyes narrowing and could tell she was pissed. *Welcome to the club, bitch.*

She stepped toward me again and tried a different technique, but I blocked her again and immediately kicked her legs out from under her. She hit the ground hard, flat on her ass. I stepped back and tried not to laugh, because I didn't even use my gift at all. She hauled herself back up, looking even more pissed. Her face was blood red. "Okay, let's go again and this time I am not holding back," she said. *Bring it on, Amazon Bitch.*

Alexis came at me with everything she had and this time, I leaned out of the way of a punch, but missed her leg sweeping mine out from under me. I landed on *my* ass this time. She didn't give me a second to recover before punching me in the face. Harrison hauls her back from me. "Alex, she gave you a chance to get up when you were down. Give her the same courtesy."

My cheek stung like crazy and I was irate. She wanted to play rough? No problem. "No, it's fine, *Harry*. Now that I understand the rules, we are on more even ground. Let's go!" I wasted no time going after *her* this time. I jabbed her again in the same spot at her ribs adding a little air to it and immediately punched her in the face with my other hand, again adding a little air to it. Her head swung to the side and I saw blood coming from her mouth, but I didn't let up. I roundhouse-kicked her on the other side of her jaw and put a lot of air into it. She hit the ground hard and didn't move for a second. *Did I kill her already? Good grief, it hasn't even been twenty-four hours. I really need to learn better control.*

She started moving a little and groaned. Harrison went over to her and helped her up. She was bleeding heavily from her lip and her cheek was already swelling. *Oooo, that is gonna look great in a few hours! Yes, take that, Amazon Bitch.* She looked at me with an "I want to kill you" look and I reveled in it. I smiled a knowing smile at her and raised one eyebrow. She would know better than to mess with me again. I may be small, but I packed quite a punch – literally!

I walked over to her and said, "Are you okay, Alexis? Sorry if I hit you too hard. I sometimes just really get into it and get a little carried away. Do you need some ice?"

“No, I’m fine, thank you. Harrison, I think I am going to go in and take a shower. Wanna join me?” she asked while looking at me, prodding me for a response. She may not be able to kick my ass, but she could mess with me through my boys.

I tried not to react, but I was fuming. Harrison said, “No, I’m good. Bre really needs to continue to train, so we will be here a while. Go on in and shower, then rest. That cheek looks bad.”

As soon as she was gone, Harrison looked at me and said, “You shouldn’t have done that. She might be able to tell you used a gift. But between you and me, it was kick-ass!” He lifted his hand to high-five me. I slapped his hand and laughed.

“To be honest, Harrison, I barely even used air, except on that last kick. I could have taken her without a gift, but I wanted her to hurt a little. She has been messing with me since she got here and I am done,” I replied.

“I get it and don’t worry, she shouldn’t be able to tell. But I know her and she will be out for your blood now. She will mess with you even more since you bruised her ego by knocking her on her ass, *twice*. Just be prepared and try not to kill her. I saw the ceiling in the work out room. Thinking about her while working out?” he asked.

“Maybe,” I quietly said.

“Why don’t we go for a run around the property to calm down?” he suggested.

“That sounds perfect, let’s go.” Harrison and I jogged part way around the property and stopped to take a break near the woods.

We were resting on a large rock when Harrison asked, “You don’t usually have a temper, so what is it about her that gets you riled up?”

“She won’t stop touching you or insinuating things she would like to do with you. I mean, really, she just asked you to take a shower with her! I don’t like her near you guys. I know it sounds selfish since I am not dating any of you, but she is the devil and I don’t like her here.”

Harrison chuckled and rubbed a thumb down the side of my face. "I wouldn't like anyone touching you, either, so I get it." He looked directly at me when he said this. It reminded me of when we were in his bed and I thought he was going to kiss me. He leaned in a bit and all I could think about were his lips. I stared down at them, willing them closer, and they came. I looked up into Harrison's eyes and it looked like he was asking permission, so I nodded just a bit. He then slowly lowered his lips to mine and softly kissed me. He was so gentle, completely different than when Chase kissed me, but just as exciting. His hand cupped the back of my head and I leaned into him. I could feel his muscular chest against mine. I wrapped my arms around his waist and rubbed my hands up his back. He pressed harder into the kiss and I opened my mouth a little. He immediately dived in with his tongue and tasted my mouth. I raked my nails down his back and he moaned. Our tongues played with each other until liquid fire was running through my body. I tried to pull him closer, but we were already chest-to-chest and I was all but sitting in his lap. Harrison broke the kiss, breathing heavily, and looked at me. My lips felt swollen, but wonderful. "That was even better than I expected. It was the hottest kiss I have ever had."

I smiled up at him, "I have to agree with you." I turned, leaned my back onto his chest, and sighed. He wrapped his arms around me and I was in heaven. "I wish we could stay out here forever. I feel more relaxed than I have in a while. Thanks for getting me away from her for a bit."

"I told you I would do anything for you and I meant it."

Chapter 14

Harrison and I made our way back up to the house and heard a commotion. Something wasn't right. We ran into the house and smelled smoke. Is the house on fire? We walked into the kitchen to see Chase's hands on fire as well as one of the cabinets. Harrison quickly suppressed the fire. I ran to Chase to see what damage was done to his hands and saw nothing. They were completely normal, not blistering and peeling like I thought they would be. I looked up at him. "What happened and why aren't you burned?"

"I have no idea. I was just reaching for the cabinet to get a glass and my hands exploded in flames. I freaked out at first and tried to use air to put it out, but all that did was make it worse. Then I realized I wasn't in pain and tried to relax to make it go out, but it wasn't working and the cabinets were on fire. That was when you guys walked in," Chase explained.

Mason and Carter ran into the room and saw the damage. "What in the world happened?" Mason asked.

"We're not sure, but it looks like Chase has the fire gift," Harrison said.

I looked in horror at Chase and asked, "What type of Elemental is Alexis?" He just looked me and didn't answer.

"Fire," Harrison finally answered.

My stomach dropped and I couldn't breathe. *No, no, no. Not Chase! He has completely ignored her the entire time she has been here. How can they be bonded? Has he been lying to me this whole time? Did the kiss in the library not mean anything? Was he really protecting her that day?* I ran from the room and out the back door. I needed air. I couldn't breathe.

"I'll go after her," Chase said, but Harrison must have stopped him.

“Let her go, you are the last person that she wants to see right now.”

“I’ll go,” I heard Carter say as his footsteps also became noticeable to my panther hearing.

I ran and ran and ran until I found myself back at the rock Harrison and I had just been sitting on. I sat on it and tried to catch my breath. My chest felt so heavy, like a huge weight was on it and I could only take in small breaths. Tears were streaming down my cheeks and I felt like I was about to pass out. Carter ran up to me, pulled me tightly into his chest, and began rubbing my back. “Breathe, Bre. I’ve got you.” He didn’t say anything else. He just held me and let me cry.

Eventually, I was able to breathe and the tears slowed down. Carter released me and wiped the remaining tears from my face. “I’m sorry, Carter, I just didn’t expect that. It caught me by surprise.”

“It’s okay, I understand. You and Chase were getting really close and it hurts to think of him with someone else. That’s one of the hardest things about bonding. Before you know who your bonded is, you can get close with someone else and then get left behind. It happened to me, too.”

“What? When?” I asked.

“Before college, I was really close friends with another Animal Elemental, Julie. We were best friends and I cared deeply for her. I thought she would eventually become my bonded, and she did, too. But she started hanging out with a guy named Ty. He had just moved into the area, and after their first kiss, they knew. She is now bonded with him and they have a little one on the way. That was one of the reasons I left and moved out here with the rest of the guys. I couldn’t stand to see them together. Julie was really sweet about it, but she couldn’t help how she felt about him. They were meant to be and I just needed to deal with it.”

“Oh, Carter, I am so sorry,” I said.

“I’m fine with it now and I can see them together and it doesn’t really bother me anymore. It just took time,” he said.

“I don’t know, I can’t stand her. I can’t imagine her with anyone I care about. This feels like my worst nightmare. I need to get out of here. Are you ready to go see that movie? I need a distraction.”

“Absolutely! Let’s go back to the house and you can take a shower. We can go get lunch and see the movie. I checked and there is one playing at 2:30.”

“That sounds perfect. Thank you, Carter. You always know how to make me feel better. I don’t know what I would do without you.” I leaned forward and hugged him tight. I laid my head on his shoulder and took a deep breath.

We walked back to the house and I intentionally avoided the kitchen and went straight to Carter’s room. I got in the shower and just stood there, and then I started to cry again. I sat on the shower floor and curled up into a ball. With my head between my knees, I grieved what felt like the loss of a part of my heart. Chase was my grumpy guy, my Oscar the Grouchy Elemental. How could he be in love with that viper? How could fate put those two together? She wouldn’t know or probably care that he loves his car almost as much as his family. She wouldn’t understand how he still grieves the loss of his sister from so long ago. She wouldn’t get that he is sometimes ruthless and mean, but it was because he cared so much. He probably felt more than anyone else in the house; he just hid it from everyone, but I could see it. I knew his heart, and it shouldn’t be with her. She didn’t deserve him.

After crying out everything I had, I finished my shower and got dressed. I didn’t care what I looked like and just put my wet hair up in a ponytail. I walked into the bedroom and saw Carter waiting for me. “Feel any better?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Somewhat. Ready to go?”

“Yes.”

We left the room and went down to the garage. Carter walked me over to a black Audi SUV and opened the door for me. I got in and waited for him. As we were pulling out of the garage, I saw Chase standing at the front door looking at me. He looked forlorn and that made me feel a little better. I turned

from him and looked straight out the windshield. *No more tears, Bre. It is what it is and there is nothing you can do about it.*

Carter chose a great little hole-in-the-wall family restaurant; I agreed with him that those were the best. I was still upset and didn't eat much, but tried to get excited about the movie. After lunch, we drove to the movie. It was fantastic! I was able to forget about Chase and Amazon Bitch for a little while and actually enjoy it. Wonder Woman is a badass with a heart of gold, and I hoped I could be half the woman she was. As we started toward the house, Carter asked, "Are you ready to go back? We can take a detour if you want."

"I have to face it sometime, so I might as well get it over with. Thank you, though. And thank you for today. You take care of me all the time. I hate that I always seem to be dumping my problems on you."

"I want you to. I like being here for you," he said.

"I think the reason I always turn to you is that, like I have said before, you get me. You understand me better than I do sometimes. You and I have a connection that started that first day with the animals. No one can truly understand the thrill and exhilaration of connecting with an animal unless they experience it for themselves. You and me, we are the same, and I love that."

Carter didn't say anything for a few minutes and I was afraid I may have said something wrong. We pulled into the garage and he turned the car off. He looked to me, took my hands in his, and said, "Bre, I feel exactly the same way. When I was with Julie, I liked being around her and we were the best of friends, but we didn't connect like you and I do. I feel like we have a deep connection that goes beyond friendship. That first day when you hugged me after learning how to speak to the animals, I thought my heart was going to explode. I have never felt that way about someone. The other four types of Elementals look down on Animal Elementals, but you didn't, you embraced it and understood the beauty and wonder of being able to connect with animals. I love that about you."

“Carter, they just don’t know what they are missing. Being an Animal Elemental is extraordinary. I am so glad I get to share it with you.” I looked into his eyes and saw a longing. I thought he wanted to kiss me. It made me nervous. I kissed Chase and he ended up bonded to someone else, then I kissed Harrison. I know in their world having more than one bonded is not uncommon, but I’m not bonded with any of them, I’m just kissing them. And so far, none of them knew that I’d kissed any of the others.

Carter leaned in closer, staring at my lips, and heat filled my body. I licked my lips in anticipation and he groaned. “Bre, you are killing me here.” He rubbed circles on my hand and it sent tingles up my arm. Just as he was about to touch our lips together, there was a knock on my window. We jumped back from each other and my heart was racing. *What the hell?*

I looked to my window and saw Chase standing there. What did he want? I tried not to be mad at him; it’s not like he can control who he bonds with, but anger is better than hurt. I opened the door and stepped out. “What do you want, Chase?”

“We need to talk – alone.”

“Chase, I need some time to work through this. You’re bonding to someone I can’t stand and it is really hard on me. Please give me the space I need to come to terms with it. I’m not ready to talk to you about your new lover yet.”

Chase ran his hands through his hair, “Bre, I just need to talk, please,” he pleaded.

“Not now! It’s only been a few hours, so back off. I know it is not in your nature to let things linger, but I need space!” I yelled and then stomped off to the house.

I walked in and saw Amazon Bitch, with her cut lip and swollen, now yellowish-brown cheek sitting in the family room flirting with Mason. “Seems like the pot calling the kettle black to me! One not enough for you?” I stomped off to the basement to hit something before I hit someone.

I wrapped my hands before remembering that I killed the punching bag already. “Ugh, this sucks!” Harrison walked in

and without saying a word, grabbed the punching mitts. He stood in front of me and held them up. I connected with my panther power and started wailing on them. Harrison took a step back a few times when I hit the mitt extra hard, but he didn't say anything and continued to hold his hands up. I guess Chase or Carter told him about my new gift. I wanted to be the one to show everyone. I was proud of my connection to Mea and wanted to share it with the guys, but Amazon Bitch was in the way, again. I wasn't sure how much more of her I could take. I was ready for her to just leave with Chase and be over with it. I continued to hit the mitts, taking my frustration out on them when I really wanted to take it out on her. After I finally exhausted myself, I crumbled to the floor.

Harrison took the mitts off and put them away. He came over to me and sat beside me on the floor. "It'll be okay, Bre. Chase didn't choose her, it just happened. What's even crazier is he doesn't even like her. I have never heard of a bond where one doesn't like the other. There is usually a strong attraction and deep connection when you meet your bonded. He said he didn't even kiss her, and he wouldn't lie about that. He is as torn up about it as you are. He made us promise not to say anything to Alexis and just see what happens. He is adamant that he is not bonded to her, but the proof is there in our scorched cabinets. I guess we need to get someone here to fix that and the ceiling in here. Between the two of you, the house might not be standing soon." I chuckled at the truth in his statement.

"Thanks for coming down and helping me out. I really needed the release."

"Anything for you. By the way, cool paws!" He winked at me.

"Well, I guess I can't stay down here forever. What are you fixing for dinner? I am starving since I didn't eat much at lunch."

"I'll fix anything you want. What are you in the mood for?" Harrison said.

"Ohhh, will you fix your fettucine alfredo with blackened chicken? I need cheese!"

“Of course. Come here.” He grabbed my arm and pulled me into his lap. I sat sideways and laid my head on his shoulder. “It’ll be okay, we will work through this.”

After Harrison left to start dinner, I sat on the workout bench and tried to relax. I knew I was going to have to see her soon and I needed to be in the best frame of mind possible. I sat there for a while until I felt up to walking upstairs, but paused when I heard talking. I guess I forgot to disconnect from my panther powers. As I was about to reign in my panther gift, I heard my name. It was Bryce talking to Chase. I stayed behind the basement door and listened, “Chase, what can we do? You obviously have the fire gift now and Alexis is a Fire Elemental. What else could it mean?” Bryce argued.

“I don’t care what anyone thinks, I am not bonded to that woman. I feel nothing for her. There has to be another explanation,” Chase all but yelled.

“You know how bonding works. Once you become intimate in any way, you start the bond and begin to use their gift as well as your own,” Bryce stated.

“But I haven’t been intimate with her. I have barely spoken to her. You know I have always thought she was conniving and selfish.”

“I don’t know what else to think. Have you been kissing or sleeping with Fire Elementals that we don’t know about?” Bryce said jokingly.

“That’s it!” Chase exclaimed. “That has to be it!”

I didn’t want to hear any more about all the others he had been with, so I suppressed my panther senses and walked out the door and up to Carter’s room. My heart hurt. I guess I knew now that the kiss in the library was nothing to him. I thought we had a special connection, but I guess I was just fooling myself. I laid on the bed, threw my arm over my eyes and sighed. There was so much going on right now, Chase was bonding with Amazon Bitch, I kissed Harrison, and I almost kissed Carter. Maybe I should’ve stuck with the platonic idea, then it wouldn’t hurt so much. Chase would be the first to leave me, but who would be next? I didn’t even want to think

about it. Maybe I needed to back away from them and go back to being alone. I was powerful enough now to take care of myself, and I didn't think my heart could take another one of them bonding with someone.

Chapter 15

Carter walked in and saw me lying on the bed. “You okay?”

I didn’t want to burden him anymore, so I sat up and tried to act like there was nothing wrong. I smiled as best I could. “I’m good. What’s up?”

Carter looked at me skeptically. I don’t think he bought my fake smile. “Dinner is almost ready, do you want to come down?”

“Sure, why not?” I said sarcastically. I got up and followed Carter to the kitchen. The table was set and Harrison looked like he was almost finished with dinner. “Can I do anything to help, Harrison?”

“Nope, everything is almost done. Why don’t you sit down and relax?” he replied.

Carter and I were the only ones so far and for that, I was glad. I reclaimed *my* chair and picked at the salad already on the table. The rest of the house came in a little while later and dinner was served. I usually loved Harrison’s cooking and he made what I requested, but I just didn’t have an appetite. Thinking about how Chase had been with other girls and was now bonded to one made my stomach queasy. At least he had the decency to not sit beside her tonight. I looked up, because no one was talking and everyone looked deep in thought, except *her*. She was looking around at everyone and seemed confused. “Why is everyone so quiet tonight? Did someone kick your puppy?” she asked.

No one really acknowledged her comment; they just continued to eat and contemplate. I wondered what everyone was thinking about, how the dynamic of the house would be once Chase was gone, or God forbid, she would move in here. *Oh shit, what if they want to live here? There is no way I will live in this house with her. I honestly think I would kill her and that*

would hurt Chase and that is something I could never do. I was right before. I need to move back to my dorm and separate myself from the guys. It is the only way for my heart to survive.

“Bre!” Mason yelled.

“What?!” I yelled back.

“I have been calling your name for five minutes, are you okay?” Mason asked.

“Oh, sorry, I was just thinking about something. What did you ask me?” I replied.

“I just asked how the movie was, you were so excited about it,” Mason said.

“Oh, it was great! She is such a badass. I want to grow up to be just like her,” I said.

“Good Lord, you guys are pathetic,” Alexis said, even though no one was talking to her. “Sweet little Breanna looks upset and you guys baby her like she is a toddler. For heaven’s sake, she is Carter’s girlfriend, let him take care of her moodiness.”

I slammed my fork down and stood up, “Look, bitch, I kicked your ass once today and I have no problem doing it again. Back the hell off.” I stormed out of the room, as I seemed to be doing a lot lately. I walked to the door to head outside and overheard her innocently ask, “What did I say?”

I got outside to breathe in the fresh air, and noticed it was getting cooler at night. Soon, it would be Thanksgiving and my birthday. I hadn’t been home since I got to college and I needed to see my parents. Maybe being away from the guys for a little while would do me some good and give me some perspective. Bryce must have followed me out, because he came to me, grabbed my hand, and pulled me away from the house and into the shadows.

Once we were out of sight of any windows of the house, he took my other hand and turned us so we were facing each other. “Bre, I know this has been hard on you with Alex here. I plan on speaking to her tonight about leaving in the morning.

She has done nothing but disrupt our lives since she got here. Just give me until tomorrow and I promise she will be gone.”

“You can’t do that, because she will take Chase with her. It is better if I leave so she can be here with Chase and you guys can stay together. I am the odd man out, not her,” I said.

“Just give me one more day and everything will work out, trust me. Do you trust me, Bre?” Bryce asks.

“Yes, of course I trust you, but I am not breaking you guys up. Out of everyone, Chase needs you guys the most. I will not take that away from him just because I can’t get along with his bonded.”

Bryce wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. I stiffened at first, because I needed to be pushing these guys away, not embracing them. But Bryce felt so good, I couldn’t help but relax into his arms. I breathed him in. This may be the last time I got to feel this close to him and I was going to enjoy every second of it. “Just give me one more day, please, Bre.”

“Okay, one more day. I have school tomorrow, so I won’t be here anyway.” We stayed like that for a few minutes more and then he walked me back into the house. I could really go for a movie night, but I didn’t want to be in the same room with her again, so I headed to the library to find a good book. Maybe that would get my mind off of everything. I grabbed one that I thought would be good, climbed up the stairs to Carter’s room, and found him there waiting for me.

“Hey. Sorry I stormed out of dinner tonight. I just can’t take her anymore. She is such a bitch,” I admitted to him.

“Don’t worry about it. I can’t take much more of her either. I don’t remember her being such a bitch before, but I guess people change. It just seems like she is trying to get you worked up. I really don’t know what her problem is. Did you find a book?” he asked.

“Yes. I really wanted a movie night, but I don’t want to be around her, so I thought a book was the next best thing.”

Carter took his shoes off and laid in the bed on top of the comforter. “Come here.” He patted the space beside him. I

took off my shoes and got on the bed. He sat propped up on a couple of pillows against the headboard and spread his legs. He moved me in front of him so my back is to his front and pulled me back against him. “Just relax and read.” I reclined into him and he wrapped his arms around me. I opened the book and started to read. He was much more comfortable than the chaise in my room. The book was interesting, but I started to doze off after a few chapters.

“I’m going to change. I can barely keep my eyes open.” I grabbed my pajamas from the closet, and then changed in the bathroom. When I got out, Carter was already in his pajamas. He slept in just the bottoms and it was sexy as hell, especially when they were hanging low on his hips like they were now. He was not as large as Harrison, but he was cut, with a lean, muscular build. I could see a V shape above his hips before it disappeared into his sleeping pants. I longed to trace that V with my fingers to see if he would flinch.

He caught me looking and smirked. “Like what you see?”

“Mmm hmm,” I replied. Apparently I couldn’t even complete an entire word at the moment.

Carter chuckled, took my hand, and interlaced our fingers. “Come on, let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a better day and things are going to change. After tomorrow, you can do whatever you were thinking about just then.”

My entire face turned red and I looked at him in confusion.

“What do you mean things will be different after tomorrow?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll see. Just get some sleep.” He helped me into bed and we laid facing each other. This was my nightly ritual with the guys and it was my favorite part of the day. I loved being here with Carter, but I missed my private time with the others. Oh, well. I guess I better get used to it, since I was leaving tomorrow and this wouldn’t be happening again.

I sighed and lifted my hand to his face. “You are beautiful, do you know that?”

“Bre, you are the most beautiful person I have ever met, inside and out. This is the best part of my day.”

I traced the side of his face lightly with my fingers. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

He took my hand and intertwined our fingers again. “Get some rest, my sweet. Tomorrow is another day.”

I closed my eyes and tried to have hope like Carter said, but it was hard. I was terrified of losing my guys, and I’d already lost one of them. I drifted off into a restless sleep, still holding Carter’s hand. At least I had one more night with him.



Alexis dialed the number and he answered, “Hello, Alexis.”

“Hello, Sir.”

“What do you have for me?”

“Not much. I haven’t seen her do anything out of the ordinary, except maybe during sparing. The guys are teaching her self-defense and I joined in,” Alexis said.

“I bet you did. You better not have hurt her,” he said.

“I didn’t. Exactly the opposite, she put me on my ass twice. I didn’t see her speak any spells, but I have a hard time believing that someone that little can hit that hard. Maybe she just got lucky.”

“Maybe. What else?”

“There isn’t much to tell. All she does is hang out with them and go to school. They told me that she is Carter’s girlfriend, but she is very close with all of them,” Alexis said.

“Well, that’s interesting.”

“Not really, they are all good-looking guys and any girl would want to be with them,” Alexis countered.

“Is that all?”

“Yes, and well, Bryce asked me to leave in the morning. It seems I have disrupted their little family. They are keeping her close and treating her like one of them and not a witch, or whatever she is. What is so special about her?” Alexis asked.

“Nothing for you to worry about. I am not pleased that you are not able to stay longer, but I think I got what I needed. Next time I ask something of you, refrain from opening your mouth and pissing everyone off like you tend to do.”

“Yes, sir, I will try harder next time.”

He ended the call and she dialed another number. “Hey sweetie, how are things going?”

“I just got off the phone updating him and wanted to let you know what was going on. I am leaving tomorrow morning. Apparently, I hurt the little girl’s feelings and Bryce told me I have to be gone by tomorrow,” Alexis said.

“Well, you do have a mouth on you,” he said.

“I thought that was one of the reasons you loved me?”

“Oh baby, it is, but it does tend to get you in trouble when you use it to speak,” he replied. “Any interesting information you can give me about her?”

“Not really, she is boring as hell. All she does is hang out at the house with the guys, work on self-defense, and go to school. I don’t understand why everyone is so interested in her, she doesn’t do anything,” Alexis answered. “Why are you both so interested in her?”

Ignoring her question, he said, “I need you to do something for me.”

“Sure, love, what do you need? And can I see you when I get back tomorrow?” Alexis asked.

“Sure, sure, come by after 11:00 tomorrow night, I should have a couple of hours. Now, what I need you to do before you leave is get her away from the guys in a private area on the property. Can you do that?”

“Maybe. They watch her like a hawk, so she is rarely alone; one of them is always with her. There is a large rock on the

back of the property that she likes to hang out on, though. I might be able to get her out there in the morning. Will that work?"

"Yes, that will work perfectly. I'll see you tomorrow night."
He then hung up.

Chapter 16

I awoke alone and wondered where Carter was, but I could hear the shower running. I laid there dreading the day. Bryce was wrong about separating Chase from everyone else; he needed his friends. I just couldn't see Alexis taking care of him, so he would need the other four. I needed to be the one to leave, so they could all be together. Knowing what I had to do filled me with sadness. I would miss my guys. Chase was truly a wonderful guy, once you got past the grumpiness to his huge heart. Bryce took care of the group and wanted everyone to be happy. Carter was the sweet one, shy around others, but had a sexy confidence when we were alone. Harrison was still my scary biker guy, but the best cook and kisser in the world. And Mason, I hadn't spent as much time with him as the others and I regretted that, but I saw him, too. He was funny and sweet and when he looked at me with those ice-blue eyes, I felt like the most precious thing in the world.

I heard the water shut off and got up to find clothes for the day. As I walked to the closet, I saw Carter walk out of the bathroom with only a towel around his waist. There was steam coming off of him and his hair was dripping onto his face and shoulders. I froze. All I wanted to do was walk over to him and lick that water off of him. I stared for longer than appropriate. "Again, like what you see?"

I blushed again, and turned to the closet to find clothes. I looked, but didn't recognize any of them. Carter walked in and turned me around, "This is your side, Bre. You were looking through my clothes. I doubt any of them would fit you."

Embarrassed, I meekly said, "Thanks." I just knew my entire face was red. Oh well, he was hot as hell and I couldn't help it.

After my shower, Carter and I went downstairs. As usual, Harrison was cooking breakfast. This time, it was a breakfast casserole with sausage, egg, and cheese. Yum! Everyone,

including Amazon Bitch, eventually came down and ate. After we were done cleaning up, I started toward Carter's room to get my backpack for school when Alexis stopped me. "Can we talk? I want to apologize for my behavior."

Not believing what my ears were hearing, I narrowed my eyes at her. "I guess." She led the way outside through the door in the family room and I followed. I followed her to the large rock at the back of the property. "Okay, what do you want to say?"

"I just wanted to tell you that I am leaving this morning, and I'm sorry for how I acted toward you. I have known the guys since we were kids. I am protective of them and saw you as a threat. I now see that they care for you and I was wrong."

Sadness enveloped me over the loss of Chase. If she was leaving, he would obviously go with her. There was no way he would let his bonded leave without him. I needed to talk to Bryce. Chase couldn't leave, he needed to stay here with his family; I needed to leave. I knew it was going to happen and I needed to be strong for Chase. Who knows, maybe once they completely bonded, she would love him and treat him the way he deserves. I had to believe that. Otherwise, my pain would be for nothing. I looked up at Alexis to tell her I would be the one leaving, but she was smiling in an eerie way. I would never understand how fate could put him with this horror of a woman. Then I felt it, darkness and evil overwhelmed me and I turned to find where it was coming from. There were now five demons surrounding us. "Alexis, we need to get back to the house, now!"

"No, sweetie. *I* do. They are here for you. Bon appetit, boys. Goodbye, Breanna. I'll make sure to take care of the guys in your absence. I am sure I can handle all five of them just fine," Alexis said while walking back toward the house.

That bitch! I knew she was evil, but I never thought she would deliver me to my death. I may have been training and was a lot stronger than I had been when I faced lizard man, but there were five demons here and I didn't stand a chance. One of them looked human, but a darkness of pure evil rolled off of him in waves. That must have been what Bryce was talking

about when he said he could tell I wasn't a demon, the hatred coming from him was so thick in the air, it was stifling. The other four were definitely not human; a couple of them looked like lizard man, but the other two were bigger, with a thin, gray skin covering their ribs, arms, and legs. They also had orange eyes on the sides of a ram-looking head, complete with horns. Their hands had sharp claws that were at least five inches long.

Concentrate, Bre. If you want to have a chance of surviving, you must use everything you have. I couldn't die here, because I *had* to let Chase know what he was bonding to. I immediately connected with my panther gift and took a solid stance, feet shoulder-width apart. I also brought fire to my hands and had air and earth at the ready.

"No need to be hostile, little one," the human-looking one said. His darkness surrounded me, making it hard to breathe. I tried to push it back, but it stayed all around me, pushing against me like it was trying to get inside of me. "You will not make it out of here alive, so let's not make this harder than it has to be. My guys here are itching for a fight. "

"No, I think I'm good. Your two lizards and rams look like they need a good ass kicking," I said with fake confidence.

"Ha ha! You are a little pistol, aren't you? It's too bad you will die here today. I might have liked to have you around for a while. But from what I was told, you are the one I have been looking for," he said.

I didn't have time to think about that, because the two lizard men stalked toward me. I hit each of them with a fireball and they flew backwards, hitting the ground hard. The two horned demons then came at me and I did the same to them. "That all you got, big boys?" I taunted. Better to go out as myself than a whimpering little girl.

All four of them got off the ground and surrounded me, so I didn't know which one was going to attack. They closed in at the same time, but I didn't wait for them to attack. I stepped toward the biggest horned one and punched him with my clawed hand, plus some extra air power. As he flew

backwards, I was grabbed from behind by a lizard man and the other horned demon punched me in the face. My head whipped to the side and I spat out blood. I struggled to release myself from his grasp and used air to create a buffer in between us. It only pushed him back a couple of steps, but it was enough for him to release me. Before I had time to react, the second lizard backhanded me and I dropped to the ground. I was a bit stunned, so it took me a second to recover. That gave one of the horned demons time to kick me in the head and knock me out.

My head was pounding. I felt like someone kicked me in the head, then remembered they did. I recovered my wits and found my guys fighting the five demons who attacked me. Bryce was facing off with one of the lizards and so was Carter, who had his talons out and had just sliced open its stomach. *Yay, Carter!* Mason and Chase were each battling a horned demon, while Harrison was in a fire fight with the human-looking one. I didn't know which direction to go first, but I wanted to help them. I looked to Mason in time to see the horned demon drive his claws right into Mason's stomach. Mason fell onto his back and blood was pouring out of his wound. I could see blood coming out of his mouth at the same time. Panic engulfed me; I couldn't lose him. We hadn't had a chance to really get to know each other yet. The panic was replaced with anger and rage at what was done to him. I screamed, "Nooooo!" Suddenly, the white light that had already saved me a couple of times before poured out of me. The force of it pulled my chest forward and my arms out to each side. The white power pulsed out of me, surrounding me in a circle about thirty feet wide. It immediately decimated all five of the demons. I dropped my arms and the white power disappeared.

I ran to Mason and placed my hands on his wound. Tears were streaming down my face as I applied pressure to the hole in his stomach. "Don't you dare die on me, Mason! We need to spend more time together. We haven't had enough time! We need you. *I* need you. Please, Mason." I looked into his beautiful ice-blue eyes and saw tears forming. He knew he was dying. The guys surrounded us, crouched down, and placed their hands on each other's shoulders and mine. We looked

like we were kneeling in a football team huddle. Their love for Mason poured out of them; it was so powerful, I could almost see it. Each of them had a grim look on their face. They knew he was dying, too.

“Sweet girl, you are the best thing that has ever happened to us. I don’t want to leave you. I want to spend more time with you, too. You’re right, we didn’t have enough time. I’m sorry. Please take care of them for me. They need you more than you know,” Mason said to me and then looked to each of the guys before closing his eyes.

I collapsed on top of him and wailed. “Nooo! This can’t be happening, Mason!”

All of a sudden, my hands started to glow with my white light and I tried to pull away. I didn’t want it hurting Mason, but my hands stuck to him like glue. I looked down and noticed the blood had stopped flowing. I tried again to lift my hands a little and was finally able to. His stomach was glowing white and it looked like it was stitching itself back together. Slowly, the wound closed completely and even the redness disappeared. I looked at his stomach and it was perfectly normal, no hint of any wound. I looked into his eyes that had opened back up and saw that sparkle that I loved. “Mason?” Mason tried to sit up, but I pushed him back down. “What are you doing? You need to lie back.”

He touched my hand and then intertwined our fingers, “Bre, you saved me. I feel fine. Look, the wound is completely closed. Aside from the drying blood, you would never know I was just gutted. You healed me!” He tried to sit up again and I let him this time.

“So you’re okay? You don’t hurt anywhere?” I asked.

“Yes, sweet girl, I’m fine. Nothing hurts at all.” Out of nowhere, he slammed his lips to mine and kissed me hard. I wrapped my arms around him and sank into the kiss. I forgot that the others were there until I heard chuckling.

“Looks like he recovered quickly.”

“Dang, man, let her breathe.”

Mason released me and I was dazed from the amazing kiss.
“Thank you for saving me. I owe you my life.”

My head was still swimming, but I was able to answer,
“You’re welcome.”

“Come on, guys. Let’s get Mason inside to get cleaned up. We have a lot to talk about,” Bryce said.

I walked arm-in-arm with Mason back to the house. I wasn’t ready to let go of him yet. I couldn’t believe I had almost lost him. After Mason showered, we all met in the family room. Bryce was standing in front of the giant rock fireplace, waiting for everyone to sit. I sat with Mason and intertwined our arms while leaning on him a little. I whispered to him, “Are you really okay?”

He turned to me and brushes a lock of hair out of my eyes.
“Thanks to you, I am. You are my personal angel.” He leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. My entire body tingled with delight. My guys were all here, safe and bitch-free. I smiled and took it all in.

Bryce cleared his throat to get everyone’s attention, “So we have a lot to talk about. First of all, Bre, what were you doing that far from the house alone?”

My heart dropped and I looked at Chase. I didn’t want him to know what his bonded did, but the guys needed to know not to trust her, so I told them, “I’m sorry, Chase, but it was Alexis. She asked me to walk with her this morning, because she wanted to apologize for being a bitch to me. I felt I owed it to you to hear her out. She led me down to the big rock by the woods and started apologizing, but that’s when the five demons came out of the woods. I told her we needed to run, but she just stood there, not scared at all. She said they were not there for her, but for me. She even had the gall to tell them to enjoy killing me! Then, she walked back to the house and left me there alone. The human-looking one seemed to be the leader of the group and just watched while his goons attacked me. I held them off for a little while, but between the four of them, they were able to knock me out. I awoke to see you guys battling them and then saw Mason get stabbed with horny

guy's claws. You know the rest. I'm sorry, Chase, but she did it on purpose."

"Why are you apologizing to me for her? I can't stand that girl and now that I know what she tried to do to you, I will kill her," Chase said through gritted teeth.

"Chase, she is your bonded. There is nothing you can do about that, is there?" I asked no one in particular.

Chase started to speak, but Bryce beat him to it. "Bre, we figured it out. Chase is not bonded to Alex."

"What? Oh." I felt a little better that he was not bonded to that horrible person, but he was still bonded; otherwise, he wouldn't be able to use fire. That meant he had been intimate with someone else, so my heart still hurt. Maybe his real bonded was a better person than Alexis, though, and *maybe* she and I could be civil, meaning Chase could still be in my life, at least a little. "So who is he bonded to?" I asked in almost a whisper and looked down at my lap.

"You, you crazy girl! You!" Chase all but yelled.

My head popped up and I looked at him, "What?!"

"Don't you remember me kissing you in the library after you tried to kill Alexis? Maybe I should have let you kill her now that I think about it, but that's beside the point. Was the kiss that forgettable?" Chase looked at me with a little bit of fear and vulnerability. I had never seen him vulnerable; it was kind of endearing. It made me want to jump up and lavish him with kisses to show him how much I loved kissing him.

"Really?" I asked.

"Yes, really," he said.

I looked to Bryce for confirmation and he nodded. "But how? I would think that you would have all my gifts if we were bonded. Have you tried to use Earth or Water or have you tried to connect to the animals? And by the way, I could never forget my first kiss, especially since it was with you." Chase beamed at my last statement.

Harrison chimed in, “We figured out he has fire now, because you kissed me, too. And I have air and would assume water any moment now that you kissed Mason.”

“I’m confused,” I said.

“Well, you kissed Chase, then Harrison. When you kissed Harrison was when Chase caught the kitchen on fire. Harrison was lifting weights last night and accidently used air. We have to replace the entire ceiling now and not just a patch from your murder of the punching bag,” Bryce spelled out for me.

I blushed when he talked about me kissing the three of them, but I was glad it was out there. I was glad everyone knew and we could figure it out together. “So you are saying that I started bonding with Chase when he kissed me, then I started bonding with Harrison when we kissed, and now I am bonding with Mason since he kissed me?”

“Yes, that is exactly what we think. We suspected it when you became so jealous of Alexis. When you meet your bonded, you have a hard time seeing them with other people. We can find out for sure right now if the three of them have all three powers,” Bryce said with a little sadness in his voice.

I was pumped that I might be bonded to the three of them, but what about Bryce and Carter? It didn’t feel right that it wasn’t all of us in this together. I looked at Carter and he looked sad and disappointed. I knew right then and there what I wanted to do. I didn’t give a crap about normal anymore. Hell, I’d never been normal anyway. These were my guys and I was going to be with all of them. I was special with all five gifts, and I needed my five guys with me to face what was to come. That was what Mea said and I knew in my heart that she was right. I released Mason’s arm, stood up, and strode over to Carter. He gave me a puzzled look from the chair he was sitting in, but I didn’t hesitate. I sat in his lap, straddling his legs, and kissed him with everything I had. He wrapped his arms around me and squeezed tight. Lightening shot through my body and I felt like I would explode from it. I had been waiting for this since the moment we spoke to the animals together. He was mine and I was claiming him. After a few fake coughs from the other guys, we lifted our heads away from each other. I

pressed my forehead to his and said, “I’ve been wanting to do that for a while now and it was worth the wait.” Carter smiled up at me with the biggest smile I have ever seen from him. He was simply beautiful.

I gave him a small peck on the lips and got up from his lap. I walked straight over to Bryce and jumped into his arms, straddling his waist, and kissed him, too. Bryce froze for just a second, but then kissed me like a dying man would. He held me under my butt with both hands to support my weight, and kissed me back. As he kissed me, he squeezed my butt and fire spread through my body. I wrapped my legs tighter around his waist, pressing myself against him. I was getting hotter and hotter. Again, fake coughing brought us out of our lust-filled kiss. *Wow, I tend to forget anyone else is around when I kiss one of my guys. I might need to work on that – or not.* Bryce slowly lowered me to my feet and I pressed against him the entire way down. I looked up at his beautiful face and saw the dimples that I loved so much.

“Wow! That was hot. Can I get one of those?” Harrison kind of jokingly said. I blushed as everyone laughed.

Hell, I just kissed two guys back to back in front of the other three I kissed just recently, why not continue with my boldness? I walked over to Harrison and ran my hand down his huge bicep and looked up at him from under my lashes, “If you’re lucky, you just might.” I then walked over to the sofa and sat back down beside Mason. I looked at a stunned Harrison and winked.

The entire room burst out laughing, even Harrison. After laughing and struggling to breathe, Bryce took a slow, deep breath and said, “Bre, I told you the first day you came here, I don’t ever want you to leave and I still feel that way. You are *our* girl and the heart of our family. Even if you don’t bond with one or more of us, you are ours, all five of ours.”

A chorus of agreements rang out,

“Exactly.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“You are ours, no matter what.”

“This is our family forever.”

My heart was so full, it felt like it might explode. I had never felt this loved or cherished. My guys, all five of them were my family. I loved each of them in a different, but just as powerful, way. No matter what happened next, we were in this together. And I knew deep in my heart that I was bonding to all of them. They would soon be as powerful as I was and no one would be able to tear us apart.

Chapter 17

We all walked outside to test Bryce's theory. "Let's start with Chase since he was the first to develop more than one gift. But if he does have all five, then we will know we are all bonded to her," Bryce suggested.

"Okay, let's see what happens." Chase stepped forward and a little bit away from everyone. "Well, I know I have Fire, and she kissed Mason next, so let's try Water." Bryce was smart enough to bring out a bucket of water before we started, so that's what Chase was concentrating on. As Chase stared at the water, his eyes glowed their usual blue and the water slowly started to move. He lifted it up into the air and lowered it back down. "She bonded with Mason." Mason's face lit up with excitement. "Let's try Earth next." Bryce had also brought out the plant I was tested on and handed it to Chase. He concentrated on the plant and it started to grow. "Bryce, you are officially a bonded man." Chase said while patting him on the back. Bryce looked at me and showed me his dimples again. *Would he be upset if I went over there and licked them? Mmmm, I will be trying that at some point.*

"Carter, can you call some of your friends up here?" Chase asked. Carter nodded and walked toward the edge of the woods. He looked really nervous, so I walked over to him.

"Carter, are you okay?" I quietly asked so no one else would hear.

"I'm just nervous. I grew up being told that I was a second-class citizen, that Animal Elementals were not real Elementals. I'm just afraid that this will prove them right if no one else is able to connect with them," Carter said shakily and looked down.

I lifted his head lightly with my hand, "Carter, you are my bonded, no matter what happens. I can feel it deep inside that we are all meant to be together. If they are not men enough to

handle all five bonds, then they are missing out. Being an Animal Elemental is by far the best, and if they don't take to it, then it will be something you and I will share, just the two of us."

Carter looked at me and smiled a little, "I love you, Bre. You know that, don't you? No one has ever made me feel so important and special. I would do anything to make you happy and safe. Thank you for, well, for being you." He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. Heat filled my body, but not in a sexual way. My whole body was filled with love. I was so happy right now that a huge smile spread across my face. I started to speak, but Carter stopped me, "Don't say anything. I want you to be absolutely positive when you say it back. I don't want it to be in this highly emotional state. It should be when we are just hanging out and it pops out of your mouth like you have been saying it for years."

"Okay."

"Now, let's see who is around." *"Chip, Rocco, Sebastian, Brutus, anyone nearby? I need your help with something."*

"Hey, Carter! Hey, Bre! What's up?" Chip replied.

"Hi, Chip! I've missed you. I hope you are doing well!" I said.

"I was hoping you could help us out. Do you mind coming up toward the house for a moment?" Carter asks.

"Sure, do you have my favorite treats?" Chip asked.

"Of course. Follow me," Carter instructed.

The three of us walked toward the house. When we reached the other guys, Carter said, "Guys, this is Chip." *"Chip, these guys are my family. That's Bryce, Harrison, and Mason. And this is Chase. He is going to try and speak to you like I do, okay?"*

"Sure thing, Carter!" Chip said excitedly.

"Okay, Chase, try to connect with Chip. Relax and think the words you want to say to him.

"I feel like an idiot talking to a tiny chipmunk. You couldn't have gotten the wolf to come?" Chase asked. Carter and I

glared at him and he refocused on Chip.

“Fine.” *“Hi there, little guy. Eat any nuts today?”* Chase said to Chip.

“Hi there, big guy. Are you a nut? What kind of question is that? Carter, this one is defective. I think we need to send it back,” Chip said of Chase.

Carter and I burst out laughing. I was laughing so hard that I had to sit down before I fell down. Tears were running down my face. I looked up at Chase and he looked pissed. *“Awe, Chase, did the wittle chipmunk upset you?”*

“I can hear you! Bre, we can speak telepathically? This is wonderful!” Chase was so excited that he picked Chip up, spun him around, and then placed him back on the ground.

“Seriously, Carter, this one isn’t all there. I think he is missing a few marbles,” Chip said, causing us to start up again. At that rate, we would never stop laughing.

“I never realized you could talk to each other in your minds,” Chase said to Carter.

“Only when we are in Elemental mode, and you can tell by the glowing eyes. So don’t worry, we haven’t been having private conversations around you guys,” Carter replied.

“Well, that makes all five. Bre is officially bonded to all of us,” Chase said.

I looked to Carter and smiled. “I told you.” He smiled and looked extremely proud.

“We should all test each gift to make sure and then guess what?” Bryce asked.

Groans filled the space and the other four all said in unison, “We need to train!”

I laughed at how well they know each other. As the others try out their new gifts, I stepped back to watch. I felt so blessed to have each of them in my life. All of the craziness in my life up to now had been worth it. I loved each of my guys and would do anything to keep loving them and protecting them. We were

a family; maybe not a traditional one, but we were a family and we would fight to keep it together.

Chase walked up to me and lightly shoulder-bumps me. “You look happy.”

“I am. There is nowhere in the world I would rather be and no one I would rather be with. You guys are my family and we will stick together. I’m glad you aren’t bonded to that awful woman.”

“I knew you were the one for me when you drove my car like I do. Oh, and I like the fact that I was your first kiss. What else can I be first in?” Chase wiggled his eyebrows at me.

“Hmm, let me think. There are so many things that I have never done before. Well, actually, I have never done anything with a man before, so the possibilities are endless. What would you like to try first?” Right when he was about to reply, I jumped in, “But then again, you got to be my first kiss. Maybe I should let the others have some firsts, too. I bet Harrison could show me a few things I have never done before and Bryce, I bet he is a little kinky, don’t you think?”

Chase picked me up and threw me over his shoulder. He started walking toward the house and I couldn’t help but laugh at his rare silliness.

“Chase, where are you taking our girl?” Bryce asked.

“Nowhere, just away from you guys!” Chase replied.

“He wants all of my firsts now since he got the first kiss!” I yelled to them.

All four of them ran toward us yelling at Chase.

“No, you don’t!”

“Put her down!”

“Chase!”

“I want a first!”

“You guys are crazy! I’m outta here. Carter, you owe me some treats!” Chip said as he walked back to the woods.

The guys caught up to us in the family room and tackled us on the couch. Everyone was laughing so hard, we could barely breathe. “Well, that killed the mood!” Chase said.

“What, the caveman ‘you woman, me man’ mood?” I asked.

We all started laughing all over again.

Chapter 18

The next few weeks flew by and fall was in full swing, evident by the colorful foliage on the mountains. Chase said I should snowboard, but I was excited to try skiing first. I just didn't think I would do well on a snowboard; strapping both feet to the same board and sliding down a mountain seemed sketchy. My birthday and Thanksgiving break were drawing closer and I hadn't been home since starting school. I called my parents every week, but I hadn't gone to see them yet. They asked a few times if they could visit, but I always told them I was too busy with school to have any real time with them. Luckily, things had been quiet, too; no attempted kidnapping, no demons trying to kill me, and no bitches trying to lead me to my death. Everything was great, so I assumed something terrible was going to happen soon.

"So Bre, where do you want to go for your birthday dinner?" Carter asked. We were all eating another one of Harrison's scrumptious dinners. It was the first night in the last couple of weeks that we were all together. Each of the guys had been called away on missions over the last two weeks. There hadn't been one day, until today, that we were all at home together. I planned to enjoy every second of it.

"I want to go to that new restaurant in Boone, the one that brags about their steaks. I am dying for a great steak!" I answered.

"Sounds perfect. Monday night?" Carter asked everyone.

"Yep."

"I'm in."

"Sounds good."

"Perfect."

My birthday was actually on Thanksgiving this year, so we were doing my birthday dinner early. Plus, I was flying out on Wednesday to go home for Thanksgiving with my parents. Home? Funny how Allendale didn't seem like home anymore; this did. I was worried about traveling by myself, but I hadn't said anything to the guys. I was afraid they would go with me and not home to their families.

"So, Bre, we have been talking and don't think it is a good idea for you to travel home by yourself. I know it has been quiet here for a while, but we think it would be best if at least one of us went with you. We don't have to meet your parents, but think it would be a good idea to fly with you and monitor the house while you are there," Bryce said, like he was reading my mind.

"Oh, no, you can't. I don't want to take you away from your families at the holidays," I retorted.

"We don't celebrate Thanksgiving. We were here before the Mayflower even thought about landing on Plymouth Rock, so Thanksgiving is not our holiday," Mason interjected.

"Really? So where do Elementals come from? I can't believe I never thought to ask."

"Thousands of years ago, Archangel Michael decided to send guardians to Earth to protect it. He created beings that looked like humans, but were connected to the elements. He sent one hundred of each being: Earth, Air, Water, and Fire. Those beings were called Elementals. A few hundred years later, he created Animal Elementals to protect the animals that inhabited the Earth. That is part of the reason other Elementals look down upon Animal Elementals; they were not sent here in the beginning," Bryce explained.

"Good grief, a few hundred years' difference in thousands? Sounds like there are some Elementals that have their heads up their asses. If Michael created them just like the others, they are just as elemental as any of them. I swear, I would love to have a talk with these Council Members. They sound old and outdated," I replied.

“Ha ha! They are all old. The youngest one is around 230, I believe. I would love to hear what you would say to them! That would definitely ruffle their feathers!” Mason said while laughing.

“Oh, and I could do it in my panther form! Wonder what they would say to that?”

“Bre, you are one in a million,” Carter said and leaned over to kiss me on the forehead.

“So, back to the trip. Do you have a preference as to who you want to go with you?” Bryce asked.

“No, I couldn’t choose if my life depended on it.”

“Anyone have something going on that they can’t go?” Bryce asked. No one replied. “Anyone not want to go?” Again, no one replied. “Well then, I guess we are drawing straws.”

It seemed like all of them wanted to go and I hated letting them down. “How about all of you go?” I blurted out before I thought it through.

“It would be easier if one of us pretended to be your boyfriend. That way, we could get into the house and not have to sneak around outside to watch out for anything bad happening,” Harrison said.

“Maybe I can talk to my parents and let them know I am bringing friends home. We could tell them that you are not originally from the US and aren’t planning to travel home for such a short time,” I said.

“You don’t think they would think it is strange that you are bringing five guys home?” Chase asked.

“Probably, but I have always been strange, so nothing new there. They will probably be happy I have made friends here. Callie was my only friend in high school. Anyway, I don’t care. I don’t want to leave you guys anyway, so this fixes the problem. Do you think you can get flights this late?” I asked.

“It won’t be a problem,” Bryce answered. “So, it’s settled, we all go to Allendale! Chase, look into hotel rooms for us.”

“Got it,” Chase responded.

I suddenly lost my bravado and started to worry about what my parents would say about me bringing so many guys home. Would they know I was seeing all of them? Would they think I was sleeping with all of them? Well, I actually was sleeping with them, but only in the literal sense. I breathed in and out slowly to calm my nerves, then said, "I'll go call them now to let them know." Here went nothing.

I walked into the family room for privacy and dialed my parents' number. My mom answered on the second ring. "Hi, Mom."

"Sweetie, happy almost birthday! I can't believe you are turning nineteen. Soon you will be twenty!" my mom Kerin said.

"Thanks, Mom. I have a favor to ask. I have a few friends that are from another country and they aren't planning on going home for the holidays. I asked them to come home with me. Is that okay?"

"Of course, honey. I am so excited you are making friends. How many are you bringing?" she asked.

"Five," I replied.

"Five...okay. Well, they will need to get hotel rooms; we just don't have enough room here. And I can go and get a bigger turkey and a few more sides. Five more little girls shouldn't eat too much."

"Well, it's actually five guys," I said quickly and quietly.

There was a long pause and she finally said, "Okay, five guy friends it is. Are any of them your boyfriend?"

"No, I am just friends with them. They grew up together and we all just kind of clicked. They are really great guys and I really want you to meet them."

"It will be fine. I will speak to your dad and let him know. When will you all be here?"

"They are looking at flights now and I will let you know, but sometime Wednesday afternoon."

“Great! I can’t wait to see you, sweetheart. I really miss you and I am so glad you are coming home. It has been way too long. I would like to take you clothes shopping while you are here. I bet you need some new things.”

“Actually, the guys want to take me skiing when the mountain has snow, do you think we could get a ski jacket and pants?”

“Bre, that is wonderful! I am so glad they are getting you out and doing fun things. I am liking them already. We can most definitely do that. I can’t wait to see you! Safe travels. Call me when you know your flight schedule and I will come and pick you up. I love you.”

“Thanks, Mom. I love you, too.” I hung up and felt a little guilty about not going to see them sooner. They were wonderful parents and I missed them. I just didn’t want to be in that town where Callie died. I walked back into the room with the guys.

“I just told my mom and she is fine with it. We are all having Thanksgiving together!” I was so happy I decided to do this. Now I would get to see my parents and didn’t have to leave the guys behind.

□□□

My birthday dinner was on the Monday before we were flying out to see my parents. I was very excited to spend time with the guys over the next week, but I was still freaking out about how my parents would react when they saw them. They were a lot to take in when they were all together. All of them were over six feet tall and gorgeous; put them all together and it was a bit intimidating. When we all went out together, it was funny how everyone seemed to make way for us.

We made it to the restaurant and I was trying to decide between a ribeye and a filet. Steak was my favorite food, and I would eat it every single day if I could. I decided on the filet and we all placed our orders. All of the guys looked a little

nervous, which made me nervous in turn. “What’s up, guys? Do you think something is going to happen tonight?”

“No, we’re just a little nervous whether or not you will like our gifts. This is the first time any of us has gotten a birthday gift for a girl that we weren’t related to. We want to make you happy and we are a little nervous,” Bryce replied.

I looked around the table and said, “Guys, it doesn’t matter what you got me. All I care about is that you put thought into it. That means more than anything. Want to go ahead and get it over with now so you can enjoy the dinner?”

“Yes, please!” Mason chimed in.

“Okay, who’s first?” I asked.

Mason pulled out a small, silver box with a white bow and slid it over to me. “I wanted to get you something beautiful that reminds you of me.” He blushed a little when saying it.

I could tell it was jewelry by the size and look of the box. I didn’t wear much jewelry, but if it came from Mason, I would wear it every day. I opened the box and saw a beautiful diamond pendant on a thin, silver chain. The pendant was in the shape of a water droplet with diamonds covering it. My eyes teared up a little at the sweet gesture. He was receiving four other powerful gifts because of our bonding, but he and I had shared water from the beginning. His was the first gift the guys showed me. It was amazing how that was only a few months ago; things were completely different now. I looked up at Mason and smiled, “Can you put it on me?”

He grinned and took the necklace from my hand, I turned around and held my hair up. He clasped the necklace and traced his fingers along my neck before sitting back. I turned to him. “I love it, Mason. Thank you! I will wear it every day.”

He looked so happy that I liked his gift. I reached forward and hugged him, “You are welcome, Bre. I’m glad you like it,” he whispered in my ear.

“See, that wasn’t so bad!” I said as I wiped the moisture from my eyes. “Who’s next?”

“Happy Birthday, Bre,” Bryce said while sliding an envelope over to me. I opened it and saw a beautiful card covered in flowers wishing me a great birthday. Inside the card was a receipt for a \$1,900 donation to the local food bank. “I figured if I couldn’t grow the food for them, I could give them money to do it. It is \$100 for every year you have been alive.”

Again, I teared up at the gesture. He knew how sad it made me that we could so easily grow food, but because humans would be scared of our gifts, we had to hide them. My goal was to one day figure out a way to help those that just need the basics, like food. No one in a country as wealthy as ours should go hungry. I looked at Bryce and smiled. “This is perfect. Thank you.” He knew how much this meant to me.

I got up from my chair, walked over to him, and gave him a hug. As I was about to sit back down, Chase stood up and said, “You probably need to stay standing for mine.” He walked over to the waitress and she led him into the back.

He emerged a few seconds later with snow skis and boots. I jumped up and down clapping. “Oh, my God! I can’t believe you got me skis!”

He walked them over to me and handed me the skis and boots. “I still want you to snowboard, but I guess you can start with skiing,” he said sheepishly.

He was so sweet. He really wanted me to snowboard, but since I said I would rather ski, he bought me skis. I would have to try snowboarding one day just for him. I put the skis and boots down and hugged him around his neck, “Thank you, Chase. I can’t wait to try them!” He smiled at me and sat back in his seat.

This birthday thing is great! I loved everything so far, because they put thought into their gifts, making them special. Harrison got up and handed me two boxes, one rectangular and one square. They were beautifully wrapped with cornflower blue paper and silver bows. I opened the rectangular box first and there was a beautiful, black leather jacket in it. I ran my hand down the front to feel the softness of the leather. I then opened the square box and pulled out a shiny, black helmet. “I would

love for you to go riding with me sometime and you need these to be able to.”

“Harry! I would love to go riding, I have never been on a motorcycle. Can we go before we leave for Allendale?”

He looked so pleased and excited that I loved his gift. “Sure! We can go tomorrow if you want.”

“Great, it is a date!” I said and then cringed a little on the inside. I knew the guys were used to different kind of relationships in their community, but saying he and I were going on a date in front of the others was a little uncomfortable for me. I looked at the others and they were all smiling. They didn’t even seem to notice what I said, and if they did, they didn’t seem to care. Well, if they were okay with it, then I would be. I hugged Harrison and thanked him again for my gifts.

Carter was the last one to give me his gift and he seemed nervous. He was such a thoughtful guy that I knew I would love it. He handed me an envelope and I opened it to find a birthday card with a panther mascot in a blue football shirt on the front wishing me a happy birthday. I giggled at the panther and opened the card. Inside were two tickets to a Carolina Panthers game and VIP passes to meet the mascot. I laughed so loud that the table next to us gave me a dirty look. “Carter, I love it!” I said as I jumped into his arms and hugged him. “It’s perfect and funny. Thank you.”

“I am always so deep and serious with you, I wanted to do something fun. And I know you love panthers!” he said.

“What is it, Bre?” Mason asked.

I turned the card around and showed them the tickets, “He got me Carolina Panther football tickets and I get to meet the panther mascot!” The entire table erupted in laughter and the table next to us shot more dirty looks in our direction.

“Carter, that is funny as hell! Great idea!” Harrison said.

“Yeah, man, what a great idea,” Bryce said.

Finally, we all sat back in our chairs just as the food came out. My filet looked heavenly and I couldn’t wait to eat, but before

anyone could dig in, Bryce lifted his glass and said, “Happy Birthday, Bre. We are so glad you came into our lives. You brought love, laughter, and bonding.” He winked at me as he said that. “I couldn’t imagine my life without you and I know the others feel the same. Happy Birthday to our beautiful, caring, thoughtful, and loving girl!” He lifted his glass higher and everyone else follows his lead. A chorus of “Happy Birthday, Bre”’s filled the room.

I was blissful right now. My boys were so thoughtful and sweet. I thought back to when I first arrived at school and how sad I was. I had been alone and depressed, but now I was happier than I had been in my entire life. My guys saved me and I would do anything for them.

We finished dinner off with dessert and I had to try the turtle cheesecake – it did not disappoint. “Thank you, guys. This was the best birthday ever. I love every one of my gifts, but I especially loved spending it with you. Thank you.”

We left the restaurant and returned home. I was so tired from all the excitement that I fell asleep on Harrison’s shoulder on the way back.

Chapter 19

On Wednesday morning, I was packed and ready to go. Bryce said he had the flight and car rental covered. We headed out to the garage and I got into the Land Rover with Mason, Carter, and Harrison. Chase and Bryce rode to the airport in Chase's Aston Martin. I had only been at the airport once, when I arrived for school in August, but could have sworn it had been in the opposite direction.

"Mason, are you going the right way?" I asked. "I thought the airport was the other way."

"Yes, we are not going to the regular airport. We are heading to the private one. I guess we forgot to tell you that we chartered a private plane for our trip," Mason answered.

"What? You guys have a private plane, too?"

"No, we just chartered one. We don't actually own it," Carter answered.

"Oh, you just chartered one. You guys know I don't like when you spend so much money on me. The birthday gifts were all over the top and now you are flying me privately to my hometown?"

"Yep, now get over it," Harrison said with a smile and a wink.

"Whatever. You really shouldn't spend this much just for me," I grumbled. They all laugh and we continued toward the *private* airport.

Once we were on the plane, everyone strapped in and we took off. A pretty stewardess came around asking if anyone wanted a refreshment. I asked for a water and sat back, trying to relax. The closer we got, the more nervous I became. My mom seemed okay with me bringing five guys, but maybe she'd just been in shock. I had no idea how my dad was going to react.

“Don’t look so nervous, Bre. It’ll be fine. Parents love us!”
Carter said.

I knew my parents would like them, but it had to seem strange to them. The only friend I had ever really had was Callie and now I was bringing home five men. I wasn’t sure how to explain the guys to them. I certainly couldn’t let them know anything about Elementals or that I was in a relationship with all five of them. They would never understand that. Which led me to the question, where did I come from?

“Uh, guys. I know my mom is my mom, but she isn’t an Elemental. At least, I don’t think she is. So how can I be what I am?”

“I’ve been looking into it,” Chase said. “There is something strange going on with your mother’s history. I can trace her life all the way back, but there is something suspicious about the information I found from her childhood until six months before you were born.”

“What do you mean by ‘strange’?” I asked.

“The information I found has school transcripts dating all the way back to elementary school, but I can’t find one yearbook that has her in it. I also can’t find any information on her parents; it’s like they don’t exist. There are names on her birth certificate, but I cannot find anything about them.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“The only answer I can come up with is that the information is fake. Someone created information to hide where she actually was right up until she was three months pregnant with you.”

“Why would someone do that?” Harrison asked, reading my mind.

“I don’t know for sure, but there could be any number of reasons. She is an Elemental and had to get away from the community for some reason. She might have been in an abusive relationship. She could be an Animal Elemental and had a relationship with one of the other four types of Elementals. She could have taken you from your real parents.

It could be any number of reasons. The only real way to find out is to ask her,” Chase answered.

“I can’t imagine her not telling me what I am if she knew. She saw how hard it was for me growing up being different and she never said anything. She is a wonderful mother and I really can’t see her not helping me if she could have,” I said. Something wasn’t right. She and I looked like sisters, so she had to be my mom. But the guys said that both parents have to be Elemental for them to have an Elemental child, so who was my father? Was he abusive and she left for our safety? If that’s the case, then why didn’t she teach me? Why did she let me struggle my entire life? And who were my grandparents? She never talked about them, either. The more I thought about it, the more questions I had. I wouldn’t jump to conclusions until I could talk to her, but thinking about it made me even more nervous to go home.

Carter gently bumped my shoulder and took my hand. He kissed the back of my hand and squeezed, “It will be okay, no matter what. Don’t stress about the things you can’t control. No matter what we find out, we will be here for you and we will get through it.”

Carter was the most in tune with my emotions and always made me feel better. I leaned into him, put my head on his shoulder, and took a deep breath. “Thank you.”

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew, we were landing. My heart started to race and I felt like I might throw up. *Get it together, Bre! You dealt with learning you are a supernatural with gifts, fought demons, and are in a relationship with five men. Seeing your parents who love you will be easy. Breathe.*

I took a deep breath and grabbed my things to disembark. At the bottom of the stairs of the plane were two cars, both black Escalades. “Do we have private security, too? Good grief!” I said.

“These are the only cars that would fit all of us and our stuff,” Bryce said.

“We look like foreign diplomats coming to Allendale to meet with the President,” I said. All five of them laughed at my statement. We got into the cars and took off; I was in the car with Chase and Bryce this time. My mom had offered to pick us up, but since there were so many of us, it was smarter to have cars waiting. Thank goodness. I wasn’t sure what she would have thought about the private plane. Bryce was driving and using GPS to navigate to my house. My stomach was churning in anticipation. After an agonizing thirty-minute drive, we arrived at my childhood home. My mom was standing on the front porch of our blue Cape Cod-style house. I had always loved this house. Callie and I spent a lot of time here over the years. I was pretty sure she’d spent more time here than she did at her own house. Thinking of her and seeing my mom brought tears to my eyes. I really missed Callie and my mom. My mom ran to me and wrapped me in a huge bear hug.

“My sweet girl. I missed you so much! I am so glad you are home,” she said while squeezing me tight. I missed these hugs and sank into her. We stayed that way for a little while and then I remembered the guys. I stepped back a little and saw tears in her eyes.

“I missed you, too, Mom. It is so great to see you,” I said.

She wiped her eyes and said, “Well, introduce me to your friends.” I looked over to the guys and they all looked a little stiff. I guess they were nervous about meeting their bonded’s mom.

“Mom, this is Bryce, Chase, Mason, Carter, and Harrison. Guys, this is my mom Kerin.”

Each of the guys walked up to my mom and shook her hand. Bryce, ever the leader, said, “Thank you for having us. We have never celebrated Thanksgiving, but are really excited to. Please let us know what we can do to help. We know that adding five more is a lot. Harrison over there is a great cook and would love to help in the kitchen.”

“Absolutely, anything you need, I am at your disposal,” Harrison said.

“Wow, thank you. Harrison, I’ll take you up on that,” Mom said. “Well, let’s get your things, Bre, and go inside. I have some snacks set out in case you are hungry.” Chase grabbed my bags from the car and carried them in. “Just put them by the stairs and we can take them up later. Boys, I have water, tea, soda, and coffee. What would you like?” The guys all opted for water. Mom pointed to the family room, “Please make yourselves at home while Bre and I get the refreshments.”

We disappeared into the kitchen while the guys sat down in the family room. Well, this was when I would find out what she really thought. My stomach was in knots and I started sweating. *Breathe, Bre. Breathe.*

“Let’s stick these in the oven to warm them up,” Mom said, motioning to the cute little hors d’oeuvres she had sitting on the counter. I giggled to myself that the guys would knock those out in a matter of seconds. Luckily, I saw a cheese and fruit tray, chips and salsa. While she was getting the waters, I placed the tray in the oven. “So, Bre, you didn’t tell me that your new friends were such large and handsome men. How old are they?”

Blushing, I replied, “Bryce is 21. Chase is 20. Mason is 20. Harrison is 21 and Carter is 19.”

“Well, I have to admit, they are not what I pictured.” I concentrated really hard on the oven, so I didn’t make eye contact with her. “Are they all in school at Appalachian State?”

“Yes, Bryce and Harrison are in their last year, Chase and Mason are juniors, and Carter is a sophomore.”

“So, if none of them are freshman, how did you meet them?” she questioned.

“Just around campus.” I answered as short and general as possible. We should have figured all of this out before coming here.

“Oh. It’s just... Now, I’m not saying I’m not glad you made friends, but it used to be just you and Callie. I find it a little

strange that you are good enough friends with these boys to bring them home. You have never been friends with any boys and now you bring five of them home.”

“What can I say? We really hit it off. They are really nice and I enjoy hanging out with them.”

“But none of them are your boyfriend?”

“No, we are all just good friends.”

Laughing, she said, “Unless you start dating one of them, I doubt you will ever have a boyfriend. I can’t imagine any guy being bold enough to come up to you with them around. I like them even more now!” I started laughing, too, because she was right. Since they were all really my boyfriends, though, it didn’t matter. “Those should be done,” she said while pointing at the oven. I grabbed a hot hand and pulled them out. She got a serving platter down from the cabinet and we placed the hors d’oeuvres on it. After we were finished, she gave me a one-armed hug and a kiss on the forehead, “Well, you do seem happy and if they have anything to do with it, I approve of them.”

Carter and Harrison poked their heads around the kitchen doorway and offered to help carry refreshments into the family room. We made our way down the hall with the snacks and placed them on the coffee table. All of the guys thanked my mom for going out of her way and then they dug in. Within minutes, everything was gone and Carter and Harrison were in the kitchen washing everything up. “I could get used to this! Since Bre went to school, I have to wash all the dishes. Boyd is absolutely no help in the kitchen at all,” Mom said. Once they were finished, Carter and Harrison came back in to sit with us. Mom looked at Carter and asked, “Have we met before? You seem really familiar.” All of the guys immediately stiffened and looked to Carter.

“I don’t think so. Maybe we ran into each other when Bre was moving in?” Carter suggested.

“No, I didn’t move Bre in. She flew there by herself and we mailed all of her belongings. You just really seem familiar.

Come to think of it, all of you seem familiar, like we have met before,” Mom said.

I started to panic and looked to Bryce. “Now that you say that, you look familiar, too. Have you ever lived in Nova Scotia?” he replied.

“No, I’ve never even been there. Is that where you are from?” Mom asked. I’m glad he said that, because we had never discussed where they were from.

“Yes, we all grew up there together and decided to go to University here in the states together. I think we might stay here indefinitely and just visit our homeland from time to time. We really love North Carolina.”

Just as my mom was about to comment, my dad walked in. “Deda!” My nickname for my dad was Deda. When I was really young, I liked to say things backwards and would call him Deda instead of Daddy. I ran over to him and jumped into his arms.

He hugged me tight and said, “Munchkin, I’ve missed you so much!” He let me down and looked over the room and my guys.

“Deda, this is Carter, Mason, Harrison, Bryce, and Chase. They are my friends from school. Guys, this is my dad Boyd Hunter.” Each of them stood and walked over to my dad to shake hands with him.

Again, Bryce spoke for everyone, “Sir, thank you for allowing us to share in your holiday. We really appreciate your hospitality.”

My dad shook each of their hands and replied, “You are most welcome. Please, sit down so we can all talk.” I got a little nervous now. “So men, how did you meet my Bre?” That’s my dad, never one to beat around the bush.

Bryce spoke first, “Chase met her first. They were both in the library studying and it became late so he offered to walk her back to her dorm. Boone is a great town, but it never hurts to be careful. The rest of us met her the next day on campus and we all became friends.”

My dad looked at me, unsure. “I thought we talked about not walking around on campus after dark.”

“We did and I don’t. I fell asleep while studying and the next thing I know, it’s ten o’clock and they were closing. Luckily, Chase was walking out at the same time and offered to walk me home.”

“Well, I am glad there are still chivalrous men out there looking after my Bre. Thank you, Chase,” my dad said. I relaxed a little until he started asking more questions. “So, what are you each studying at App State? What are your plans for after school?”

Carter spoke up first, “I plan to become a veterinarian, so I am majoring in Biology.”

Bryce answered next, “I am in my last year of undergrad, majoring in Sustainable Development and plan to start The Cratis D. Williams Graduate School next fall majoring in the Environmental and Conservation program.”

“I am majoring in Computer Science and plan to get my graduate degree in Engineering. I am still working toward exactly what I want to do with it, but I am leaning toward work in Civil Engineering,” Chase answered. I didn’t know that; funny what you can learn when you ask.

Mason answered, “I plan to get my doctorate in Educational Leadership eventually. I am planning on finishing a year early with an undergraduate degree in Leadership and Education Studies first. I would like to become a professor.”

“And I am one semester away from my undergraduate degree in Physics. I am still debating on what graduate degree I want to pursue. I can’t decide between Mathematical Sciences and International Business,” Harrison answered.

Both my dad’s and mom’s mouths were hanging open at their answers. My guys were both sexy and smart. My face beamed, I was so proud of them. I looked to my dad and he closed his mouth. “Well, that is great to hear, boys. Looks like Bre hooked up with some smart and motivated friends. I am glad she ran into you, Chase. It makes me feel better knowing she

has friends like you looking out for her since she is so far away from us.”

“Well, I can now breathe a sigh of relief. Thank you for looking out for our little girl,” my mom said.

Looked like they both like the guys, so I breathed my own sigh of relief. “Mr. and Mrs. Hunter, thank you for your hospitality. We should go and get checked into the hotel. We know you want to spend time with Bre alone, but we would love to take you out to dinner tonight as a thank you for having us. I hear there is a really great restaurant one town over, Jean Luc’s Steakhouse.”

“Oh no, Bryce, that is really expensive. We only go there on special occasions,” Mom replied.

“It’s fine. We want to do something special for you, since you are going to be working so hard tomorrow. Please allow us to do this for you. Plus, tomorrow is Bre’s birthday, so it is a special occasion.”

Mom looked to my dad and he nodded, “Okay, Jean Luc’s it is,” Mom said.

“Great, we will meet you there at seven o’clock if that works,” Bryce replied.

“Seven it is. Thank you, Bryce. That is really nice of you,” Mom answered. The guys got up to leave and I offered to walk them out.

Once we were outside and out of earshot, I asked, “What was all the ‘you seem familiar’ talk?”

“Your mom is an Elemental. I can’t tell what kind, but she is definitely an Elemental,” Bryce said.

My heart dropped. How could she be an Elemental? I had never seen her do anything out of the ordinary. And how could she not have told me? I’d had such a hard time before the guys taught me what I was and what I could do. How could she have let me struggle like that my entire life? I started to get angry and then felt sad and let down. How could she have done this to me?

Carter walked up and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, “Bre, you don’t know why she did what she did. Don’t jump to conclusions until you know the entire truth. Your mom loves you and would never do anything to hurt you. Let’s find out what happened before you get upset with her. Let Chase see what he can find first and if he can’t find anything, you can talk to her.”

Harrison came up on my other side and took my hand, “I agree, you can tell she loves you more than anything. Let Chase do what he does and we will go from there. Tomorrow is your birthday, so forget about all of this and just enjoy being with your family.”

“That’s easier said than done, but I will try. I know you’re right, she does love me. I just don’t understand. If she knows about Elementals, why she would let me struggle my entire life and not explain it to me?”

“I will figure this out, Bre,” Chase said.

Each of the guys hugged me and got into the cars to drive to the hotel. I watched them drive away, wishing I was going with them. *Suck it up, Bre. Chase will figure this out.* I walked back inside to sit with my parents in the family room, and tried my best to relax.

“We really like your friends, Bre. They seem like great young men,” my dad said.

“Thanks, they’ve made my first semester a lot easier. I can’t imagine being there without them.”

“So, none of them are your boyfriend?” Mom asked.

“No, we are all just friends.”

“Well, maybe one day!” Mom said. “Do you want to go unpack and rest for a little while before dinner?”

“Yes, I am a little tired.” I went up to my room with my bag and flopped onto my bed. My mind was swirling with questions. I tried to relax and not think about it, so instead I think back to the night of my birthday dinner.

I woke up in the middle of the night with Bryce lying beside me in my bed. I must have fallen asleep on the way home. I looked at him sleeping peacefully and thought about the first time I met him. He was so sweet and wanted so badly to help me. I really couldn't imagine what my life would be like without him. Bryce opened his eyes and looked at me, "Hey, beautiful. Everything okay?" he asked in a husky voice. "Yes, I just woke up and was admiring the handsome man in my bed." He smiled at me and ran a finger down the side of my face. I stared into his eyes until I swore I was lost. He leaned forward and lightly brushed his lips over mine. He kissed me so softly that I barely felt it. Slowly, he ran his tongue over my lips and my entire body heated up. Then, his tongue slid into my mouth and found mine. He slowly tangled his tongue with mine until I was aching all over. I ran my fingers through his hair and pulled him closer. I needed him closer. He deepened the kiss and I still wanted more. He propped himself up on one elbow and slid the other hand down my arm to my hip. His hand squeezed my hip, then cupped my ass and pulled me flush against him. I could feel his excitement and it made me even hotter. He pulled back from my mouth and started kissing and licking down my neck. I arched my back to give him better access and because I couldn't help it. My heart was racing and my entire body was on fire. He slid his body down a little, but still pressed against me, kissing from my neck down to my chest. He looked up at me, asking permission, and I nodded. He lifted my shirt and began kissing my stomach. His tongue created swirls around my belly button as he lightly pushed me onto my back. He continued to kiss and lick my stomach as he lifted my shirt over my head. He looked at me and smiled with those dimples, saying, "You are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen, and I am the luckiest man in the world to be bonded to you. Let me show you how much you mean to me." Again, I nodded and he unclasped my bra, completely removing it. My chest was bare in front of a man for the first time, but I didn't feel nervous or embarrassed. I felt wonderful and loved. Using one finger, he lightly traced circles around my breasts and my nipples hardened immediately. He looked into my eyes and leaned in for another kiss. As he kissed me, he enclosed my breast in his hand and squeezed. I moaned into his mouth. He

backed away from my mouth again and I was about to pull his head back to me when he lowered his head to the other breast. He licked in circles around my nipple and then brought it into his mouth and sucked. I arched my back off the bed in a raging heat. What he was doing felt so good, but I needed more.

“Bryce, please.” He knew exactly what I needed; the hand that was around my breast slid down my stomach to undo the buttons on my pants. I was in a haze of want and needed him to move faster. He finally got them undone while moving his mouth to my other breast. My hands were in his hair, pulling him tighter to me. He slid his hand under my pants and panties to find them soaked. He slid one finger inside of me and then slowly back out. I needed him to go faster, so I placed my hand on top of his and forced him to move quicker. He kept that up for a minute, then added another finger and I immediately broke apart. I arched my back as my first-ever orgasm exploded through my body.

Bryce got one of my firsts and man was it a great first. I laid in my childhood bed and was hot from thinking about that night. I wished one of them was here now. Instead, I cooled myself down with a shower and got ready for dinner.

Chapter 20

Mom, Deda, and I pulled up to the restaurant and found the guys waiting for us at the entrance. They all looked dashing in their button-up shirts and slacks. Harrison was, of course, in all black, Carter was in a cornflower blue button-up and khakis, Chase was wearing a white dress shirt with his sleeves rolled up to the elbows and black slacks, Bryce was wearing a navy blue shirt with khakis, and Mason was in a red shirt with black slacks. They were all drool-worthy. I looked at Bryce and blushed a little. He tilted his head a little to the side in question. As I walked by him to go into the restaurant, I whispered, “I was thinking about the night of my birthday dinner.” Bryce looked at me with a huge grin and puffed his chest out a little. It made me giggle.

Jean Luc’s was a beautiful restaurant with its chandeliers, white tablecloths, and ornate archways. I was glad I chose my little black dress and black heels with ribbons wrapping around my ankles. I never wore these shoes, because they were uncomfortable, but they were super sexy. I also had my water symbol necklace Mason gave me proudly displayed. I wore it every day, but usually tucked into my shirt. My mom noticed it on the way over and was shocked that he spent so much on a birthday present for a “friend.” I wasn’t about to tell her what the others got me since they were just as expensive. My parents would freak out if they knew how much the guys spent on me. Heck, even I did sometimes.

The dinner was going great; Chase and my dad spoke about cars while Harrison and my mom discussed the Thanksgiving dinner preparations for tomorrow. I was so happy that my parents liked the guys. I felt a sense of relief knowing that they approved. I highly doubted they would approve of me being in a relationship with all of them, but at least they liked them. While we were eating, Chase asked my mom about her childhood and where she grew up.

“There is not much to tell. I grew up in a small town in Nebraska and my parents died when I was eighteen. I became pregnant a few years later and moved to Allendale. I had Bre and met Boyd a couple of years after that, and here we are,” Mom answered. It sounded very vague to me.

“Wow, that must have been hard to be on your own at eighteen,” Chase said.

My mom put her hand on her head and squinted, “It was. I’m sorry everyone, but I suddenly have a terrible headache. Boyd, I think I need to go home. I am really sorry for cutting tonight short. Thank you for the wonderful meal and company. Bre, please finish your meal. I’m sure the guys can drive you home.”

“Of course. Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” I asked.

“No, I’ll be fine. I get migraines sometimes. I just need to lie down and I will feel better. Again, I am so sorry.”

Bryce stood to pull her chair out for her and said, “Think nothing of it. We would be glad to take Bre home. I am sorry you are not feeling well.”

Mom and Deda left and the table was silent. Everyone was wondering what had just happened, but I was the first to speak up, “What the hell was that? Do you think she faked a headache to get out of answering questions?”

“No, she was really not feeling well. Did you see how white her face went as soon as Chase asked her about being on her own at eighteen?” Bryce asked.

“As soon as I asked something specific, she went white as a sheet and the headache started. I have no idea what is going on, but I am going to find out,” Chase said.

Something wasn’t right with my mom and that really worried me. She was the most important person in my life and I would do whatever I needed to do to make it right. “Chase, please figure out what is wrong with her.”

Chase looked at me with concern in his eyes, “Bre, I will do everything I can to figure it out. We will get to the bottom of

this.”

I pushed the rest of my food around on my plate, but didn't eat anymore. Bryce paid the bill and we all left. We stood outside the restaurant and Carter wrapped his arm around my shoulders, “Are you ready to go home?”

“No, can we maybe just walk a little? I need to clear my head before going home,” I answered.

He kissed my forehead. “Of course.”

We walked down Main Street and looked in the windows of the little shops. There were a couple of boutiques, more restaurants, an old hardware store, and a pet store. I stopped in front of the pet store and saw some cute puppies looking out the window. I switched on my animal gift and heard the puppies all speaking at once.

“Pick me!”

“Grrr, you are going down, stuffed monkey.”

“No, pick me!”

“I'm hungry!”

“My ball, mine.”

I laughed at how stinking cute they are. Once everything settled down, I wanted to get a dog. I had always wanted one, but mom had never let me have a pet. I would want a big dog, too, like a German Shephard or an Akita.

“I think they like you, Bre,” Mason said. “What are they saying?”

“Not much. Some of them are asking me to pick them and others are only thinking about their toys. I would love to have a dog one day. My mom would never let me have any pets. She is scared of most animals.” Chase had a strange look on his face when I said that. “What is it, Chase?”

“Not sure, but as soon as we get back, I will start researching. Try not to worry, we will get to the bottom of this. So you want a dog?” he asked, changing the subject.

I let it happen, because I really didn't want to stress about it anymore. "Yes, one day I want a really big dog, at least a hundred pounds."

"Well, we have enough land to have any size dog you want," Bryce said. "Should we look for one when we get back?"

"Not yet. I want things to settle down first, but then I would love to find one!" I said. These guys were so good to me.

"Bre, is that you?" I turned to see Tyler Robertson from high school walking toward us with Raven Haynesworth at his side. I hated both of them. They were a couple of the kids at school who picked on me. Most left me alone, but those two loved to embarrass me in front of everyone. One time, I was covered in my lunch, *don't ask*, and Raven took a picture and sent it to everyone in school. She called it Bre-rrito. The entire school called me that for months. I have hated her ever since. I looked to the guys in horror, because I just knew she and Tyler would try to embarrass me in front of them. I immediately stiffened when they walk closer.

"Bre-rrito! That is you!" Raven all but yelled. The guys seemed to know I was uncomfortable and took a step closer to me. Tyler and Raven looked around at the guys and Raven was practically drooling. "We haven't seen you since graduation. What have you been up to?"

Before I could speak, Bryce wrapped an arm around my shoulder and kissed my forehead, "That would be my fault. Bre and I started dating at college and this is the first time we have had a chance to make it home. And you are?"

Raven blushed and stepped away from Tyler a little. "My name is Raven. Bre and I went to high school together. Are you all in town for Thanksgiving break?"

Chase stepped forward, "Yeah, ever since Bryce started dating Bre, we all just fell in love with her. She was nice enough to invite all of us home for her birthday and Thanksgiving."

"Oh, how nice. Bre was always such a sweet girl in high school, everyone just loved her," Raven said while stepping toward Chase. She was such a liar. I started to change from

anxious to angry. She ran her hand down his arm and said, “There is a party Friday night at the old mill in Allendale, you guys should come.”

Bitch better get her hand off of my man or I will remove it for her. Bryce could tell I was about to do something, so he tightened his arm around me. Before I could move, Chase pulled away from her and looked to me, “We are here to spend time with Bre and her family. We have absolutely no interest in going to your little party.”

Raven, not one to be discouraged, looked up at Chase with her big brown eyes, thick with black liner, and said sweetly, “It will be fun. You could be my guest.”

“Not interested. Now go away. We were having a nice night until you came up,” Chase said, making me chuckle. We left them gaping there and continued down the street.

Take that, bitch! Where were the guys when I was in high school? I would have had a much easier time if I'd had them around.

We walked the main street until I started to get tired. “I’m ready when you guys are,” I told them. We all headed out to the cars and I jumped in with Carter, Chase, and Mason.

Chase sat in the back with me and wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “We will figure this out, I promise. Try not to worry about it.” He leaned over and kissed my forehead. I relaxed into him and laid my head against his chest. Too soon, though, we were back at my childhood home and I had to tell each of them goodbye again.

“We will be here first thing in the morning to help you and your mom with lunch,” Harrison said.

Bryce hugged me and said, “Get some rest and we will see you tomorrow.” He whispered in my ear before pulling away, “That means, don’t think about the other night if you want some rest. Unless you aren’t tired and I can sneak into your room tonight and recreate it.” He pulled back and smiled at me with his devilish dimples.

I giggled and blushed, thinking about how he'd made me feel and how I couldn't get enough of him. God, how I would love to be in his arms tonight. I wasn't sure how I would even get to sleep without one of them with me. But it was my parents' house and that would be disrespectful, no matter how much I wanted him in my bed. I smiled up at him, "No, not while we are here, but ask me again when we get back on Sunday." He nodded and they all got into their cars and drove away.

My parents were already in bed when I returned, so I went up to my room and changed into my pajamas. I laid in bed trying not to think about anything stressful. I needed to relax and sleep. My phone dinged with a text from Carter.

I miss you already. Sleep well, my love.

I texted him back, *I wish you were here.*

Over the next few minutes, each of them sent me a sweet or supportive text. I loved each and every one of them. And I was in love with each of them, too. I never comprehended a life like this. Hell, I never imagined I would have a real, lasting relationship with one man, much less be bonded to five of them. I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

Chapter 21

“Happy Birthday! Happy Thanksgiving!” My mom busted into my room shouting and waking me up. I didn’t sleep well with all the craziness and because I was alone. I doubted I would ever be able to sleep alone again. “My baby girl is nineteen!” She came over to the bed and I sat up. She sat beside me and gave me a huge hug. She handed me a little gold box with a white bow. “Happy Birthday, Bre. I love you.”

“Thank you, mom. I love you, too.” I opened the box to find a silver ring with four stones, a green one, a blue one, a clear one, and an orange one. “Mom, this is beautiful!”

“It was my mother’s and now I want you to have it. I am not sure where she got it, but I have had it since she died. Now, it’s yours.”

I hugged her and stared at the ring. I absolutely loved it.

“Thank you! I will wear it every day!”

“Happy Birthday, sweetheart. The guys should be here in about thirty minutes, so you should get up and moving.” She went back downstairs and I looked at my hand with the ring. I couldn’t wait to show the guys!

After I showered and got dressed, I bustled downstairs. The guys were here and already helping Mom, so I stood in the doorway to watch. Bryce was peeling potatoes, Carter was chopping onions, Mason and Chase were adding a leaf to the dining room table, and Harrison was basting the turkey that was already in the oven. A wave of contentment washed over me at the sight of all of them here in my childhood home. “Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to help?” my mom teased.

Each of the guys turned to look at me, “Happy Birthday, Bre!” Carter, who was closest to me said. He walked over and gave

me a big hug. The others quickly followed suit. I saw my mom watching us with a curiosity that made me nervous.

“So, how come none of you are dating my daughter?” she asked.

Mortified, I covered my face and shook my head. “Mom!!”

The guys burst out laughing at her boldness, but it was Bryce who responded first, “Well, you see Mrs. Hunter, each of us is in love with her, but we don’t think it’s fair for her to have to choose. So we all spoil her and take care of her together.”

Bryce’s explanation was so close to the truth that I stared wide-eyed at him, shocked that he would answer her so truthfully.

“Well, that is interesting. I am not really sure how to respond to that. Do any of you have other girlfriends?” she inquired.

“No, just Bre,” Bryce said matter-of-factly, like it was normal for five guys to be with one girl. I was horrified at what my mom would think. I looked at her and she had a small grin on her face.

“Well, Bre is a special girl. I guess she needs more than one guy to care for her. If nothing else, it will be interesting to see how this works out. I just hope it doesn’t break up your friendship.”

“No worries with that, because we’re all in this together. Bre’s happiness is our primary concern,” Harrison said.

My mom beamed at his words and looked at me with a questioning look in her eyes. I smiled and nodded. She nodded back and turned back around to work on the stuffing. “Well, let’s just keep this between us. I am not sure her father would be as open to this as I am.”

Everyone chuckled at the truth in that statement and got back to work. I couldn’t believe he told her, but it was such a relief for her to know at least part of the truth. I had wanted to talk to someone about my strange relationship with them and now I could. I looked to Bryce and smiled. He smiled back.

Mom kicked everyone out of the kitchen except Harrison and we went out to the backyard to get some air. With all of that

cooking, it was getting hot in the house. The cool November air was just what I needed. I took a deep breath and lifted my face to the sun. Just then, I heard my dad pull up. His dealership wasn't open today, but he still liked to go in and do paperwork. "Hi, Deda! How is the dealership?" I asked.

"Everything is good, very busy. Mom kick you out already?"

"Yes, Harrison is in there with her, but the rest of us were booted. It's probably for the best, I am sure I would have burnt something if I was in there too much longer. My mere presence around cooking food tends to ruin it." I didn't know what it was, but I really could not cook. I doubted it had anything to do with being an Elemental; I think it's just me.

As my dad walks over to me and kisses me on the forehead, he said, "I'm going to go change and see if she needs me."

After he was inside, I walked over to Chase and asked, "Did you get a chance to do any research last night?"

"I was up all night trying to figure it out, but I didn't find anything about your mother. I am changing my focus to the headaches she gets. There is something to that, but I need to speak with a witch I know first. There has to be something magical at work here. As soon as we get back, I plan to meet with her and see what she knows."

"Okay, thank you," I said as I wrapped my arm around his. I had been away from them all night and I needed the contact. He placed his other hand on mine and took my hand to look closer at it.

"Where did you get this?" Chase asked about the ring my mom gave me for my birthday.

"Oh, I almost forgot to show you guys. My mom gave this to me for my birthday. She said it was her mother's. Isn't it beautiful?"

Each of the guys walked over to examine the ring when Chase said, "Bre, it's a royal Elemental ring. The emerald is for earth, the blue topaz is water, the diamond is air, and the citrine is fire. She said it was her mom's?"

“Yes. She said she didn’t know where her mom got it, but knows it was hers. Why are there only four stones and what do you mean ‘royal’?”

“Old fashioned, backwards-thinking men, that’s why there are only four stones.” Carter said gruffly. I saw him give the others a sideways glance, but decided not to call him out on it. I had too much on my mind to worry about it.

“Well, when we get back, I want to add another stone right in the middle. Since a panther is my spirit animal, I want a black diamond dead center!” I all but yelled. I swore, those heads-up-their-asses council members needed to either step down or change their way of thinking. I was sick of hearing how Animal Elementals were treated differently. One of these days, I was going to tell them exactly what I thought about their outdated way of thinking.

“Only the royal family has rings like this. Each member of the royal family has a ring made for them once they reach the age of 20. How in the world did your grandmother get this ring?” Chase asked.

“Who knows, maybe I am a long lost princess and that is why everyone is trying to either kidnap or kill me!” I said jokingly. Everyone except Chase laughed; he looked deep in thought. I laughed it off, knowing that the ring on my finger was not royal. It must look similar, but there was no way it was a royal Elemental ring.

The rest of the morning passed with Mom and Harrison cooking, and my dad, the guys, and me talking in the family room. Deda even pulled out old photobooks of me as a child. The guys loved it and I was mortified. Around one o’clock, Mom and Harrison came in and asked a couple of us to set the table. When everything was ready to go, we served ourselves buffet-style and sat at the table. My plate was completely filled with a little of everything. I loved my mom’s and Harrison’s cooking.

Before we dug in, my dad stood up with his glass and said, “A toast to good friends and family, may each of your days be filled with love, laughter, and hope. Salud.”

A chorus of “salud” could be heard from everyone before we started to eat. Everything was wonderful and I was again so happy to have the most important people in my life with me, healthy and happy. After everyone was done eating, my mom and Harrison disappeared into the kitchen and came out with a cake, singing “Happy Birthday.” Everyone else joined in and I blushed and laughed at some of their terrible voices. Mom and Harrison placed the lit birthday cake in front of me and told me to make a wish. I knew exactly what I wanted to wish for. *My birthday wish is for everyone in this room to have a long and happy life.* I blew the candles out and everyone clapped. Mom cut everyone a slice and we sat down to enjoy it. My dad left the room for a few minutes and returned with a wrapped gift. I already knew what it would be, but I got excited every year.

Each year since I was six, Deda had given me a model car kit for my birthday. We always built it together and I displayed the finished car in my room on the shelving he made specifically for them. I unwrapped the kit and laughed out loud. Everyone looked at me in confusion. As I held the present up for everyone to see, I said, “It’s a model of a Shelby Cobra.” I looked directly at Chase and smiled.

After we all pitched in to clean up, we moved into the family room and watched football. I wasn’t a huge football fan, but my dad loved it. He was a diehard Arizona Cardinals fan. Every year, I sat and watched football on Thanksgiving with him. I never really paid much attention, but I thought I would this year since I would be going to a game with Carter. The guys were rooting for Arizona since my dad was and they were all getting loud. Apparently, a ref made a bad call and they were not happy about it. I gathered this from their yelling at the TV that the ref was blind and an idiot. Needing a break, I headed into the kitchen for some hot tea and saw my mom was there tidying up.

“Getting too loud in there for you, Bre?”

“Yeah, I needed a break from all of the testosterone. Guys really take football seriously, huh? I am glad that Deda is

getting along with the guys so well, though. It really means a lot to me that you both like them.”

“I can tell they mean a lot to you and you to them. I am just worried about this different type of relationship you have with them. Don’t get me wrong, I can tell they each care about you a great deal, but it is really unusual for people to be okay with others showing their significant other affection. I just don’t want them to get upset with each other and in turn, you.”

“I was worried about the exact same thing, but they don’t think anything about it. They don’t see it as weird. They have been friends since childhood and are closer than most families I know.”

“Just be careful. I don’t want to see you hurt. This is your first relationship with a man and it is with five. It won’t be easy.”

I walked over to her and whispered, “I know, it’s crazy, isn’t it? I worried I would never even have a boyfriend, much less five at once. But mom, I love them all. They are all completely different and I can’t imagine my life without them in it. They are family to me.”

“Bre, you have always been smart and levelheaded. I trust you know what you are doing. And as strange as the relationship is, I feel comforted knowing you have so many people that care about you looking out for you.” She leaned in and gave me a hug. “I just want you to have a happy life in whatever form that takes. That is more important to me than anything.”

I hugged her back, “Thanks for understanding, Mom. They are the best thing that has ever happened to me.” I walked over to the kettle and filled it with water for my tea before placing it on the stove to heat up. “So Mom, do you get those headaches a lot? I was really worried about you.”

“I used to get them all the time when you were really young, but throughout the years, they stopped. That was the first one I have gotten in years. I think I was just excited about you being home, the dinner, Thanksgiving, meeting your friends, and your birthday. It was just a little too much at one time and I became overwhelmed. After I laid down and relaxed, it immediately went away. I hope I didn’t ruin dinner.”

“No, we were just worried about you. After we finished, we all walked down Main Street and looked in shops. I saw a couple of puppies and the guys said I could get one. They all share a really large house and have a lot of land. The dog would have plenty of room to run.”

“Well, better them than me. I do not like pets. All that hair everywhere and the poop, yuck!”

“We also ran into Tyler and Raven while we were walking.”

“Really? How did that go? I know you can’t stand her.”

“It went great! Bryce said he was my boyfriend and Chase ran her off by being his gruff self. They were left dumbfounded. I loved every second of it. Too bad they weren’t in high school with me. I would have had a much better time.” I paused and thought back to high school and Callie. God, I still missed her terribly. In a softer voice, I said, “I think Callie would have loved them.”

“I know she would have! She would have loved anyone who cares for you like they do. Now, don’t get me wrong, I think she would have put them through the ringer first, but then once she was convinced they were honorable, she would have embraced them. Are you going to go see her gravesite?”

“Yes. I think I will probably go tomorrow. I think I am finally ready. How are her parents? Have you seen them recently?”

“Yes, we had dinner with them a couple of weeks ago. They miss you, too. You should go by and see them while you’re here. They are very proud of you and how well you are doing in college.”

“I don’t think I am ready to see them yet. It would be too hard. I will either give them a call or write them a letter. I feel terrible about not visiting them, but it is too difficult to see them, because I see her in them. Mom, I miss her so much. It is not fair that she doesn’t get to grow up and experience life. She was only eighteen. She had barely lived.” I started to cry. “It’s just not fair!” My mom came over and hugged me while I cried. I looked up and saw Carter and Bryce standing in the doorway, looking worried.

“Bre, are you okay?” Carter asked.

I pulled away from Mom and walked over to them; they both hugged me at the same time. “I’m fine. I was thinking about Callie and how I need to go to her gravesite tomorrow.” I relaxed into them a little. “I still miss her so much.”

Bryce rubbed circles on my back, “I know, sweet girl. I am so sorry you had to go through that. We will all go with you tomorrow and you can introduce us to her. Would you like that?”

“Yes, I would. Thank you.” They each gave me a kiss on the cheek before walking back into the family room.

I turned to look at my mom and saw her eyes were glassy with unshed tears. “They really love you, Bre. You are very lucky to have them in your life. It was like they knew you were upset and had to come to you. I have never seen anything like it.”

I smiled a little at that, knowing she was exactly right. They knew I was upset, because they could feel it. I knew this, because I could feel all of their love and strength flowing into me right now. Our bonds were getting stronger.

Mom and I made our way back into the family room a little while later. The afternoon turned into evening and we all ate leftovers for dinner and called it a night. I walked the guys to their cars. “Thank you for coming to Thanksgiving and helping so much!”

Harrison picked me up off my feet in a big hug, “Bre, we wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Happy Birthday!” He kissed me on the cheek and stepped away.

Chase walked up to me next, “Bre, Happy Birthday. I will continue to work on things, so don’t worry.”

“Chase, I almost forgot, I asked my mom about her headaches today. She said she used to get them a lot when I was little, but hadn’t for years until last night. I’m not sure if that will help at all, but wanted to tell you,” I said.

“That does help, thank you.” Chase leaned in, kissed me on the cheek, and whispered in my ear, “I miss holding you at

night. When we get back home, you, me, and The Notebook in your bed. How does that sound?”

I looked at him, astonished. “Really? I would love that. You really must miss me if you are willing to watch The Notebook!”

“You have no idea! Sleep well and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Bryce, Carter, and Mason also gave me a kiss on the cheek and wished me a happy birthday before they all left to return to their hotel. I sighed and went back into the house. I loved being with my parents, but I was ready to be back home with my guys.

I talked with my parents about school, my classes, and North Carolina for a couple of hours until it got late and we headed off to bed. As I laid in bed reliving the day and thinking about how perfect it was, I thought about how they knew I was upset and came to comfort me so quickly. I needed to ask them more about bonding. All I knew was that when you were fully bonded with someone, you took on their gift permanently. They never said anything about being able to sense the others’ feelings. I wondered what else would happen once we were fully bonded. I started getting nervous thinking about being fully bonded to all of them. That meant I would need to have sex with each of them. Don’t get me wrong, once I was ready for sex, I would have no problem being with any of them, but growing up human made me a little uncomfortable about sleeping with five different people. Sleeping with one of them made me anxious. Most of them were a little older than I was and I was sure vastly more experienced. What if I sucked at it and they were stuck with me for the rest of their lives? What if the others knew when I’d had sex with one of them? I imagined walking down to breakfast one morning and having to face the other four. I shivered when an uncomfortable dread filled me. What if two of them wanted to have sex with me at the same time? How would that even work? All these questions were making my heart race and my forehead was sweating. My mind was bouncing all over the place when my phone rang. I answered it without looking to see who it was.

“Bre, are you okay? What’s happening?” Bryce asked.

“I’m fine, just lying in bed thinking about things.”

“Oh, okay. We were all hanging out in my room when all of us suddenly felt anxious and jittery. Our hearts were racing and we started feeling nauseous. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine, I promise. I was just thinking about some things that were making me a little nervous.”

“Give me the phone. Bre, this is Chase. We are coming over now. Just stay where you are and we will be there in fifteen minutes.”

“Chase, no, I’m fine. I was just worried a little about some things.”

“What things, baby? I’m going to put you on speaker so we can all talk to you.”

Great, now they wanted to know my fears about having sex with them. Could this get any worse? I couldn’t talk to them about this. Then, I thought back to something my mom said to me once, “If you can’t talk about sex, then you shouldn’t be having it.” I giggled a little at that, knowing she was exactly right. So I pulled my big girl panties up and told them. “I was thinking about how I will have sex with each of you to fully complete the bond and how I was nervous about it.” There. They asked, I answered.

There was complete silence for a few seconds before Bryce spoke up, “Bre, we sometimes forget that you didn’t grow up in an Elemental environment and think differently about things like that. Plus, the fact that you are inexperienced probably adds to your nervousness. Sweetheart, don’t worry at all. Things will progress with each of us as it should. None of us will pressure you to do anything you are not ready for. We have a very long lifetime to be together and we are in no rush. We will take all of this at your pace.”

“Thank you, Bryce. That really does make me feel better, but I worry about being with one of you and how the others will feel about it. My worst fear is that you will fight or argue with each other. I will not allow anything, including myself, to break this family up. I would rather be alone than have that

happen.” It was easier to talk to them about this when I didn’t have to look at them. I would be so embarrassed to have this conversation in person. I was very glad they called me.

“Bre, we would never have a problem with you being with one of us. We are a family and one day, we will be fully bonded to each other. You have to understand that we grew up understanding we would be in a multiple-person relationship. We never thought it would be with five others, but we always knew we would either share a woman with another man or would have two women share us. The only thing we worried about was if we would be able to get along with the other man if that was how it worked out. We are extremely lucky to have our entire family bond to the same girl. I am sure the others feel the same way I do when I say, I could not in my wildest dreams have imagined it working out better. I will have my family of brothers with me for my entire life while we work together to make our bonded the happiest Elemental in the world,” Chase said.

A small tear slid down my face at his sweet and sincere words. Chase may be the grumpiest of the guys, but he was also the most feeling. He felt his emotions deeper than anyone. “Thank you, Chase,” I said softly. “You guys are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I can’t imagine my life without you.”

“I’m glad you feel better. Now, get some sleep and we will see you tomorrow,” Chase replied.

I heard the others in the background.

“Goodnight.”

“Sleep well.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“Miss you, sweetie.”

My guys were the best. I felt so much better after talking with them. I still couldn’t believe I said what I said. I blushed just thinking about it. I guess I would do what Bryce said and take it as it goes with each of them. I did need to make sure I spent alone time with each of them, though. Sleeping together was one way, but I needed to start spending time with them outside

of the bedroom. Wow, never thought I would think that statement about five men! Oh, how my life had changed.

Chapter 22

I woke up the next morning dreading what I needed to do today. I willed myself to get up and shower. I didn't do much with my makeup, just a little mascara and lip gloss. I made sure the mascara was waterproof, because I would be needing it. I traveled downstairs and saw my mom cooking breakfast. I smelled bacon and my mood immediately improved. Mom created a plate for me with bacon, eggs, and pancakes. I poured a glass of milk and took everything to the kitchen table. "Thanks, Mom, this looks great."

"Of course, honey. Now, it may not be as great as what Harrison can fix, but it should be good."

"I meant to ask you, how did cooking with him go?" I asked as I took a large bite of bacon. *Mmm, bacon!*

"Honey, he is wonderful. He gave me several new ideas for different ways to prepare some of my recipes. He should be a chef!"

"He is a wonderful cook and somehow knows when I want something hearty or when I want something light. His pot roast is to die for! And I really love his chocolate chip pancakes, too!"

"So, are you at their house for breakfast often?"

Oops. I wasn't thinking when I said that. Oh, well. She knew most of it already, so I might as well tell her everything. "So mom, I, uh...I kinda live with them now," I said it as quickly as I could before shoving some eggs in my mouth and looking up at her sheepishly.

She took a deep breath before speaking. "Okay. Let me process this. My nineteen-year-old daughter is living with five men who she is also in a relationship with." She took another deep breath. "Are you sleeping with them?"

“What? No! They live in a huge house and created a room for me. I have only kissed each of them. I am not ready for anything else yet.” That wasn’t the entire truth, but she was my mom and that was not something I wanted to discuss with her. Plus, it was mostly the truth.

“Okay. I can handle this.” She took another deep breath. “I do feel better that you are with them and safe and that you have your own room. But Bre, this seems really fast – moving in with them after only knowing them for a few months.”

“I know, I thought the same thing at first, but it’s working out fine.” I couldn’t tell her that the main reason I moved in with them was that I was almost killed and kidnapped twice. I figured she would feel better about me being safer with them, but freak out that someone was trying to kill me. I couldn’t wait until Chase figured out what was going on and I could talk to her more openly. I just couldn’t imagine what could have happened. Why didn’t she know she was an Elemental? I pushed those thoughts aside. “Mom, I am being responsible about this. I have my own room and they help me with studying and my classes. Mom, please trust me that this is the right thing for me right now.”

“Bre, I do trust you. It is just a lot to take in all at once. I will be okay with it once it all sinks in. Just give me time.” She smiled at me and changed the subject. “What time are they picking you up?”

I looked at my watch. “Oh, crap, any second now.” I shoved the rest of my breakfast in my mouth and rinsed the plate just in time to hear a knock at the door. I placed the plate in the dishwasher and walked to the front door. As soon as I opened it, my favorite sight in the whole world was standing before me – my five Elementals. A rush of heat filled my entire body at the sight of them. They were each wearing casual clothes, either a button-up shirt or a Henley with khakis or jeans. I stared at them for a few moments until my mom came up behind me and invited them in.

“Bre, it’s chilly out there. Why didn’t you invite them in?” Mom asked.

“Oh, sorry. I guess I was, uh, never mind. Sorry guys.” I couldn’t help but stare at them and get lost sometimes. They were just so beautiful, I couldn’t help it. Each of them smirked at me as they made their way in.

“Have you boys eaten this morning?” Mom asked them.

“Yes, ma’am. We ate at the hotel before coming over,” Mason replied.

“So, what are your plans today?” Mom asked as we walked into the family room.

“Well, we planned on going with Bre to Callie’s grave and maybe grab lunch while we’re out,” Bryce answered her.

“Why don’t I meet you after lunch and take Bre shopping for her ski suit? I hear you guys are going to get her on the slopes,” Mom suggested.

“Yes, we are! She already has skis and boots. Once she has the ski outfit, she will be set,” Chase beamed.

“You already have skis? Where in the world did you get those?” Mom asked.

Carter answered before Chase or I could, “I gave her my older sister’s old set. She outgrew them and they had been sitting in our basement for a couple of years. I figured Bre would fit in them and she did.”

“Oh, great! Well, I have a few things to take care of. Just call me when you are about to eat lunch and I will head that way. Nice to see you again, boys,” she said as she headed upstairs.

I looked at Carter and said, “Thanks for that. I’m not sure how much more she can take. I slipped up and told her I live with you guys. Telling her that you guys spent way too much on me for my birthday would push her over the edge.”

“You told her you live with us?” Harrison asked.

“Accidentally. She was talking about how great a cook you are and I told her you made the best chocolate chip pancakes. She then asked how often I was there for breakfast.”

“You could have told her I fixed breakfast for dinner or something,” Harrison replied.

“Oh, I didn’t think about that. Oh, well. Now she knows. I hate lying to her anyway. Once we figure out what is going on with her, I want to tell her everything. I hate keeping things from her.”

“Are you ready to go?” Bryce asked.

“I guess. I am really dreading this. It’s the first time I have been back since the day they buried her.” I grabbed a jacket from the hall closet. It wasn’t too cold, but there was still a briskness to the air today.

“We can wait if you are not ready,” Carter said.

“No, I need to do this. I owe it to her to visit and I want to introduce you guys. She was one of the three most important people in my life, so I want her to meet five of the most important people in my new life. She would be pissed if I didn’t introduce you.”

“Okay, let’s do this,” Bryce said.

We all got into to their rental cars. Today, I was riding with Bryce, Harrison, and Mason. Too quickly, we arrived at the cemetery and I directed them to her grave. Sadness and grief weighed heavily on me as we got closer. The guys stayed back a little so I could be alone for a few minutes. Tears were running down my face by the time I reached her final resting place. I wiped them away with the tissues I had thankfully brought with.

“Hi, Callie. I miss you. I think about you every single day. I wish you were here with me. You would love North Carolina and college life. Things are really crazy for me right now. I found out that I am an Elemental. And I am a weird, one-of-a-kind Elemental. I have all five gifts when others only have one. But you know me, *strange* is my middle name! I wish you were here with me, helping me through this. But I do have five guys who are helping me. I know it’s weird that I have never had a boyfriend and now have five, but you will love them.” I felt the guys move closer and surround me.

“Callie, this is Bryce. He is the leader of this group and takes care of everyone, especially me. Next to him is Chase; he used to be grumpy to me, but now he is the most passionate person I know and is only grumpy to other people. Mason is next; he recently came so close to dying that it almost broke me. He promises to never do it again, because Callie, I don’t think I could take it. Then there is Carter. He knows me almost as well as you do. He makes sure I am okay and surrounds me with his love when I am not. And last is Harrison. He looks scary, but he is the sweetest and best cook I know. Trust me, if he winked once at you like he did me, you would be putty in his hands. They are my bonded. I have a connection to each of them and will share my life with them. Callie, I love each and every one of them. They each hold a special place in my heart, but in vastly different ways. I don’t know how to explain it, but I was made to be with them.” I looked each of them in the eyes and smiled at them. I wanted them to know I meant every word. I loved each of them with everything I had.

Bryce stepped forward and looked down to Callie’s gravestone. He placed a single calla lily on the grass before her gravestone. I hadn’t even noticed that they were all holding them. I couldn’t believe I forgot to bring her flowers. I was a terrible friend. As I berated myself in my head, Bryce started speaking to Callie, “Callie, I just want you to know that Bre is the most important person in our lives. We will take care of her for the rest of our lives. I promise this to you.”

He stepped back and Chase stepped forward. He placed his flower beside Bryce’s. “Callie, we will protect her from anything and anyone that will try to do her harm, no matter what. I promise this to you.”

Next was Mason, “Callie, we will make sure she is happy. We will fill her days with laughter and joy. I promise this to you.”

Carter stepped forward next. “Callie, Bre’s life will be filled with love. She will never go a day without knowing she is loved by each of us. I promise this to you.”

Harrison took Carter’s place. “Callie, we will support and nurture any goals Bre wants to reach in her life. We will make sure she fulfills her passion. I promise this to you.”

Tears were falling freely now. I couldn't believe how thoughtful they were. My guys made promises to my best friend to cherish me for the rest of my life. What did I do to deserve this? My heart was bursting with love, but also with sadness. Oh, how I wished she could be here now. I wished she could see how great they all were. I hoped she was looking down on us, smiling at how beautiful our relationship was.

I stepped up to her gravestone and placed my hand on it, "I love and miss you, Callie. You were the best friend a girl could have. Thank you for being there for me. I miss you." I lifted my fingers to my lips and kissed them, then touched the top of her gravestone. "I will make you proud, I promise."

I turned to the guys and they enveloped me. No one said anything, they just held me. After crying everything out, we made our way back to the cars. I turned to them and said, "Thank you for that. It was really hard for me, but you made it special. I will never forget what you did for me today. I love you all."

We got in the cars and drove one town over to the large mall there. During the twenty minute drive, I looked out the window and thought back to what each of them said to Callie. Looking back, it was almost like a wedding promise each of them made to her about me. I'd never even thought about marriage. I couldn't legally marry all of them, so how would that work? Since I had enough going on in my head at that moment, I pushed it to the back of my mind for later.

We enjoyed lunch together and then my mom met up with us to take me shopping. We looked for a ski outfit and I found a really cute, powder blue jacket and black ski pants. I spent the rest of the night talking and laughing with my mom and dad. It had been nice to spend time with them for the past few days, but I was ready to get back to the little castle. I missed being with my guys all the time.

The next morning, I packed my bag and headed downstairs. Today we were heading back to North Carolina. I heard the guys speaking with Mom and Dad as I made my way down the stairs. Deda was giving them a talk about watching out for me and making sure I never walked alone at night again. I

chuckled to myself at how sweet he was. He may not be my biological father, but he was the best dad in the world. I think I lucked out in that department. Just like me, my mom had great taste in men!

I left my bag at the bottom of the stairs near the front door and walked into the family room. My breath was taken away for a second at the sight of them. I would never get used to how beautiful they all were and when they were all together, whew, talk about man candy!

“Bre, we are going to miss you! I am so glad you came home and brought your friends,” Mom said. “And I don’t care what you say, your father and I will be coming to see you soon.”

“Of course you can come see me!” I walked over to her and wrapped my arms around her. “I love you, Mom. Thank you for understanding.”

“You are welcome. I trust you to do what is best for you. I love you, sweetheart. Now, I have some muffins for you to take with you. I made blueberry and chocolate chip.” Mom released me and disappeared into the kitchen to get our muffins.

I walked over to my dad and hugged him around the waist, “I love you, Deda. I’ll be back in a few weeks for Christmas break.”

He squeezed me back and said, “I love you, too, munchkin. Hopefully, you will be able to stay longer next time. This visit was just too short for my liking.”

Mom came in with our muffins and handed them to Carter. We all made our way out to the cars and I turned around to hug my parents one more time. “I love you. I’ll be home in a few weeks.” They hugged me back and told me they loved me. I started to get misty-eyed, so I turned and walked to the car with Bryce and Chase. We all waved as we drove toward the airport.

The flight back seemed longer than the one there, but the guys and I played cards to pass the time. Apparently, they didn’t think a girl knew how to play poker and took it easy on me at first. After beating them five times in a row, they stopped. I

explained to them that my dad and I had been playing since I was five. We would gather up a ton of pennies and whatever I won, I kept. I thought I was rich when I was little with all of those pennies. My dad never let me win, though. He always played like he would with his friends. That's how I got so good. The guys never saw it coming.

As we walked back into the front door of our home, I said, "I loved being with my parents these last few days, but this is home and I am glad to be back! Movie night tonight?" A chorus of yeses came from the guys. "Harrison, what do you think about doing a selection of appetizers for dinner and eating them while watching a movie? I would kill for your fried mac and cheese balls."

"That sounds like a perfect idea, Bre!" Harrison replied. "We could do those and chicken wings, boiled shrimp, french fries, potato skins, and dip."

"You are making me hungry!" I replied.

Everyone separated to unpack their things and settle back in. I took a long bath with bubbles and relaxed, happy to be home.

Chapter 23

Movie night was so much fun. We watched another superhero action flick and ate the appetizers Harrison fixed. It was a perfect homecoming. After the movie, I climbed the stairs to my room with Chase. He promised me *The Notebook*, and I was holding him to it. While he set up the movie, I went into the bathroom to change into a tank top and sleep shorts. As I walked out of the bathroom door, I saw him lying on the bed in just his boxer briefs. He was a sight to behold. At over six feet tall, he stretched almost the entire length of the king bed. He was leaning back on his elbows messing with the remote and didn't notice me ogling him. His blond hair was getting long and covered his eyes, so I couldn't see that beautiful ocean blue. But I could see his lean and sculpted chest, with what had to be an eight pack. His long legs were stretched out in front of him with his ankles crossed. He looked up at me, flipped his hair out of his eyes, and in true Chase fashion, smirked at me.

"Like what you see?" he teased me.

"Hell yes, I do!" I ran and jumped onto the bed, almost landing on him. He rolled over and caged me in with an arm on either side of my head.

"Well, I like what I see, too." He leaned in and lightly kissed my lips. "Now, this is what I have been waiting on for days. I missed being able to touch or kiss you."

"Chase, it was only three days," I teased him. I didn't tell him that I felt the same way. Being home gave us the privacy to really be with each other instead of watching our step around my parents.

"I know, it was the longest three days of my life!"

I giggled at his exaggeration as he leaned down and kissed me again, this time a little harder. I ran my hands through his hair

and wrapped my arms around his neck. The kissing got more intense and I felt him lower his weight on top of me. I could feel how excited he was and it got me even more aroused. I started to press against him and move a little, hoping to encourage him to do the same. He pulled back from kissing me and put his forehead to mine, “Bre, you have no idea what you do to me. I have never felt this way about someone emotionally, not to mention how just looking at you gets me hard.” Suddenly, there was a knock at the door and I could hear Harrison apologizing.

Chase rolled over beside me and got under the covers. “Come in,” he said.

“Chase, man, I know it’s your night and I am really sorry,” Harrison apologized again.

“Don’t worry about it, brother. Whatcha need?”

“Would you mind if I hung out in here for a little while? I just need to be around her for a bit, so I can relax and sleep.”

“Of course I don’t mind, but you have to watch The Notebook.”

“I’m fine with that. Bre, is it okay if I stay for a little while?” Harrison asked.

“I would love it!” I replied. Harrison was shirtless with only his black, *of course*, sleep pants. He was the tallest of my guys at 6’5” and the largest. His barrel chest and huge arms made for an imposing sight. Add in his sleeve of tattoos on one arm and halfway across his chest and his jet-black hair that was spiked up a little in the front and you have my scary biker guy. I’d been wary of him at first, but the more I got to know him, the more I figured out that his look is in direct opposition to his everyday demeanor. Don’t get me wrong, cross him and you would feel his wrath. That was when sweet, cuddly, Chef Harrison disappeared and Death-in-biker-boots guy came out. I smiled a little at how I now knew them so much better.

Chase and I situated ourselves on the bed with me in the center and him on my left. Harrison walked around the bed and got in on my right. We all propped ourselves against the headboard

with pillows and Chase started the movie. While watching the movie, I felt like I could relate to Allie's fierce love of Noah, because I felt the same way about my guys. About thirty minutes into the movie, Chase scooted in closer to me and held my hand. He started rubbing circles on it with his thumb. After a couple of minutes, I reached over to Harrison and took his hand. I expected Chase to get upset that he was sharing his alone time with Harrison, but he didn't seem to care. Within a few minutes, each of them was lazily running fingers up and down my arm with a feather-light touch. It felt so good that I laid my head back and closed my eyes. Slowly, Chase leaned into me and kissed my exposed neck. He placed kisses up my neck to my ear. Then, he lightly bit my earlobe and I gasped while grabbing each of their thighs in a death grip. Harrison ran a hand over my stomach, brushing the bottom of my breasts as he did so. I arched my back a little in reaction to his touch and he lifted the bottom of my tank and slid his hand under. Feeling his hand on my bare stomach was intoxicating, but then he continued up to my bare breasts and teased them with his barely-there touch. I tried to press into his hand, but he kept the touch light.

Chase was still kissing and licking my neck, then took my chin and turned my head toward him. He softly kissed me and ran his tongue over my lips. Then, he slid his tongue into my mouth and circled his tongue with mine. At the same time, Harrison squeezed my breast and lifted my tank so he could place kisses on my stomach. The kisses led up to my breast and he circled his tongue around my nipple. Then, similar to Chase and my earlobe, he lightly bit it and then fastened his mouth over it and pulled me into his mouth. I couldn't think straight with everything they were doing to me.

My hands were still on their thighs, so I slid them up until I was touching them. Both of them were hard as steel as I started to slide my hands up and down. Both of them groaned from my touch and pushed into my hand. Chase released my lips, then kissed and nibbled down my neck. Harrison lifted his head long enough to take my top off. They seemed to be in sync, because Harrison turned my head toward him and kissed me roughly as Chase lowered himself to lavish my breasts. I

tried to lower Chase's briefs and push down Harrison's sleep pants, but I wasn't having much luck. I growled into Harrison's mouth with frustration and they both chuckled and gave me some assistance. Now I had the real things in my hands. As I touched them both, they each slid a hand down my stomach and lowered my sleep shorts and panties until I could pull my feet out of them. I was completely naked now and they each wrapped a hand around my knees and pulled my legs apart. Chase continued to lick, suck, and squeeze my breasts while Harrison's tongue invaded my mouth. They were both hard as rocks as I pumped them up and down. I was squirming, wanting them to touch me and they did. Harrison played with me while Chase put two fingers inside. All three of us found our rhythm and exploded at the same time.

After we came down from the orgasm high, we laid there and no one said anything. I was starting to feel embarrassed at what just happened when Chase said, "Holy shit! That was the sexiest thing I have ever seen. Bre, you are beautiful and it completely turned me on seeing Harrison and I both get you wet and make you come. I never thought I would be into threesomes, but holy hell, that was hot."

"Fuck!" Harrison said as he ran his hand through his hair. "I'm getting hard again just thinking about it."

I smiled and relaxed into them. I was so glad they liked it, because I couldn't think of anything sexier than two of my men lying naked and satisfied next to me. And I had been worried about them being jealous of each other. Guess I could put that to rest. If they were okay with this, then I knew they'd be okay with what I had been worried about before.

I laid back and covered myself with the sheet and comforter. Chase turned toward me and wrapped an arm around my stomach. Harrison started to get up, but I shook my head and pulled him back to me. He laid on his back and I leaned my head against his shoulder and threw a leg over his. If someone walked in here right now, they would know exactly what had happened.

Chapter 24

I awoke to knocking at my door. I found myself snuggled up to Chase with Harrison spooning me from behind. A girl could get used to this. A second after the blissfulness of waking up to two of my guys, panic set in. What were the other guys going to think? Whoever was at the door was going to know what we did. My confidence from last night was waning.

“Come in,” Chase called out without opening his eyes or moving. My heart was racing and I was afraid I would have a panic attack.

Bryce walked in, observed the three of us in the bed, and smiled. It was a true smile, because I could see his dimples showing. He walked over to the bed and sat on the edge beside a naked, but covered up, Chase. He handed me a mug of my favorite hot tea and said, “You guys look like you had fun last night. Sorry I missed out.”

Harrison abruptly sat up and said, “Holy shit, dude. It was fucking hot as hell. Never thought I would be into *sharing* sharing my bonded, but you have no idea how much of a turn on it was to see Chase get her aroused. It’s like you get to watch and experience it at the same time.”

“Well, I will have to experience it for myself one day,” Bryce said while winking at me.

I blushed at his statement, but got excited that it might happen. I breathed a sigh of relief that he wasn’t upset. They kept telling me that this is what they were used to, but it was going to take me a little while to truly understand.

“Since you are both here, I can tell you at the same time. There is a mission that I need both of you with me on. Carter and Mason are staying here with Bre and the three of us need to leave by noon today,” Bryce explained.

My heart dropped every time one of my guys left for a mission. I was terrified that they wouldn't come back. I knew this was what they did, but I hated the thought of any of them getting hurt.

"Got it. We'll be ready," Chase answered. Bryce smiled at me again and got up and left the room.

Harrison and Chase laid back down and snuggled with me for a few more minutes before getting up. They each left to shower and pack. I laid there feeling a little sad and alone. I really hated when they had to leave. Resigned to the fact that there was nothing I could do about it, I started to get up to take a shower when I heard another knock at my door. I quickly covered up and said, "Come in."

Carter walked in and saw me in the bed, holding the sheet around my neck, clearly covering my naked chest. I blushed a little while he stood there staring. He finally realized that he was just standing there staring and looked down. "Sorry, I just wanted to see if you wanted to train with your panther gift today. We haven't really worked on it much."

"Carter," I called his name so he would look at me. He looked up at me expectantly. "Come sit with me for a second." I patted the bed next to me. He walked over and sat down. He seemed hesitant with me and I didn't like it. I'd had *very* intimate times with Bryce, Harrison, and Chase, but not Carter or Mason. I wanted to make sure I spent time with them as equally as possible; no one should feel left out. I loved them all and wanted to make sure they knew it. So in true, not-so-Bre fashion, I dropped the sheet and answered his question. "I think that is a great idea. Want to start after breakfast?"

He stared at me for a few moments, looking stunned, but that quickly changed into a hungry look. He lifted his eyes to meet mine and I could tell he was turned on. I took his hand and placed it on my breast. I had never been so bold before, but I wanted him to know how much I cared about him and wanted to share intimate moments with him, too. I looked up into his eyes and saw his shock at my audaciousness. I smiled at him and laid back on the bed, hoping he would follow. He leaned over me with his hand still on my chest, squeezing and playing

with my breasts, and kissed me. I kissed him back, pouring all my love into the kiss. I ran my fingers through his hair and tugged a little. This caused him to kiss me harder. We continued to kiss and touch until we heard Bryce in the hall saying breakfast was ready. Carter pulled back from the kiss and looked at me with admiration and love. I looked directly into his eyes and said, "I love you, Carter. I wish I could keep kissing you forever."

He leaned back down and kissed me one more time, "Bre, I love you, too. I can't wait to spend alone time with you again. I want to show you how much I love you."

I smiled up at him and said, "Okay!" His smile lit up his beautiful face. I knew he'd had it rough being an Animal Elemental and dealing with the loss of his girlfriend to her bonded, but I hoped one day he would trust in our bond and know how much I cared about him. I looked at him and saw a beautiful man. He was stunning with his soft brown hair and golden eyes. His chiseled jaw had a little scruff and I couldn't wait to see what was under those clothes. All of my men were in shape because of their job, and I couldn't wait to explore his beautiful body.

He got up and said, "I'll see you downstairs." There was a lightness to his demeanor that hadn't been there before. I hoped I could continue doing that for him.

After he left, I quickly jumped in the shower and dressed. I put on a black tank with grey yoga pants and my hair in a ponytail. Once we finished with breakfast, we could get straight to training on my panther gift.

After breakfast, Carter and I trained for several hours and I felt like I was getting better. He was able to help me to channel my panther gifts and test my limits. I could run faster than he could and I was more agile, but he beat me in hearing and sight. We were physically superior to the others in these areas, because of our animal gifts.

Exhausted, we went back inside for lunch. Bryce, Chase, and Harrison were about to leave and I was glad I got to see them off. They each gave me a hug and kiss on the cheek before

leaving. I tried to be tough for them, but as soon as they left, I shed a few tears. I worried about them so much when they left for missions. Carter and Mason tried to cheer me up by asking if I wanted to go for a hike. That was just what I needed to get my mind off of the other three leaving.

After lunch, the three of us drove up to the Blue Ridge Mountains. I was glad Callie and I chose North Carolina; it is the most beautiful state I had ever seen. We took the trail to Linville Falls to see the waterfall. It was a pretty easy hike and I would have loved to talk to the animals on the way, but there were quite a few people around. It was a beautiful day; a little chilly, but with perfectly blue skies and a few puffy, white clouds floating past. It felt so good to get out and breathe in the crisp mountain air. Carter and Mason walked on either side of me, talking the entire time. I zoned out a bit and just enjoyed being there with them. After making it to the lookout for the falls, we made our way back to the car. I was glad to get away for a few hours and clear my head. I knew my boys were okay, but I couldn't stop myself from worrying about them.

Since none of us could cook, we grabbed Chinese takeout on the way home. Being that we were the only three at the house, we vegged out in front of the TV in the family room. Reruns of Buffy were on, so I pouted and begged just enough for them to give in and watch it with me.

After a while, I started to get tired and began cleaning up our dinner, so I could shower and go to sleep. Both of them helped and we knocked it out in no time. Carter, being the gentleman that he was, kissed me on the cheek and headed to his room. Mason was sleeping with me tonight and I was excited to spend some one-on-one time with him. Of all my guys, I still felt like I didn't spend as much time with him as the others. He was pretty quiet and didn't ask much of me.

I looked to Mason and said, "I'm going to take a quick shower. Meet me in my room in fifteen minutes?"

"Great. I'm going to do the same. See you in a few."

I headed to my room and quickly showered, As I was drying off, I remembered I forgot to bring night clothes in the bathroom with me. As I moved back into my room in just a towel, I saw Mason walking in. He saw my state of undress and stopped. “Sorry, I guess I was a little quicker than fifteen minutes. I can come back after you get dressed.”

As he started to back out of the doorway, I said, “No, come on in. It won’t take me a second to put something on.”

Mason ventured fully into the room and closed the door. While he walked over to the bed, I pulled a tank, underwear, and sleep shorts, from the dresser. Apparently, I was still in “bold Bre” mode, so I dropped the towel and began to dress. I could feel Mason watching, so I took my time. After I finished dressing, I turned and walked over to the other side of the bed. I tried to act like I hadn’t just gotten completely naked in front of him for the first time and climbed into the bed. I looked up at him and he was staring at me with his mouth hanging open.

“You might want to close that or you will catch flies,” I said, giggling.

He closed his mouth and looked at me like he wanted to say something, but didn’t. “You okay?” I asked.

“Uh, ah, well, uh, yes, I am great,” he said, smiling.

I laughed at him and snuggled under the covers. He finally recovered and climbed in as well. He turned off the lamp and faced me. My eyes hadn’t fully adjusted yet, but I could feel him looking at me with those ice-blue eyes. I turned toward him, “I feel like I haven’t had much time alone with you. I am so glad you’re here with me tonight.”

“Me, too.” He traced my hairline with a light touch and softly ran his knuckles down my cheek. “You are so beautiful. I just can’t get over how lucky we are to have you.”

“Mason, I am the lucky one. Before I met you, I had no idea who or what I was. I was completely alone. You guys have given me my life back.”

“No, you gave me my life back. I wouldn’t be here without you. Not only is my girl beautiful, but she is a badass, too. The

things you can do amaze me.”

“Well, get prepared, because you will be as powerful as me soon.”

“I’m not so sure about that. I know we haven’t completed the bond yet, but our gifts are nowhere near as powerful as yours. We can all use each of the elements to some degree, but even my born-with element is not as formidable as yours. Your gift of water was stronger than mine from the first time you used it. Now that you are bonding with us, it is becoming even more powerful. You are the most powerful Elemental ever born.”

His words weighed heavily on me. I quietly said, “I’m not sure I want to be the most powerful Elemental ever. I just want to live my life with my bonded in peace.”

“I know. Don’t worry, we will figure out what is going on and deal with it as a family. We are five of the most dominant males in our community. We will take care of you.” He leaned in and kissed my forehead. He made me feel safe.

I snuggled closer to him and said, “Mason, will you kiss me?”

He didn’t hesitate; he pulled me even closer to him, wrapped his hand around the back of my neck, and kissed me hard. We held and kissed each other for a long time, but it didn’t go any further. We ended up talking all night long and didn’t even realize it until we saw the sun come up the next morning. I was going to be exhausted in my classes today, but it was worth it. I learned so much about Mason during our talk. He was considered one of the best sharpshooters in the Elemental community, he had five older sisters, and was the baby of the family. He hated mayonnaise and ketchup, and preferred thousand-island dressing on his salads. He was funny and loved to play jokes on the guys.

Mason and I slept for a couple of hours before I had to get up for school. After he left to get dressed, I threw on some jeans and a sweater and headed to the kitchen for some caffeine. I was so excited that the others would be back tonight. I felt so much better when all of my guys were home and safe.

After brewing some tea, I decided to take a walk outside to help me wake up. It was a beautiful, but chilly morning as I made my way down to the boulder at the back of the property. I sat and thought about everything I needed to do today. I had classes, we needed to go to the grocery store for Harrison, laundry had been piling up since we'd been gone, and I needed to train on my sixth gift, the white light. I really needed to come up with a name for it. Bryce seemed to think it was a gift that only I would have and it was produced when I combined all five of my other gifts. All I knew was that it had saved me several times, and Mason, too.

I was so in my head that I didn't notice when someone appeared behind me. I felt a hand on my shoulder and I turned to see if it was Mason or Carter when everything went black.



I woke up some time later and looked around at the metal bars of a cell. It was damp and musty, like you would think the dungeon under a castle would be. When I looked up, I saw the eyes of pure evil. He didn't feel the same as the demon I fought, but he was definitely evil. The man must have been six-and-a-half feet tall with dark skin and a bald head. He was wearing a deep crimson robe with his arms crossed over his chest, staring at me. I tried to pull forth my panther gift, but I couldn't; I couldn't feel any of my gifts. A knowing smirk appeared on the face of the man who took me.

With a heavy Indian accent, he said, "Bre, it is wonderful to finally meet you. My name is Dresden."

TO BE CONTINUED...

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Ryann Elizabeth lives in South Carolina with her husband and their son, Gavin. (He wanted his name mentioned ☐) She is an avid reader of anything romance, fantasy or paranormal. She works as an Executive Assistant to the CEO of a company and is also the Licensing Manager. Her love of reading lead to her deciding to write her first book.

Author Note:

Thank you for reading my book! I really hope you enjoyed it.
The second book in the trilogy is called *Taken Elemental*. It
should be out Spring 2018.



Taken Elemental

Book 2 in The Five Elements Series
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