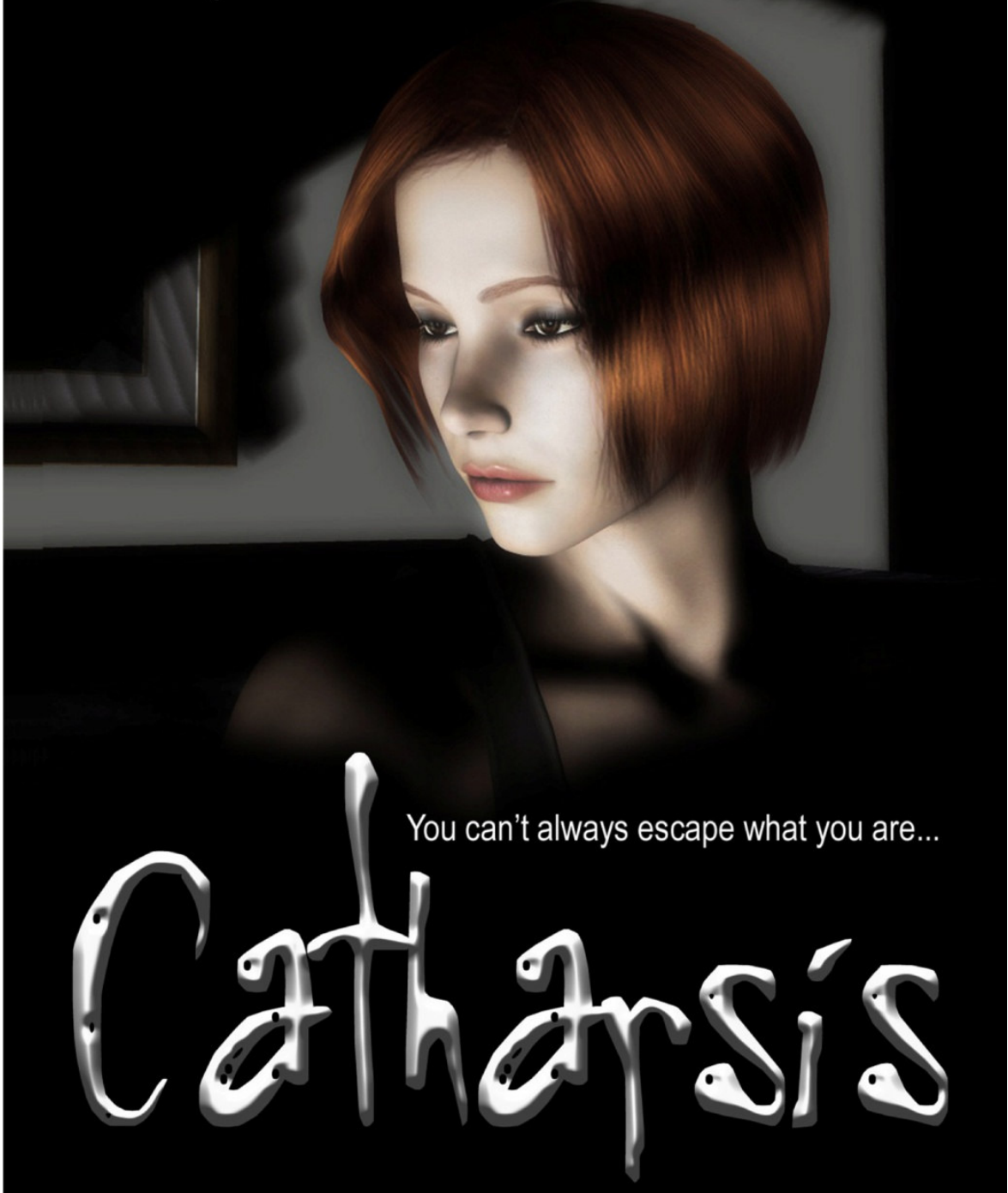


Skyla Dawn Cameron



You can't always escape what you are...

Catharsis

For more free fiction, visit www.skyladawncameron.com

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Dedication

To everyone who stopped by to read *Catharsis* while I was writing it and afterward, specifically my message board peeps, in alphabetical order: Aiyana, Clare, Hannah Jo, Jeroen, Jess, Judy, Laura, Livi, and Scott, as well as all the people who kept up with the story, but lurked. I can honestly say it wouldn't be the same without you, and this book is as much yours as mine.

Except I get to make all the money. Ha!

As always, to Hanna—I miss you every day.

And finally, to JHCS.

Introduction

In February 2004, I started a little story for my personal website. The idea was to make it an eSerial (a serialized work available in electronic format), and I set out to post one chapter at the beginning of every month. I don't recall if it had a title yet at that point, but I had a rough idea in mind, and expected it to turn out as a short novella. For the first three months, I don't think I had any readers, save "Aunt" Judy (who never ceased to cheer me on) and myself. Eventually, two or three people popped by the forum to comment, and membership slowly grew from there.

A shameless self-promotion tactic was all I really had in mind: I had a book coming out in another year or two, so if I had something on my website to encourage visitors to come back every month, they in turn would constantly hear about my new book release, and hopefully purchase it.

What I didn't anticipate was the little "novella" hitting seventy thousand words, with another seven thousand word extended epilogue, a three-part novelette prequel, and a short story from another character's point of view...and that was just the stuff by me! Even fan-written chapters followed, leaving me with no other choice but to declare *Catharsis* had indeed reached "cult status."

This edition you are gently reading, my gentle reader, is the standard version of *Catharsis*—the full story, with no bells and whistles. Great for the newbie or casual reader. A few months after releasing this edition, I plan to release another (just like those money-hungry Hollywood directors do!) that is more of a special/deluxe edition, or a "director's cut" of the book. It will include everything an obsessive fan could want: the extra long epilogue, prequels, other short stories, pictures, chapter-by-chapter commentary and an essay discussing themes and symbolism in the story.

I will probably always continue providing free serialized fiction for my fans (at least as long as I have time to produce it), but time will tell if anything holds a candle to the first one.

Much thanks, again, to all those who followed the story from start to finish, and thanks for picking up the paperback copy. Now go buy my other stuff!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stefan Cameron". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned at the bottom center of the page.

Chapter One: Crazy

I was insane. I knew it. Normally that conclusion would take a person years to come to, but I've always been a bit ahead of everyone else. So I was nuts and fully aware of it. That happens.

In between contemplating my sanity and awareness that I lacked it, I had been surveying my surroundings. I suppose it was only fitting that I stood in front of an old psychiatric building. You know, with the whole craziness-thing. But I wouldn't be getting any treatment there; boards criss-crossed over the windows, murals and profanities were graffitied over the front of the building...the place was abandoned. All that was missing was the classic "condemned" sign over the door.

Clutched in my hand was a piece of paper with the address of the old building. I unfolded it, smoothed the crinkles, and re-read my scrawled writing. This was indeed the place he wanted me to meet him at.

As I stuffed the paper back in my pocket, I glanced around once more. The hospital was the only building in sight, but I saw nothing that suggested people were gathered within; no cars, no lights, no one ready to welcome me at the door. To make an already creepy situation complete, night had fallen quickly. With it came a cool breeze that stirred the fine strands of my hair. The final rays of light perished beyond the building, and the remaining fragments had turned my copper tresses a rather unflattering shade of orange.

My internal alarm bells were going wild at this point. That he planned to meet me only two counties from the small town where I lived freaked the hell out of me. Remember, I'm crazy, but not stupid. How the hell did he know where I lived? Though I wanted to turn back, I couldn't leave without information—without a reason for being drawn there.

I started up the steps.

I inspected the door, but it was nailed shut and wouldn't budge. Though most of the windows were similarly barred, the boards over one were loose enough for me to pry them off.

I paused—okay, more like "froze"—as complete darkness confronted me. This was just too much. An abandoned building in the middle of nowhere, pitch black, meeting people I didn't know...

Luckily, I came prepared. Not prepared in that I was packing an Uzi, but when I left the car I did think to bring a flashlight. I brought out the weak light and shone it inside. Even with the light, I found I had no desire to enter.

I recalled Rune's words from his last e-mail. The message had been short, impersonal, and ended with: *This relates to what you are, and it's important we meet.* At the bottom I found an address, a time and date, and now two weeks later at the rendezvous point, he was nowhere to be found.

That he specified "what" and not "who" had been weighing on my mind ever since I read the message. "What" was I? Just a normal twenty-year-old girl. Prior to the cryptic e-mail, I hadn't

heard from Rune in over a month, and I'd started to worry. The hope of finding out what he meant had drawn me to meet him against everything sane I'd ever been taught.

Out of nowhere, an image of my mother came to me. I pictured her standing with me as I peered inside the abandoned building. "Eve," she would say, "are you that stupid that you'd run off and meet some person you met off the internet?" I would *not* resist the urge to say "yes," of course, because I'm just mouthy that way. Then she would dutifully point out that Rune might be part of a cult, or a fifty-year-old man, and all that. That's what mothers are there for, right? So concerned for my well being, she would forbid me to do anything but turn around and drive home immediately. And what daughter wouldn't want to listen to her mother?

With a smile, I climbed through the broken window and into the darkness.

Once inside, I wandered around the chairs scattered throughout the foyer and cast the light over the walls. The same graffiti from the outside spilled onto the interior walls. *Becky luvs Jamie...Steve L. was here...some drawings of questionable anatomical correctness... Really riveting stuff.*

I followed the writing as it extended past the receptionist's desk and down the primary corridor. At the end of the hallway were two flights of stairs. One led up, the other down.

Great, I thought. I sure as hell wouldn't be going down there.

"You looking for something?"

I nearly leapt a full foot off the ground as I heard the voice behind me.

"So are you?" the guy said as I turned around. From the shadows stepped a tall young man I didn't recognize. His hair was dark and short; eyes deep-set and equally as dark; skin either olive or tanned, though I couldn't tell which in the ugly glow of the flashlight. He was incredibly broad; his shoulders had to span twice what mine did, and I'm not exactly petite. I did *not* want to get cornered by this guy.

"Maybe," I replied warily, taking two steps back for every one he took forward.

He paused, looked me up and down, and then flashed a crooked grin that did manage to ease my nerves a bit. "Indigo?"

That was my internet I.D. Slowly, I nodded. "Rune?" I guessed, hoping I was wrong because this wasn't how I pictured him.

"Nope, he's not back yet. Gone to pick up someone else."

"And that would make you...?"

"Jupiter."

I remembered Jupiter well. Always with a crude joke to offend us girls, never a serious thought in his head, and completely the opposite of how he looked at this moment. Even in the poor light, I caught the concern in his expression.

"The others are downstairs," he said as he started past me.

I backed up. As I've established, I was crazy for showing up there in the first place, but I would not be going downstairs with that guy, even if he was Jupiter.

"You coming?"

"I'm thinking no."

"Look Indigo, we don't have much time."

"If it's that important, maybe everyone could come up here," I suggested. "Or maybe come to a crowded, well-lit public place."

"It isn't safe—"

"But the basement of an abandoned building two kilometres from civilization is?"

"If you wait and talk to Rune—"

"Talk to me about what?"

As I turned around, I suddenly felt as though I was surrounded. No, scratch that—not felt like. *Was* surrounded. Stairs behind me, a wall to my left, Jupiter to my right, and now this guy—who I surmised was Rune—was in front of me.

"You're Indigo?" he asked. I kept my flashlight on Jupiter while he was off to the side, and tried to make out Rune's features in the dark. He was slender but not really thin, and a bit taller than Jupiter. Straight dark blond hair just barely brushed his shoulders, and he looked pretty much as I had pictured him, with the exception of his clear blue eyes. They seemed far more hostile than I imagined quiet, gentle Rune's to be.

"Did Arrow make it?" Jupiter asked.

Rune gave the slightest shake of his head to indicate "no."

"Shit," Jupiter muttered.

"Arrow?" I repeated. It had been nearly three weeks since I'd heard from him, but I'd told myself that it was because he'd gone back to school and was busy.

Rune nodded. "He lived only twenty miles east of here...until recently."

"What happened to him?"

"He's dead."

"What?!"

"Supposedly he hung himself." Rune's face was void of all emotion as he spoke, and I wondered if I really did look at the same person I had chatted with for over a year. There was something far more aged about the guy before me—a weariness in his eyes that suggested he was much older than twenty.

"What the hell do you mean 'supposedly?'" I asked.

"How many people do you think we've been corresponding with online?"

"I don't know...twenty-something?"

"Twenty-six. So far nineteen are either dead or missing, all within the last month."

"Dead or missing?" I asked with a healthy dose of skepticism in my voice. "What the bloody hell is going on?"

"I don't think this place is safe," Jupiter said, and Rune met his eyes.

"It isn't," Rune replied. "If they've found Arrow then they might know we're here." For a moment both he and Jupiter seemed to forget I was there...and I really hate it when people ignore me.

"They who?" I interrupted.

"We have to leave, Indigo," Jupiter said. "And you have to come with us."

"Oh, do I?" I challenged.

"You'll—"

"Uh, no, I think I'll be staying here where people *aren't* psychotic."

"Indigo—"

"Jupiter," Rune said, his tone warning. With a sigh, Jupiter turned and started down the stairs.

"I'll get the others," he announced, as if it had actually been his idea to leave the conversation.

Once Jupiter was out of sight, I inched my way around Rune and toward the other end of the hallway.

"So why did you want to meet me here?" I asked.

"Something's happening," he said. "I don't know the details—yet—but while we were talking in that chat room, it seems like someone has been tracking us down."

"Uh, could it be you? You're the one who found me."

"Jace has been taking care of that."

"Jace found out where I live?" I asked and Rune nodded. Jace was a computer hacker or something. I never really asked what he did, since I guess I just wrongly assumed he wouldn't invade my privacy.

"No matter how they found us, Arrow's dead, and they probably know where you are."

"So? I haven't done anything to anybody or anything..." I paused to search my memory for a moment. *Had* I done something? No, I was pretty sure I'd remember committing an act worthy of someone murdering me.

"This isn't because of something we've done," he said calmly. Too calmly, in fact. I'll admit, only Rune would be that unfazed about someone being out murdering people. "It's because of who—or, more specifically, 'what'—we are."

"And what are we?" I asked, mocking his tone because truthfully I wasn't sure how else to react.

"You know what I'm talking about," he said quietly.

"Christ, are you like on crack or something?" I said, ignoring his words. "I don't even know you, and yet you show up here, expecting me to believe someone's coming to kill me?"

"Not just coming—may already be here."

"So is this the part where something freaky happens to scare me into going with you? If so, I'm sorry, but I've already seen that movie several times."

"You know I'd never try to contact you if it wasn't serious."

"Actually, Mr. Ominous, I was pretty sure you'd never try to contact me because you didn't know who I was!"

"I still don't. Jace is the only one who knows our real identities."

"Then do you mind bringing him up here so I can kick his ass?"

"Lisa's missing," Rune said. "Presumed dead."

"Lisa?" I repeated in disbelief. As far as good friends who I'd never actually met went, I put her near the top of the list.

"Her car was found smashed against a tree a week ago, but there was no body. However, the police found blood. A lot of it."

"Gosh, is it okay if I just take your word for it?" I muttered.

"I've got the articles back at the motel—"

"Ooh, and if I go in your car with you, can I have some candy too?"

"Fuck, we don't have time for this!" Jupiter shouted. He was still downstairs, but probably eavesdropping from the bottom step.

I took a few more quick steps back as Rune reached for something in the back pocket of his jeans. It was a small notebook, and he scribbled something down, tore the sheet from the book, and reached out to hand it to me.

"Take it," he said, but the request sounded more like a command.

"What is it?" I asked instead of accepting it.

"The address of a motel. We'll be there until Monday morning. When you change your mind, you can meet us there—"

"Thanks, but no." I started back toward the front of the building.

"We need to go immediately."

"Well then, go. You know, some people have jobs and responsibilities they can't just walk away from. Besides, I've heard your supposed story, and I've made the executive decision to leave."

I didn't need to glance back to know he followed me. So long as I could reach the window...

"Do whatever you have to do," he continued. "Give the address to a safety contact or something—"

I stopped at the window and slipped outside.

"Indigo—" Rune reached out and grabbed my arm.

I glanced at his hand, and then back in his eyes.

"See," I began. "The thing about my safety contact..."

Rune froze as the arm of a man—who stood just out of his sight—juttied out and pressed the six-inch blade of a knife to his throat.

"...is that I brought him," I continued sweetly. "And he's packing a weapon."

"Let her go," Malcolm Trottier, my tall-dark-and-handsome knight-in-shining-armor, said in a deep voice. It was like the warning growl of one caveman to another.

Cautiously, Rune released my arm, but he didn't take his eyes from mine.

"Indigo—" he began.

"I'll be going now," I said. "It was nice chatting with you, psycho."

"What the hell—she's leaving?" Jupiter shouted from behind Rune. I heard his footsteps pounding toward us.

"We'll be at the motel on the main highway two miles north of town," Rune said.

"Have fun," I called as Mal and I started for the car.

"Eight a.m.," Rune said.

"Whatever," I returned.

"If you don't come with us, you'll die," Jupiter yelled.

"At least you waited to threaten me until we were in front of a witness," I shouted as I opened the car door. "That'll help when I call the police."

Malcolm kept his silence until we were in the car. I fastened my seatbelt and stared out the window uncomfortably as he turned his dark eyes toward me.

Please don't say anything, please don't say anything...

"You took a risk, Eve," he said quietly.

"That's why I had you come, *dear*," I replied in my usual sharp tone of voice. "And we didn't get murdered, raped, or kidnapped, so I'd say everything ended up okay."

"Eve."

I hated it when he used that tone. The tone meant to make me come clean about whatever untruths I spoke. Perhaps that was what broke us up almost six months earlier—that tone. It actually wasn't his fault, and I knew that, but I felt better thinking he was solely to blame.

"Eve, who was that guy?"

"Just a friend," I replied casually.

"You're friends with cult members now?"

"He was just concerned for my well-being," I said, perhaps a little too defensively. Damn Malcolm and his right-ness...he always made me react like that. Oops, that would be me blaming him for stuff again. Oh well.

"Concerned?" Mal asked with surprise.

"He may be delusional, but at least he cares."

"As opposed to me?"

"Shit, I didn't mean anything by it," I said quickly. Christ, he could be so sensitive sometimes. "Let's just go."

"Are you going to meet them at that motel?"

"C'mon, I deserve more credit than that."

"Are you?" he persisted.

"Of course not," I said. "I'm not that crazy." Technically speaking, I wasn't lying. At that moment, I was certain that even I wasn't loony enough to have any more contact with Rune.

But sometimes I surprise even myself.

Chapter Two: Special

When Malcolm dropped me off at my apartment, I could tell he wanted to come upstairs and talk. Possibly it was to reminisce about before I went all crazy, or perhaps even for another round of break-up sex (though we'd been good about that and only fell in that trap once months ago). Whatever it was he wanted, I wasn't interested, so I did the most logical thing I could think of: I avoided his eyes, gave a quick smile, and then bolted from the car as casually as I could.

"Mom called," a voice shouted from the living room as I walked into my apartment, and then there was the rattling of a chip bag and some crunching.

"Did you answer?" I asked, but as I passed the blinking answering machine, I knew Desdemona's response.

"Yeah, right," Dez said.

Instead of checking the message, I proceeded to the living room and slumped down on the couch next to my twelve-year-old sister. She was like my "Mini-Me." It wasn't that she was like midget short or anything next to me, but we both had our alcoholic, absentee-father's brown eyes, fair skin, and average height and build, as well as our evil-hell-bitch-mother's copper hair. But where my tresses were cut to my jaw, Dez's flowed down over her shoulders, the way I used to wear mine when I was her age.

"What are you watching?" I asked as I snatched the bag of ketchup chips and started munching.

"Crappy Mandarin movie set in ancient China. It's like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, only bad."

I watched the war of flying kicks and ridiculously complicated jumps sprinkled with cartoon-y special effects. After a few moments of seemingly nonsensical dialogue, Dez turned to me.

"I thought Mom disowned us."

"Not us, just me," I reminded her.

"So why did she call?"

"To check on you, maybe?"

"Hardly. You sure she didn't disown me too?"

I nodded in the direction of the drawer in the corner desk across the room. "You can check if you want."

"What do you mean?"

"The letter's over there."

Dez rose from the couch and went for the desk to fish through the drawer. When she came upon the sheet of creased paper covered front and back in our mother's handwriting, she sat down next to me to read it.

I decided to focus on the riveting plot developments of the movie rather than think of my sister reading the letter from our mother. When Mom kicked me out a year and a half earlier, I

lived with Malcolm for awhile, and then moved out on my own. I had only been in my own place for two weeks when she disowned me. Only she didn't call or anything—she hid behind the postal system. My Mommy-Dearest, Camilla Shelby, wrote a letter listing the reasons why she felt I was a horrible daughter, and then told me she was "stepping out" of my life, because "obviously" I didn't need her. There was a lot of other victim-y, "poor me" stuff, but I'm not the type to fall for that. Dez had only been living with me for a week at that point, and yet our mother didn't mention her in the letter, nor had she called to ask how her only other child was. My mother had started phoning me again a few weeks earlier, as if everything was peachy, and she didn't, you know, *disown me*. I guess craziness runs in the family.

"Wow," Dez said as she finished reading it. "Harsh." She glanced at both sides of the letter again, and then folded it and tried to hand it back to me.

"I don't want it."

"They why'd you keep it?"

"In case many years from now my yet-to-be-conceived children want to know why they don't have a grandmother."

"She didn't even mention me," Dez complained as she returned the letter to the drawer.

"I'm sorry she was too busy disowning me. Next time we have a little chat, I'll bring up the fact that she should treat us equally. Now, did you go to school today?"

"No. It's Saturday. *Duh.*"

"You sure?" I asked suspiciously.

"Yup. So what did those people want?"

"To tell me someone's out to get me. Paranoia is more Mom's thing though, so I left."

"Were they for real?" Dez said with a giggle. A bunch of psychos were threatening me, and she thought it was hilarious—big surprise.

"Probably not. Rune was acting like it's the end of the world or something."

"It is." Desdemona's face went dead serious, and for some reason a chill went up my spine. Eyes unblinking, she stared at me, and I fought the urge to back away.

A moment later she burst out laughing.

"I had you totally wiggled!" she proclaimed with a superior grin.

"Whatever," I muttered. She tried to take a chip, but I smacked her hand away. If she was going to be a brat, no potato chips for her.

"So Rune was there?" she asked.

I didn't reply.

"Was he cute?" she said in an annoying sing-song voice.

"In a psycho-killer kind of way. He's a total fruitcake...all apocalypse-y and stuff."

"What did Mal say?"

"That I was as crazy as everyone else."

"He misses you," she said, and I noted the laughter and teasing was gone from her voice.

"I know," I replied. My tone narrowly avoided crossing the line between understandably sharp and unnecessarily harsh.

"I bet you miss him too," she persisted.

That aforementioned line was getting blurrier and blurrier, so I abstained from responding.

"Evie?"

"There was just too much he didn't understand," I said after calmly rehearsing my words in my head.

"Maybe you should have talked to him more. Maybe if he knew what happened..."

"I already told him about Mom and the letter."

"That's not what I mean, Eve," Dez said. Something strange flickered through her brown eyes—something that made me shudder. But I turned my gaze away and pushed the eerie sensation from my mind.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I replied with all honesty.

"C'mon, Eve, seven months ago—"

"What?" I snapped.

"Nothing," she said with a sigh. "So I guess love just wasn't enough with Malcolm, right?"

"You're too young for me to discuss this with you."

"I'm thirteen!" she declared.

"Not for another month. Besides, that's still too young."

"Fine!" Dez crossed her arms and turned her face to the T.V. Because she was so much like me, I knew she'd tire of the silence within minutes, so I waited it out.

Sure enough, during the next commercial break, she looked back at me.

"I get it, you know," she said in that irritating, "I know everything" sort of voice that every twelve-year-old seems to use.

"Get what?"

"Stuff. Stuff about you. It's not just Mal—you've got that 'nobody gets me' complex."

"Everyone's got that," I responded carelessly.

"Yeah, but you're *special*." She glanced at me and raised her copper brows.

Though I knew what she was referring to, I chose to ignore her.

"Bet your 'net friends are too, aren't they?"

Christ, she was persistent tonight. I got up and started for my bedroom. "Goin' to bed."

"Yeah, I bet you're *real* tired," Dez returned with sarcasm.

"Don't stay up all night," I said as I partially closed my door.

I was tired. Perhaps not as mind-numbingly exhausted as I pretended to be, but Dez could get a little irritating at times. Well, most of the time, I should say. But she was my little sister. Almost thirteen...Christ, I hoped I wasn't that annoying at her age. Maybe I shouldn't blame my mother for disowning me.

I stripped off my jeans and t-shirt, left them on the floor with the rest of my wardrobe, threw on a nightshirt, and crawled into bed.

Despite Dez's insistence that I wasn't that tired, I fell asleep minutes after my head hit the pillow.

I hadn't allowed myself to think about finally meeting Rune up until that point. Not during the silences in the car with Malcolm, not while I was watching that terrible movie with Dezzie. I assumed that I'd spend the night pondering Mr. Cryptic and his lunatic pals, but I didn't. Maybe my brain just didn't want to think about it...

At least not while I was awake.

~*~

My entire body jumped as my eyes flew open.

The room was pitch black and the clock on my dresser flashed three-thirty-five. I rested there for a moment, trying to slow my thumping heart. I reached for my forehead and brushed the sweat from my brow.

Okay, calm down, I thought.

Calm down?! the irrational side of me screamed. But I just—

I'd had a dream. Of that I was certain...but of what? Other than an overpowering sense of dread, I wasn't sure.

I searched my memory, but came up with nothing. No, wait, there was definitely something there...and it was a nine-digit number. A phone number, to be exact.

I automatically reached for the telephone receiver on my nightstand, but then pulled my hand back. What was I thinking? I couldn't just phone some random person in the middle of the night...

I had a feeling I knew whose number it was, though.

After spending plenty of time convincing myself I shouldn't, I picked up the phone and dialed. Whatever had compelled me to meet Rune in the first place also made me call him. Damn those pesky intuitive nudges. At least they weren't telling me to burn things...anymore.

"Greenside Motel." The man's weary voice on the other line startled me to awareness just as I had grown accustomed to the ringing.

"Hi, can you connect me to room..." I closed my eyes, allowed my breaths to slow and my mind to relax. Then I pictured a narrow wooden door with faded, peeling green paint, and a rusty black number hanging...

"What number, Miss?" he asked with growing impatience.

Of course he had to interrupt me right when I was in the middle of figuring it out.

"Five," I said, hoping it was more than just a guess.

"One moment." The phone beeped as my call was transferred, and then I heard ringing.

How did I know? I'm *special*, remember.

Seven rings in and someone finally picked up.

"...H...Hello?" The woman's voice on the other end worried me; maybe I wasn't as special as I thought.

"Hello?" she repeated with annoyance.

"Where's Rune?" I asked.

There was silence on the other line, then she covered the mouthpiece and I heard muffled voices.

"Indigo?" said the guy who took the phone.

"Rune?"

"Why are you calling? I told you to come by—"

"Look, I don't know why, but I had a dream about the motel phone number, and I think you guys have to leave."

"If we're in danger, so are you. You have to come with us."

I knew I did. I felt it, deep within me. I had to leave...

"My sister," I said suddenly.

"What about her?"

"She lives with me. I can't leave her."

"No—"

"She's twelve."

"We can't take anyone else," he insisted. I heard a few more voices talking in the background. Though I couldn't make out the words, there had to be at least three or four people in the room.

"That's different," Rune said to someone. He started to speak again when another person took the phone.

"Hey, Indigo," said a girl who sounded different than the first. Christ, did he have a harem in there or something?

"Who's this?" I asked.

"Martie—Martie Cooper."

"No names!" a guy shouted in the background. "Rune said—"

"Relax, Jupe," Martie said, and then she returned her attention to me. "Rune doesn't want us to give out our real names in case we get caught or something by whoever is doing this, but I'd rather be called Martie than *diamond gurl*. So who is it you want to bring?"

"My twelve-year-old sister."

"That sounds okay to me, but our fearless leader doesn't look too thrilled."

Our Fearless Leader...that was a title all too perfect. I had no idea how or why, but Rune always managed to be the one in control, the one in charge, whether it was a position he wanted or not. I wasn't surprised that he was the de facto boss in this situation as well.

"Uh oh," Martie said. "I think he wants the phone back. See you, Indigo."

Rune came back on the line and, like Martie said, he didn't sound amused.

"Is there someone you can leave her with?" he asked.

"There's no way in hell she'll go back to live with our psychotic mother, so no."

"And your 'safety contact?' Couldn't she stay with him?"

"I told you, I'm all she has."

He was silent for a long moment. My patience with the guy was wearing thin. I had always considered Rune a friend, but I wasn't going to leave my sister to face whatever assailant was coming after me just because he said she couldn't come with us.

"Are you certain about your dream?" he asked.

"Well, I knew the phone number and what room you were in," I replied, and resisted the urge to add Desdemona's customary "Duh."

"Okay. Eight tomorrow morning," he reminded me before hanging up. I returned the receiver to its cradle and sat there on my bed in silence. Goddamn it, he was right. Something was wrong...I could feel it...

And I had been feeling it for almost a month, which was when he said the murders or disappearances or whatever started happening.

Someone knocked on my door and the sound made me jump.

"Evie?" Dez said as she stepped in my room. "What's going on?"

"Pack a bag." I stood and flipped on a light.

"Why?"

I looked over at her and saw concern brimming in her eyes. When I reached over and embraced her, she must have realized something serious was going on because she didn't give the usual, "Aww, Eve," and push me away.

"I need to go and I have to take you with me, okay?"

"Okay," she replied, hugging me back. When she let me go and started for the door, I saw the doubt in her face. I couldn't bear it.

"It'll be all right, Dezzie," I promised her.

"I know." She braved a smile.

I hoped I was telling her the truth.

Chapter Three: Accident

I wrote a quick note to Malcolm and sealed it in an envelope along with my apartment key, and then left it in his mailbox on the way to the motel. I didn't give him any of the details about where I was going, mainly because I wasn't sure myself. Besides, I knew if I told him I was taking off with Rune and the others, he'd try to find me or phone the police or something. I gave him some bullshit excuse about going to visit my father and left it at that. I wasn't sure how long I'd be gone, but I needed him to check in with the super and ensure the rent got paid and my plants watered. As irresponsible as I was sometimes, I still wanted to be certain that my sister and I would have a home to return to.

Dez and I arrived at the Greenside Motel at seven-thirty in the morning.

"Stay here and lock the doors," I advised her as I was about to get out. She was stretched out on the backseat with her pillow under her head and her eyes closed. "Dez!"

She glanced up at me sleepily. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever."

I waited outside the car until I saw her lock the doors, then I proceeded to the motel.

I'm not a fan of clichés, but the only way to describe that motel is to say it was seedy. Not just a little seedy, but the seediest. It probably rented by the half-hour, and even then I couldn't imagine anyone actually visiting the place. The peeling green paint was just as I'd seen in my vision, but it wasn't nearly as gross looking as the once-yellow aluminum siding that covered the outside of the strip of rooms.

There were only two cars and an older van in the parking lot. Rune hadn't said how many people he'd gathered so far, so I thought maybe all the cars belonged to his group. The license plate of the van was partially smeared with mud—a not-so-subtle attempt to disguise it, I suspected—but the plates were definitely from the U.S. I was pretty sure Rune lived somewhere in Michigan, so it would make sense that the van was his.

I strode up to the door with the black number five and knocked.

I heard a lock snap. The door creaked open an inch and someone peered through the space.

"What?" the young woman within said cautiously.

"So much for my welcoming party," I muttered.

"It's okay." I recognized Jupiter's voice from within the room. "It's Indigo."

The girl who first answered the door stepped back to let me in.

Curtains were drawn over the single window, leaving the room eerily dark. There was an unmade double bed pushed up against one wall, and four sleeping bags scattered over the floor. Seated at the table in the corner were two girls and a guy, and I didn't recognize any of them. Jupiter stood next to them, while the chick who answered the door stood studying me with her arms crossed at her chest.

I decided to study her back. Subtlety obviously wasn't in her nature...coincidentally, nor was it in mine.

She was a few inches taller than me, which put her at 5'9" or so, supermodel-anorexic thin, and had long, shiny dark hair. From the hostile look she was giving me, I was certain I didn't know her.

"Hey Indigo," said one of the girls at the table before I could take in too many details. She jumped up and walked over. "I'm Martie."

Of course. Bright, bubbly, buxom and blonde. I could have picked her out in a crowd.

"You know Jupiter," she continued. "That's Jace," she pointed to the only other guy in the room, "that's Kitty," she gestured to the girl still sitting, "and that's Breanna." She concluded the introduction by nodding to the girl who first answered the door.

I was familiar with BadKitty11—who hid behind a long fringe of dark blonde hair and looked far more shy than I would have pictured her—and my hacker friend who figured out my name and address, short, black-haired Jace Hart, but I didn't know a Breanna.

And I was pretty sure she wasn't interested in knowing me.

"She's Rune's girlfriend," Martie said when she realized I had no idea who Breanna was.

Oh. His girlfriend. I wasn't expecting that.

Big surprise, Eve! You don't actually know anything about these people!

I don't know why, but it still came as a shock. Considering we were pretty good friends, him having a girlfriend seemed like the kind of thing he would tell me. Of course, Rune had always been a very private person, and if his girlfriend was a complete be-otch, it's possible he didn't want anyone to know about it.

"And it just occurred to me that this probably totally weird for you since this is the first time you've met any of us," Martie said. "I was the first person Rune picked up, so I'm used to all the awkward introductions."

Yet I didn't feel awkward. Not really. I felt like I should be uncomfortable standing there in a seedy motel room with a bunch of complete strangers, but I didn't.

I really must have been crazy.

"Where's Rune?" I asked.

"Off to get our complimentary breakfast," Martie said. "And since the owner thinks only him and Bre are here, I suspect the rest of us will be very hungry. Someone better raid the vending machines. So where's your sister?"

"Waiting in the car."

"You're not riding with us?"

Yeah, right. My mother always taught me to never get in a vehicle with a stranger. Maybe she should have added motel rooms to the lesson, though.

"No," I replied. "Dez and I will follow you guys. So where exactly do people on the run head to? We can't go to Canada 'cause we're already here, so I guess that leaves Mexico."

"We have to get Archangel first," Jace said. "He hasn't been answering any of his e-mails, but there haven't been any reports of his disappearance yet."

"This is just too weird," I said as the left side of my brain reminded me it was idiotic to even be considering what we were talking about.

"If you don't believe Rune, then why are you here?" Breanna asked coldly. I don't know, maybe she was just pissed that I called and woke her up in the middle of the night, but I didn't get much sleep either, so she could bite me.

"Well," I returned just as shortly, "when I get premonitions that my life is in danger, and people tell me some whack job is out to murder me, I tend to take the threat seriously. Better safe than...well, than not safe."

"Wow, so you really did have some freaky dream?" Martie asked.

"The force is strong with this one," Jupiter joked as he walked over and patted my shoulder.

I rolled my eyes and shifted uncomfortably. To the causal observer, it might seem as though something Jupiter said or did bothered me. He at least thought so, for he immediately returned

to his place next to the table. In truth, I was more bothered that I suddenly felt singled out. The previous night, Desdemona had called me "special"...and yes, in some ways, I was. I wasn't normal, so if special was the opposite of that, I supposed that was an appropriate adjective to describe me. But in that motel room, I was supposed to be with others like me. Although we all knew it, outside of personal instant messages it wasn't something we actually discussed. How we ever managed to find one another was still a mystery to me, even after a year. I had discussed our "special-ness" with Martie, Jace, and Lisa on occasion, and then only with Rune in detail. He'd basically implied that everyone we talked with was "special."

Well, he said nothing about Breanna.

"I should make sure we've got the van packed," Breanna said suddenly. Before she went to the door, she grabbed a file folder from the nightstand and handed it to me. "Rune wanted you to look through this. He should be back soon." She left the room without another word.

"Wow, icy," Jupiter commented as soon as she shut the door.

"What the hell was her problem?" I asked no one in particular. I wasn't sure I'd even get an answer—everyone looked as dumbfounded as I felt.

"This has been getting really serious," Martie explained. "I know she's worried about Rune, and she wants to keep moving. She thought we should just leave after you refused to come with us yesterday."

"He gave me two days to think it over—you can't have been in that much of a hurry."

"Uh, no," Martie laughed, "maybe he told you two days, but he made it very clear to the rest of us that we were staying until you came with us."

"And if I didn't change my mind?" I asked.

"Then we'd still be waiting, I guess," Martie replied.

That was a sweet sentiment. I didn't believe for a second that Rune would put everyone else at risk just to help out one person, least of all me, but it was a nice thought.

"So what's all this?" I asked as I opened the folder, eager to get away from the subject of our impending doom.

"The articles Rune has compiled about the others," Jace replied.

Oh. So much for forgetting about that impending-doom thing.

I flipped through the folder and the faces of people I didn't recognize stared back at me. Faces of young men and women, faces of friends I had spoken to only a month ago. Along with their faces were obituaries, missing persons ads, and the odd third page news story. Nineteen faces. Nineteen dead or missing.

Just as I closed the folder and placed it on the nightstand, Breanna returned. She immediately swept past me and started gathering the sleeping bags.

"Rune's outside," she said. "He probably wants to speak to you." As she glanced at me, she forced a smile. It was fake, but I smiled back anyway.

"Thanks." I sent a quick grin to the others at the table, and then slipped from the room.

I took a few steps outside and looked around for Rune.

"You're early."

The voice startled me. I swung around to see Rune leaning against the wall to the right of the motel room door, obscured by the shadow of the building.

"Okay, what's the deal with you guys doing that? Stop wiggling me out."

"Sorry," he said, giving me a half smile.

Yeah, I bet he was sorry. What a creep.

He stood up straight, nodded toward the other end of the strip of rooms, and started walking. Not content to simply follow, I quickened my pace so I could walk a step ahead of him.

"Where's your sister?" he asked.

I gestured toward the car. "Sleeping in the back. Late night."

"So you don't remember the details?"

Ah, the dream. I should have expected he'd want to know right away. We both knew some of the others weren't comfortable discussing such things in a group, so it made sense he'd take the opportunity to talk about it when we were alone.

"No details, just the number. And the dread-thing. Wait..." A thought suddenly came to me—one that immediately set me on edge. "It wasn't you, was it?"

Rune was silent.

"You did, didn't you? Why don't you stay in your own goddamn dreams!"

"It wasn't me," he said at last.

"Oh, that's really convincing after the extremely long pause."

"I was trying to see if I had influenced you subconsciously, but I didn't."

I grudgingly had to admit that if he said he didn't, then he was probably telling the truth. But that made the danger we were in all the more real. At least if it was just Rune playing with my head again, I could feel a bit safer.

"And the others? Did one of them?"

"I don't think so."

"How would you know?" I persisted. What can I say—I really didn't like the idea of someone not only invading my dreams, but influencing them as well.

"I'm not sure we have anyone left who is...well..."

"Skilled enough?" I guessed.

"Prepared and able to do something so complex," he said carefully. So no one was skilled enough. That was just the nice way of saying what I did.

"Not even subconsciously, as you thought?"

"I don't believe anyone did. They haven't...practiced as much."

Meaning they just tried to hide what they could do instead of learning to use it. Sure, it wasn't as though I went shouting from the rooftops or anything. Hell, I hadn't even told Malcolm, so maybe I wasn't one to talk.

"And what about Breanna?" I asked. "She's not..."

"One of us?" he filled in. "No."

If she isn't one of us, then why—

"She wanted to help," he replied, knowing my thoughts and guessing where they were going.

"No, I mean why the hell didn't you want me to bring Dez?"

"Bre's an adult. She knows the risks, and she can take care of herself."

I figured I'd better watch Rune around Dez. If she heard him refer to her as anything less than a mature, young adult, she'd be royally pissed. And Dez can really hold a grudge.

"We're all glad you decided to come with us," he said.

Breanna's not, I thought, but for once I kept my silence.

"And I wouldn't have left without you," he continued.

"Wow, that was so subtle," I said with a laugh.

"You were projecting that one," he returned. "Even the motel owner probably heard you. You wanted to know if it was true."

I shrugged and made sure I wasn't allowing him to know he was right.

"We lost Arrow...and I suspect whatever got him is close."

Great. Way to make me feel a lot better. I admit I was projecting that.

We turned around and started walking back toward the parking lot. Breanna was tossing the sleeping bags into the van while Martie, Jupiter, Jace and Kitty all snuck out of the room, then ran in the back of the vehicle.

"You're certain you don't want to ride with us?" he asked just as we reached the van.

"Let's see...ride in a van with six other people, or have my nice roomy car all to myself... Definitely a tough call."

"Stay close to us then," he advised in a very concerned, Rune-like tone of voice. "If we lose sight of you, we'll pull over and wait."

"I had three speeding tickets before I was eighteen—trust me, I can keep up."

"Do you have a cell phone we can call if we need to reach you while on the road?" Breanna asked.

"I don't need a cell phone," I replied. I only needed to spend a few seconds focusing before I sent a harsh, mental jar in Breanna's direction.

The look she gave me was a mixture of shock and annoyance. I had perfected the mental "ping" that could only be described as a "fuck you" without words or gestures. Pretty damn handy sometimes.

I waved goodbye over my shoulder as I walked to my car. Dez was still stretched out and sleeping. Christ, it must have been nice to be her age, able to sleep wherever and whenever.

"Dezzie, we're going," I called as I sat behind the wheel and slid the key in the ignition.

"Where?" she muttered.

"I don't know," I replied quietly.

~*~

"We've been driving forever," Dez whined. She reached from her place in the backseat, over my shoulder, and flipped through the radio stations. She refused to stop at a song for more than twenty seconds and I was seriously considering doing more than just "pinging" her.

"It's only been a day," I replied. A long day, but a day nonetheless. Rune was the one with the map, and he'd sent me the impression that we weren't far from a motel. I was actually just as anxious as Dez was to stop; I hated driving. It was probably worse for her, though—she had slept all day and even missed the several gas station and drive-thru stops we'd made.

"I can't even play the license plate game."

She was right—midnight approached and we hadn't seen another car on the stretch of unlit highway for hours.

"If you don't leave the radio alone, you'll see *this* car's license plate speeding away after I leave you on the side of the road. Now do your seatbelt up."

Dez sighed and flopped back down in her seat. "Can't you at least pull over so I can get in the front?"

"We'll be at a hotel soon."

"But Evie—"

Her voice faded. At first I thought she had just stopped speaking, but I couldn't hear the radio either. Then a new sensation enveloped me. It was as if I was rapidly being driven under water; the cold and unrelenting pressure around my head was about to make something explode. Suddenly I wasn't aware of anything—not the steering wheel I gripped in my hands, not the seat beneath me. Absolutely nothing.

I don't really know what happened next.

Perhaps there was the squeal of tires. Perhaps Dez screamed. Perhaps I sent out a mental call for help to Rune. I don't know. I just watched the ditch rise up to meet and crush the front of my car.

And then all I knew was darkness.

Chapter Four: Empty

At first I thought I was waking from sleep back home in my bed. Then I merely wished I was there as I felt a dull ache in my head and sharp stabbing in my knee.

Slowly, my eyes opened. I was in my car—still—with my head resting atop the deflated air bag on the steering wheel. I tried to sit up, but pain shot through my neck and down my back. Okay, so moving was bad. I'd just refrain from doing anything more than lying there.

Where the hell was I? As I looked out my window, I saw I was in a ditch. I supposed that was better than the middle of a fiery car wreck or a lake, but how did I get there and why was I even sitting in my car in the first place...

Dez!

All my silent musings and pain were forgotten as I sat up and looked around.

"Dez!" I called. She had to be okay...she had to be...

"Desdemona!" I cried again. The passenger side was empty, but then I remembered she had been in the back...

I turned my head and scanned the back seat, but she wasn't there.

"Dezzie!" I continued calling her name, praying at any moment I would hear her respond. I struggled to turn in my seat, but I was bound in place by my seatbelt. After several unsuccessful attempts at yanking the belt free, I resorted to stretching it as far from my waist as I could, then I crawled out. My coordination was off and I smacked my head on the roof of the car as I tried to manoeuvre my way around the front seat. *I knew moving was a bad idea...*

"Dez! Dammit, where are you?!" I searched the back more thoroughly, checking to see if she was couched on the floor—

And then I saw one of the rear doors was open.

Both of the front doors seemed sealed shut, so I squeezed between the front seats into the back and then through the open door. Maybe she found me unconscious and went for help...

"Dezzie!" I screamed. My voice grew hoarse, but I continued shouting her name as I looked around. Though it was still dark out, the sky had begun to lighten. It was probably close to five or so in the morning.

I stumbled out of the ditch, slipping on the dew-soaked grass as I forced my unsteady legs to move. Several metres down the road, I spotted Rune's van. The front was smashed into the partition that separated the lanes, and the back doors were wide open. A faint interior light shone on the figures in the back.

"Rune!" I shouted, running as quickly as I could with my aching knees. Someone hopped out of the back and ran to meet me.

"Indigo!" Martie raced over. "Are you okay—"

"Dez—have you seen her? Is she all right? I woke up and she was gone..."

"Kitty and I just woke up ourselves. The others are still out; we were trying to wake them up. What the hell happened?"

"I don't know," I said, struggling to remember. What *had* happened? "...I was driving and suddenly everything got all weird and..."

"And it was like something incapacitated you?" Martie nodded, suggesting she understood exactly what I was trying to say. "Me too. Rune was saying something about your car going in the ditch and suddenly I got all woozy and confused...I remember Rune swerving or something...we hit that wall," she gestured to the partition, "and I think I hit my head."

"Dez is gone," I said, still too frantic with worry to think about much else.

"I haven't seen her..."

"The back door was open and she was gone—"

"Jupiter's awake!" Kitty cried. Martie and I raced to the van. Kitty moved out of Jupiter's way as he sat up, then she crawled over to Jace's side to check on him.

"What happened?" Jupiter asked. He squinted to make out the rest of us and rubbed at the back of his head.

"It was some sort of accident," Martie explained.

We all looked over at Jace as he moaned and rolled over. Slowly he started to open his eyes as well.

"Everyone's okay though, right?" Jupiter asked.

I was about to mention Dez when I noticed Martie and Kitty exchanging glances. They dropped their eyes and made no move to answer.

"Who's hurt?" I demanded. "Who? Is it Dez? Do you know where she is?"

Finally Martie shook her head, but she wouldn't look at any of us.

Rune!

I ran around to the driver's side.

Rune's head rested on the steering wheel. His van was an older model and apparently didn't have an airbag, so there was nothing to protect him when the vehicle impacted with the cement wall.

A trickle of blood had dried on his forehead...

"Rune!" I banged on the window. He stirred. "He's alive!" I shouted to the others. "Someone help me get him out!"

I yanked open the door and tipped his head back. The gash on his head didn't look bad—at least not on the surface—but it never occurred to me to get my medical degree, so I was hardly qualified to judge the damage done. Had I known I'd be getting in a serious car accident, I certainly might have considered going to med school like my guidance counsellor in high school suggested.

"Is anyone coming to help me?" I yelled again.

"Yeah, I'm right here," Jupiter said from directly behind me, causing me to nearly leap a foot off the ground.

"Let me get his seatbelt undone, and then we can pull him out." With care, I pushed Rune back and reached for the belt's lock.

"Jesus," Jupiter muttered behind me.

I looked up and saw what he stared at.

Breanna.

There was a huge, jagged hole in the passenger side of the windshield where Breanna's head had gone through. Her upper body had been thrown onto the dashboard, and she was stretched onto part of the hood in a pool of blood. She stared down in that blank, lifeless way dead people do in the movies...only this wasn't a movie. It was real.

I couldn't look at Breanna—I couldn't even think about her. I had to focus on getting Rune out and ensuring he was okay. He always seemed to know what was going on, so there was a chance he might have a clue about what happened or where Dez was.

After fumbling with the clasp for a few long moments, at last I pulled the seatbelt from Rune's waist. Jupiter and I dragged him out of the van.

"Is there somewhere we can lay him down?" I asked Jupiter as he and I each slung one of Rune's arms over our shoulders.

"Over here!" Martie called.

We carried Rune around to the back where Martie and Kitty were inspecting Jace's arm.

"Oh, great, are you broken too?" I asked Jace.

He looked up at me and offered a grim smile. "Nope, just banged up."

"Okay, so where can we put him down?" Rune's six-foot-something frame was getting a little too heavy for my five feet, six inches.

"Lay him down in here." Martie scooted out of the back of the van to show where she had propped up a few pillows.

Just as we were carrying him over, Rune started to come to.

"What..." he muttered as he looked up. He seemed like he was going to pass out again, so Jupiter and I cautiously lowered him to the ground then kneeled next to him.

"Are you okay?" Just as I asked him, I realized what a stupid question it was. Of course he wasn't okay—he'd just been in a car accident. But that night wasn't exactly a shining example of my more intelligent moments.

At last Rune's eyes seemed to focus and he looked at Jupiter, then me. "The...the accident?"

"Right, we were in an accident," Jupiter said.

"Uh, yeah," I added. "There was much broken glass and a few head injuries. You really didn't miss much."

Except for Breanna going through the windshield, I thought.

Suddenly, Rune's eyes froze on mine.

Oh, shit, was I projecting that?

"Bre!" he shouted. He still stared at me, as if willing me to think more, but I kept my mouth—or rather my mind—shut.

How were we going to explain this?

"Just sit down for a minute, man," Jupiter advised. "You could have like a concussion or something—"

"Where's Bre?" Rune demanded, but he didn't need any of us to answer. Though incredibly skilled at shielding others from his thoughts, I didn't have to scan his mind to know the truth—I could tell by his eyes that somewhere within him, whether he admitted it or not, he knew.

Seeing him like that—dishevelled, bleeding, filled with dread—tore at my insides. I had a certain degree of empathy that I had worked very hard to control and I had almost perfected shielding myself from other people's emotions, but at that moment I could do nothing to stop it. All of his pain suddenly filled me and I couldn't keep my eyes from tearing up.

That must have done it—my crying confirmed it for him.

"Bre!" He leapt to his feet and ran around the van. Jupiter and I jumped up and raced after him.

We found the passenger door flung open and Rune leaning in the van.

"Breanna?" he called, touching her head tentatively.

"God..." Martie whispered behind me. She, Jace and Kitty had followed us, and they stood huddled in a group next to Jupiter, all staring at Rune.

"Where the hell is the ambulance," Rune shouted. I was about to tell him it would be there soon then I realized I didn't even know if someone had called one.

"Didn't someone have a cell phone?" I turned to the others.

"Um...that was...Breanna's," Martie replied. "And I just checked—it's dead." Her eyes widened as she realized she had just mentioned "Breanna" and "dead" in the same sentence. I

turned back to see how Rune had reacted, but he wasn't listening to us. I approached him with care.

"Rune...Rune, the ambulance isn't coming. It's too late."

He felt around her neck, ignoring me and checking for a pulse he had to know wouldn't be there.

"Bre..."

"Rune, she's—"

He tried to life her body up. Thick, dark blood coated the huge piece of broken glass that had impaled her throat. A visual image struck my mind suddenly of her being thrown into the windshield then landing on the shards that remained.

I heard movement behind me, and looked to see my companions staring at the sight in horror. Jace ran to the ditch to retch up whatever his stomach contained, and Kitty looked ready to join him. Both completely ashen, I suspected Martie and Jupiter might have been vomiting as well had they not already been going into shock.

"Bre?" Rune said again, his voice even weaker this time. It was a sort of half cry, half whimper that nearly broke me to hear. He pulled her completely off the glass and rested her back in the seat. Gently, as if not to disturb her, he pushed her bloody, matted hair away from her face and whispered her name once more. The deep hole in her throat oozed some thickened blood. She was definitely gone.

Someone had to help him, and since I was the only one not acting comatose, that someone would have to be me.

"Rune..." I put my hand on his shoulder and tried to pull him away. "Come on."

He didn't say anything; he simply stared at Breanna and ran his hand along her cheek.

"Can someone get a blanket for...for *her*," I called to the others then returned my attention to Rune. "Please, you've got to listen to me..."

Dazed, he stumbled a few steps away from the door and collapsed on the pavement next to the van.

"Rune..." I sat down next to him, though he seemed oblivious to my presence.

Jupiter walked by us with the blanket I requested, and draped the sheet over Breanna's body. Rune didn't glance up. He pulled his knees up to his chest and buried his face in his arms.

I wanted so badly just to let him be. His girlfriend was dead and he had every right to sit there and mourn. But I knew we didn't have time. *Something* had caused the accident, Dez was missing, and we were no closer to knowing what the hell was going on than when we started.

"Please, you've got to talk to me," I said. "We have to figure out what happening to us."

He didn't answer—in fact, he gave no acknowledgement he had even heard me.

I had to think of something. If I were him, I wouldn't want someone nagging me either. But after glancing back at Jupiter, Martie, Kitty and Jace, and seeing their still-horrified faces, I made the decision for him; he could deal with Bre's death later.

"Hey!" I yelled, giving his shoulder a shake. Perhaps it wasn't very sensitive of me, but I was really starting to wig out. "Rune!"

Either he just heard me or I was finally getting on his nerves. Whatever the reason, my yelling reached him. He looked up at me.

"Rune," I pleaded then decided to switch tactics. When your voice isn't reaching a fellow telepath, there's one sure way of getting and keeping his attention.

My sister's missing, I began, sending him a summary of my memory after the accident. Most of us couldn't send actual words, not in the Hollywood sense. We were used to sending more thought "packages" that contained the odd word, but for the most part consisted of concepts and emotions. I was slightly more skilled than the average telepath though, and was able to clearly get a few sentences across. Though I was out of focus, I sensed he was receiving what I was thinking. I didn't need to worry about the others hearing me because, as Rune had

mentioned, they weren't "prepared and able" to understand if I was taking precautions to keep them out of the conversation.

You're the only one here that I trust is actually capable of helping me find her. The rest of them can't handle this on their own. I need you.

"We need you," I added in a hushed voice. "Are you going to be able to pull it together?"

After several long moments of staring at me, I saw an understanding in the cool blue depths of his eyes.

"A couple miles east on this highway, there should be a motel." His voice was strained and I suspected he wanted to either scream or cry...maybe both. But in true Rune-like fashion, he maintained control. "Your sister might have gone there for help. Whether she did or not, you'll at least find a phone."

Thank you, I thought.

"We need to get going," I said as I stood and looked toward the others. "If you guys have any money, bring it. Maybe grab a change of clothes or something, but we need to go *now*." Everyone started for the back of the van and I ran over to my car. I grabbed the overnight bag from my trunk and paused as my eyes fell on Dez's suitcase.

I'll find you, I silently promised her. Since we hadn't passed any houses on the way, she probably did go east, to the motel, like Rune said. She was waiting for me. I had to hurry.

I jogged back to the van. The others had their things ready, but Rune was still sitting on the road. I don't think they even tried to move him, and I can't say I blamed them—for some reason I was the only one with the stones to try to tell him of all people what to do.

"Rune, c'mon, we've got to go."

"I'm not leaving her," he said quietly.

"Rune—"

"I'm not leaving her!" he shouted, his voice filled with pain and desperation.

I wanted to argue with him, to force him to get up and go with us. He knew as well as I did that Breanna was no longer in that body, that there was nothing more that could be done. But I was also all too aware that grief isn't exactly the most rational state of being. He wouldn't be going anywhere.

"Okay, someone should stay with him," I said to the others. "I would, but I've got to find Dezzie."

"I will," Jace offered. He was still cradling his hurt arm and I suspected he wasn't exactly cheerful about lugging his duffle bag a couple of miles. "You guys can leave your bags here and we'll bring them when you send back some help."

"We'll hurry," I promised, then Martie, Jupiter, Kitty and I set off.

~*~

We were all pretty silent that morning. Of course, what were we going to talk about? The dead girl in the van? Our leader going postal? Or the something that caused us all to lose consciousness at the same time?

I wasn't sure how far we walked, but the sun had been up for awhile and Jupiter's watch indicated it was after eight. We had yet to see a gas station, let alone the motel Rune mentioned. Hell, we hadn't even passed any signs.

"Anyone else notice the highway's pretty empty?" Martie commented after awhile. "We haven't seen a single car—don't you think that's kind of strange?"

"Strange compared to what? I don't think I even have a normal compass anymore." The more I thought about it, though, I realized she was right. Not a single car had gone by. Even the night before, Dez had commented on the lack of other vehicles on the road.

"If someone had gone by during the hours we were out, they would have stopped or phoned the cops, right?" Martie said.

"I don't know, my faith in humanity just isn't what it used to be when I was like five," I replied.

"This is seriously fucked up," Jupiter muttered. "Do you think Rune's gonna be okay?"

Actually, I had been wondering the same thing. I never imagined Rune would completely lose it like that, not ever, no matter the circumstances. I don't think any of us did, and his current state left everyone a little shaken. I wanted to think that he'd snap out of it, but I was pretty sure our calm, quick-thinking leader was broken beyond repair. Perhaps it seemed like we relied on him too much, but he was our rock—the staple of our group, as well as a number of other better metaphors that I was just too tired to come up with that morning.

I figured the others were all thinking about how much easier it would have been if he was with us, as if he could magically make the motel appear. I loathed to admit it, but I agreed with them. I totally sucked at the whole leader-thing. I wasn't even sure which direction was east, so I was glad Rune had pointed it out before we left.

The minutes dragged on. I was about to suggest taking a break when Kitty spoke up.

"Um, guys..." She pointed at something in the distance. Though the highway seemed to stretch on forever into the east, about half a kilometre ahead of us there was a cut-off that led to the south. Next to it was a sign, advertising hotels, restaurants, and other stuff that could only mean one thing...

We neared a town at last.

~*~

Just before nine, we found ourselves at the edge of the small town. The first buildings we saw were houses, though no one seemed to be home. It was odd, but we just shrugged and moved on.

"There's a phone!" Martie exclaimed as she pointed to the pay phone booth down the street. I was exhausted from walking, but I raced there anyway.

I grabbed the receiver and punched in the numbers so quickly I had to double check I got them right. Soon it was ringing, and I slumped against the Plexi-glass booth wall and sighed with relief. We'd be getting help soon.

"Should we really be calling 911?" Jupiter asked as he caught up with me. "If we're trying to keep a low profile—"

"Dead girlfriend, missing sister, smashed up cars, all of us suffering minor injuries...any of that ring a bell?" I reminded him. Across the street I spotted a gas station and a convenience store with a flashing "open" sign in the window. "Hey, why don't you guys see if someone there can pick up Rune and Jace or if they know where we can rent a car?"

He nodded and jogged to the store.

I was sure someone would pick up in a few seconds. It was a fairly small town, so they probably didn't get a lot of 911 calls. Maybe their single operator was on a break. And maybe they didn't have someone to cover for her. Or maybe they had turned the ringer off. A lot of really stupid maybes went through my head—some of which involved phobias of telephones, others that involved secret affairs between 911 operators and their supervisors. One "maybe" scenario even involved alien probes, though I admit that one was a little far fetched.

But for whatever reason, I didn't hear the helpful, "911, what's your emergency?" that I hoped for. Thirty-seven rings left me pretty sure no one was going to pick up.

Dread and uncertainty filled me. I tried to tell myself everything was okay and my feelings were just the product of the concussion I probably had...but something was definitely wrong.

I saw Jupiter, Kitty, and Martie talking just outside of the convenience store, so I reluctantly hung up the phone and wandered over.

"Are the police coming?" Martie asked hopefully.

"Not unless they're psychic," I replied. "No answer. Something has to be done about the under funding of our public services."

"I don't think it's just the police," Jupiter said. "There's no one at the gas station."

"You know, stores do have back rooms."

"And I checked," he said. "There's no one there."

"We checked a couple of the stores and knocked on the doors of a few houses," Martie said. "It's the same thing; there's no one there. It's like the whole town...it's..."

My gaze drifted down the street. There were no people, no sound of cars—absolutely no sign of life.

"Empty," I finished for her.

Chapter Five: Vision

Our trip was turning out to really suck. Not that I expected puppies and happy dances, but car accidents, death, and abandoned towns? If our wacky, on-the-run adventure *had* a brochure, I'm sure that wouldn't have been in it. I might have commented that it couldn't possibly get any worse, but that would have doomed us for sure. So for once I kept my wisecracks to myself.

Well, most of them.

"This all seems kind of familiar," I said as the four of us walked down the quiet street.

"You mean like *déjà vu*?" Martie asked.

"No, I mean I've played this video game and seen this movie like a million times. Group of young people find themselves in a creepy empty town and end up fighting some sort of scary creatures. Sound familiar?"

"I don't know," Jupiter said. "I stopped playing survival horror games after the first *Silent Hill*."

"Oh, so you missed *Fatal Frame*," I said as I shook my head in mock disgust. "You should check it out. Scariest game *ever*."

"Hello!" Martie said to the two of us. "You know, this isn't a game—this is serious!"

"Still, if we run into any zombies, you guys are on your own," I said. I knew I shouldn't have been making jokes about such things, but I couldn't help myself. Someone had to lighten the mood and I'm probably one of the few people that could find humour in our situation.

"You kinda have a point there," Jupiter said. "We *are* from a heavy gaming generation. So what are the first things you do in a survival horror game when you're in an abandoned town?"

"Don't split up, for one thing," I answered. "Bad things always happen when you separate, so we should definitely hurry back for Rune and Jace."

"Why not figure out why there's no one here?" Martie suggested. I guess she got over the fact we were talking about scary games. And some people actually think video games are bad for children! Clocking dozens of hours a week on various Playstation games was really helping us think logically about our situation. Who would have guessed it.

"Maybe it was evacuated or something," Jupiter added.

"Or maybe the people were zombified," I suggested. No one laughed. "But newspaper clippings in *Resident Evil* were always quite helpful. Any other suggestions?"

"Weapons," Kitty spoke up. We all looked to her and she dropped her eyes shyly. She had barely said anything all morning and at times I forgot she was with us.

"Something for defense," she continued, a bit quieter this time. "Just in case. And supplies."

"Good idea. A few weapons of minor destruction would definitely be helpful." I slowly nodded as a plan formed. "Okay, the investigating of newspapers and such can be done later. Our priority should be to get Rune and Jace. And for that, I suggest a vehicle."

I'd rather not talk about the ethics of stealing cars. The only thing I'll say is that people should probably be more careful about leaving their keys in the ignition. After checking only

three cars, we found an unlocked, icky brown station wagon. I wanted to suggest we keep looking for a prettier vehicle, but I recognized that beggars (or car thieves, in our case) can't be choosers.

Looting, on the other hand, was something I greatly enjoyed. Who doesn't dream of pillaging a store? Not that we were grabbing plasma screen T.V.'s, state of the art sound systems, or anything like that; we just went into the convenience store when we were filling the station wagon with gas. Martie stocked up on bottled water and a few snacks for the ride. Jupiter suggested we leave some money, just in case whoever owned the place happened to come back. I reminded him that zombies don't like money—they want brains. No one thought that was funny.

We stocked everything in the back of the station wagon and everyone started piling in. I had been trying to find the perfect time to spring the rest of my plan on them—the part they wouldn't like—but that perfect time never came. I decided to finally blurt it out in a sad attempt to be casual about it.

"Okay, so you guys get Jace and Rune, and we'll meet back here."

"Wait a minute," Martie said, blue eyes widening with surprise. "Our first rule was that we can't split up!"

Damn, they remembered that. Oh well.

"And we shouldn't," I said. "But my sister could be wandering around here somewhere. She's only twelve—I've got to find her."

"But-but the zombies!" Jupiter said.

"Forget the zombies!" Martie's patience with him was already running thin. "We're in a completely empty town! We can't leave you here, Indigo. Let's just get the guys and we'll come back and look together, as a group."

Martie's plan was logical. The drive to pick up the others and then return would only take like half an hour or so. It would be a lot easier to search if we were together...not to mention safer.

But this was about what Dez needed, not logic.

"No," I stated flatly. "She's just a kid. She needs me and I'm going to find her."

They all wanted to argue with me, I could tell, but since Rune was no longer the boss, that seemed to have left me in charge. No one would actually pick a fight with me.

"Maybe someone should stay," Kitty suggested.

"I can," Martie was the first to offer.

"I will," Jupiter said.

"Right, because weak little women can't take care of themselves?" Martie shot back.

Sure, Jupiter was a bit of a chauvinist—we all knew it—but he was also six feet tall and built.

"No, Juve is good," I agreed. "I'll keep him in line. We can get a weapon, per Kitty's suggestion, and bash some zombie brains in if necessary."

"There's a grocery store just down the street," Martie pointed out. "When we get back with Rune and Jace, we can look around for your sister too, then meet back there for sure in an hour or so?"

"Eleven-thirty sounds good," Jupiter said as he glanced at his watch. "This place isn't that big so we should be able to cover a chunk of it in that time." We bid Martie and Kitty farewell, and as I watched the car drive up the street and turn the corner, I hoped we had made the right decision; I wasn't too keen on just Juve and I wandering around town ourselves. But I had to find Dez.

"So, what do you want to do for weapons?" he asked.

I gestured to a shop across the street. "Hardware store. A great place to find all things sharp, blunt, and with many other brain-damaging capabilities."

He nodded his agreement and we entered the store. The shop was pretty big, at least for such a small town. No one came to the counter to ask if we needed help finding anything. Not that I was surprised to find it completely void of all people or anything, but I still retained some hope that we might run into someone else. I was, in fact, fully aware that I was deluding myself.

"So what do you think is going on?" Jupiter asked as we perused the aisles. "I seriously hope this is just some long, fucked up dream I'm having."

"Yeah, I seriously hope this is your long, fucked up dream too."

"It's definitely not," he said.

"Damn. You sure?"

"Yup. If it was, I'd be able to control it, but I haven't had any luck getting your clothes to fall off yet."

I rolled my eyes. "And you're not likely to talking like that."

We came to the hunting section, but other than some camo clothes and fishing line, there was little else there. And here I'd been hoping for a crossbow, dammit. Not that I'd know how to use one, but it would still be cool.

"Oooh, knives!" I declared with glee.

"You are a very scary chick sometimes," Jupiter observed, notably from afar. "Still pretty hot, but scary."

I lifted up a hunting knife and pretended to take a great deal of interest in the blade. "Watch it, Jupe. And quit following me and go find a weapon."

"Yes, ma'am." He disappeared into another aisle.

I grabbed six boxes of Swiss army knives—one for each of us—and gathered a couple of hunting knives. I hooked the latter in my belt loops and went looking for Jupiter.

He was in the section with the tools and garden implements. Don't ask me why. We had just been in the hunting section for Christ's sake, and yet, to my horror, I actually saw him eyeing a screwdriver.

"What are you going to do with that?" I asked as I approached. "Offer to help high school student zombies with their shop projects?"

"It's kind of stabby...and it might come in handy. What if we need to loosen screws or...or tighten them, maybe? This could be the key to our survival."

"Not bloody likely, but just in case, I got you this." I gave him one of the army knives that came complete with a screwdriver *and* a spork. Zombies beware! "C'mon, let's get a bag or something." I grabbed a shovel on my way through the aisle.

"What are you gonna do with that—dig graves for the zombies?" he teased.

Maturity abounded as I stuck my tongue out at him. "It's for hitting things long range." I was pleased to see him eventually grab a crowbar. It made him look like a thug, but at least it was better than a screwdriver.

"So where do you think we should start looking?" he asked.

"I wish I knew. I don't know why Dez wouldn't have just waited at the car for me to wake up. It just doesn't make sense that she would leave."

"Maybe she saw Bre and went to get help..."

We both went silent, our minds drifting to the same person. Rune. I pretended to be studying a khaki, one strap bag I grabbed from a bin, but in truth I didn't really see it. If I had, I probably would have left it there because even with my copper hair, khaki really isn't one my colours.

"Do you think he's gonna be okay?" I quietly asked at last.

"I don't know," Jupiter replied. "I think she meant a lot to him."

I nodded absently. Right. *Of course he won't just snap out of it, and of course she meant a lot to him, Eve—she was his girlfriend after all.*

I guessed it was time to get comfortable with my shiny new in-charge position. I figured I should probably start coming up with inspiring things to say that would unite people.

I stashed the extra items we picked up into the bag, and we stepped outside.

"I have no idea where to start," I said with a heavy sigh.

"I guess we should just start walking," Jupiter suggested.

Neither of us moved.

"Maybe we could find a map or something?" he asked.

I gave my eyes an exaggerated roll. "Oh, please. Some tough guy you are." I started down the street.

"Hey, I just thought that since you looked so scared—"

"Excuse me?" I turned to face him. "You think *I'm* the scared one? You—" I was about to continue when I noticed the colour rising in his face. A quick scan of his emotions told me he was pretty freaked out and feeling rather embarrassed about it. I ceased my teasing and patted his arm. "Actually, I am a little wiggled about all this. I'm glad you're here with me—I feel a lot safer."

"You are such a liar," he growled as he pushed past me. At least he forgot his fear to be pissed off.

All I can say is that we wandered. And wandered. And yes, wandered some more. Along Main Street, down the side roads, and back to Main Street again. We checked in all the stores as we went. *All* of them, whether it was a restaurant, a baby furniture outlet, or a dry cleaners. Did I really expect to find someone? Or even *something*? Honestly, I couldn't force myself to consider the alternative of *not* finding anyone. So I held out my hope. Every time we opened a door—weapons poised and ready—and searched the stores, I silently prayed that I would find Dez alive and well. Prayed to who, I didn't know. I didn't believe in God. I wasn't sure of much...but I prayed to whoever might be listening nonetheless.

"You're really worried about her, aren't you?" Jupiter asked me as we exited a coffee shop.

"Duh," I snapped. What a stupid question.

"No, I mean *really* worried." He stopped to face me and study my expression. "You don't think she's okay."

"I know she's fine!" I shouted. Okay, so immediately screaming like that probably didn't help my credibility.

"You know, you're not the only one who...who can..."

"Christ, you can't even say it! Listen, I'll do it for you: *read minds*. Oh, was that scary to hear? Hmm?"

I was acting totally irrational in taking my problems out on Jupiter. It was wrong of me and I knew it. I didn't even need to scan his thoughts to realize it.

"I don't need to read your thoughts!" he shouted. "You're projecting them! Rune was right about you."

"Excuse me?" That was one I hadn't heard before. "What the hell has Rune said about me?"

"Why don't you just *read my mind*," he muttered sarcastically.

I had no desire to actually do that. I probably didn't want to know what Jupiter was thinking most of the time; I had a feeling it frequently involved nudity.

"Desdemona is fine," I insisted instead. I had been trying to keep collected but with my emotional state slipping out of my control, so went the calmness in my voice. "I will find her and then we're getting the hell out of here. The rest of you can deal with whatever is coming—I don't care! None of this happened until I went with you guys. If I had just stayed in my apartment, she would've been all right! She would still be—"

I stopped myself from speaking further. I had almost done it—I had almost voiced my worst fears. But not saying it helped preserve my already fractured hope that she was safe.

"You don't think she's okay," Jupiter said, despite the fact that I raised the shovel to hit him when he spoke. "What I was trying to say before is that you should be able to...to, you know, do something to find out if she's alive and where she is. But you won't 'cause you're afraid she's..."

He was right. I hated it when someone other than me was right. And I really hated that it was Jupiter. But I couldn't deny it.

"I can't do it for you," he said. "I haven't met her, I don't know like her energy or anything, and even if I did, I'm not sure...well, I probably could, but then you'd never shut up that I was the one who rescued your sister. As much as I'd love to rub that in Martie's face, you might make my head explode or something."

Again, he was right. Not about the head-exploding thing—though that would rock if it was true—but that I had to try, no matter what I found.

I walked over to a grassy area outside of the local bank, left my bag of goodies and my shovel on the ground, and sat down cross-legged under a tree. I closed my eyes and ignored everything around me. That was far from difficult considering there were no sounds but that of the breeze rustling the tree leaves and Jupiter's footsteps as he approached me. I let everything go, relaxed all my muscles, and emptied my thoughts.

Then I pictured Dez. I thought of her glossy hair and how it framed her round face. I thought of her curious, intelligent dark eyes. I saw her raise one copper brow and look at me skeptically, and then roll her eyes and sigh. Then I saw her suddenly grin and giggle in that infectious way that made me forgive her no matter how much she pissed me off. I felt her energy—her joy, her mischievousness, her innocence... For a moment she was so real, I felt like if I reached out, I could even touch her. And it broke me to know that if I actually did reach for her, I would know she wasn't really there.

I had a strong imprint of her energy, so now I just had to do an astral search for her, and see if I could produce an image of where she was. I wouldn't actually be astrally projecting—I was still too upset for that—but if I could just disconnect my astral body a little bit, I would probably be able to sense her.

Suddenly, I felt her. It wasn't just the image of her I had conjured up—it was her... Where was she...?

...scared...Evie, where are you?...frightened...

Dez! I thought. Dezzie, I'm here, baby...

...need Eve...don't want to be here...by myself...so scared...

I could feel her, I could sense her thoughts...but I couldn't see her yet. I had to reach further.

"Jupiter," I whispered while trying not to break my bond with Dez. I heard him sit down directly in front of me. "I've got her, but I'm not sure where..."

"Time for some group mojo?" he asked.

I responded by grabbing his hand and sending him a quick, *Shut up and concentrate!*

I did wish it had been Rune there with me. Combined, I was certain we could find her in no time. But Jupiter was better than no one. I gave him a few minutes to relax and clear his mind (the latter I honestly didn't think would take very long). When I thought he was ready, I brought forth another very vivid image of Dez, and did another sweep for her energy. I didn't need Jupiter to search with me or anything, but rather I needed an anchor to keep me from slipping from my body completely. Kind of like holding onto one of my hands so I could reach out with the other and not fall. Considering how anxious I was—and the bad stuff my anxiousness and ill preparedness could lead to—I needed a grounding force.

It didn't take long for me to find her again.

...don't wanna be here...why can't I get out of here?...please...where's Evie...

Right here, Dezzie, I thought, but no matter how hard I tried to send my reassurances, she didn't seem to hear me.

afraid...not alone...

Yes, *I'm here!* I thought, relieved that she finally seemed to know I was there. I was seeing her now—seeing her as she glanced around in fear. She brushed her copper tresses from her brow, bit at her bottom lip, and looked from side to side...

"She's...she's inside," I whispered to Jupiter.

"Inside where? In a store?"

Desdemona crept forward, her arms crossed over her chest as she forced herself to keep from shaking...

"She's so scared," I said.

"Can you see anything in the room?" he prodded.

I tried to make out her environment, but it was still a blur...my vision was glued on Dez. She was so frightened...

I...I'm not alone here, she thought.

No, sweetie, I'm with you! You're going to be okay!

"Indigo, you have to tell me where she is," Jupiter said, but I barely heard him...I was slipping...

The room grew clearer. A window...Dez glanced toward a large, floor-to-ceiling window, and I followed her gaze. Outside the sun shone, but trees outside the building blocked most of the light. I could see the street, though...

"Ground floor," I muttered. "But it's so dark..."

...not alone, not alone...what's here with me?

I saw her eyes tear up as she looked around again, and suddenly I knew it wasn't me she felt there. As she tried to force herself forward, a fear-induced paralysis gripped her. She stared ahead, not even daring to breathe, as a shadow moved across the wall...

...so scared...can't move...Evie, where are you?...said she'd take care of me...Evie won't leave me here...

"Where is she?" Somewhere in the distance, I heard Jupiter speaking to me...

Dez glanced around, frantic, seeking somewhere to hide. There were rows—many of them—of things that reached far above her head and they went right across the room. Shelves! Maybe she could hide behind one of those...

Oh, please Evie, help me...God, no, what is that?

"Indigo, where—"

...so scared...

Dezzie, I'm coming!

...please, help me...

"What's in the room..."

...it's getting closer...

Dez's eyes grew wide with terror and she opened her mouth to scream, though no words came out...

I suddenly opened my eyes. "I know where she is!"

I jumped up and ran.

Chapter Six: Monster

"Indigo!" Jupiter called behind me.

I ignored him and continued to race down the street, all the while going over the town map I had created in my mind. My destination should be somewhere around the next block...

I cut across someone's nicely trimmed lawn, stomping through the flowerbed and hopping over a low fence onto the driveway. I ran faster than I had ever thought my lazy ass capable, gaining speed as I tore down a slight decline in the road.

Jupiter caught up to me at last. The bag with our stolen goodies from the hardware store was slung over his shoulder, and he had the shovel in one hand and the crowbar in the other. He stopped just ahead of me, blocking my path. I could have easily continued running, for he was out of breath from chasing me and carrying all our supplies, though I took pity on him and waited to hear what he had to say.

"Hold on," he said in growl. "How do you know where she is?"

"Duh, I saw her!"

"But where?"

"There were rows and rows of bookshelves."

"So?"

I rolled my eyes and planted my hands on my hips. "She's at the library, though I guess you'd be unlikely to recognize such a place."

"But she's okay?" I wasn't sure if he simply ignored my comment or just didn't realize what I was implying.

"She won't be if I don't hurry," I warned as I stalked past him.

"What do you mean?"

I kept on walking. I didn't want to talk about it—didn't want to even *think* about what could be in there with Dezzie.

"You have to tell me, Indigo!"

"There was..."

"There was what?"

"Well, I don't actually know what it was," I admitted with reluctance. "But it was something. And she was scared."

He didn't press for any further information. Instead, he simply passed me my weapon of choice, and we started running toward where I remembered the library being.

The building was three stories high, red brick, and had huge windows that went from floor to ceiling all along the front. Outside the first floor, a series of maple trees blocked most of the windows, exactly as I had seen in my vision.

"This is definitely it," I said. "She's got to be inside."

The entrance consisted of a pair of painted metal doors with round handlebars. I strode up the steps and reached for one of the doors, only to have Jupiter draw me back. All I saw was a dark shirt covering his flat back as he stepped directly in front of me, all defensive-like. Any other time I might have badgered him about being overprotective and sexist, but there were more important things going on.

"Just let me go first," he said, quite possibly reading my thoughts. With the crowbar poised for attack, he cautiously tugged open one of the doors, and we stepped inside.

There was a small foyer with stairs, an elevator, and washrooms to our right, and another set of doors that led to the main library to our left.

As we peered through the glass doors, we saw the lights on inside, unlike they had been in my vision only minutes earlier. There was no sign of anyone within. I couldn't say for certain that what I had been viewing was in "real time," but it hurt too much to think I had missed her...

"You sure she was on the ground floor?" Jupiter asked, reading the doubt in my face.

"Uh, no, I meant the roof," was my sharp reply. "Of course I am. Now if you're going first, you damn well better hurry up."

He pulled open the door and we filed into the room. Immediately, I pushed past him, my gaze sweeping across the long, narrow space for any sight of my sister.

"Dez?" I called.

The only answer was the hum of the fluorescent lights above us.

"Dez?" I said again, this time a bit louder.

Again, no sound of acknowledgement followed.

"You're sure—" Jupiter began.

"Christ, would you quit asking me that!"

Was I sure? Hell, no. The rows of cheap, faux-wood stacks *looked* like the ones I saw, but there was nothing particularly unique about them...

"What about a school?" he suggested. "Could you have seen a school library?"

I started to protest, but in truth I had no bloody idea. I probably wouldn't have been so defensive though if he didn't keep nagging me for my certainty.

What struck me first about the place was the smell—or rather the lack of one. I remembered spending a lot of time when I was a kid at the public library in my home town, and it was always a motley cornucopia of scents, from the librarian's heavy perfume that always made me sneeze, to the pine cleaner used daily on the desks and tables. But in here, there was nothing. Nothing that suggested people were ever here. All we were left with was stale air; the result of no open windows and poor ventilation.

I wandered around a bit, remaining near the entrance, studying the windows from a few different angles. There were the tress, and beyond them the street...

"Yes," I insisted. "This has to be it."

"Well, then where is she?"

Stupid Jupiter with his stupid logical questions.

I shrugged and started walking. After some initial hesitation, Jupiter followed. I didn't see what he was so freaked out about—he wasn't the one who had the ultra-creepy vision.

Even in the quietest of libraries, there are always sounds. A sniffle here and there. Pages sliding across one another, books closing. Clicks of a mouse at the computer. Whispers. Footsteps. But there was none of that, save from our own cautious movements.

We passed the checkout counter and the information centre. Toward the back of the room, on the right wall opposite the stacks, I spotted a black door that I figured led to the inner office.

"Maybe she went in there," I observed aloud.

Suddenly, the fluorescent lights flickered above us.

We froze. Our eyes turned upward as the humming got louder. The lights shuddered on and off a few times, giving the illusion they were shaking without actually moving. Then they blinked on and remained that way as if nothing had happened.

Jupiter and I looked at one another. My own confusion and trepidation was reflected in his expression, but before either of us could comment on the sudden power surge, the bulbs at the far end of the room shattered.

The next set followed and then the third row. One after the other, the bulbs broke like dominoes falling over.

"Look out!" Jupiter shouted as those above us broke. We raced back toward the entrance, shielding our heads as we went. As we stopped next to the doors, I found he was shaking—freaking right out, really. His eyes were huge and his usually medium-toned skin was ashen. "What the fuck is going on?"

Though it was the middle of the day, the library was dark, as it had been in my vision. The trees outside blocked most of the sunlight and now we were stuck without artificial light as well.

Why the hell didn't I grab a flashlight in the hardware store? I thought, but I couldn't even curse my stupidity for coming unprepared. I didn't have time to; I recognized where we were now. Without a doubt. It wasn't just that the room was suddenly identical to what I had seen in my vision; I felt an even greater remembrance...the *fear* my sister felt when I saw her there only ten minutes ago.

"Dez was here," I said with certainty. "She probably still—"

I paused. A slow creaking sounded across the room. The office door we had been trying to reach was opening...

I don't think a single breath passed between us as we waited. The front of the door opened toward us, blocking our view of who was on the other side.

"Dezzie?" My shaking voice betrayed my fear, but I called out again anyway. "Dez—"

A long, thin, pale finger went around the edge. It was followed by another, and another, until four, knobby digits held the door.

I instinctively took a step back, grabbing Jupiter's arm at the same time.

Rather than let the door swing open completely, the thing finally walked around it. A long, tangled mass of wet-looking reddish hair fell around her narrow form, wrapping over her shoulders and arms like a cloak, clinging to her. Her head was bowed, the mess of knots falling over her face. She shuffled toward us, creeping eerily across the floor, dragging her feet on the carpet as she went.

"Shit," Jupiter whispered. "Shit—what the fuck—"

She looked up at us, cocking her head to the side as she grinned. Her eyes were nothing but black spheres that seemed too small for their gaping sockets.

Jupiter backed up as she continued forward.

I tried to keep moving—tried to run—but my feet stuck to the floor. I couldn't be seeing this. This wasn't happening. God...it just couldn't be real...

"C'mon!" Jupiter shouted, yanking my sleeve and shaking me from my disbelief. I could deliberate my sanity later.

We turned and ran for the door, stumbling over our own feet. I fell, losing my balance and crashing into Jupiter. He began to lunge forward, but corrected himself mid-fall and grabbed my arm to steady me. We burst into the foyer and then outside, not stopping until we reached the street.

"What the fuck was that?" Jupiter shouted. "Jesus-fucking-Christ, what the hell?!"

"Dez was in there," I said quietly, more to myself because Jupiter was too busy ranting and pacing. *That* was what she saw, the shadow in my vision...*that* was why she was terrified...

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*" Jupiter continued his yelling. "Fuck! What the hell was that? A goddamn zombie? I can't believe it—there are really fucking zombies here!"

I totally wanted to smack him. Of course it wasn't a goddamn zombie. But I had no idea what it actually was, so I refrained from criticizing him. It didn't matter what we were dealing with, though...it was still in there...

"Okay, we...we need to think," Jupiter said, as if I wasn't already doing that. "We gotta get Rune. Rune will know—"

That thing was in there...and so was Dezzie...

I started for the library again, an overwhelming sense of love and determination filling me and overshadowing my fear. Adrenalin coursed through my veins, amplifying my growing anger.

Fuck the bitch. I was finding my sister.

"What the fucking hell are you doing?" Jupiter seized my arm and yanked me back.

"She's in there!" I screamed, tearing my arm from his grasp. "I have to get her!"

"Look, it's time to meet Rune, and they're only a couple of blocks away—stop it!"

I tried to run for the door again, but he grabbed me around the waist with ease and dragged me backward. Try as I may, I couldn't wiggle out of his grip. When I agreed to take him along earlier, I hadn't taken into consideration his huge, football player frame might actually be used to *stop* me from doing something.

"Rune will know what to do—"

"Really? Because so do I!" I held up my shovel. "If that fucking thing comes near me, I'll bash her fucking brains in!"

"We just need to talk to Rune—"

"Rune is gone, Juve. Either you start thinking for yourself or go sit with him and be comatose. I don't care—just get the hell out of my way!"

"We get the others, and come back then! All of us, prepared."

"Or I could go now—"

"I'm not letting you, Indigo."

"Fine!" I wrenched from his grip and started walking opposite the library. After hesitating long enough to ensure I was serious, Jupiter followed.

I hadn't gone half a dozen steps when I suddenly turned and swung my shovel at him hard. It struck his chest and he fell to the pavement, stunned for a moment. I dropped the shovel on top of him, snatched up the crowbar instead, then ran for the library.

"Indigo!" he shouted as I flew through the doors. I wedged the crowbar through the two curved handles once I was in the foyer, effectively barring it shut.

"Indigo!" Jupiter cried again. I leapt back as he pounded on the door. "Goddamn it, open the fucking doors!" He continued slamming his fist on the steel and swearing, but there was no way he would get through those heavy doors.

I backed up and jumped, startled, as my back hit the set of inner doors. What the hell was I doing...?

My fingers trembled as I pried loose the hunting knife from the sheath at my belt. *Calm down, Eve, calm down.*

I could do this. Like I said, I'd bash that bitch's brains in if she fucking came near me...except now I was without a brain-bashing weapon—as I had stupidly left it outside—and all I had was some pathetic knife that seemed to be growing smaller the more I looked at it. *Close combat it is then*, I thought, assuring myself that I could take the zombie-chick or whatever she was. I'd do it for Desdemona.

I raised the knife, yanked open the door, and stepped into the darkened library.

The woman, or thing, or whatever the hell we had seen, was gone. I wasn't totally sure if that was cause for relief or not. At least when she was coming toward me, I could be certain she wasn't going to jump up behind me. *Stab first, ask questions later*, I resolved. Good plan.

Worked in theory at least, but I had never actually stabbed anyone before. It probably wasn't best to dwell on my inexperience as a killer, though.

Bits of broken bulbs crunched under my feet as I walked. I winced with each step, cursing the noise I was making.

And then I could have sworn I heard sobbing. Or did I...?

I paused and listened. A few seconds of silence followed, then I heard the quiet cries again.

"Dezzie?" I called, praying to whoever might be listening that the thing from earlier didn't respond. No one answered, but the soft sobbing sound continued. It was definitely coming from somewhere to the left, where the stacks were.

I crept toward the first row of books and peeked my head around the corner with the knife thrust out in front of me.

All clear. One down and about...seventeen or eighteen to go. Great.

My heart thumped erratically in my chest. The sound echoed in my ears and drowned out my own quick, shallow breaths as I slowly approached the next tall shelf. I glanced around the edge...and there was nothing.

But the sobs grew louder.

Investigating each space between the shelves was getting harder and harder. With every potential hiding place that was empty, I became that much more certain that the next one would reveal...well, reveal *who* I couldn't say. Or even *what*. But I continued on.

What am I thinking, what am I doing, I wondered. Damn, I had turned into that stupid ditz who left behind her companions to explore the creepy, abandoned place where the monster was lurking. *Oh Jesus Christ, I actually believe I saw a "monster!"* What the hell was wrong with me? There weren't *actually* zombies or anything.

Of course, this was coming from a telepath/empath/remote viewer with a whole host of other weird psi-power labels. Perhaps I shouldn't be debating the existence of monsters considering I had psychic visions and stuff. The prospect left me with an icky feeling in my stomach. I really had possibly locked myself in the building with a...

Stop it, I told myself. Instead of my mind's wanderings, I focused on my careful steps towards the sixth shelf. The crying was definitely closer now.

I tightened my grip on the knife to the point my knuckles went pure white, then I turned the corner...

I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't. I was so overjoyed, my eyes filled with tears.

It's her!

Desdemona was huddled in the corner next to the wall, with her back to me. Her shiny copper hair hung down over her back to her waist, almost grazing the floor. Even in the darkness, I recognized the light blue t-shirt she wore. It was definitely Dez.

"Dezzie!" I cried, absently setting the knife on the nearest shelf. I devoured the space between us in two long strides and knelt down behind her.

"Dez, it's me, sweetie—" I reached out and touched her shoulder.

The force of my hand threw her off balance, tipping her left side toward the ground. She swung around as she fell to floor, landing on her back and staring up at the ceiling with glazed, unblinking eyes.

I recoiled when I saw the huge, bloody hole in her lower abdomen.

"Dezzie!" I shrieked, leaning over her body and reaching for her shoulders. My hands trembled as I grabbed her arms and tried to shake her awake. "Dezzie—wake up—Dez!"

Hot tears streamed down my face and I wiped them back on my sleeve as I continued to cry. *She has to be okay, she has to be...she just passed out, that's all...*

I wasn't thinking clearly. What do people do when someone's bleeding?

Stop the blood flow. I placed my hands over the wound, cringing at the warm, sticky liquid beneath my fingers. She didn't actually seem to be bleeding anymore...

Heartbeat—right, Eve, find her heartbeat...

I reached for her throat, leaving bloody fingerprints everywhere I touched. Her skin was cool. Too cool. God, how long had she been there? I felt around her neck, not even sure where to look for a pulse. But she *had* to have one.

"Dezzie, please," I sobbed, the hurt of knowing I had lost her filling my chest, compressing it, making it so I wasn't sure if I'd ever breath again. *This can't be happening!*

Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. I didn't notice it right away, so I can't say how long it was there...but all at once I became aware of it. The fingers squeezed hard, nails digging into my flesh and sending ripples of pain down my arm.

I turned and looked up to see the cruel grin of the woman we saw earlier...and I screamed.

Chapter Seven: Dissention

I think I blacked out. Well, I'm *certain* I blacked out, because I came to stretched out on the floor. I wasn't sure *why* I was on the floor, but I felt the carpet-covered ground beneath me and my back ached, so I guessed I had been there awhile. A pair of male voices argued above me.

"You cannot just walk in, without a weapon, when you see someone unconscious on the ground!" Okay, that was definitely Rune.

"But she was just—" That sounded like Jupiter.

"You go in unprepared and you could get yourself killed," Rune warned. Never had I imagined him sounding so pissed off. *Never*.

I opened my eyes, just then realizing that they were closed. Jupiter had knelt next to me, but looked up at a fuming Rune. Our "leader" stood over us. For a couple people that were supposed to be concerned about my lack of consciousness, they seemed pretty intent on glaring at one another and ignoring me.

Rune yanked Jupiter to his feet by his shirt collar, snatched the hunting knife I had left on the shelf, and handed it to him.

"Make sure the room is clear," Rune ordered as he sent Jupiter out of the stacks.

Dezzie! The memory of what transpired washed over me and I bolted into a sitting position.

"Where's Dez!" I cried. I started to stand—despite the spots of white that flashed in front of my eyes—but Rune stopped me and urged me back down. I was about to complain when he shone a penlight into my eyes, momentarily blinding me. He held my eyelids open, peering into my eyes and searching them for something.

"You don't have a concussion," he said.

"No, but I'm fucking blind now, thank you!" I pushed him out of my way as I sat up again. "Where is she?" Once again entering panic mode, I didn't care that my voice disclosed my bewilderment. There was no sign of her where I'd seen her before I blacked out—not even a drop of blood on the carpet. A thousand possibilities ran through my head...what if she was really okay and went to hide?...what if she went for help?...what if that *thing* took her?

I rose a little too quickly, which sent my head spinning, and then I stumbled past Rune and out into the main part of the library. There was a huge hole in the far window at the front and a river of broken glass on the floor.

"Dez was here—she was—" *Dead*, I thought, my eyes tearing up. But she couldn't be—she *couldn't* be! This wasn't happening...

"Do you want to explain what you were doing?" Rune asked, suddenly back to using that typically calm voice of his.

"Well, I certainly wasn't freaking out and leaving people to deal with the situation on their own!" I snapped. I was stupid to think that me making a comment like that would shake him, though—he still stared at me in that collected, distanced way.

"The room's clear," Jupiter said, glowering at Rune but saying nothing more.

"What happened?" Rune directed to me.

"Where's Dez?" I responded.

"You were the only one here when we came in."

"I'm sick of waiting out there," Martie called, striding into the room via the hole in the window. Kitty and Jace followed with hesitation, and soon we were standing in a loose semicircle.

"Indigo, are you okay?" Martie asked, so far the only one who *actually* seemed worried. "Guys, I knew we shouldn't have left her..."

She went on about their foolish agreement to allow me to stay behind, but I was lost in thought. Jupiter wouldn't have missed seeing Dez in the room if he had really looked around...and he had to have given it a thorough search, because he wouldn't dare cross an already pissed off Rune. But then where was she? Did that thing really take her somewhere?

I returned to where I had found her before and tears welled in my eyes at the memory. It was so real...

"She was laying right there!" I insisted, pointing at the floor. "She was...and I found her...and then there was the..." I looked down at my hand. Only minutes ago I had pressed it to the bloody wound in her gut. But there was no sign of that now—not on my palm, not my fingertips, not even my shirtsleeve.

"This isn't happening," I said, repeating it for the umpteenth time in my head as well. I felt an arm go around my shoulders and I turned into Jupiter's waiting embrace where I let out a deep sob. Christ, I felt so weak. So tired. And my chest ached as I cried.

"What happened?" Rune asked again, unbothered by his own perceived need for repetition. I knew damn well he'd just ask us all bloody day until we gave him a straight answer.

"I told you—there was some fucking zombie-creature-thing, and it—" Jupiter began before I could.

"Indigo," Rune directed to me.

I broke out of Jupiter's hug to face Rune. "She was here...and so was that...*thing*..."

He didn't believe us—I could feel it. Even though he knew we were telling the truth about what we *thought* we saw, I felt his skepticism. He didn't need to say it—he didn't even need to project his thoughts to me. I knew what was going through his mind. *You're crazy, Eve. Crazy like your mother...*

And that was enough to throw me over the edge.

"Dez was here," I stated firmly, taking a few steps forward to stand before Rune. My shoulders squared and my arms crossed at my chest, I gazed defiantly up at him. I may not have had his height, but so help me, I would not stand down, even to him. "*Something* else was here, and it hurt her. I don't give a damn if you believe me! You would *know* what we saw if you were where you were supposed to be—with us!"

"Indigo," Martie said with care, looking warily from Rune to me. She hated it when anyone—other than her, that is—argued. This I knew, but I wasn't holding back because she was too sensitive to deal with a bit of conflict.

"Nobody else will say it, so I will," I replied. "He has a responsibility—"

"But he doesn't—"

"Yes, he does," I said, all the while keeping my eyes locked with Rune's. Though my words seemed directed at her, I meant them for him. He knew it. "He brought us into this. He said we needed to run and then he wasn't there when we needed him. And now he won't take responsibility for it."

"He didn't force us to go with him," Martie said, though the doubt in her tone betrayed her true feelings.

"And we didn't force him to come to us with this talk of missing and dead friends meant to scare us into following him!" I added. Perhaps I wasn't being true there—inside me I had no doubt of his true, altruistic intentions—but once again, Irrational Eve reared her ugly head.

He didn't utter a word. Not one syllable. Instead, he simply turned around and started back for the street. I scanned his thoughts, but all I caught was one single word.

Bre.

"Fine," I said before I could stop myself. "Go. But Breanna is dead. Dez may be hurt. The rest of us will definitely be if we don't figure out what's going on."

He continued walking, and after a few glances at me, the others started to reluctantly follow. What a bunch of sheeple!

"Right, just go back to the van and freak out a bit more," I continued ranting. "That'll really be helpful. But I'm searching this entire place until I'm positive Dez isn't here."

Martie caught up to Rune first and tried to stop him. He said something her that the rest of us missed, then she came over to speak to me while he continued outside and down the street.

"I'll go with him to...to get Bre's body," Martie said as the others joined us. "He doesn't want to leave her sitting in the van and I can't say I blame him. The rest of you stay here and help Indigo look."

"Well, so long as we have his permission," I snapped.

"Indigo—"

"Have fun," I interrupted. "Go hang out with dead people or whatever while the rest of us actually do something."

An understanding flashed through her blue eyes; she knew I couldn't be argued with. Rather than try and smooth things over with me, she dashed after Rune without another word.

"Okay, you and me will take the second floor—" Jupiter began.

"I don't think so," I shot in, still pissed that he hadn't helped me earlier. I started for the foyer, grabbing Kitty's arm on my way by and dragging her with me. "You boys go play with zombies in the back room down here. We'll meet you later." We slipped from the room and headed straight up the stairs before he could stop us.

Kitty and I reached the third floor without her breathing a single syllable. Perhaps I should have brought Jupiter after all, if only for conversation's sake.

"So how did you guys find us?" I asked as we entered the top floor of the library. It was identical to the first story, though in place of the counters, there were several desks surrounded by chairs. The room was lit completely, suggesting the phenomena Jupiter and I had experienced earlier had been confined to the ground floor alone.

"We heard Jupe yelling," she said. I waited, but she didn't offer anything more.

"Who broke the window?"

"Rune."

Oh, so post-traumatic-stress boy wasn't so useless after all.

"He freaked when he heard you were in here alone," she continued and I sensed her relax a bit. She was still nothing like the talkative girl I knew from online, though. "He put the shovel through the window."

"How very...destructive of him," I said. The gesture seemed far less impressive given his abrupt departure.

"He didn't even seem to care when he heard the town was empty," she said thoughtfully.

"Just another boring day for him. And now he's off to collect his dead girlfriend. He wasn't like...I don't know, cradling Bre's corpse when you got back, was he?" That was a creepy picture I had trouble getting out of my mind.

"Nope—still sitting next to the van. I think he wanted to get something to put her in before..."

"Before she goes all maggoty and smelly? Yeah, decomposition tends to ruin the whole 'they're just sleeping' image." I felt the energy around Kitty tense. Funny, I thought she would have been used to my bizarre sense of humour by now. "Sorry," I offered, a bit uncomfortable because I wasn't really sure what I was apologizing for, beyond freaking her out. "I may be having trouble accepting what is going on and my attempt at comedy is a symptom of that."

"It's okay." Kitty tried a wan smile. "I think we're all having trouble accepting this. But...but did you and Jupe really see..."

"What did he tell you?"

"He was pretty...incoherent."

"He tends to get that way when he's excited about...well...anything."

A bigger smile—this time one of amusement—broke across her round face and she even brushed the long dark blonde bangs from her eyes to shoot me a wink.

"Or at least if there's a girl involved," she said and we laughed.

"But you usually give him a run for his money," I commented. "At least online."

"It's..." She blushed. "It's easier there. Talking, I mean."

"But you've been travelling with the others for like a couple of weeks, right?"

"About...eight or nine days now, I think."

"And you're not comfortable yet?" Christ, I was starting to feel really bad. Here I was pestering the poor girl about something so unimportant as just being a little introverted! But I found it odd—I wasn't used to her being so quiet.

"I don't know," she said shyly. "They don't really ask for my opinion or anything."

I shrugged. "They don't ask for mine either, but I give it to them anyway. And they've yet to tell me to shut up, so I'd say you've got nothing to fear."

"But that's cause Rune...well...he values, you know, what you have to say and all."

That comment caught me off guard and I almost ceased my step. Did Rune really treat me differently than everyone else? He had been so quick to anger with Jupiter, and yet he tolerated my ranting and raving without so much as batting an eyelash at it. A sense of guilt washed over me. *I probably shouldn't have...well, I was right—I know I was! But still...*

"Don't feel bad about it," Kitty said. The colour rose in her face again and she dropped her gaze to the floor.

"Boy, I sure do project things, don't I?" I said with a laugh, hoping she wouldn't crawl back into her shell right when she seemed to be growing at ease with me.

"A little," she confessed.

A thought occurred to me. Jupiter hadn't been willing to divulge anything more about the hint he dropped, but maybe Kitty would.

"Is that what Rune said?" I asked, pretending to be casual about it.

"Well...yeah...when you're upset or emotional...he said you can blast your thoughts so loudly that even normal people can hear you, even though they probably wouldn't realize what was happening. It was sorta a warning to the rest of us—"

"A warning? So I'm a 'warning' now?" I interrupted. I regretted my outburst at once; Kitty shrank back and I caught the discomfort in her eyes as she glanced at me from behind her long fringe of hair.

"Just so that we'd be careful. He says the stronger we get with what we do, the more dangerous it can become if we don't keep our emotions in check."

"That must explain why he doesn't seem to have any," I muttered.

We finished up on the third floor. Nothing freaky happened—no scary person popped up, no bizarre lighting accidents. Absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. Except for the complete lack of people, it almost seemed like a normal day.

On our way to the middle level, we encountered Jupiter and Jace.

"Nothin' in there." Jupiter gestured to the second floor double doors. "Nothin' in the back room of the first one either."

"You sure you didn't see her come out?" I asked, looking at each of them in turn. They all shook their head. "But this doesn't make any sense—I saw her. Is there a back door?"

"I saw one in the back room, but it was locked," Jace said. He looked down at his watch. "We'll need to meet up with Martie and Rune soon, and though I'm not feeling much like eating, we probably should look into getting something for dinner."

"And find a place to spend the night," Jupiter added.

"Then I'm spending dinner—and the night—combing this entire place to find her," I said stubbornly. The realist in me was tugging at my conscience, though. She wasn't in the library—there was no trace of her. The town wasn't that big, but there was still a lot of ground to cover, and it would be getting dark soon. I needed the others for help with this, despite how I loathed to admit it.

"Maybe we can come up with a plan as a group," Jace suggested, probably sensing my distress. "I'm sure we'll be able to find her if we work together, but we should plan for the night just in case."

I put up my hands in surrender. "First things first, then; I guess we're off to rob a grocery store." We returned to the first floor. While I had intended to remove the crowbar to go through the front door, we found it was already gone. I asked the others, but they didn't have a clue where it went. That suggested to me that while Jupiter was off getting the others, Dez could have run out through there and somewhere into the town. I kept those thoughts to myself, though, since it was clear everyone else already thought I was nuts.

As we started down the street, I glanced back at the library and fear crept through me.

Where was my sister?

~*~

The only bad thing about stealing from an empty Loblaws is having to bag your own groceries. On the plus side, you can also steal a shopping cart. And we did—we took two of them, in fact. Jupiter and Martie raced them outside for about half an hour once we found a hotel to stay at. Ah, how quickly people forget they're in a goddamn abandoned town.

Rune was nowhere to be found, though Martie assured us he just needed some "alone" time. No one seemed too concerned about him being on his own. No one but Jupiter and me, that is, which made sense because we were the only ones who believed there was anything to fear in the *goddamn abandoned town*. Sheesh.

Dinner consisted of everyone fending for themselves, using the appliances in the hotel kitchen. We consumed our meals, left our dishes sitting on one of the counters, and sorted out the sleeping arrangements...and that turned into quite the chore.

"Rune said we should all sleep in the same room," Jupiter insisted. He had been repeating that argument for the entire discussion, probably because he didn't have anything else to back up his opinion.

"Yes, but that was when we didn't have any money to afford extra rooms," Martie reminded him. "For the first few days—before we decided to pool our cash—he and Bre had one room and so did I. Now we have an entire goddamn hotel and I'm not sleeping with you again. You snore."

"Um, I don't think any of us should be left alone right now," Kitty said quietly, her eyes scouting everyone's faces for any hint of a negative reaction to her speaking up.

"Oh, you don't really think that they..." Martie stopped and looked at me, trying to read whether or not I knew what she was about to say. And I did.

"Of course not, because we're both just crazy, right?" I ranted. "Not only are Jupiter and I *both* delusional, but we *both* had the same delusion at the same time."

"Indigo—"

"Or maybe we're just liars," I continued. "We thought, 'Hey, wouldn't it be fun to make up a story about lights breaking and some freaky monster chick?' 'Why, yes, because that makes a lot of sense—come up with a ridiculous lie that no one will believe.'"

"Look, I'm sorry. I just...I don't know, it's kind of hard to believe."

"Yeah, well, try being in the situation."

"Excuse me," Jace cut in. "But I think we were supposed to be deciding on sleeping arrangements?"

"One room," Jupiter said in a familiar stubborn tone.

"No, I'm not sleeping with five other people again," Martie countered.

"Why not give the girls one room, and us guys another?" Jace, ever the practical one, suggested. "Side by side. There are probably some with either a double bed or two single ones."

"Which would make sense if there were only two girls and two guys, but there are three of us," I said.

"Someone could sleep on a cot?"

"Any volunteers?" Martie asked.

Sure enough, there weren't any takers.

"Separate rooms, then."

"No—" Jupiter started.

"Yes." Both Martie and Jupe were firm in their positions and I doubted either side would be giving up any time soon.

"I'll go out and get the bags," Jace said, the equivalent of a parent saying, "By the time I get back, you'd better have this sorted out!" People were less likely to listen to him than Rune, however, so I wondered if maybe he was actually going off to get our leader to handle this one.

"How about by twos?" Kitty suggested. "Two people to a room?"

"No, Rune said—"

"Rune's not here," I reminded him. "He's still wiggling out somewhere by himself. I vote for two to a room."

"Sounds fair," Martie agreed.

"So who bunks with who?" Jupiter asked. I really didn't like the way he was eyeing us girls. Not that I believed he'd try anything with any of us, but he'd flirt to the point it was just plain annoying.

"Since you're so keen on what Rune has to say, you can share a room with him," I said.

He opened his mouth to protest just as Jace returned with the luggage—without Rune.

"So have we decided?" Jace asked.

"Two to a room, and Jupe and Rune will have the first one," Martie explained before Jupiter could argue again.

"Ah, so who do I get?" Jace's eyes fell on Kitty, which made sense, I suppose. He tended to be the most quiet online, and she was far less mouthy than Martie and me in real life. "You up for it Kitty?"

She nodded.

"So then it's me and Indigo," Martie said. "Wanna go for the expensive penthouse rooms?"

"This isn't the Four Seasons," I said. "I doubt it has special Jacuzzi suites or anything."

"Second floor?" Jace suggested. "Just above the lobby, by the stairs maybe? We'll get three in a row."

Everyone agreed. Well, Jupiter didn't—he mostly just looked really, really pissed off. But he didn't say anything. As we started gathering our bags, Jace spoke to me privately.

"Rune's still out there," he said. "He's just sitting on the car. Maybe you could have a talk with him?"

Catharsis

I sighed. I didn't want to. Like *really* didn't want to. But the sooner we got our leader back, the sooner everyone would stop arguing and start helping me look for Dez.

Chapter Eight: Promises

Have I mentioned how much I didn't want to go out and talk to Rune? Because I didn't. At all. Why the hell did Jace want *me* to do it? The others could just as easily have tried to talk some sense into him. Any one of them. So why did I get stuck with the job?

Outside it was dark and strangely none of the streetlamps had come on in the parking lot. Most of the lights inside were off as well, leaving the moon as my only guide to find the beat-up station wagon. A cool breeze swept over me, reminding me that no matter where we went—abandoned town or not—we wouldn't escape some things, like early fall. I pulled my fleece, hooded sweater tighter around me and went in search of Rune.

Around the back of the building, I spotted the station wagon. There were only a few other cars in the lot and only that one had a person laying on top of the vehicle's driver's side. Rune's legs were stretched across the hood, his back rested on the windshield, and his hands were folded behind his head. He stared up at the stars, regarding them without purpose, and he didn't look at me as I approached.

I hopped onto the hood next to him, sat back, and didn't say a word. Okay, so I knew why Jace asked me to talk to him. We all knew. Kitty was right; he listened to me, he bounced ideas off of me, he was willing to hear me out when I had a differing opinion about something...and I knew he trusted me.

"They're starting to snap in there without you, you know," I said. Probably not the best conversation starter, but I felt it was best to be direct. "Jupiter just keeps repeating things you've said in the past, even Martie's starting to lose it, and God knows I'm not being too helpful."

"Yes, you are," he said, his natural tone of voice—when he wasn't shouting—so quiet it wasn't far above a whisper. He glanced over at me and offered the slightest of smiles. "You're the only one thinking clearly."

"Nah..." I actually blushed at the compliment, and I *never* blush. "Jace seems pretty level-headed still, and Kitty's fine. She just doesn't talk much...well, okay, ever."

"Kitty won't lead because she's afraid to and Jace has other responsibilities."

"Like?"

"Like figuring out where we are, for one thing. If we know that, we might figure out *why* we're here. The more I know about this, the better I can plan what to do."

I nearly sighed aloud, I was so relieved. He hadn't left us, hadn't forgotten that we needed him. Perhaps it was time I started trusting in him as he did me.

"I'm sorry about Breanna," I said softly, knowing I should have said it sooner and hoping he'd forgive that I'd waited so long.

"It's my fault." I knew him too well to think he was simply seeking attention or pity by saying that. He spoke so plainly, so matter-of-factly, it was clear he believed it was true. I knew I went loony blaming him for all of our problems earlier, but I didn't actually mean it then.

"No, it's not. You couldn't have known—"

"But I did." He shook his head sadly, pulled his arms down and folded his hands across his stomach. "I knew she shouldn't have been with us. She didn't belong here. I was selfish, weak, and I shouldn't have let her come...I think somehow I knew she'd pay the price for it."

"She didn't belong because she's not one of us?" I asked, feeling the hairs on my arms rise with my anger. He probably felt it coming off me in waves, but he answered anyway.

"Yes."

"So you *knew* this would happen? You knew Dez would be hurt too, didn't you! You—" Tears burned in my eyes.

"I suspected," he admitted. Before I could start screaming, though, he continued. "But I thought if there was really any danger to them, you would know too. When you didn't seem to have a problem with her going, I thought I was just being paranoid."

I pushed the tears from my cheeks, soaking them up with the sleeve of my sweater. I did feel it. I knew she didn't have to come with me. Stupidly, I just thought I didn't have any other choice. But both Rune and I did—we could have left them behind. It probably would have been safer, but neither of us could change that now.

"I don't mean you're to blame," he continued. "I'm the one responsible for bringing everyone together. I thought if we kept moving, we'd be okay, and I'm the one who should have told you why I didn't want your sister to come. I'm sorry."

I looked over at him, still on the verge of crying, and still trying badly to be as controlled as he was. He turned his head to gaze over at me.

"You know we really did see what we said we did, right?" I said. "Something hurt Dez..."

He was so restrained, so calm, and yet I swore I saw the slightest movement in his hand. For a moment I thought he might reach out, just to offer a touch of comfort, being the good friend of mine that he was. But he didn't.

"I know," he said. "But first thing tomorrow, we'll all go out to look for her. I promise."

His cool blue eyes returned to viewing the night sky, and mine did the same. I felt a peace rush over me and I suspected it was coming from the person beside me, as if since he couldn't offer physical comfort, he would send some of the telepathic variety. I accepted the energy. My breathing and heart rate slowed, my muscles relaxed, and despite the number of things I was extremely freaked out about, tranquility enveloped me.

"You never told me about Breanna," I said after a few minutes of silence.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"How long have you...had you been with her?"

"Since March."

Well, this conversation isn't going anywhere, I thought, but I was still too curious to stop my questions there.

"Did you love her?"

Silence.

Probably none of my business. I expected he would tell me where to go any second now.

"I don't know anymore," he said at last, and I realized he really had used the silence to consider the question. "I loved what she represented to me. She was..."

"Normal," I finished for him and nodded. "Mal as the same. He was normal and when I was with him, I kind of felt like I was too."

"You're not living with him anymore?"

"I haven't for almost six months."

"So I guess that's why we didn't hear from you for so long? You were moving?"

"It wasn't that long," I said, recalling my brief disappearance from the internet world earlier that year.

"Three months."

"Okay, I guess that was 'so long.' It took me awhile to get back on my feet."

"So who pays the rent now?" Rune knew of my dislike for any mundane sort of job, and since I had refused to go to post-secondary school—because I hated formal education just as much—I was without income and without any sort of training that could get me a half decent job.

"I blackmail my father. I need cash, and he doesn't need anyone knowing that as a local member of parliament, he had an illegitimate daughter twenty years ago—least of all his wife—so really, it works out for everyone."

I snuck a glance at Rune to see him grin, and I stifled a laugh. He knew me well enough to realize I wasn't joking.

"So when you said you couldn't come with us because you had a job and responsibilities..."

"I never said *I* did," I corrected him. "I said *some people* do."

"I see."

More silence. It was the comforting sort, though. We didn't need to speak, and it wasn't just because we could send thoughts. I think there is a level of communication beyond telepathy, in which there is simply understanding. We had that.

"You didn't tell me you two broke up," Rune said, back onto the subject of Malcolm. It was probably best not to dwell on how many laws I was breaking with my unique form of income anyway.

"And, you didn't tell me you'd been with Bre for how long again?"

"You're right, I probably should have told you."

"Psi-powered friends tell psi-powered friends when they're dating norms," I joked.

"I think you would have liked her," he said thoughtfully.

I tried really hard not to laugh. Of course, he sensed my amusement with the statement, but continued on anyway.

"She was just...such a *good* person. She knew what I was and it never bothered her—not once. It didn't scare her, it didn't impress her...she just accepted it. Because it was part of me, I guess."

Which was more than how Malcolm was with me. Sure, he made me feel normal in a lot of ways, but because I never told him anything about what I could do or what I was, I felt even more isolated. I couldn't say for certain if he would have accepted me if he'd known the truth, but given how sensible and "normal" he was, he never would have believed me. Whether it was love or not, I envied what Rune had had with Bre. I'm sure he must have guessed that, which easily could be why he had never chosen to tell me about her.

"I'm sure she was great," I said, acknowledging to myself that my first impressions of her were probably wrong. "I don't think she liked *me* very well, but I don't doubt she cared about you."

"Bre wasn't like us, but still, she suspected, if not completely knew...certain things." I felt his hand cover mine and I entwined my fingers with his in return.

Ah, so she knew "things." But what's a little astral sex among friends? It was an "experiment," and only for the purpose of science. Really, I swear that was our reason.

That little bit of contact overwhelmed me. I had know him for over a year. Talked with him for over a year. Shared more with him than just about anyone. Been touched by him in dreams and the astral plane in ways that would be unladylike of me to repeat. But not like this. Not palm to palm, not for real, not physically touching with only inches separating the rest of us.

"Rune..." I turned my head to look at him and he did the same. I felt tears well in my eyes again and I cursed myself for getting so ridiculously emotional all of a sudden...but it was Rune, and I knew that right now, if anyone understood, it was him.

"Rune, if you tell me we'll find her, I'll believe you."

Still holding my hand in his, this time he did reach out with the other. He brushed a few strands of hair from my eyes, his fingers coming to rest on the back of my neck. I was moving. He was moving. Or maybe only one of us was—my head was whirling and my eyes involuntarily closed, so I couldn't say anything for certain. All I knew was that within moments I could feel his hot breath on my lips, his mouth barely an inch from mine...but that was as far as it could go.

It was wrong. I knew it. God knows, he knew it. And it wasn't fair.

Why did it have to be like this? Why these circumstances? Why shouldn't we just be two normal people, in a normal town, sitting on a car holding hands in the moonlight? Why did we have to finally meet this way; trying to escape whatever it was that caused the deaths and disappearances of our friends?

Of course, I did know why. Because we weren't normal. And he had a girlfriend that died horribly not twenty-four hours ago. I had a sister that was missing, and no matter my powers, I couldn't do a damn thing to find her.

It wasn't our moment. I wasn't going to kid myself—I knew we might never have a moment, but that did nothing to change the fact that it was wrong. Still, we lay there for a few minutes longer, denying ourselves the one thing we knew we couldn't take advantage of.

"I'd better go inside," I finally said. I opened my eyes to read his expression.

He gazed down and sighed, then nodded his agreement. See? He knew.

Slowly I got up, desperately not wanting to leave, but knowing I had to. And he let me go—desperately not wanting to, but also knowing he had to.

"You and Jupe will be sharing a room," I said, standing next to the station wagon with my left hand still in his. "We're on the second floor above the lobby. Our rooms are easy to find—they're the only ones with people in them."

"I'll be there in a little while," he replied.

I nodded and chose to stare absently at my feet. They weren't going anywhere, despite how I tried to command them. Stupid feet.

At last, I got my legs moving. I felt my fingers slip from his, but I kept going.

"Indigo."

I looked back at him.

"We'll find her," he promised.

Sure enough, I believed him.

~*~

"So how's he doing?" Martie asked me when I entered our room.

On the way there, I met Jace in the hallway. He explained that he and Kitty took the room in the row with the single beds, so the rest of us got to share doubles. I understood their position, and I didn't argue about it, though I was less than thrilled. It wasn't like Martie and I would suddenly be going all *Mulholland Drive* with the lesbo action, but I was still a little mad at her from earlier. I think it showed when I was talking to her.

"Super—he's out there doing cartwheels right now," I replied, rifling through my overnight bag in search of my PJ bottoms. "I've got a good feeling he'll make it all the way to the Olympics this year."

She ignored my sarcasm. "Is he coming inside?"

"Um, I'm not sure—how about I teleport outside and ask him?" Okay, not being fair to people again. I should probably start thinking before I speak. But where's the fun in that?

"I was just asking."

I sighed. "He'll come in when he's ready." *And you and everyone else would know that if you'd gone out there to talk to him yourself*, I silently added.

"I guess Jace has his laptop hooked up and he's trying to narrow down where we might be."

"There was nothing on Rune's roadmap?"

"There were plenty of towns and things, but we can't figure out where we are among them." How comforting. So much for Rune's clever planning.

"Indigo, I...I'm sorry," Martie said. "For not believing you guys, that is. It's just—"

"It's just that it's pretty damn unbelievable. I get that." I *didn't* actually "get that" and I was still pretty pissed off, but I didn't feel like arguing. It had been a hell of a day, and I just wanted to sleep.

"Are you going to keep being mad at us?"

"Probably." I suddenly smiled. "But even though I hold one hell of a grudge, I have the attention span of a three-year-old, so I'll probably forget about it by tomorrow."

After undressing, I slipped on a tank top and over-sized, drawstring PJ bottoms, and crawled into my half of the double bed. Thankfully, I didn't have to wait long for sleep to take me.

~*~

Desdemona was watching T.V. That was hardly a surprise—some days I swore she never left the couch. She would sit there flipping channels on the "idiot box" (as our mother would say) for hours at a time. What was it that seemed so strange about this...?

And then, I remembered she should have been dead. I remembered taking off with Rune and the others, the empty town, and the moment when I found her lifeless, bloody body.

"Dezzie?"

She looked over at me and grinned. She was okay... All of it must have been a bad dream, because she was okay! I threw my arms around her and hugged her tightly.

"Ugh, need air now," she joked and pushed out of my embrace. "You're so emotional sometimes."

"But you were gone—"

"Duh. But now I'm here. You promised me you'd always take care of me. I know that."

For a moment I was sitting back in my room. Dez had just arrived from Mom's house to live with me, and she dropped her luggage at the apartment door. She called my name and found me in a sobbing heap on the floor of my bedroom.

"It's okay Eve." She knelt beside me and hugged me. "I'm here with you now, for always, okay?"

"Dez," I cried into her shoulder, suddenly feeling as though I was the younger sister. "I'll take care of you...I'll take such good care of you now honey, I promise...I promise..."

But we weren't there—we were seated on my couch watching a movie and I had the distinct memory of her dying in that abandoned town.

"Dezzie—"

"Shh." She gestured to the T.V. "Commercial's over."

Everything was back to normal. She was safe, we were together again, and I was so happy I didn't even ask why.

"What's on this time?" I asked.

"The Master.' Classic Jet Li."

"Why do all these movies feature him fighting an American white guy with a mullet?" I thought it was sad that I had seen enough kung fu movies with her to notice that common thread.

"Duh, because mullets are scary." She laughed. "But they don't scare you, do they Evie?"

"Haircuts aren't scary."

"Some are."

A streak of dark red flashed in the corner of my eye. I turned, but nothing was there—nothing *at all*, in fact. The wall of my apartment was gone, with nothing in its place but a grey void. *That shouldn't be like that...* I forced away thoughts of the dread building in my gut and looked back at the T.V.

"Why can't you watch normal shows?" I asked.

"Like you?"

"Well, yeah."

"I'm not Eve, like you're not Camilla. We aren't the same."

"But you're part of me—"

"No, I'm just me."

I glanced back at where my wall used to be. This time I saw the library—the one from earlier that day. It was dark, and the cracked bits of light bulbs were scattered across the floor. *No, no, we're home now...*

"What would Mom say?" she asked.

"That's not important Dezzie."

"Would she have let me live with you if she knew you would let me die?"

I looked over at her to see a wound in her stomach, blood soaking through her light blue shirt until she was completely covered in it.

"That isn't real," I said.

"Yes, it is real, but it's not mine."

Something pierced my gut and I screamed. My hands flew to my abdomen, blood gushing over them...

~*~

My eyes shot open as I awoke. At first I wondered why my bedroom looked remarkably like a hotel room, but then I remembered the previous two days. I also realized I hadn't simply woken myself up from such an unpleasant dream, but that someone was sitting next to me, shaking my shoulders. The bedside lamp was switched on and in the glow I recognized Martie.

"Indigo," she said.

"Yeah, yeah, sorry I woke you—bad dreams."

"It's not that..." She looked terrified; her brows were furrowing in worry and she was pure ashen. "Something happened..."

"Shit, what is it now?"

"It's..."

I sat up, the urgency she projected taking hold of me.

"It's what?" I demanded.

"It's...it's Rune."

Chapter Nine: Apparition

Without a word, I stood and ran for the door. Martie was at my heels as I raced down the hallway to the far end, where Jupiter, Jace, and Kitty awaited me.

"What happened?" I asked as I approached.

I was met with faces etched in concern, but no one offered a response.

"Is he okay?" I looked at each of them. "So everything is super and you just thought it would be fun to wake me up and scare the hell out of me?"

"He's in there." Jace gestured to the room they all seemed to be guarding. It was several down from the one Rune and Jupiter were supposed to be sharing.

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded.

"Just go in and have a look, but don't...don't disturb him," Jace replied. "Don't talk to him, don't do anything." He stepped aside so I could enter the room.

I was terrified going into that room. I didn't want to go in blind and unprepared, but when I scanned the minds of my companions, I don't think I got a single coherent thought from any of them.

Cautiously, I opened the door. The bedside lamps were on, revealing a huge, dark red stain spanning almost half of the bedspread. It couldn't be blood...there was no way...someone would have to be dead to soak it that much...

Goosebumps dotted my bare arms as a chill enveloped me. *Rune*.

My pace quickened as I continued into the room. Across from the bed I saw him, his back against the wall and his knees pulled up to his chest. His arms rested over his legs and there seemed to be something clutched in his hand...

Just as I opened my mouth to speak, someone grabbed my arm. Jupiter dragged me back into the hallway and Jace eased the door shut.

"What the fuck happened in there?" I shouted. "Why the hell does he have a gun?"

"We don't know." Jace nodded to Jupiter. "Jupe woke us up to tell us Rune never came inside. We saw a light under one of the doors and this is where we found him, just like that. Jupe and I tried talking to him, but he doesn't even seem to know we're there. That's when Kitty went to get you and Martie. I have no idea what went on in there, and he's not talking.

"And I don't think he wants to," Martie added.

"We have to do something," I insisted.

"Yeah, but he's got a gun," she said. "Who knows what he's done already?"

"It's not like he killed anybody!"

"We don't know what—"

"We *do* know he didn't because all of us are accounted for! Anyone missing a few litres of blood?" I didn't see anyone raise a hand.

"Something must have happened," she continued.

"No," Jupiter interrupted firmly. "Rune wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Then where did the blood come from?" Martie stepped in front of him, planting her hands on her hip. The colour rose in both their faces as they entered another standoff.

"We would have heard the gun go off if he'd shot someone only a few rooms away," he said. "He definitely won't hurt any of us—we just need to keep trying to talk to him."

"Are you insane? I'm not—"

"How about Indigo?" Kitty spoke up. She looked over at me, her eyes pleading. "He'll listen to you, right?"

Sure, because my discussion with him earlier seemed to put him on the right track.

"You'd be better able to figure out what he's thinking if he won't speak," Jace agreed.

"Don't you dare send her in there by herself!" Martie shouted. "Just because you have no idea what to do, you can't send her in there alone—"

"It's okay, Martie," I said. Normally, I would have joined her in protesting their choice and bitched about them always picking me...but this was too important.

"But—"

"I'll be fine," I assured her. "You guys go wait in Jace's room or something."

After another round of concerned looks, they reluctantly left for the other room—all except for Jace, whom I sent a silent request, asking him to wait a minute. He remained behind until the others were out of earshot.

"Please tell me you have the slightest clue what's going on?" I pleaded. "Even if you have to make it up, at least tell me something."

"I don't, I'm sorry. Just do what you can—don't push him or anything."

"Well, duh. Look, do you think this is about Bre?" I suddenly felt horribly guilty. What if this was my fault? What if our potential make-out session filled him with shame and made him go postal?

"Could be," he said. "They were pretty close. What did you talk about earlier?"

I shrugged. "Just...stuff."

He didn't believe me, but, being Jace, he didn't push for details. As always, he felt that as a group we were on a need-to-know basis with one another, and he trusted others to discern what they thought he needed to know. "How did he seem when you left him?"

"He seemed fine...like he was coming back to his usual self." I glanced at the door, behind which Rune was waiting for me to figure out how to bring him back to sanity. "I guess I should get in there. Can you tell me something about him? Something I might be able to use to make him listen?"

"Like?"

"Like...I don't know."

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Jace must have sensed my hesitation. Of course, it's not like I was hiding it or anything.

"Yeah...Jace, what's his name?"

"His real one?"

I nodded.

Jace struggled with that request for a few moments. He didn't want to reveal it to me—it was Rune's rule, and so far as the others were concerned, that meant law. Martie had broken it of her own volition, but what I was doing went beyond that. I was *asking* for someone else to breach the agreement. But no matter what he thought we were running from, it didn't seem to matter any more.

"Colin," he finally said. "Colin Faitel."

Colin. I absently smiled.

"Take it slow, Eve," Jace said pointedly, shaking me from my musing on how well I thought the name fit Rune. "If you can't get through to him, come back and we'll think of something else. Be careful."

I nodded, took a deep breath, and opened the door. *Here's hoping he doesn't go all homicidal.*

The room was how I left it—still freaky as hell, and still with Rune sitting unmoving against the wall.

"Rune?" I called gently.

He didn't respond.

"Rune?" I walked to him, careful not to rush, and tried to appear at least remotely calm. "Rune?"

He didn't speak, didn't look up at me, and didn't seem at all aware of my presence. He stared down at the floor without seeming to see it, blue eyes wide and unblinking. I eased myself to the floor across from him, only a foot away.

"Rune?" I waited, but he said nothing. *Here goes Plan B...*

"Colin?"

I began to smile as his eyes shot to mine, but suddenly he swung the revolver toward me. Instinctively, I jumped back, falling on my hands and staring at the barrel aimed at my forehead.

"Get away from me," he growled.

"It's okay." I don't know if I was talking to him or me at that point. I struggled to keep my voice even, and my mind focused on calming my breathing. It was Rune—Rune wouldn't hurt me. He was just confused or something. Or maybe possessed. But if an exorcism is what he needed, I feared we were probably screwed. "It's me, it's Indigo."

"Indigo doesn't know my name," he stated. His eyes were wild, betraying that he had been through *something*. I was too busy trying to think of a way to keep him from shooting me to scan his thoughts for what that something was, though.

"Jace told me before I came in here—"

"No, he wouldn't." The hand with the gun started to shake and the other darted out to steady it. His finger tightened on the trigger and my heart leapt to my throat.

I could run. I could jump to my feet and race for the door. Well, stumble to the door. My coordination sucked large even when I wasn't afraid for my life. But I didn't know for sure whether or not Rune even knew how to use a gun, so there was a chance it wasn't loaded or the safety was on or something...

But I couldn't force myself to take the chance. There was no way in hell I was leaving him alone with a weapon at that moment.

"I asked Jace to tell me and he did. He said your name is Colin."

He seemed to relax a bit and started to lower the gun. I pulled myself onto my knees and leaned forward, then slowly reached my hand toward his. If I could just get the gun...

Rune raised the barrel to my head again. I froze and stared at him, silently pleading for him to believe me.

"You're not Indigo," he insisted.

"No, I'm pretty sure I am. My name is Eve, a.k.a. Indigo, a.k.a. rainbowbrite_rulez. We can call Jace in here and ask him if you like, but if you shoot me over my knowing your real name, I am going to reincarnate as some professional wrestler guy and kick your ass big time."

There was a softening about his face and his eyes widened as if he was seeing me for the first time. "Eve?"

"Yes. Eve Shelby." Great, so all it took for people to recognize me as being me was a little threat of violence and some sarcasm. Exactly what that said about me as a person...well, I didn't want to think about it just then.

He lowered the gun then raked his fingers back through his blond hair.

"What happened?" I asked, sliding the gun from his grasp and setting it down on the floor behind me. He didn't seem to notice the weapon's absence and I let out an involuntary sigh of relief.

He leaned his head back against the wall and cast his eyes to the ceiling. "I don't know. I just...I don't..."

I took a closer look at his face in the lamplight. Something dark streaked down his cheek—the same something tangled throughout his hair...blood...

"Jesus, are you hurt? What's that—"

He shook his head. "It was you...but then it wasn't and she was dead...and you came in, but...but it wasn't you..."

"Okay, I'm marvelling at the sense that *didn't* make," I muttered. I stood and offered him my hand to help him up, but he didn't seem to see it and stood shakily on his own. There was still a vacant look to his eyes, as if he was barely aware of what was going on around him. I took his arm and gently led him to the door.

As I guided him from the room, I cast a glance back. The blood on the bed and on Rune, the gun...

What the hell happened there?

In the hallway, the others stood in the doorway of Jace's room. Jupiter opened his mouth to speak as Rune and I went by, but I shook my head. As for my near-comatose companion, I don't think he knew they were there. I mouthed the word "wait" to the others and they nodded, returning to the room in understanding.

I stepped ahead of Rune and stopped him at my door. Just inside the room, I flipped on the lights in the bathroom and directed him in there.

He froze under the harsh white light to stare at his reflection in the mirror. I had no idea what he saw in his own eyes. I didn't want to think about it—I just wanted him well. Against the clean, stark white tile, he looked even more ragged. It was time for me to assess the damage.

I moved to his side, standing on my tiptoes in an effort to study the side of his face. Pushing back his hair, I saw no sign of a wound. Across his cheek, the dried blood had imprinted creases...like fabric...

God, he had been laying there, on that bed...

"You're okay," I mumbled reassuringly. I was pretty sure he wasn't listening, but the silence was creeping me out. I grabbed a cloth and soaked it under the tap. Once he got cleaned up, he would shake out of this daze—I knew he would. Just as I reached up to wipe the blood from his cheek, he turned away and headed for the shower.

"Okay, so you do that and I'll—"

The water running, he started to undress while oblivious to my presence.

"I'll be out here," I finished and bolted from the bathroom. *That was awkward.*

I knew the others were waiting for me, swapping theories about what they thought happened. I also knew I should go in there and explain. Explain *what*, though, I couldn't say. Maybe just assure them he was all right.

For now.

But I couldn't do that, not yet. First I had to check on some things.

The room we found Rune in was still a bloody mess. Okay, so what had happened... I was a devout follower of any of the forensic dramas on T.V. and I usually had the case figured out within the first half hour. I could do this. I just needed to put on my C.S.I. thinking cap that I kept tucked away in my brain next to my Vampire-Slayer thinking cap—which I just might be bringing out later if we *did* happen to run into zombies or monsters. But right now the question was WWGD: what would Grissom do?

Well, there was no body. No one missing a couple litres of blood. Grissom would probably send a sample off for analysis, or at the very least have a cool little kit that could tell him whether or not it was really blood, and if it belonged to a human...

I decided maybe it would be best if there was no more forensic T.V. for Eve after this was all over.

I stood at the end of the bed. The blood seemed concentrated at the top half, about a foot or so below the headboard, and mostly on the left side. The blood on Rune's face had been on his right, or my left. I visualized him laying on the bed, and deduced he must have been on the right, facing the bloody side. That wasn't the most helpful of deductions, but it was something.

I snatched up the revolver from the floor and stashed it against my back in the waistband of my PJ bottoms. The metal was cold against my bare skin, but I was too jittery to notice any more shivers.

This is just too weird, I thought, still unable to wrap my head around what had happened the past two days.

"If you don't believe Rune, then why are you here?"

I stared at the bed, unwilling to force myself to turn around and face the person behind me. My heart thumped wildly in my chest and I could hear nothing but its beat pounding through my ears. That voice...it couldn't be, it just couldn't be...

"Typical Eve, always the skeptic."

I heard her soft footfalls on the carpet as she walked toward me, but still, I couldn't face her. It wasn't her—it just wasn't!

"Well, I sound like her...and I look like her...so the only logical conclusion is that I *must* be her, right?" she said, coming to a stop next to me. In the corner of my eye, I glimpsed that long dark hair shining in the soft lamplight. Slowly, I shifted my gaze to the left and was met by her piercing eyes.

"What?" she continued. "You'll cheat with my boyfriend but when I want to have a girl-to-girl chat, you have nothing to say for yourself?"

I finally forced myself to turn and face her. She was there, only a foot away from me, looking as real as my own flesh, and I knew I couldn't deny the apparition before me any longer...

Breanna.

Chapter Ten: Doppelganger

I stared in silence for a few moments at Breanna. I didn't know what to say—she was just standing there looking at me, and even if words hadn't escaped me, I wasn't sure I could force out my voice.

"No snappy comebacks?" she said, the corners of her coral-coloured lips turning down in a false pout. "This is all it takes just to make you speechless? And here I was hoping for a meaningful talk."

"Sorry," I said, regaining my composure. "You might have to give me a few minutes to brush up on my, '*Hey, My Friend's Evil-Bitch Girlfriend is Back From the Dead—Let's Laugh About It!*' comedy routine. I confess I didn't think to have that one prepared."

"That's the spirit," she said, giving me a cold grin. She walked past me to stand next to the bed, her gaze trailing across the mattress. "You know, someone should call housekeeping about this."

"Something tells me you aren't here to discuss the laundry," I said. "Or else you're the most boring ghost ever. Aren't you guys supposed to be all scary or something? Makes me long for the good old days of white sheets and chains."

"Oh, I'm not a ghost." She returned her eyes to mine. "But I'm pretty sure you already knew that, didn't you Eve?"

I did. Not only that, but I knew it wasn't Breanna. No matter how much she seemed to dislike me, and despite what her spirit might have witnessed between me and her boyfriend earlier that evening, I didn't believe the real Breanna would come back and hurt Rune.

"Come on now, Eve," she said, reading my thoughts. "Where's that sense of logic of yours? Remember, you don't really know any of these people. How can you possibly guess what a spurned and recently deceased Breanna is capable of?"

"I don't," I replied. "But I know Rune and I trust his judgment where Bre was concerned."

She threw her head back and laughed a throaty chuckle. The sound set my nerves on edge; not knowing what a creepy dead person found so funny just did that to me.

"You don't know Rune," she said as her laughter finally ceased. Tears had formed in her eyes from her mirth, and she reached up to brush them dry. She sighed heavily and shook her head. "You haven't a clue, little girl."

"But you do?" I challenged. I placed my right hand on my hip and waited expectantly for another ambiguous answer, secretly hoping to distract her long enough to get the revolver from my waistband.

"Of course I do. I learned quite a bit this evening." She swept past me gracefully toward the door and stopped several feet in front of it.

While her back was to me, I reached around behind me until I felt the cold grip of the gun. I slid the weapon around to my side—

"That can't hurt me." She turned to face me and raised a brow, daring me to deny what she already knew I plotted.

"Maybe indulge me nonetheless? Just hold still a sec and let me aim this directly at your head—"

"Save the bullets, Eve," Breanna said. "Someone may need them."

"Where the hell is my sister?" I demanded.

She smiled. "That's a good question."

"Did you hurt her?" The idea that this woman—whatever or whoever she was—had harmed Dez, replaced any lingering fear I had with anger.

"I haven't hurt anyone."

"Except for when you killed the real Breanna, right?"

"Wrong. Breanna died tragically in a car accident."

"That you caused."

"You give me too much credit." She suddenly laughed, amused with something she hadn't shared yet. "Or maybe I *have* done all this and I'm pretending I didn't in an attempt to put you off guard. Quite a predicament, isn't it?"

She wasn't there to talk about Dez—this I knew. I focused on her mind, reached out to her thoughts, but I came up with nothing. It wasn't that she was blocking me—there was *nothing there*. Emptiness. So what did she want from me? Why stand there calmly chatting with me? Why not do to me whatever she had done to Rune?

"Now that's a better question," she answered my thoughts, and I understood. Well, not that a light bulb flashed above my head, making me suddenly shout "Aha!" but I was pretty sure I knew at least part of why she was there.

She wanted me to know something. Whether it would help or hinder me and the others, I couldn't know right away...

But I could listen.

"What did you do to Rune?" I asked, suspecting this was the direction she wanted the conversation to go in.

"I'm so glad you asked," she said brightly. "I really wish you could have been here—it was such a touching moment, you know. He came inside a little while after you and saw a door open with a light on inside." She gestured to the closed door behind her. "And there you were, sobbing over that brat of a sister of yours. It just broke his heart. He hadn't been there for you earlier today, hadn't been able to help you find her..." She walked toward me again, her eyes dancing as she retold the events, delighting in the anger I knew was spreading across my face. She was taking far too much pleasure in this, but I bit my tongue.

As she stepped closer, her pale complexion darkened a shade and her eyes swirled from pools of icy blue to chestnut brown. Her shiny tresses grew shorter and shorter, stopping a few inches above her shoulders and then lightening to varying hues of copper. High cheekbones, so hollow they could almost be called gaunt, softened as she gained a roundness to her face and features. By the time her walking came to a halt before me, I recognized a face I knew all too well. My own.

"So he just hugged you," she continued, this time in a voice like mine. "He held you—standing right about here, in fact—and promised you again that it would be okay." She sighed. "Want to know what happened next?"

"Not particularly."

"Don't worry, you guys just talked, actually," she said. "Well, mostly. Anyway, it was all sickeningly innocent." Groaning, she flopped down on the bed, the mattress springs protesting the action by crying out, which unequivocally told me this was no apparition. Whatever she was, she was physically there.

Propped up on her elbows, she turned her eyes to me. "Though I don't think just talking can really be considered innocent—not with Rune, right? I mean, he barely tells you guys anything, ever. Keeps everything to himself, all the time. Can't worry your fragile little minds. You know, he was even like that with Breanna..." Her sentence drifted off as she considered something for a moment, her gaze falling to the side to stare off in space. "It frustrated her. They wouldn't have lasted long, and not just because of you. Or, rather, me. Tell me, is it weird for you, standing here talking to yourself?"

"Weird? No. It's dull though—I'm way funnier than you."

"Oh please, sarcasm is like the lowest form of humour."

"As said by someone who obviously doesn't understand it's proper application."

"Damn, even faced with me, she still comes out swinging. Feisty as ever. Anyhoo, as you might recall, we were talking about Rune, and how he just poured his heart out to you. It was sweet, really. He finally broke down and told you everything. His fears for everyone, his guilt...he confided it all in you."

"You can read our thoughts, so what exactly did he tell you that you didn't already know?"

"Some things we keep hidden, even to ourselves. I'm pretty sure you know what I mean, Eve."

"Whatever." I rolled my eyes. "You're just a crappy telepath, and that's why you had to trick him."

"If that helps you sleep at night, believe what you want, sweetie. Not like you'd do otherwise, of course. But I didn't *trick* him per se. I just appeared this way—it's not my fault the guy's got a hard on for this particular face."

"So what exactly is it that you want from us?" I asked, my patience wearing thin.

"Maybe you should be wondering what you're getting from having me here."

"Mostly I'm just getting really, really bored."

"I bet you're wondering who I might 'go after' next. It's hard to decide though, you know"

"So many people with issues to exploit, so little time?"

"No, not for me. *I've* got all the time in the world. Some of you aren't so lucky, though." She hopped up from the bed to stand before me, closely watching my expression as she spoke. I tried to force my face to remain unreadable, but I doubted I was successful. The bitch was freaking me out, and it's kind of hard to keep a poker face when you're talking to yourself.

"Colin was fun," she said thoughtfully. "I think he and I will definitely need to spend more time together."

"I think you're full of shit. If we really had anything to fear from you, you wouldn't be standing here talking to me—you'd be killing me or whatever."

"Interesting theory. Oh, and when you go back to talk to the rest of the kids and they don't believe you—because they won't, you know, since they think you're crazy—ask Denny-boy if he's heard from Carin lately. That'll help your case."

And with that, she disappeared. Like *disappeared*, completely. Ceased to be there. I blinked a few times but she was gone, and there was no indication she had ever been there at all.

~*~

"So here's the dealio," I said a few minutes later as I stood in front of Jace, Kitty, Martie and Jupiter. "Rune didn't hurt anyone. It seems there's someone or something that can take the form of other people and it really enjoys fucking with our minds. Any questions?"

They stared at me for a couple of seconds, absorbing what I had just said.

"Um, what?" Martie finally broke the silence.

"I promise, you heard me right the first time."

"But how can you know—"

"Because I just had a conversation with Breanna, who then turned into me," I replied. "I think that counts as a shapeshifting doppelganger. She smiled as she was fucking with my mind, so I'll assume she enjoyed it. Now, any more questions?"

"Holy shit," Jupiter mumbled.

"You're sure?" Jace asked. "You saw Breanna?"

"Yeah, and so did Rune, which is why he's suffering from a major case of the wiggins right now."

"But this thing is really after us or something?" Martie said. "All of us? I mean, you're sure it's not just Bre back with a grudge? Just an angry ghost—that happens, right?"

"Well, she didn't exactly resemble Kayako, so I'm ruling out movie-like grudges." I looked over at Jace. "Now who's Denny?" He, Martie, and Kitty glanced at one another in confusion...and that gave me my answer.

"Jupe, you're Denny?"

"Indigo—" Jace began.

"Oh, get over it," Martie said. "We're as good as dead anyway."

"Look," I said. "It told me to ask 'Denny-boy' about Carin. So what was it talking about?"

Jupiter blanched and everyone else noticed too. In seconds, though, his colour turned to bright red as he glared at me, then Jace.

"How the fuck did you find out?" he shouted at Jace. "What, besides my name you fucking hacked into hospital records? And you got Indigo to—"

"Whoa," Jace said, putting his hands up in surrender. "I didn't—"

"Then how the fucking hell did you know?" He stood and turned a hateful stare my way.

"I just told you my evil twin told me!" I snapped. "Now you damn well better calm down and just tell me what the hell is going on! Your name *is* Denny?"

"Dennis," he finally said.

"And who is Carin?"

He swallowed hard and slumped back to where he had been sitting at the end of Jace's bed. "My old girlfriend."

"And?"

"And it doesn't matter."

I scanned his mind and received a rush of memories and thoughts. A cute little brunette, hazel eyes streaming with tears...

"Stay the hell out of my head, Indigo," Jupiter growled. I pulled out of his mind without argument.

We were all silent for a few moments, collecting our thoughts and going over a million theories.

"So why would this thing bring up Jupiter's old girlfriend?" Martie asked. "Just so that we'd believe Indigo?"

"No," I said. "No...this is obviously something Jupe still thinks about..." I looked over at Jupiter to see if he'd correct me. He didn't. "Something he feels guilty for, maybe? Regretful?"

"Like Rune feels guilty about Bre's death," Jace filled in.

"And like I feel guilty about bringing Dez and losing her." I realized it was probably our shapeshifting friend that I had seen earlier, and for the first time in hours I felt a glimmer of hope that Dez was probably out there somewhere, alive and waiting for me to solve this and find her.

"So whatever is doing this is playing on our guilt and weaknesses?" Martie asked.

"I guess so," I said.

"But why? Why bother? What is it getting out of this?"

"And why did it want Indigo to know?" Jace added.

"I don't know," I said. "But I definitely need to talk to Rune about this." I looked to Martie. "Is it okay if you and he switch rooms tonight? I'd prefer to keep an eye on him."

"Well, I *suppose* I can bunk with Jupe for the rest of night," she joked, but he wasn't laughing. I don't think he was even listening to us.

"Tomorrow morning we should all meet and talk about this," Jace suggested.

"Tomorrow morning we're going out to look for my sister," I reminded him.

"Prior to that, just to go over some things as a group and hear what Rune has to say." He checked his watch. "It's just after one. How about we meet in here at nine?"

We all agreed. I was somewhat reluctant and wanted to look for Dezzie immediately, but I didn't think Rune would be up to discussing the supposed re-emergence of his girlfriend and all this stuff with everyone else tonight.

As Martie, Jupiter and I started for our rooms, I glanced back at Jace and Kitty.

"Don't either of you leave the other alone," I said, sending warning glances to Martie and Jupe as well. "None of us can be alone longer than a few minutes. The thing I saw...I think it prefers us on our own."

Everyone nodded. "Buddy system it is," Jace said.

Chapter Eleven: Scars

Jupiter managed to pull himself out of his stupor long enough to locate Rune's duffle bag and hand it over to me, then he was back to La-La Land, sitting lost in thought in one of the armchairs in his room. I had too much respect to go searching through his mind for more hints of Carin or why Evil-Bre/Me had brought her up, but I did decide that if things got bad, whether he—or I—liked it or not, I'd be doing a full sweep of his head.

Martie accompanied me back to our room so she could pick up a change of clothes for the next morning. She remained silent as we walked down the hall and didn't speak until we were actually in the room, and—I suspected—out of earshot of the others.

"Are we going to get out of this?" Martie finally blurted out. "Like do you honestly think we'll make it?"

"Well, I am," I replied. The shower was still running and Rune was nowhere to be seen, so I immediately stashed the gun in the nightstand next to the bed. I had no idea what to do with it. Empty the bullets out of the chamber would probably be a good start, but what if Evil-Bre was right? What if we might need the weapon?

"Seriously, Indigo," she said. She pulled out a pair of jeans and a t-shirt from her main suitcase, then turned to face me. "Do we have a chance in hell of surviving this?"

"I just told you I am," I said. "Whether the rest of you do is up to you guys. *I'm* not dying in this town, and *I'm* not giving in to whatever brought us here. I'm getting my sister and I'm getting out. But I can't make that decision for everyone else."

"So you're not making that decision for Rune or anything?" She smirked for the first time that evening. "Cause that's kind of what it looks like from here."

"Well, in a round about way, I'm actually helping everyone by helping him," I said, albeit unconvincingly. "You're all more likely to listen to him than me if things get worse."

"True, but c'mon Indigo."

"C'mon what?"

"You know...there's vibes..."

"Yes, I'm a very vibey individual. Lots of vibes vibing off me all the time. You should probably check on Jupiter." I walked to the door and held it open for her.

She didn't move. "We can read each other's minds—there's no sense in being secretive about things. You're worried about him and not because you're Mother Theresa."

Martie had me there. I certainly wasn't a dead Catholic nun...but I knew what she meant. "Okay, now you're starting to sound like Evil-Bre." I gave a laugh, though it was an uncomfortable one. Damn, I was getting sick of being on the defensive where Rune was concerned. I sent Martie a silent "back off" and she didn't pry further.

The sound of running water in the bathroom ceased.

"I guess I'll head back now," she said. "If you need anything or if something happens, just—"

"Holler, 'Oh my god, he's going to kill me?'"

"Yeah, and we'll come running."

I ushered her out, gathered Rune's duffle bag, took a deep breath, and knocked on the bathroom door. He didn't answer, but then I wasn't exactly expecting him to.

"I prefer my friends to be clothed, so please have a towel on," I called as I opened the door. Luckily, he had a towel wrapped around his waist, so things wouldn't get too awkward.

Rune sat on the edge of the bathtub, his elbows on his knees and hands propping his chin up. Apparently lost in thought, he didn't acknowledge my presence.

"I brought your stuff," I said, gesturing to his luggage.

No answer.

"Are you okay?"

He blinked a few times, then slowly turned his head toward me.

"Indigo." It was more a statement of fact than a question of my identity, but I nodded anyway.

"Feeling better now?"

He didn't reply, and instead returned his gaze to the nothing he had been staring at.

"Well, get yourself dressed, and we can talk." I dropped his duffle bag at his feet and turned for the door.

I jumped as he suddenly grabbed my wrist, his firm grip startling me. My heart thumped a little wilder as he stared up at me, and for a fleeting second I was terrified of him. I opened my mouth to speak, but my voice had left me and I could only return his intense gaze.

Right when I thought we'd be frozen like that for the rest of the night, he pressed my fingers to the side of his head. "It's gone?"

"What is?"

"Her blood..."

Understanding washed over me, and I calmed down considerably.

"Yes, you're fine," I said softly, regretting that I'd been so quick to freak out. I just had a conversation with his evil, dead girlfriend look-a-like, and here I was scared of Rune? And a weapon-less Rune at that. Wow, I sucked.

I snatched a towel from the shelf and knelt next to him, unfolding the terrycloth and then pressing it to his head. It soaked up the water from his still drenched hair, then pulled it back for him to inspect.

"See, it's gone—she's gone."

"Not for long," he replied quietly.

So much for my assurances. "Screw later—for now she is. And you're okay. Get dressed and we can talk for a bit, then you can get some sleep, okay?"

He nodded and let my hand go.

After I left the bathroom, I headed for the mini-bar. What was it Homer Simpson said? "Here's to alcohol: the source of, and answer to, all of life's problems." In the aftermath of all that had happened in the past day, a bottle of Cherry Brandy was looking pretty damn appealing, so I raided the little fridge and spread the variety of bottles across the small circular table in the corner of the room. Just as I pulled up a chair and cracked open a drink, Rune joined me.

He looked at me for a moment, then at the room around him. "Where's Jupiter? I thought you said..."

"You and Martie have switched for tonight. She's bunking with Jupe, meanwhile you get me and a fine variety of liqueurs." I held out a bottle of Peach Schnapps. "Drink up—it's bound to make all this a *lot* funnier."

Well, it didn't. Not a lot funnier. Not at all funny, for that matter. I skimmed through the details of my chat with Evil-Bre and Evil-Me. Really, it was just the gist of it; I didn't think he

needed to hear everything. Then I went over what I discussed with the others, but though the line of empty mini-bottles grew, I wasn't laughing, and neither was he. I'll blame it on him, though, as he barely drank and was trailing me by about five bottles.

"So I'm hoping maybe you can get something from Jupe tomorrow," I said, tossing back another drink, making it six bottles. "If he's going to tell any of us, it'll be you."

"I think perhaps you overestimate my influence over him." A half smile. Maybe the schnapps were having an effect after all—it seemed the old Rune was making an appearance.

"Nah, you could probably just order him to tell you. He wouldn't refuse."

"You said her name was Carin?"

"Yep."

"I'll ask him."

Silence. Now came the part I was dreading. I opened my mouth to speak, but even my curiosity couldn't force the question out. Of course he already knew what I wanted to say, though, so he said it for me.

"You want to know what happened earlier."

I nodded. "I can't help but think whatever is doing this is giving us pieces of the puzzle, like it wants us to figure it out at some point. It's probably anticipating we'll get it later rather than sooner, but I'm hoping I'll turn out to be smarter than the average bear. Or at least smarter than the average evil-shapeshifter-thingy." I was rambling. Not a good sign. "I just thought it might have told you something..."

"Something that would help, I know."

"She told me you came upstairs and found me," I prompted when he didn't say anything further.

He nodded. "I was talking to you..." He met my eyes for just a moment before returning his gaze to the table. "It must have been for a couple of hours. I was exhausted and the last thing I remember was seeing you—her—smile at me before closing my eyes."

"And then?" I said gently.

Images rushed through my mind, all from Rune's perspective. *Awake. What the... My vision focused on the person laying beside me. Bre. Oh God...*

She stared up at the ceiling, her eyes open but glazed over and lifeless. The hole in her throat seeped blood, as if the injury had occurred only minutes ago. I stumbled off the bed, unable to process the scene. What had...*no, this can't be...she's dead...Bre?*

"Rune?" a familiar voice said.

"I saw you come in the room," Rune said, shielding his mind again to keep me from accessing his memories. "I remember falling back against the wall, my head spinning, and you said it was okay..."

"So where did you get the gun?"

"You put it in my hands. Then I looked up and you were Bre again."

"Still deceased?"

"No, she looked like she always did, but...but God, the things she said..."

I didn't want to press him further. Well, okay, so I did, but I knew I shouldn't. I also knew that I had to, though.

"What did she say? Was it anything that could help—"

He shook his head. I'd have to leave it at that then.

"It's just going for our guilt, our weakness," I said, hoping it was some kind of comfort. "You and Bre. Me and Dez. We might know more when we hear about Jupe's Carin."

"It's not just appearing as people we know, though. What you and Jupiter saw..."

"You're right. That wasn't about guilt, it was about fear. There goes my theory." I chuckled bitterly. That was the *only* theory I had.

"It's still something. And we can't expect it'll stick with one form for each person—it'll use whatever it can to get to us." He looked at me pointedly. "Keep that in mind."

"Are you suggesting I have a lot of psychological issues?" I joked. "That's not fair."

"Indigo."

"Yeah, yeah, we're trying to anticipate its next move." I sighed. "Well, let's see...what do we have on the list of Eve's problems... My mother, of course, but that would be way too obvious. She's already disowned me and said just about every conceivable bad thing to me, so there's little left to say." I pretended to think for a moment, though I already had the answer, even in my near-drunken state. "There's always my dad. That might be fun; I'm sure there are some underlying feelings of resentment there."

"You never spoke much about him," Rune observed. He was right; I tended to rant about my mother the most.

"Not much to say. Want some scary memories of a violent drunk? I got those. At least I saw him then, though." He wasn't stopping me, so I kept talking. I do that. Often. Not sure why—I guess I just really had to express some things and Rune was good with listening in that non-judgmental way. Kind of like a wall or a housecat.

But I didn't want to talk. It was easier to let the memories whiz by in my head than to have to voice them aloud. I remembered happy times, like staying for a week at a hotel with my parents, and one evening Dad made arrangements for me to be allowed to sit in the bar area. He got the piano player to play, "Always On My Mind," and he dedicated it to me. I was thrilled then, and remained thrilled years later, humming the tune to myself. His meaning was clear: even though he wasn't always there for me, he always thought of me...

That memory was cut short by another one, a memory of my mother waking me in the middle of the night to drive to the city to visit him at a hotel...and I was scared. Scared to the point that I couldn't feel anymore. I just sat there in the car, looking through the window into their hotel room on the ground floor as she went in to talk to him. I don't know why she did it. She had several years before my birth to know that no matter how charming and thoughtful he was when he was sober, he was a violent monster when he was drunk. But she took us into the city anyway and still, with all the knowledge of his prior behaviour, she went in that room.

I remember her crying. And I remember him throwing a chair at her. And I remember them shouting at one another. So much shouting and crying and throwing of objects...

For some reason, they came outside into the parking lot—probably because she told him she was going. And when she got in the car to drive away, he jumped on the hood and began kicking at the windshield. I was crying as I stared into his eyes—eyes that, when I look in the mirror now, remind me so much of my own.

"How old were you?" Rune asked. I hadn't bothered to keep him from my thoughts, though I was somewhat surprised he asked.

"Six, though I kind of blocked all those traumatic feelings out until I was seven. That's when I became scared. She told me we were going away for the weekend to stay at a hotel with him, and I was...terrified. And I knew I needed to talk about it with someone—anyone—so I ended up explaining it to my second grade teacher. And you know what my mother told me that night?" I paused for a second as I recalled the memory with bitterness. "'Don't ever talk about that with other people, or they'll take you away from me.' So I had finally allowed myself to recall a severely traumatic event, and she was worried about Children's Aid coming after us."

"Your resentment of him is understandable," Rune said. He reached across the table for my hand, taking it gently in his. His fingers ran over mine, tracing a short line over my wrist and along my forearm. Any other time I might have found the action soothing, but the alcohol was only amplifying my anger. I bit savagely at my lip, long-suppressed emotions ready to erupt.

"I don't resent *him*," I snapped, withdrawing my hand from his. He visibly backed off, folding his arms across his chest and studying my expression. I avoided his gaze as he suddenly

reminded me of Malcolm, sitting there patiently while I vented, wondering why I was acting like such a child in getting all upset 'cause of my screwed up parents.

I glanced up at Rune at last, and knew right away that he thought no such thing. Though he was still shielding his thoughts, I knew him well enough to be certain he wasn't judging me. He was waiting for me to express everything I had to express because that's what I needed at the moment, and should I require him to offer any other kind of support—be it comforting words, suggestions as to how to deal, or simply understanding silence—he would give it. That was the thing about Rune: at all times he made it about you and what he intuitively thought you needed, not about *his* reactions or opinions. Perhaps that's what freaked us all out earlier when Bre died; he wasn't there for us suddenly, and he became just a little more human for a moment. As unnerving as I found it when I never really knew what he was thinking or feeling, I think I was infinitely more scared when he was like the rest of us.

I sighed, realizing I was the one who barked at him before. He must have been waiting for me to continue.

"I resent *her*," I explained. "A lot. He might have tried to kick in the windshield, but she put us in the situation in the first place, yet never took any responsibility for it."

"Where was your sister?"

I thought for a moment. "She must have been...no, wait, she wasn't born yet. It would be another two years before she came along, and shortly thereafter our mother finally separated herself from Dad a bit. I suppose one could praise her for it, but she'd already been involved with an abusive, alcoholic, married man for quite a number of years, so fuck that. And to think *she* fucking disowned *me*. Whatever.

"See, I know my dad, the real one. The sober one. I understand him, and I know he loves me. But I don't know my mother. She doesn't have vodka as an excuse. What could possibly possess someone to bring a child up in that kind of situation? That was rhetorical, by the way. You can't defend that kind of thing. She tried. Repeatedly. Never worked."

"You realize that if we're right about this, you may have to deal with those memories and them again?"

"Well, I know I'm pretty crazy and all, but I'm not enough of a loon to believe it's really them if they show up—" I ceased speaking as soon as I realized what I was saying, but another effect of liquor is that your brain moves a lot slower than your mouth.

"Shit, Rune, I didn't mean—"

He put up a hand to stop me. "It's a justifiable comment. I know I should have..." He took a deep breath. God, he looked tired. "I should have realized it wasn't her."

"Oh, please, Jupiter is still pretty sure he saw a zombie earlier. At this point, I think it's okay to assume anything's possible."

"No, I still should have known..."

I caught the rest of his sentence in my mind before he could stop it.

Unless it really is her.

"No Rune, it's not," I insisted. "She wouldn't."

"Wouldn't she? After—"

"No."

"This didn't start until after she died—"

"No, this started a month ago."

He looked at me in confusion.

"The others, the ones like us...you said some of them went missing. I'm pretty sure technically now we are too."

Though he nodded, I couldn't tell if he truly agreed with me or not.

"Bre's not doing this," I said. "You couldn't be with someone capable of this. I know you."

"Do you."

Someone knocked on the door. I rose to answer it, reluctant and stumbling a bit more than I care to admit. I found Kitty in the hallway.

"I—I mean Jace and I—wanted to make sure everything's okay," she said, looking apologetic for bothering us. "He's all right?"

"Basically," I said, lowering my voice and seriously hoping I didn't reek of alcohol. I didn't want stories of Rune and I consuming liquor while sleeping in the same room to get back to the others, else I might find myself fending off more rumours of wild monkey sex the next day. "He seems to be relaxing."

"We were just worried...you know, leaving you alone like that..."

For a moment I thought she might be referring to the monkey lovin' I was just thinking about, but then I realized what she meant. "He's okay now—no homicidal tendencies."

"If you need something, let us know."

"Thanks, I will."

With a wan smile, Kitty started for her room, and I shut the door. Need anything? If the liquor hadn't cured our problems, I wasn't sure what would.

I turned to face the room again and found Rune's chair vacant. He rested on Martie's side of the bed, and switched off the lamp next to him. I took my cue and turned off the remaining lights, then joined him.

Had I still been sitting at the table, I'd have been tapping my nails uncomfortably at that point. A whole lot of thoughts flitted through my head—mostly thoughts I probably had no business thinking, however I'd just blame that last bottle of Baileys. But it was Rune. Right there, not a foot from me. *In bed*. And if you knocked a few years from my age, I'd probably let out a dreamy, schoolgirl-ish sigh when I said his name. I could pretend to be indifferent to him, or that we were just good friends, almost to the point that I believed it...but not completely.

I lay there for a few minutes, my eyes wide open and staring at the darkness. God, I wouldn't be sleeping. Ever. I knew it. I'd just be laying there all bloody night, and the next morning I'd be totally hideous with huge black circles under my eyes and unable to focus while—

"Eve?"

"Yeah?" I said, realizing it was the first time he had used my real name, save for earlier when I first told him it, and I confess I loved the sound of his voice saying it.

I waited a few moments, but there was only silence. There was a sense of expectancy in the air, as if he had something to say, but was either having trouble putting it into words or just didn't want to.

Rolling over, I found his back was to me. I propped myself up on my elbow, hoping to catch a glimpse of his expression. It was impossible to see in the darkness, however, so I prompted him with, "Colin?"

"I did," he said at last. "You asked earlier...and the answer is, I did. I can't tell her now, but someone should know it..."

And up went my mental and emotional shields. I laid back down, this time closer and pressed up against his back, then put my arm around him. I knew how much it must be taking out of him to finally say this, and though I wanted so badly to be there for him, it hurt more than I ever thought it would. I knew what he would say next and, as much as I didn't want to hear it, I kept my mouth shut and just held him.

"I loved her," he said, and as his voice broke, so did a part of me.

"I know," I whispered.

There would be no more dreamy sighing while saying his name. No wild love making, no matter how often we were together in a horizontal fashion. No more pretending that I didn't already suspect this was true. Whatever Evil-Bre said to him earlier triggered something in him, similar to what I told him had happened to me when I was a child. He was finally admitting the trauma he experienced and all of it came back—with a vengeance. The woman he loved was

dead, and now that he fully comprehended that, it was killing him. I didn't blame him, because I felt the same way when I saw Dez's supposedly dead body earlier. But understanding didn't make it any easier and I bit my lip to the point I tasted blood, all to keep from crying.

I knew that even if we survived whatever it was we were caught up in, there would be no future for us...because he loved Bre, like I loved Dez. Like I loved him.

And there was no getting over a loss like that.

Chapter Twelve: Leader

"Evie, wake up."

My eyes shot open. I was laying on my stomach, clutching my pillow as if the apocalypse might occur if I released it. *That's funny, I swore I heard—*

"Evie, it's time to wake up."

I swung around and gasped.

"Dezzie? You're okay?"

Daylight streamed through the hotel room's windows onto Desdemona, giving her silhouette a golden glow. She stood next to the bed and grinned down at me. "C'mon sis, you can't keep sleeping. You have to wake up now."

I opened my eyes. I rested on my stomach, clinging to my pillow. *Déjà vu...*

Oh my God—Dez!

I bolted upright and looked around. The room was empty. I slumped back down, sighing. So much for a Hollywood-style Christmas miracle in early October.

I glanced to my left. That side of the bed was empty, though it seemed to me someone was supposed to be there...

Oh, damn it...Rune. The previous night's conversation returned. Well, most of it. Basically the part where I hijacked the discussion of his recent trauma with my own problems, then me playing the role of comforter while he missed his dead girlfriend. I cursed myself for drinking so little—just a few more bottles and I would have blissfully forgotten it all.

I checked the bathroom, but it was empty as well. The only remaining place was the closet, and I highly doubted he was in there. I got myself cleaned up a bit, ran a brush through a bad case of bed-head, then resolved to get dressed and see if I could hunt him down. Just as I buttoned up my shirt, I glanced at the clock. 11:38 am. We were supposed to have a meeting at 9:00—what the hell?

From the hallway, I heard low voices and a bit of laughter within Jace and Kitty's room. My face flushed with anger. They fucking let me sleep for an extra two and a half hours and wasted valuable time...

I opened the door without bothering to knock.

Not announcing my arrival right away, I took in the scene from the doorway. Jace's laptop was set up on the table and he sat next to it, though rather than hunched over the computer, he faced the room. Jupiter had the chair next to his. Martie and Kitty were lounging on the edge of the bed. Finally there was Rune, standing with his back to me, leaning his shoulder against the wall. And they were all smiling. Laughing, even. Just casually sitting around chatting while we could be out searching...

Martie noticed me first and grinned as she met my gaze. "G'morning, Indigo."

Everyone else turned their glances toward me—all but Rune, who remained in his spot.

"Yeah, good morning," I said in an overly sweet tone. "Though I think technically it's getting closer to afternoon."

Martie didn't need extra perceptive psi-abilities to tell I was annoyed—the look on my face probably did it. "We're sorry," she began. "We just—"

"Let me guess: you already found Dez and stopped the bad guy, and this is the fun epilogue and roundup of events where you joke and discuss possible adventures for next time?"

Martie's brows furrowed as she glanced from me to Rune. "But...he said you might need the sleep."

I started into the room, glaring at Rune as I passed him. His steady but unreadable gaze followed me as I went to stand next to Martie at the bed. I spun to face him and crossed my arms at my chest. "Wasn't that thoughtful of him."

"We were going over possible theories and a plan of action for today," Rune said, his expression betraying no emotion.

"And you didn't think maybe I should be included in that given that my sister is the one we agreed to be looking for this morning?" I was somewhere between shock and rage that he was suddenly so...*dismissive* with me.

"You already know the particulars of our situation, so it didn't seem necessary to have you here for when we recovered all of that—"

"Also known as, 'Your input is useless, Indigo.'" Okay, now I was closer to rage.

"As for your sister," he continued, undaunted by my interruption. "We all know quite well your desire to find her immediately and I felt that since you would likely be pushing yourself to the limit both physically and mentally when it came to searching for her, it would be better to let you get as much rest as possible now."

I strode up to him until we were mere inches apart and glowered into his eyes. "Let's be clear: *you* don't get to decide what's best for me," I said in a low voice so only he could hear. "I'm not a goddamn child and I'm not going to stand here while you treat me like one." Yeah, that was definitely rage.

I stalked past him toward the exit, throwing an, "I'm leaving," over my shoulder.

"Indigo, wait," Martie called as she hopped off the bed and followed me.

I stopped at the door to face her. "What?"

"I think we're done here anyway, and we were about to split up and start searching."

"Good. You guys go do your thing and I'll find Dez and get the fuck out of here. Should you run into Breanna or my evil twin, make sure you say 'hi' for me."

"But..." She sent a pleading look to Rune. "Can't you do something?"

"No, he can't. See, I've got this pesky little thing called 'free will.' Maybe you guys have heard of it?"

I felt something pass through my peripheral "telepathy" vision, as if a thought meant for someone else had just been sent. My eyes settled on Jace as his gaze flickered to Rune for a millisecond before turning to me.

"If something possibly has your sister, you may need help," Jace pointed out. "You won't be very useful to her if you're dead or taken as well."

Though the idea had come from Rune—and while I was stubborn where he was concerned—I wasn't stupid enough to put Dez at an even greater risk.

I gave a heavy sigh that wasn't the least bit ambiguous about my displeasure. "Fine. Whoever is coming with me, let's go."

"Kitty and Jupiter, go with Indigo," Rune stated. Not suggested. Not asked. Stated. "Take the area north of Main—"

"Wait a sec," Martie spoke up. "I'm going with Indigo and Kitty. You can have Jupiter—we'll be fine."

"Martie," Rune started.

"We'll have her lil sis and be back here within an hour," she said. "Don't worry about us—girls kick ass."

"This is no time for a rant on feminism," Jupiter said. "It is an accepted fact that the average male is physically stronger than—"

"Oh my God!" Martie's eyes widened. "I think we're back in the dark ages; Jupiter must be able to harness the power of time!"

"Then I suggest he go back to when I beat him with a shovel yesterday," I said.

He tried to protest, but a look from Rune stopped him.

"Back here by dusk, though," Rune said. "Whether you find her or not—"

The door closed on our way out and none of us heard the rest.

~*~

Our first stop was once again the hardware store, which allowed us to stock up on weapons and tools we might need. Second was a convenience store, because I hadn't had breakfast yet. Barbeque nachos, though not the breakfast of champions, would certainly do as the breakfast of Eve the Telepathy Girl.

Kitty had a clipboard with a stack of paper and a pen. She was to map out the area we covered and make note of any significant businesses, like pizza places, video stores, and anything else with a well-known name. Since most major, nation-wide chains had websites with store locators, it might actually be possible to narrow down where we were. It was a smart idea, though I wouldn't dare say that aloud because it was Rune's. I didn't know where the hell the guy from the night before went—the sweet, vulnerable hottie who promised me we'd find my sister—but I hoped he'd hurry up and return. I was likely to kill the new one.

"What the hell was up with Rune this morning?" I asked Martie and Kitty as we walked, unable to keep myself from wondering aloud.

"Well, he was pretty quiet earlier, but otherwise seemed okay to me," Martie replied. "Is he giving you bad morning-after-vibes or something?"

I choked on my nachos. Literally. Martie rushed to get a bottle of water out of her knapsack and Kitty patted my back until I could breathe again.

"Where the hell did that come from?" I shouted.

Martie shrugged, her blue eyes betraying a false innocence. "He did seem a little cold, so I figured—"

"God, no! You figured wrong. Like, way wrong. The wrongest you could figure. Ever. Wrong." *Unfortunately.*

"Look, Bre's dead and gone, and we'll all probably be following her, so it's completely understandable if—"

"No, no 'ifs,'" I interrupted. "None at all."

"But—"

"No 'buts' either. This isn't a movie and a crisis is not an acceptable time to begin dating. And I don't get this notion that since we're all going to die, it's okay to start going at it like rabbits."

"Well, I don't accept this notion that because we're not going to die, it's okay to deny ourselves what we want," she countered with a grin.

"Jesus Christ, I am so not having this conversation."

"What's the big deal?"

"The guy's still grieving—and in love with—his dead girlfriend."

"So's Jupe," she said nonchalantly. "But that didn't matter to him."

"Whoa, slow down a sec. You and Jupe...?"

"Wait—Carin's dead?" Kitty said at the same time. We both looked to Martie, and she chewed at her bottom lip.

"Um, yeah, last night, and no, she's not dead—at least I don't think so. He hasn't seen her in four years. But I'm pretty sure he's still in love with her."

"Did he tell you what happened with her?" Kitty asked.

"Nope. Didn't want to talk and I didn't want to pressure him—"

"Hold on," I interrupted, still stuck on my question. "You and Jupe?"

"It was just a thing—no big deal."

"No, it is a big deal. It's always the couple having sex that gets killed first. Then the ones doing drugs."

"But you said yourself this isn't a movie."

"But there's no reason to tempt fate!" I turned to accuse Kitty next. "And I suppose you and Jace were also getting busy."

She shook her head.

"Besides, he's gay," Martie added.

"Jace is what?"

"Actually, I'm pretty sure he's bi," Kitty explained. "But he's seeing someone back home."

"Oh my God, *why* am I suddenly living in a soap opera?" I moaned. This was getting ridiculous.

"I think a better question would be how the hell did we all get stuck with three unavailable men?" Martie replied.

"Right—next time I decide to get stuck in a deserted town, that'll definitely be my first priority," I muttered. "Excuse me, evil-shapeshifting-doppelganger-thing, but could you please get some attractive, non-fucked up men who aren't seeing anyone? Thanks."

"Good luck with the non-fucked-up part," Martie said. "Your soap opera theory seems plausible, though. Explains why nothing is making sense."

"Well, if this is *Days of Our Lives*, we just need to figure out which one of us is related to Stefano," I said. "Then we'll have our bad guy. Did anyone actually come up with a decent theory this morning?"

"So far just variations on one of three: either a mass delusion, we're all dead, or aliens did it. I swear, you didn't miss much. What about you and Rune? Did you guys come up with any ideas last night?"

"Nope."

"Then all you talked about was Breanna?"

"Her and my serious parental issues."

"And he really loved her?"

"Yep." Wow, was I ever sick of this conversation.

"That's funny," she said, her tone suddenly soft and reflective.

"I assure you it's not."

"No, I just...I don't know. The two of you were always like 'Rune and Indigo.'"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I mean you two always seemed so close. Like you really *got* one another, or you had something going on or whatever."

"Is no one but me really tired of discussing this?" I glanced over at Kitty. She shrugged and shook her head.

"Nope, we both find this very entertaining," Martie said with a smirk.

I ignored her and decided to steer the conversation away from me and my lack of love life. "Desdemona!"

"What does your sister look like again?" Martie asked.

"Like me only eight years younger. Long straight hair. She was wearing a light blue t-shirt and jeans."

"I don't suppose you have a picture?"

"How many twelve-year-olds are you planning to run into?"

"I just thought it would help if I had a mental image of her..."

So Martie had been trying to use our seemingly useless abilities as well. A lot of good it had done us thus far; I'd been attempting to focus on sensing Dez in that E.S.P. way as I had yesterday, but nothing had come of it.

"Maybe..." I flipped through my wallet. I didn't find any photos, however. *Of course not—the kind of girl who is so irresponsible that she lost her sister certainly wouldn't have a photo of the kid.*

"Hey, relax," Martie said, sensing my growing apprehension. "We'll find her."

~*~

We didn't find her.

I hate to say it like that. In my head, I softened the phrase in every possible way: we had not yet located her. For the time being, our search failed to turn up any evidence. She would be discovered at a later date. But no matter which way I put it, she was gone. Nearly ten hours of wandering and we came up with nothing.

Martie assured me that the next day we could grab the station wagon and head out to the very outskirts of town. She thought we might find Dez there. But what was it all those daytime talk shows said whenever they did an episode about missing children? Something like the first twenty-four hours were the most important? We were well over that—nearing forty-eight, in fact.

When we got back to the hotel, we found the guys sitting in the lobby.

"I said dusk," Rune said immediately.

"I don't care." I slumped down next to Jace on one of the couches.

"We made pizza." Jupiter gestured to the remaining slices of now-cold thin crust pizza on the table in front of us.

"I still don't care."

"Find anything?" Martie asked, snatching up a slice and chowing down.

"Nothing," Jace said. "No sign of a single person. There were newspapers showing Sunday's date, but nothing local—all Toronto papers."

"Forget our location then," I said. "What we need is the station wagon." I repeated Martie's plan to head to the outskirts of town, only substituted "tomorrow" for "right now."

"There's little use in us looking in the dark," Rune said.

"That's what headlights are for. Duh."

"We're not driving around in the middle of the night on little sleep and with no idea of where to go."

"Why the hell are you so intent on stopping me from finding her now?"

"I'm not trying to stop you, but you need to think clearly if you're going to stay alive."

"And I'm supposed to believe you suddenly care?"

"Indigo," Martie began.

"Then I'll go myself," I said, challenging Rune and ignoring her.

"Not while I have the car keys," was his simple reply.

I opened my mouth to yell some more, but his steady expression told me it would have little effect.

"Fine! I'm going to bed, where I will get plenty of rest so I can leave at dawn." I glared at Rune—which was something I seemed to be doing a lot lately—and strode for the steps.

"Um, Indigo," Jupiter called.

"What?" I snapped.

"We brought the bags down here. Rune thought it would be better—"

"God, do you people just do everything he tells you to?"

"It makes more sense to be on the ground floor," Rune said. "Multiple exits, closer to the things we need—"

"Well, I happen to like the second floor," I said, my stubbornness taking over. "And I'm getting my stuff and going back to *my* room now." As I walked for the closest row of rooms, I focused my mind on determining where they'd put the luggage. I stopped at room 103 and tried the door, but it was locked.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rune approaching. I readied myself to berate him some more, but he pulled out a room key and unlocked the door for me. Thanking him would have been too weird, so I went inside without a word. With my bag in hand, I turned for the door again. He blocked my way. That seemed to be a pattern with him.

"Oh, I get it," I said. "I bet you're Evil-Rune or something, aren't you?"

"I won't stop you from sleeping upstairs—"

"More like 'can't.'"

"—but promise me you won't do anything rash—"

"I'm not promising you anything."

"—and don't go anywhere on your own."

"Of course I wouldn't—that was my rule yesterday. Remember that? Yesterday? When you were too wiggled out to even talk to anyone? I suppose a, 'Thanks, Indigo, for keeping everyone sane,' would be too much to ask."

No response. None at all. No shouting, no apologizing... Well, fuck him.

"You know, I don't even care anymore why you're being such a prick. You've only spared me any guilt I might have felt for leaving you here as soon as I find her. Now get the hell out of my way."

He held his place for a beat longer, then stepped aside. I got the sense he had something to say and who knows—had I pressed him, I might have found out. But I didn't care. I stalked past him and through the doorway.

"Thank you," he said, his voice not far above a whisper.

I stopped, but I didn't turn around. "It's a little insincere coming after I've requested it."

"Still, thank you...for being there for them when I couldn't be."

I turned to face him then. "Couldn't or wouldn't?"

He didn't answer.

"I know this is all pretty fucked up and confusing," I said. "But everyone is feeling that way right now, and you don't see us shutting down."

"But it's acceptable to be stubborn, irrational, and to shout at everyone?"

I stormed back into the room, tossed my bag on the floor, and stood before him. "So now I'm stubborn and irrational?" I shouted. *Wait a sec, so far I'm three for three...maybe he has a point there...*

"You're acting that way," he stated.

In truth, he was right, but I might have been more willing to listen to him if he wasn't being so goddamn cold and unfeeling.

"Sorry, but it's a by-product of my sister being missing for two fucking days!"

"If my previous behaviour was hurting the group, what do you suppose yours is doing right now?"

"Except I'm not a part of 'the group.' I never have been. My being upset pales in comparison to your abandoning them!"

"This business of you being a misfit even among us doesn't work with me, Indigo. Nor will feeling sorry for yourself."

My eyes burned with tears I refused to shed. I took a deep breath, determined I would be as calm and composed as him the next time I spoke. *One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand...*

"I don't mean to upset you," he said.

...six one-thousand, seven one-thousand...

"All this hasn't been easy—"

...nine not-fucking-helping-me one-thousand, ten...

"—and I know you want to find her and it's hard with what you're feeling, but you need to keep a level head—"

"What I need is her!" I shouted. "Don't tell me what I want or what I feel."

"Indi—"

"Stop it, because you don't understand. You can't, because if you did, you wouldn't..." I sighed, still angry, but defeated. There was no sense arguing with him. He didn't get it and he never would. I picked up my overnight bag and headed for the door again. "You know what, just go and pay attention to them, because they're the ones that need your words of wisdom and oh-so-excellent and completely non-flawed leadership and guidance. Just leave me alone. It shouldn't be difficult, since you seemed pretty good at it today." I left the room and he didn't stop me. Not sure if I wanted him to or not, but nor did I care. I jogged back upstairs to the room I'd had the night before.

My luggage returned, I decided to head back downstairs to search for some dinner before officially retiring for the night. I opened the door and stepped out into the hallway—

But it wasn't *the* hallway. Not the hotel one. It was *a* hallway—far shorter than the other one, with only three doors besides the one I had walked out of, and a flight of stairs leading downward. What the hell...

The walls were burgundy, with a flowery wallpaper border at the top. Cherry wood railings and steps...so familiar...

I started down the steps, fearful and treading with care. Dread filled me as I recognized the framed photos spread across the wall in the stairwell. God, no, this wasn't happening...

I jumped at the sound of stainless steel pans clattering as someone dropped them in the sink. I stopped at the foot of the stairs, facing the kitchen, where a woman stood with her back to me. She hummed to herself, and I knew that voice, just like I knew the curled auburn hair and heavy smell of perfume. I blinked a few times, willing the scene before me to disappear. It didn't work.

She glanced over her shoulder and spotted me, then turned back to her cooking.

"I see you finally decided to get out of bed," she said. "I'm making some vegetables for dinner, but I don't suppose you'll have any. God forbid you eat something other than junk."

I just stared at her, my heart thumping so wildly I swore she heard it too.

"Mom?"

Chapter Thirteen: Home

"I put some extra potatoes in for you, so you're welcome to have some. If not, that's fine. I'll just have leftovers to heat up for the next day. I don't mind eating by myself—I do it all the time..."

She continued on, but I wasn't listening. This wasn't a case of me simply tuning her out for the sake of it, though, as I had far more immediate threats to my sanity than my mother's repetitiveness.

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded.

"I told you, I made dinner. I don't know what you want, so I'll let you—"

"Don't you think you could be a little more original than this?" I said to Evil-Mom. *Wait, would that be Eviler-Mom?*

"I made the carrots the way you like them..."

"You did a good job, though," I said. "Very accurate depiction—she never did listen to me either. Now do you mind telling me where my sister is?"

"I hope these are fully cooked." She pulled a pan out of the oven. Sliced potatoes encircled the steaming roast beef in the dish. "I zapped them in the microwave—"

I grabbed the doppelganger by the shoulders and turned her to face me. "Where the hell is my sister?"

She stared at me blankly, her brown eyes glazing over in confusion. "Oh, Eve, you don't have a sister." She sighed and turned back to her cooking.

"Ah, I get it. You've gone back to when I was really young to keep me from seeing her. Nice touch, but I think I'll be going now."

"Great, I cook something, and you won't eat it! That is so typical." She started muttering under her breath, talking to herself as she did every time she got mad.

"Okay, number one, you're not my mother. Good impression, though. Number two, I'm a vegetarian."

"That's why I cooked extra potatoes."

"In the meat. There doesn't seem much point in not eating meat if you cook everything in it."

"You know what Eve, fine, don't eat it. You wonder why you're sick all the time!"

"Sick? They're allergies, for Christ sakes!"

"It's because you refuse to eat anything that—"

I'd stuck around long enough. Ignoring her ranting, I went for the front door. I flipped open the lock and yanked on the handle, but it was stuck. I found the back door to be in the same condition. Stubborn me tried them both a few more times, but to no avail. "Nice one—locking me in here with her," I muttered. It made me actually miss the directness of Evil-Bre.

"Okay, I'll bite," I called as I returned to the living room. She sat in an arm chair with her plate on her lap. I slumped down on the couch and looked over at her. "So why am I here? Just trying to annoy me to death?"

"Why do you have to be such a little bitch with me? My mother always said she wished—"

"She wished you'd have a daughter as horrible as you were," I finished for her. "And lo and behold she got her wish. Christ, I know you're trying to be convincing as her and everything, but this is a little much. So what's the dealio? Why am I here?"

Either she didn't hear me or she didn't care what I had to say. "I see from the dishes in the sink, you sat on your ass all day."

"Actually, I did a surprising amount of walking. And I might also point out that I don't eat here, so the dishes are hardly mine to do."

"The least you could do is help me a little around here!"

I rolled my eyes. Why was this evil thing obsessed with small talk?

"You know, I had a child thinking she'd help me around the house and want to do things for me—"

Right, have a kid to do housework. Great parenting ideals.

"Eve, why can't you just talk to me?"

Because you don't listen.

"I don't know why I even bother, you never—"

"Fine," I interrupted. If she wanted to know what I thought, I'd fucking tell her for once. "I was thinking you probably should have hired a maid rather than have me. It would have been cheaper."

"Sometimes I wish I ha—" She stopped herself, but it was too late.

It's not your mom, it's okay, I tried to reassure myself, but that was bullshit because my real mother had already said that to me a few times. Luckily, I'd had enough practice at turning my hurt into anger that it didn't take too long to rally.

"Great, so you regret you had me. That makes two of us."

Some parents would immediately offer an apology for lamenting their child's birth right in front of them, but not her. No, of course not; why would she do that when she could make it all my fault?

"Is your life really so horrible—"

"Yes," I interrupted.

"Goddamn it, Eve, I gave you everything I could—"

Except a mother with some semblance of sanity, apparently...

"—but nothing is ever good enough. It's just been you and me all these years and you're nothing but a bitch to me all the time. You have no motivation, you're so antisocial and sullen, and...and I just don't see why I couldn't have a normal child!"

Hurt boiled to the surface in me. I felt my eyes burn with tears, but I held it together. Again, that was something I was pretty good at by now.

"Fuck this." I stormed from the room.

"What did you say to me?"

I shouted my reply. "Fuck. This. I'm going back now." I returned to the second floor, and marveled at my own frustration with the thing that wasn't really my mom. Even five minutes with a fake one was enough to piss me off.

I'm going back to the hotel now, I'm going back to the hotel now, I'm going back... Truthfully, I'd rather be stuck in the abandoned town waiting for certain death than be living with my mother. I chanted my intent again and again, determined that when I opened the door I'd come through and find myself back with the others.

I paused in the hallway outside my room. My hand shook, possibly out of fear, but more than likely out of the anger from just speaking with Mommy-Dearest. I forced back my trembling as I placed my hand on the doorknob and turned it. *This will work, this will work...*

I opened the door.

It hadn't worked.

I stared at my old bedroom. Outdated posters of actors and musicians I used to like covered the walls, because I'd always been too lazy to take them down. Multiple piles of clothes were scattered around the floor; an unbelievably cluttered dresser and a note written to myself in eyeliner on the mirror because I couldn't find a pen and paper one time when I needed them. Yep, this was definitely my room. Whatever evil thing was causing this, it had an excellent attention to detail.

I slammed my bedroom door shut and flopped onto my daybed. This was so screwed up. Like, I know stuff was screwed up before, but this...damn. It was definitely scarier than anything I'd seen so far.

What the hell was I going to do? Just keep walking in and out of rooms in the hopes that I'd end up back at the hotel? Or was I supposed to go down and talk with Eviler-Mom? Now that was a chilling thought. Maybe I could try the phone, or break a window or something...

I heard a sound at my door and I glanced up to see the knob turning.

"This may not be real, but it's still my room!" I shouted. "Go away!" I grabbed a pillow and threw it over my head. It soaked up the tears from my eyes as they formed, so at least I could allow myself the simple pleasure of denying I had been crying.

"Evie?"

I tossed the pillow aside and bolted upright. "Dez?"

She ran into my arms, crying. "Oh my god, I was so scared..."

"Me too, sweetie, me too." I squeezed her so tight that any other time when we weren't in a life or death situation, she would probably have grumbled or made some joke about a sudden lack of oxygen. Satisfied she was really there in my embrace and not going anywhere, I sat back and held her at arm's length. "You don't look hurt—are you okay?"

"I'm fine, at least I think so...but what's going on? Where are the others?"

"Both excellent questions that I don't have the answer to. One minute I was at this hotel, then the next I'm here. The others and I have been looking for you since the accident—what happened? Where did you go?"

She stared off into space, frowning in recollection. "I remember waking up in the car. I tried to get you awake, but you stayed knocked out. I got out to look for your friends, when..." As she started to cry, she covered her face with her hands. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed, but as I reached out for her, she sat up. Straightening her back and wiping her away her tears, she continued.

"Something was out there." Her voice was steady—surprisingly so—and she met my eyes. "It came from around the van, and...and I just had to run. I'm sorry, I didn't want to leave you, but it went right past the car, like maybe it didn't notice you there or something."

"You didn't see what it was?"

She shook her head. "Just a shadow, and I was so confused, but... But I *felt* it, Evie, you know? It was...it was so evil..." Her body shuddered, giving her a frail look for a moment then she offered a wan smile. "Don't get mad, but I thought maybe I could lead it away from the car while you woke up, and then lose it in the woods and come back for you later, but I got kind of lost. Please, please, *please* don't be mad at me."

I wasn't mad; I was struck all at once by how strong she was. In all my worrying, I never once considered that she could look out for herself so well. Any other child her age might have froze, but she thought clearly and did what she had to, adapting to circumstances as she went.

Desdemona, my baby sister... Now that I saw the quick-thinking, strong young woman she had become, I was left wondering how I ever missed such a development.

"Evie, what's wrong?" she asked with worry as I began to cry.

"Nothing's wrong." I laughed as I blinked back tears. "I'm just so proud of you."

"Aw, I think I'd like it better if you were mad." She gave a mock groan and rolled her eyes.

"You're such a brat." I threw up my hands, defeated, and started to stand. "That's it—I'm leaving you here with Mom."

"Oh no, *please* don't do that." She grabbed my arm and drew me back. "When I was down there, I think she was actually having a conversation with the cat."

"It wouldn't be the first time. I guess we should figure out how to get back to the hotel."

"What's this about a hotel you keep mentioning?"

"When we awoke and couldn't find you, Rune suggested you had gone to this town that was nearby, so we went looking for you..." I recounted what had happened, from our initial search of the town to my vision of her, and then skimmed through the details of what Jupe and I had seen in the library.

"But I haven't been in a library or any building until now," she interrupted me.

"You're sure? I was positive that was you..."

"C'mon, I think I'd remember."

I tried to keep my sudden concern from spilling onto my face and worrying her, but my mind was whirling. Though I didn't think the dead version of her I found was actually my sister, I was certain that my original vision was real. It *felt* so real...and to think that whatever was doing this could so easily manipulate us, even with our abilities...

"How are we going to get out of here?" she whispered.

"I don't know," I said quietly. I was sure that I just needed to find her and everything would be all right, but now what?

"Do you think the others will find us?"

I barely shook my head no.

"Can't you do something to, you know, like contact them? You're special, remember."

I shook my head again. "I'm not special, Dezzie. I'm just me."

"But you can do stuff—"

"Except so far anything I thought I could do has just turned out to be either a liability or completely useless. I don't trust myself right now." I bowed my head and raked my hands back through my hair. "God, I don't know what to do."

"Don't say that," she whispered. "Please don't...we can do this together, right?"

"Yeah, of course." I had to start thinking—I had to pull it together. If not for myself, then for her. Now was not the time for despair. "I guess we can try the front door again. If worse comes to worse, maybe we can tie up and interrogate Eviler-Mom. Let's go."

We both rose and went for the door. Just as I slipped through the doorway, I heard the door slam behind me.

"What—" I turned around. My heart pounded and my jaw dropped open.

Dez was gone.

Chapter Fourteen: Alone

No, no, not again...

"Dezzie?" I forced my tone into something resembling calm as I tried the knob. *Don't panic, don't panic...*

The door wouldn't budge.

I braced my shoulder against the wood and pushed as hard as I could, twisting the handle with one hand and pounding on the door with the other.

"Dez, hon, let me in!" I was trembling now and biting my lower lip to keep from losing it completely. "Open the door! Damn it, Dez!"

The door abruptly flew open under my weight and I stumbled into a familiar room...

My hotel room.

No, no, no, this isn't happening...

"She's still here," I mumbled as I searched wildly around the room for her. But I was alone.

I slumped to the floor, my knees suddenly nonexistent. My head and heart ached, and as I felt my body sag forward, I let myself collapse completely. My forehead touched the carpet and I wrapped my arms around my stomach as I sobbed. I had her right there, in my arms, and now...

Now I'd lost her. Again.

Get up, Eve, I told myself. Get up and do something about this.

"But I can't," I whispered. I can't do this anymore."

She needs you, Eve.

"There's no point..."

GET UP!

I sat up. My internal voice reverberated through me. It forced me to my feet and to take one deep breath, then another, then another, until my head was clear. I was needed and I didn't have the luxury of giving up.

I headed to the bathroom, where I cupped my hands beneath the tap and splashed some water on my face. That stopped my crying, and after drying my skin, I glanced in the mirror. I had a sudden remembrance of the night before, when Rune stood in that very spot and stared at his reflection. I now knew what he saw as he stood transfixed on his own gaze: complete hopelessness.

Rune. I had to tell him. He'd understand and he might be better able to come up with a plan.

I raced down the stairs into the hallway of the lower rooms and froze. A young woman, with wide chestnut curls that grazed her shoulders, exited a room. She shut the door gently behind her, and as she glanced at me, I recognized her.

Oh no, Jupiter...

With a knowing smile, the girl I surmised was Carin's doppelganger sauntered down the hall away from me, then disappeared. I ran to the room she had come out of and burst through the door.

"Jupe? Are you—"

"Hey Indigo." He sat on the end of the bed, flipping through T.V. channels. "We get a bunch of movie channels here. Thank God for small favours." He looked at me with curiosity—too much of it for it to be authentic. "What's wrong?"

"Were you alone just now?"

"Of course." He went back to studying the T.V.

Jupiter was lying. The thing pretending to be Carin had spoken with him moments ago, but he feigned confusion. And since I'd been arguing with his hero Rune, I wasn't exactly high on his list of trusted friends. I doubted he'd tell me the truth.

"Remember, it's not her," I reminded him.

"What are you talk—"

"I saw her."

He went silent, and though his expression betrayed nothing, I sensed his sudden unease and embarrassment. He wasn't going to admit to anything.

"Just...just remember it's not her," I said, looking at him pointedly.

I received no reply, as he pretended to be fully engrossed in the television.

As I left the room, I bumped straight into Rune.

"Rune..."

"Indigo." He seemed surprised to see me there, but regained his expressionless countenance once more. "Is everything all right?"

I was about to tell him all of it—what I'd experienced, what I'd seen, what I now knew I needed to do...but then I caught a look from him, a look that said, "Great, what does she want now?"

"Indigo?" he prompted.

Still, I tried to force the words out. I wanted so much to just dump all my problems on him, all so I wouldn't be alone to deal with them anymore. But as he stood in front of me, a look of expectation on his face, waiting for whatever it was I had to say, I remembered the truth of it: I was alone in this. He had his problems, I had mine. We were better off if we didn't mix them.

And if I'm that much trouble to him, forget it.

"It's nothing," I said. "I was just looking for Martie, that's all."

"She's still in the lobby, I believe."

I sensed him trying to determine if there was more to my being there, but I blocked him.

I nodded curtly. "See you tomorrow, then." I strode past him, calm as ever, and I kept up my mental wall until I was certain he no longer paid attention.

When I entered the lobby, I found it empty. Just as I was about to ascend the stairs to the second floor, I ran into Martie on her way down.

"Hey," she said. "I brought my bags upstairs, but then I couldn't find you. Where'd you go?"

"Looking for the vending machines," I lied. I noticed her glance to my empty hands, so I was quick to cover my untruth with another. "Then I remembered I didn't have any change on me, so I was on my way back upstairs."

I jogged up a few steps to meet her then we walked up the rest of the stairs, and into the hallway.

"Next time let me know," Martie said. "Remember, we're supposed to stick together." She opened the door to our room and we went inside.

"Yeah, but you know you don't have to stay with me if you don't want to."

"And sit in a virtually silent room while Jace is engrossed in his computer and Kitty stares uncomfortably at the floor? No, thank you."

"You could possibly share another room with Jupiter." I gave her a sly grin, happy to repay her for the annoyances she caused earlier. "Hell, you two could probably go at it with Rune just standing there. He wouldn't care, so long as you didn't suggest doing it out in the parking lot at night while unsupervised."

Martie laughed. "I know. But as I said, it was just a thing. Like I told Rune, I was already planning to keep sharing a room with you so—"

"Why were you talking to Rune about it?" I asked. I sat down on my bed to rest my rather weary legs and waited for her response. It was obvious she debated what to say, and she stalled by taking her time changing into her pyjamas.

"He just..." Still stalling, she got into bed and tucked the covers up over her. "He just wanted me to keep an eye on you is all."

"What?!"

"I think he's just concerned—"

"If it was concern, he'd say, 'Hey, be careful, okay?' and not ask someone to baby-sit me."

"I'm sure he didn't mean it like that," she said. Doubt filled her voice, however, as my skepticism planted the seed in her head. "I know he didn't—Rune's not like that and definitely not with you. It probably seems like he doesn't understand, him being an only child and all, but I think he actually does get what you're going through...sorta. He's just looking out for you."

"How about you?" I asked, pretending to be casual about it, but secretly paying close attention to her words and actions. A lot was riding on her reply, but I maintained my cover and kept my thoughts and plans to myself. "Are you an only child?"

"No..." She thought about it for another moment then changed her answer. "And yes, I guess. I had a brother a few years older than me, but he died."

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged, as if it wasn't a big deal, though her gaze traveled across the room absently. "He drove straight off this bridge one day, completely out of nowhere. Didn't leave a note, didn't tell anyone. He just did it. And the funny thing was, he just bought this car a few months earlier—a little Pontiac Sunfire. Dark red. Cute car. He loved that thing."

"And he used it to kill himself?"

Martie started laughing. Usually I was the sort of person that made inappropriate jokes at serious moments to break the mood, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out what she found so funny. It took her a few minutes to calm herself, but she couldn't help grinning.

"That's the thing," she said. "He didn't use his car. He stole our oma's old junker and drove *it* over the bridge, leaving his in the driveway at home. Even then, he didn't want anything bad happening to it."

"That's one...uh...interesting brother you had there, Martie," I said. I wasn't nearly as amused as she was, though I still found her story pretty funny.

"Oh, Mark used to do the weirdest things," she said. "He would buy one of every type of peanut butter—extra smooth to extra chunky and everything in between—and make several slices of toast in the morning, covering each one with a different type of peanut butter." She sighed, the light in her eyes fading as she ceased recalling those memories. Out of respect, I kept from her mind for the moments she was silent. Eventually, she turned to me with a soft smile. "Does Dez do weird stuff like that?"

"Like bizarre eating habits? Yeah, but I blame it being on her being twelve. She's always been obsessed with Parmesan cheese, though. She'll put it on anything. Pasta, potatoes, toast, fries, veggie-dogs...even pancakes once."

Martie shuttered at that thought, and I probably would have too if I wasn't so used to it myself.

"Okay, you get the official 'Weirdest Sibling Award,'" she said.

"I'll put it on my mantle and observe it with pride."

"Well, maybe tomorrow she can steal some from the grocery store and make us some bizarre meals after we find her," Martie said brightly.

"Yeah..."

She must have heard the hesitation in my answer, and immediately interpreted it as doubt. "Indigo, I don't blame you for wanting to go out tonight to find her...but I think it's going to storm—the sky was getting pretty dark today."

"Yeah," I replied with a sinking feeling as I realized she wouldn't be helping me.

"You gotta agree with Rune on this one; we really shouldn't be wandering around at night. As soon as it's light out, though, I'm sure we can go look for her."

"I know," I lied. Though she seemed to be on my side—and I was pretty sure she saw my point of view—I knew there was no way she'd go against Rune on this issue.

I'd definitely have to keep her out of my plans for that night.

~*~

Martie had awoken a few hours before me that day, and that coupled with our excessive exercise earlier, had left her exhausted. It was a long, tedious wait for her to fall asleep, though. Even as her eyelids fluttered shut, she continued to try to engage me in conversation. I don't think she heard half my replies.

At last, I stood and claimed I was taking a shower. Her eyes were closed by then, so she didn't see me snatch up my running shoes and jacket before I went into the bathroom. I left the water running and waited as the minutes ticked by. After nearly half an hour, I was certain she was asleep.

Rather than cut through the lobby, I took a much longer route down the end of the hallway, which led me down a flight of stairs to the first floor. It was too risky to go anywhere near the others' rooms, so I left the hotel through a back door.

After my brief conversation with Dez earlier, I realized she seemed to have no knowledge of the town. She ran for the woods near the car, so provided she was able to escape Eviler-Mom, she might still be there. Some houses lay between there and the town and she could easily be hiding there as well.

To get there, I needed a car. Even if I managed to steal the keys from Rune, it was too risky to start a car parked right outside his window.

Two blocks from the hotel, I found my answer: a car dealership. None of the building's doors was locked, and inside were several sets of keys. Matching some up to car took only a few minutes, and shortly after that I was speeding down the road behind the wheel of a four door white Mazda.

Dezzie, I'm coming.

~*~

As I passed Rune's van, I slowed then pulled the Mazda to a stop not far from my old car. With the headlights streaming light over the ditch and field, I left the keys in the ignition. It was totally giving off enough light, even with the black, moonless sky; Rune really should have listened to me. I grabbed my flashlight and my trusty hunting knife—which I hoped I wouldn't be using—then exited the vehicle to approach my old car.

The back door was still wide open from where Dez, and later I, had stumbled out. Inspecting the ground, I soon found what looked like footprints. One set was mine, and led away from the car toward the road. A second pair went in the direction of the field on the other side of the ditch. In the far distance I saw the woods. It seemed a long shot, but I wasn't sure what else to do...

So I started shouting.

"Dez?" I called, tentatively at first as I followed the footprints. "Dezzie?" My voice carried over the field, breaking through the silence with ease, but I didn't get a response. I felt a faint drizzle on my face. Great. Why the hell could I read minds but not be able to control the weather?

The thicker the grass became, the more difficult it was to follow the footprints. Thankfully, the blades were bent and broken from where she ran through the field, so I continued on what seemed to be her path.

Rain pelted down on me, the droplets growing larger and falling faster and harder. In the distance, the sky lit up for a second then thunder followed. That was just super. It was a dark and stormy night, and Eve was taking yet another page from "Stupid Cliché Heroine Behaviour For Dummies." Why the hell didn't I bring Martie? Why the hell didn't I tell anyone? Of course the answer was because they'd tell Rune, and he'd try to stop me. I bet he'd have succeeded, too. Pity that.

Now that I was out there, though, I saw little point in turning back. Never mind that the last time I did this, it turned out badly; this time I wasn't locking myself in anywhere. I was in an open field. No problems there. I'd just walk around and shout a bit, and if I didn't find anything, I'd leave. Piece of cake.

I trudged through the grass, but soon it was obvious that the rain was washing away any trace of footprints. At the edge of the woods, where the bent grass—and any evidence of where she might have run to—ended, I stopped and shouted her name a few more times. Rune was probably right; the search would be easier during daylight. But I never would have known that had I listened to him and stayed inside, so I was still pleased with my decision to hunt for my sister anyway. It was worth a shot, and nothing freaky happened. I turned around to start back to the car—

And I saw Dez.

I stopped so abruptly that I almost fell over. Several metres ahead, she stood with her back to me.

I wanted to run towards her but...*why* the hell was she just standing there? Unmoving and without acknowledging me? This was weird.

"Dezzie?" I called as I started toward her.

She didn't respond. I stopped, keeping a distance of about ten feet between us.

"Oh, right, like I'm falling for that again," I said. "If you're Desdemona, turn around. Dez!" I shouted until I was hoarse, but she didn't move.

But maybe it was her and she was suddenly deaf. Or...um...something like that. I spotted a small, Loonie-sized stone on the ground, which I picked up and gave a gentle, underhand throw.

It pinged her shoulder. She still didn't move.

I rounded her slowly, keeping several feet away. Part of me wanted to take off for the car, drive back to the hotel, and slip into bed, forgetting any of this happened. But every time I tried to do that, a single thought stopped me: what if it *was* her?

So I didn't run. I refused to until I was certain.

Her eyes were huge, hair had soaked to her head, and her mouth was agape. *And* she wasn't blinking, which was really making me wonder.

"Dezzie?" I said as I approached. I waved my hand in front of her face. "Desdemona?" I touched her shoulder in an attempt to shake her back to reality. "De—"

She grabbed my arm. When I glanced down, I recognized the long, pale bony fingers. Looking up again, I watched Dez's eyes blacken, her skin become translucent and ragged, and her stringy hair darken. Once again, I looked at my zombie friend.

"I knew it!" I declared triumphantly, too pleased with myself to think to run. "I knew you weren't Dez—"

My gloating was short lived as her hand flew across my face, nails scraping along my cheek. The rain stung my broken skin. I reached up to wipe away the blood.

"You bitch—"

She hit me again, this time knocking me to the ground.

God, I was getting bitch-slapped by Jupiter's "zombie." This was just sad. But the realization hit me then: I was in a bit of trouble and it was a good time to run.

The zombie had other plans, though. She grabbed me by the shoulder and hauled me off the ground.

Why didn't I tell anyone where I was going?! Oh, right, they would have stopped me. That was definitely seeming like a good idea now.

I pushed away from her with such force that I lost my balance; the worn treads of my running shoes failed to stop me from slipping into the mud. The flashlight slid from my grasp and went out as it hit the ground and rolled from my hand. Thankfully, the headlights from my car provided enough light for me to find my way. I raced as fast as a girl can when she's trudging through mud and grass up to her waist at night, in the rain...which turned out to be surprisingly fast. Mind-numbing fear can do that to a person.

Just as I was growing confident in the distance I put between myself and her, I decided to double check and glance behind me—

—And I ran straight into another person.

I let out an involuntary—and unflattering—yelp, and backed away.

"Indigo, hold on—"

I shielded my eyes from the rain and looked up into the person's face.

"Rune? Oh, thank god!" As he put his arms around me, I gratefully sank into his embrace. "How did you get here?"

"I followed your car. What happen—"

"I fucking knew it!" I interrupted him, still on a bit of an adrenaline high. "It looked like her, but it was that thing, and—"

"It's okay, there's nothing there now. You're safe."

I felt my heartbeat slow from its elevated, so-fast-it's-immeasurable-like-a-small-rodent's rate to a more human-like normal one, and I took a few deep breaths to further calm me. Still, I was reluctant to let go of Rune and release the physical support he provided; I doubted my knees could hold me at that moment.

"I'm so glad you're here—did you bring the...others..." My eyes drifted past him to the road where I saw the vehicles. There were only three: mine, the van, and the car I'd just stolen. And that meant...

I tried to back away, but he caught me by the shoulders and gave a cruel laugh. Though I struggled in his grasp, pushing and clawing at his arms, my efforts did me no good. He grabbed the back of my head, tugging me closer, and all at once pressed his mouth to mine and kissed me hard. I tasted blood as his teeth cut my lip.

As I wrenched myself back, he let me go and I stumbled and fell.

"Wow, been wanting to do *that* for awhile," Evil-Rune said, and he followed that up with another uncharacteristic laugh. He knelt down so he was eye-level with me, swept some wet blond locks from his face, and fixed his gaze on mine. "Yep, a long, long while. That's funny, though—I thought you'd be happy to see me."

"Well, *duh*, but you're not him."

"Indigo, Indigo, Indigo..." He shook his head and smiled, then raised a brow. "You sure about that?"

My gaze shot past him to the road. I had to get back to the car...the lights were still on, which meant the keys were still in the ignition. If I could just get past him, I'd be home free.

I rose with caution. Before taking any steps in any direction, I glanced behind me. Zombie-chick was still there with that same hideously delighted grin on her face. Looking back at Rune, I found him advancing on me. Evil-Bre was at his side.

"Oh, so everyone's coming out to see me," I said. "Are we having a reunion?"

Beyond them, I spotted Eviler-Mom and Evil-Me approaching. After spending time with the former earlier, I wasn't looking forward to another chat. I turned around deciding to take my chances with the one evil thing rather than four of them, but not far from Miss Zombie was Dez. She too was presumably of the evil variety, given her devilish smile and the fact she was stalking toward me. To her left was the girl I knew as Carin, but with something I hadn't noticed before: a loose-fitting top hanging over a very rounded stomach. I didn't have time to think about it, however, when I spotted someone else closing in. A tall, thin man of about forty whom I had never seen before had joined the bunch.

I was surrounded.

Things aren't looking good for our heroine, I thought.

Too late I realized I had been instinctively backing up as those in front of me advanced, and I slammed into a tall, solid body behind me. Though I attempted to bolt forward, Evil-Rune gripped my throat and yanked me back. Kicking and elbowing was of no use—it was like hitting a wall, and he didn't budge. I reached for the hunting knife at my waist, but his other hand grabbed that arm and twisted it behind me.

"It's unfortunate you found me out so quickly," he whispered, and gave my earlobe a playful tug between his teeth. "We could have had some fun. I really am going to miss you, sweetheart."

Like I'm giving up that easily. I grabbed his pinky finger with my free hand and jerked it back from my throat, certain the pain would make him let go. Instead, his finger bent back and I heard a *crack* that made me shudder.

His grasp over my throat tightened and my vision went black.

Please let them find me, was my final thought as I slipped into unconsciousness—and quite possibly death.

Chapter Fifteen: Surrender

Indigo.

A voice in my head jarred me awake.

Indigo, where are you?

My efforts to force my eyes open went unheeded by my body.

I'm here, I'm here, I thought. That was all my weakened mind permitted me to do, however, as I blacked out again from the struggle.

~*~

"Indigo!"

Somewhere within my dream of being pursued by a dark figure through the woods, I heard two male voices shouting for me.

I opened my eyes to see the grey sky of dawn. Heavy drops of rain irritated my eyes, so I closed them again.

"Indigo!"

The voices were closer now. Just as I was about to shout back, I heard, "She's over here!"

The rain battering my face ceased as someone leaned over me.

"Shit, man, is she..." The second guy's voice trailed off.

I felt a hand on my wrist, presumably feeling for a pulse.

"She's alive," said the man above me.

That sounds like—

I opened my eyes then and saw Rune leaning over me. His hair and t-shirt were soaking wet, suggesting he'd been out in the rain for awhile.

In my mind flashed an image of him from the night before. His cruel grin, that maniacal laugh, the feel of his teeth on my lip when he kissed me... *It's not him,* I told myself.

Then I remembered his words: *Are you sure about that?*

I bolted away from him, rolling onto my stomach and scrambling to my feet. My legs failed me and I fell onto the grass again.

"Hey, Indigo..." Jupiter was too near for my liking as well, so I backed away from them both.

"It's us," he said.

"How did you find me?" I demanded.

Jupiter looked to Rune, who in turn looked at me.

"I heard you call us," Rune said in a careful tone that suggested *I* was the loony one here.

"Then I remote viewed your location."

"How did you get here?" I asked, still not trusting them.

"We drove," Jupiter said.

"Wh-where's the car?"

He gestured across the field to the road. Slowly, I stood and looked to the road. There sat the station wagon a few feet from my car. Relief rushed through me—it was them.

"C'mon," Jupiter said, and the two of them started toward me.

Instinctively, I shrank back from Rune, falling instead against Jupiter's supportive shoulder.

"Don't," I whispered, my gaze flitting to Rune's, then back to the ground. I was still getting flashbacks from the night before, and I couldn't stand the thought of being anywhere near him. I straightened my back and tried to act calm. "Just...don't touch me."

Held up by Jupiter's arm—and with Rune walking a few steps behind—I made my way to the car. Everything was soaked through; my hair, clothes, shoes and socks. My jeans were caked in mud, as was half of my upper body from laying on the ground all night, and even the rain beating down on me did nothing to wash the dirt away. It wasn't a warm rain either; it was the cold type that always seems to be present in the autumn, and I shook with the chills running down my body.

When we got to the car, I veered away from the Mazda and pulled my own car keys from my jacket pocket.

"What are you doing?" Jupe asked.

"My other bags are in the trunk," I said. "I want to bring them with me—I'll need a change of clothes. And Dez had a blanket in the back...I'm cold."

Rune reached for me. I took a step backward. He paused, allowing me to calm down then moved his hand slowly toward me again. I watched him warily as he took the keys from my grasp.

"I'll do it," he said. "Go sit in the car where it's dry."

Jupiter led me to the passenger side of the car I drove out there, but didn't linger once I was inside. Instead, he jogged to the station wagon and returned a minute later with a jacket in his arms. He opened my door again and passed me the dry garment.

"What's this..."

"It's Rune's. He thought we should have something dry for you if...when we found you."

I slipped off my coat and put Rune's on, zipping it up to my neck. I practically swam in the thing, so there was enough room to manoeuvre around and slip my wet t-shirt off. I tossed it beside me and crossed my arms around my stomach.

"Great, now which one of you is giving me your pants?"

He didn't laugh. "Why did you do it?" he asked instead. "Why didn't you wait?"

"What happened to the baby?" I countered. After all, he already knew the answer to the one he asked, and I felt my question was far more relevant.

"What—"

"Carin's baby. I saw her last night. What happened?"

"It's none of your—"

"Wasn't it yours?"

"Of course he was!"

"What happened?"

He sighed. "Nothing. It's...it's nothing."

Rune returned then, and stowed the extra luggage in the backseat. He passed me Dez's blanket and handed Jupiter a set of car keys. Deciding our conversation was completed, Jupe closed my car door and went for the station wagon while Rune went around to the driver's side of the Mazda I sat in. He got in and slammed the door shut, wearing down the last of my frayed nerves. When he reached for my cheek, I backed away.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said quietly. He picked up my damp t-shirt, held me gently but firmly by the jaw, and ran the wet cloth over the side of my face to clean some of the mud away. The sudden prickling pain reminded me that was where the thing had clawed me last night.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Bear attack," I muttered.

"Indigo—" he began, impatience creeping into his tone.

Indigo, Indigo, Indigo... I remembered his voice repeating my name...

"You know what, that's not my goddamn name, so stop calling me that," I snapped. "It's Eve. E-v-e. And I already know what you're going to say; 'I told you so.' Spare me the lecture and let's just go back."

He bit back whatever he was going to say, cast my wet shirt in the back, and turned to face the steering wheel. Stupid me, I couldn't just leave it at that though.

"I don't see what the big deal is anyway," I ranted. "Who the fuck cares what I do? My choice, and I'll take the goddamn consequences! If that means being knocked around by some freaky evil thing, then whatever."

He put his seatbelt on and reached for the keys in the ignition. I knew I told him not to lecture me, but his silence was bothering me more than anything. I wanted a fight.

"What about Jupiter? You let him alone to drive the station wagon! You didn't send Martie to baby-sit him!"

"I didn't—"

"Yes, you did! She told me! I can take very good care of myself, thanks."

Without a word, he took his hands from the steering wheel and turned to face me. Fear gripped me as he snatched my left arm.

Oh god, it's him—

I remembered what he'd said the night before: *It's unfortunate you found me out...* He was going to kill me for real this time...

I reached for the door handle, but he held me there. His narrow fingers were deceptively strong and I couldn't wiggle free of his grasp. He turned my arm so my palm was facing upward, then held it in front of me and pushed my sleeve down to my elbow.

"You can take care of yourself?" he demanded.

I ceased my struggle and slumped back in my seat. He wasn't evil. He was pissing me off, but that didn't make him a doppelganger.

"Eve." He pronounced my name slowly, deliberately, and held my arm close to my face until I finally looked at it. "Can you explain this?"

An ugly white scar, about two inches long and as thin as, say, *the blade of a razor*, stared back at me from my wrist.

"Stigmata," was my stubborn reply, then I wrenched my arm from his grasp. I stared out the window, ignoring the probing gaze burning a hole in my head. A few moments later, I heard the car start. Ahead of us Jupiter turned on the station wagon and started in the direction of town. We followed.

Neither of us said anything during the ride. It was just as well: he'd only turn the conversation to things I didn't want to talk about, and I didn't feel like fighting anymore.

Just as we neared the cut-off to town, Jupiter sped further head, zooming right past our destination.

"What the hell?" I broke the silence. "Didn't he see—"

"He saw it," Rune muttered, his voice low and angry.

"Where's he—"

"This is why it matters when you take off on your own." He stomped down on the accelerator. Jupiter sped faster and faster down the highway, and I wasn't sure if we'd catch up with him.

"Oh, don't you blame this one on me!"

"They see you act out and it sets a dangerous precedent."

"Act out?!" Against what—your stupid rules that don't seem to be doing us any good to begin with?"

"I'm trying to keep them under control and safe—"

"Newsflash, Rune: they're human beings and you can't control them..." I leaned over the dashboard and tried to peer between the rivers of rain splashing across the windshield. In the passenger side of the station wagon, I could have sworn I saw—

"Did you guys bring any of the others?" I asked.

"No. Why?"

"Oh dammit... Three guesses as to who's sitting in the car with him?"

"The girl you told me about?"

"Carin. I caught her visiting him last night, but he denied it."

"And you *didn't* think to tell me this earlier?"

"Of course not—I'm mad at you, remember?"

"You would put others in danger because you have a problem with me?"

"How could you possibly have stopped all this, even if you knew?"

In answer, he accelerated the car further.

Soon we caught up to Jupiter, but I doubted he was aware we were even there. Closer to the station wagon now, I had a clear view of him and Carin arguing in the front seat. Rune pulled the car up next to Jupiter's and honked the horn, but he ignored us. His lips were moving, but I couldn't make out a thing he said. Carin replied and Juve pushed the old station wagon even faster. As they sped away from us, I caught Carin's gaze when she looked out the back window.

She smiled.

"Rune, she's going to kill him..."

Rune shook his head. "No, she's going to make him kill himself."

The station wagon swerved back and forth ahead of us. Rune kept a distance of a few metres behind Jupiter and I knew both of us were thinking the same thing now: how the hell were we supposed to stop him?

Rune slammed on the brakes as Jupiter stopped abruptly in front of us. The station wagon veered to the right, then spun on the slippery road in a complete circle before sailing into the ditch. Rune slowed the car to a stop and I jumped out.

Jupiter's door opened just before I reached it, and he stumbled out. He slumped to the ground beside the car.

"Juve?" I said as I knelt next to him.

"Are you okay?" Rune asked as he crouched at Jupiter's other side.

"I think he is," I replied. "Juve...?"

Instead of replying, he looked over at Rune. "She said we were going to see him."

"Damn it, I told you it wasn't her—" A sharp look from Rune silenced me. *Fine then!* If he wanted to deal with the situation by himself, he bloody well could. Angrily, I stood and leaned on the side of the station wagon.

"Who were you going to see?" Rune asked.

"She just..." Jupiter struggled with the words, his mouth open but no sound coming out as he thought of what to say. "I knew it couldn't be her, and we were supposed to be going back to town, but...but then she was there and she promised she knew the way to see him..."

"See who?"

"She promised... Why didn't she take me to him?"

"Who do you mean—"

"It's his goddamn son," I interrupted then I turned my gaze to Jupiter. "Carin took him somewhere, did she?"

He looked up at me and shook his head. "Private adoption. They said it was the right thing...that it was best for him... I signed the paper, but I...I just wanted what was best. And I convinced her to sign them too..."

"She wasn't here just now," I told him.

"I know—"

"And if you listen to that thing again, you're going to get yourself killed then you'll *really* have no hope of seeing your kid. Now I'm cold out here—let's go back."

Before they could point out that I should probably take my own advice next time I thought of heading off alone into the woods, I returned to the vehicle. This time I took the backseat, while the guys took the front. Thankfully, Rune drove.

~*~

None of us spoke for the duration of the trip. When we reached the hotel at last, it was almost eight o'clock and the rain had nearly ceased. Jupiter helped me carry in my luggage, and Jace met us in the lobby.

"Glad you're okay," he said with a smile when he saw me. "You had us pretty worried."

"I went out for coffee and got lost," I joked. "And after a night of frolicking in the mud, I'd very much like to take a shower now." I passed him and started up the stairs.

"Afterward, I'd like you to come back down, as you and I have some things to discuss," Rune called after me.

I spun on my heel to face him at the foot of the stairs. My face flushed with embarrassment at his sudden singling me out. He couldn't have said that while we were alone in the car? "No, I think we pretty much said everything already."

"What the hell!" Jupiter shouted. "He saved your life this morning and you should damn well thank him!"

"Actually, Mr. Reckless Driver, the only time I was in physical danger this morning was when *you* took off like a maniac and nearly put both cars in the ditch!"

"That never would have happened if—"

"Jupiter," Rune cut in. A thought must have passed between them, because Jupiter threw his hands up abruptly and stormed off towards his room.

"He's right," I said to Rune. I swallowed my remaining pride to concede this one point. "Thanks for coming for me—you and Jupiter both—and thanks," I unzipped the jacket and tossed it to him, "for your coat." I wrapped my arms around my torso to keep from shivering. "Now that's all I think we have to discuss."

I began my trek up the stairs again. The truth was, I still didn't trust him. I should—I knew that much—but I just couldn't. Though all I had were some implications made by a creature bent on destroying us, it had planted enough doubt in my head to leave me wary of him. In all honesty, I didn't know him well. How could I be certain that this Rune I trusted was his true self? How did I know that of any of the people I was with? I didn't. It was that simple. I needed some time to think...and shower, 'cause all that mud was seriously gross.

My room upstairs was empty, which was nice because then I didn't have to fend off any questions as to why I was soaking wet and covered in mud, had scratches across my face, and was topless but for a bra.

I stood under the shower of hot water for at least a half hour. The nice thing about the hotel was apparently the hot water never ran out. When at last I was satisfied I was clean and some of the muscles aches from lying on the ground had dulled, I turned off the water then stepped out of the shower and into the bathroom. As I headed to the main room to get a fresh set of clothes, I remembered all the luggage was left in the lobby. Thank God for fluffy, white

terrycloth robes, complimentary of the hotel. My hair towel dried and the rest of me wrapped in an oversized robe, I opened the door...

And froze.

A boy of seven or so stood across the room from me, stark naked but for cuts and purple bruises all over his body.

I might have spoken if I'd had the slightest clue of what to say. There was something eerily familiar about his shaggy, sandy hair, and the eyes that peeked out at me from behind his locks. The marks on his body suggested he'd been through some sort of abuse, but as my logic prevailed—and I realized there was no sane way for a naked kid to be in my room—I took a step backward instead of helping him.

"You can go downstairs," he said, "but it'll be too late."

"Too late for what?"

"She's seen him, seen me. She knows. Don't be sad, 'cause she's not scared anymore, and she doesn't blame herself or me now. It was him, not 'cause of us. I never understood 'til after."

"Who are you talking about?"

He rolled his eyes. "You know. You saw him."

My memory flashed an image of the one person I didn't recognize in the group of doubles I saw last night; the forty-ish man with a hard jaw and cold eyes...

Reading my mind, the boy nodded. "You're lucky you didn't know him. She did and now she can't forget."

My vision blurred. I grabbed the doorframe to steady myself as I felt my body go weak. I had an abrupt sense of displacement and as my sight cleared, I looked around a room that wasn't my own. It was a child's bedroom—a girl's, no doubt. A single bed to the side had a unicorn comforter atop it, and there were a few dolls on the floor. It didn't hold the joy a child's room should, however. There was heaviness to the air, thick with fear and pain...

In the corner of the room, a little girl of five sat on a beanbag chair, a picture book open in her lap. Across the floor, not far from her, was the boy I had seen in my hotel room—clothed this time—stretched out on his stomach, reading a comic book.

The heads of both the children shot up at the sound of a car in the driveway outside.

...wish I could hide... The girl's eyes glanced under her bed. *...no, he'll know...scared...wish I didn't have to...*

Her fear overwhelmed me. I heard a man's footsteps in the hallway, heavy boots thumping on the hardwood floor. *Just let me get out of here*, I thought. My knuckles were white and my hands shook.

The little girl looked to me, as if she saw me standing there. Her brother didn't seem to notice, for his gaze was locked on the closed bedroom door.

Can you help me? I heard her voice in my head.

No, no, I need to get out of here! Wait, was that her thought or mine...?

The doorknob slowly turned.

...I don't want to...not today...I told Mark it isn't right...why does he do it...?

I closed my eyes as the door creaked open. *This isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't real...*

"This isn't real," I said aloud. My eyes opened and I found myself back in my hotel room, the boy still standing there looking at me.

"I don't know what you're trying to do to me, but stop it!" I said. "It's not real and I'm not falling for it again!"

"It's better this way, I think," he said softly. "You should probably say 'bye to her though." His form faded into the background until he disappeared all together.

Okay, spooky naked children able to warp the appearance of the room was too much. Lines were being crossed here by the shapeshifting thing, and I'd had enough of it myself. Something needed to be done...just as soon as I got some clothes on.

I returned to the lobby and found my things still sitting next to the staircase. I was about to pick them up when I noticed a figure at the end of the far corridor of rooms where the others were staying.

I considered taking my bag and going upstairs, but instead found myself walking toward the hall. Though her back was to me, I recognized the shoulder-length blonde hair, so I called out.

"Hey," I said. "You've been hanging out here with the others?"

As I drew closer, Martie turned around to face me. Tears streamed down her cheeks...and yet she smiled.

"I understand it now," she said, delighted and almost laughing.

You should probably say 'bye to her... The boy's words echoed in my mind again and I realized why he looked so familiar; I had spent two days with his sister. I glanced to the object clutched in her right hand...

Oh God.

"Martie, you need to put that down." I spoke as calmly as I could manage, given the fact she was standing there with a gun and looking out of her mind. I paced toward her with care, but she didn't seem the least bit bothered by my presence. Her grin was wide and peaceful. Despite her tears—and the revolver she held—she looked happy.

"Just put it down and we can talk about this, okay?" I said, my voice falling to a whisper. I neared the rooms occupied by the others. "I'm going to call Rune now and I want you to tell him what's going on."

"But I get it now, Indigo! I get what's happening."

I pounded on the door nearest to me.

"What?" Jupiter growled from within.

"Get Rune and get the fuck out here now!" Though I'd been trying not to shout, my volume escalated with fear. When I saw Rune's door open, I raced to Jace and Kitty's room to call them out as well.

"What the hell...?" Jupiter said from behind me. Everyone piled into the hallway and froze at the sight of Martie.

"You don't want to do this," Rune said in that über-calm voice of his as he stepped beside me.

"I saw your brother," I told her. "I know what happened—"

She shook her head and I saw her smile falter for just a second. "No, you don't...but I can show you."

All at once, images rocked my mind, and I felt physically ill deep in the pit of my stomach. But it wasn't just the visual memories of years of perverse sexual acts she and her brother were made to play out for an audience of one—their stepfather—that I received from her. The terror, guilt and shame I caught a glimpse of in her childhood bedroom minutes earlier paled in comparison to what I suddenly felt.

"Please, don't do this," I said, now crying as well.

"It's okay!" she insisted. "It's so clear. I get it! But...but I can't do it. Maybe next time, but not now. I'm not strong enough."

"Yes, you are! You are so strong, if you just—"

"Listen to us," Rune said at the same time. "We can take care of this together—"

"I'll miss you guys," she whispered.

Then she raised the gun to her temple and fired.

Chapter Sixteen: Confessions

I stared, unable to do anything, as Martie crumpled to the floor not six feet away from me.

I don't know how long I stood there gaping at her, at the blood, at the hunks of flesh on the wall next to where she had been standing... And then I was no longer looking down at her, but closer to eyelevel as my legs gave out and I slumped to my knees. I covered my hand over my mouth, afraid at any moment the churning in my stomach would cause me to lose what little food I had left in there. My shoulders sagged forward as I started to sob. Why didn't I stop her? I should have been able to do something...

I felt a presence behind me, and I glanced up to see Jupiter. He was crying too, though fighting hard not to. He put a hand on my shoulder; I took it in my own and tugged him down so he was sitting with me. Enfolded in his arms, I gazed behind us to see Kitty, red-eyed and crying, so I gestured for her to join us. Soon the three of us were a tangled mess of arms and tears.

"Why did she...we could have helped her..." Jace whispered as he walked over to sit with us.

Rune was gone from the hallway, though no one seemed to notice but for me.

I put my arm around Jace and pulled him into our group hug.

A few minutes later I heard footsteps in the hallway, and the four of us separated and sat back. Rune stalked past us without so much as glancing in our direction, a pile of sheets in his arms. He stopped next to Martie and knelt down.

"What are you doing?" Jupiter asked before I could.

"I'm not leaving a dead body in the middle of the hallway," he replied. Methodically, he pulled a pillowcase from the pile of bedding, raised Martie's head, and slipped the sham over her face. The white cotton darkened with huge crimson spots from the blood still running from her head.

The rest of us just stared, mouths wide open in a mixture of shock and horror at his sudden calmness and ease at handling the still-warm corpse of our friend. Rune unfolded a sheet and spread it out on the floor.

"Jupiter, give me a hand," he said without looking at any of us.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Jupe whispered.

Rune glanced to him. "Do I look like I'm kidding you?"

"What the hell are you doing, man?! Martie just..." Jupiter wiped a few angry tears from his eyes. "She just died and you want me to help you clean up!"

"Yes. Now get over here and take the feet."

Jupiter stood, his face red and his chest rising and falling heavily with his sudden anger. "Fuck you." He stormed into one of the rooms and slammed the door behind him.

I looked to Kitty. *Don't leave him alone.*

She nodded and went after him without a word.

"Jace," Rune said, undisturbed by Jupiter's sudden departure. "Help me move it onto the sheet."

Jace rose. I did too, but I grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"What the hell is your problem?" I shouted at Rune.

"She dead," Rune said, his voice emotionless. "We can't change that."

"So the solution is, just clean up and pretend she didn't exist?"

"Exactly what do you want from me?"

"Just...just stop being like this—"

"Like what?"

"Like so goddamn cold! It's *Martie*! Doesn't that bother you?"

"Breanna died and none of you gave a damn. All you wanted was for me to take care of things. Now I'm expected to sit around and cry with you?"

"This is different?"

"Why—because it's suddenly someone you care about?"

"Because she's one of us!" I cried.

"She was until she put a gun to her head," he said, with a level of finality to his tone, effectively ending the conversation. "Now it's time to move on."

Jace started towards Rune again.

"Jace, if he wants to just make her disappear, let him do it himself!" I said.

Jace put up a hand to silence me. His expression was pained, but he shook his head. "It's all right, Indigo. Maybe you should go be with Jupiter and Kitty."

Maybe I should, I thought. But the truth was, I'd rather be alone. Guilt overwhelmed me; what if I had just stayed there last night? What if I hadn't left her by herself? My stupidity cost Martie her life...and that was my burden, mine to deal with...alone.

I cast one last disgusted look over my shoulder at Rune covering our friend up with a bed sheet. He briefly met my eyes, and I shook my head.

"I don't even know who you are," I whispered.

He went back to work and I fled for the staircase.

~*~

I had no idea what time it was. A clock sat on the nightstand next to the bed where I lay, but I hadn't bothered to check it. Rather than reflect the mood of everyone in the hotel, the rain had stopped altogether and the weather was beautiful. Only when the sun was high in the sky and shining through the room's windows did I get up, and it was simply to close the dark burgundy curtains. I didn't want to see the light anymore.

I returned to my resting spot, once again curling up on my side with my knees pulled to my chest and buried beneath my huge terrycloth robe. I had been crying off and on the entire time I'd been upstairs, the full weight of everything hitting me at once. Two people were dead. My sister had been missing for over three days. None of us was any closer to figuring out what was going on.

Maybe the truth was that we couldn't survive. This thing, whatever it was that wanted us dead, would take us out one by one, and there was absolutely nothing we could do to stop it. In a way, that was almost comforting. Knowing that we *couldn't* succeed made accepting the fact that we were losing much easier. Martie found death to be a better option than facing the personal nightmares brought on by the creature that put us here, and maybe the rest of us would too, when our time came...

...Which I suspected would be soon.

I heard a knock on the door, but I didn't get up. I didn't need to look to see who it was, so I instead sent the message, *come in*.

Moments later the door opened. Gentle footfalls on the carpet followed. The mattress sunk down as someone sat on the edge of the bed not far from my feet.

"I'm sorry about Martie," Rune said quietly.

The mention of her name brought a fresh batch of tears, but I blinked them back and sat up. I swung my legs over the mattress edge to sit next to him.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you," I replied with a snuffle. "Repeatedly."

He put his hand over mine and squeezed it softly, still not looking at me. "Whatever happened to us?"

"You got a girlfriend and I'm a psychotic bitch."

He gave me a sad, half smile. His hair was damp from a recent shower, and he'd changed into a t-shirt and loose-fitting dark blue flannel pyjama bottoms. I guessed that transporting Martie got a little messy, but immediately pushed any visual of *that* out of my mind.

"It's my fault," I began.

"No, it's not."

"But it is. I should've...I should've known. If I had just gotten downstairs sooner, if I hadn't been in the shower so long, or—"

"She had already made up her mind by then."

"But last night, if I'd just stayed...but I was so mad that you asked her to keep an eye on me, that I—"

"It's not your fault." He sighed with something that I suspected was frustration, and I looked over at him. He was blocking me from his thoughts, but I caught the sudden sense of guilt—an emotion I was *very* familiar with. He cast his eyes down and shook his head. "I knew something was wrong with her. Jupiter...he noticed some things the other night that he thought were odd."

"Was that before or after the crazy monkey love?"

"You heard about that?"

"Yeah, Martie told us yesterday. What did Juve say?"

"Just that she was acting weird and a little distant. He couldn't figure out what it was, but she just seemed...sad."

"She was pretty badly sexually abused as a kid."

Rune nodded. "Jace was just doing a little digging through archived newspapers online. He's pretty sure he found mentions of her case. Her stepfather was eventually arrested and charged when she was twelve, but I guess the damage was done."

"Her brother committed suicide a few years ago too. I didn't think it was my place to ask her why...but maybe if I had..."

There was a stretch of silence, in which I suspected he had something to say, but was putting whatever it was into words.

"What is it?" I asked.

He didn't reply.

"I know there's something." I tapped my forehead and gave him a small smile. "Telepathic, remember?"

"I asked her to keep an eye on you because I didn't want *her* to be left alone," he confessed at last.

"Why didn't you just tell me—oh, right, Eve the Psychotic Bitch."

"I just thought if she believed she was doing me a favour, she'd stay with you, and then you'd both be all right."

"I was already fine," I began, the volume in my voice heightening, but then I realized he now knew that wasn't one hundred percent true. "Except for when I occasionally suffer the wounds of Christ."

"Indigo..."

I sighed. God, I didn't want to tell him...but my lips and larynx obviously didn't know that, as they went ahead and worked without my permission.

"Everything that could go wrong had," I said, recalling the night almost six months ago when I nearly ended it—the night Dez came to live with me. "Mal didn't want me, my own mom decided I was the cause of all her problems...I didn't have anyone."

"You could have had me."

My eyes teared at those simple words, but I shook my head, knowing his statement wasn't true.

"Right." I gave a chuckle that could be described as a bitter one. "I could have had the guy who lives in another country, with another life, *and*, as it turns out, another girlfriend."

"Not then," he replied. "You had been gone for quite awhile before Bre. Even then, I would have been there, or done whatever you needed me to do, if you had just told me."

"I just...there was just stuff going on. I've never been like the rest of you—I've never been a part of what you guys have..." I sighed. "Which is just plain sad that even with a bunch of fellow telepaths, I don't fit in. But I couldn't deal with it any longer. I ended up on my own, completely alone, and I didn't have anyone. I didn't have any reason to be here...and I didn't want to be anymore."

For a moment, I felt a twinge of hopelessness again from when I collapsed on my bedroom floor. In my hand was a razor from the bathroom. Piece by piece, I took the thing apart until I had the element I desired...

"Then Dez...she saved my life. The moment I heard her voice, it was like a light turned on. She couldn't take living with Mom anymore and decided to come stay with me. When she saw what I was doing, she just hugged me. I promised I'd take care of her, that I wouldn't let anything happen to her..."

The one thing that mattered to me here, I thought. The person I swore I'd protect...

"And I lost her," I whispered.

I felt his arm go around my shoulders. I sank against him as I began to cry.

We'll find her, he thought.

No, we won't, I responded, certain more than ever that even if she was alive, I wouldn't survive long enough to locate her.

His other arm went around me and he pulled me into a tight embrace. "We'll find her," he promised aloud this time, and swept his hand back through my hair. I felt a kiss on the top of my head, then another, then a third.

"I swear to you we'll find her," he whispered into my hair.

I lifted my face to his and his mouth came down on mine. All thought and reason was banished from my brain as I kissed him back, twisting in his embrace to face him completely. The kiss deepened, became rushed—the dam between us breaking at last.

All at once, he let go of me and turned away, resting his elbows on his knees and his forehead in his hands.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Um, of all the things to be sorry for, kissing me doesn't make the cut," I replied.

He shook his head. "I can't...I can't be around you and think clearly."

"Saying that, however, makes the top ten list." He didn't smile, so I guessed it wasn't the time for making jokes.

"Everything I've tried to do to help has made things worse," he said. "I have all these people that keep looking at me to do something about all this, and I have no idea."

"They expect it because you've been their leader."

"But I didn't ask for this—"

"But you gathered us together—"

"Because I thought maybe we could come up with something as a group. Instead, everyone just expects me to immediately know how to solve our problems, and then you—" His stop was so abrupt that I knew whatever he was about to say was something that would piss me off.

"I what?" I demanded.

He didn't reply.

"C'mon, what have I done to ruin our lives now?"

"I didn't say—"

"No, but you sure as hell implied it. Now what about me?"

"You start worrying about your sister and—"

"Oh, I'm so very sorry my concern for her is causing such a problem—"

"You start worrying about her, and I can't think of anything else," he cut in, silencing me. "In my head, I know I'm supposed to be looking out for the rest of them...but you're the only one I'm thinking about."

"But you didn't even bother waking me up yesterday morning," I began. "Then last night you didn't want to look...oh." It dawned on me then. He wasn't trying to keep me from looking for her; he was trying to distance himself from me—to put the group before any one single person.

"I was just trying to remain objective," he said, confirming my suspicions. "Trying to keep myself out of this...which clearly hasn't been working so far. I know I naturally treat you differently than everyone else—they notice it too—and I just wanted to do what seemed fair. What I thought a friend who *wasn't* in love with you would do."

Oh God, I was hearing things. That's it—I truly was crazy. I had to be. There was no way he said—

You're not hearing things, he thought.

My expression softened. "You're in love with me?"

A flicker of his cobalt blue eyes to me, then back to the floor again. "Of course I am."

I opened my mouth to say something of my surprise, but all I managed were a few unintelligible sounds.

"You and I hadn't talked much in the past several months," he said. "It was like you dropped off the planet. And then you had Malcolm—or so I thought—and then there was Bre."

"But the other night, you said you were in love with Breanna—"

"I loved her," Rune said, nodding. He looked at me then. "But not like I love you." He held my gaze for a few beats longer, then went back to staring off in space, and raked his hands back through his hair. "Now she's dead because of me—because I didn't make her stay behind when I knew I should have. I could have encouraged her to go back when she didn't want to be here anymore. I could have been honest with her about you."

"You're still angelic compared to me," I said. "I still fell for you while I was with Mal, then I stopped talking to you without telling you what was going on, then I proceeded to stay with him—"

"Malcolm's still alive."

"But Bre made her choice."

"No. I was responsible for her safety. Suffice to say, I'm about the worst person in the world...I wasn't fair to her, I haven't been fair to you..."

I took his face in my hands and turned him to me, then leaned in and kissed him. He didn't fight me like I thought he might, and instead buried one hand in my hair and folded the other around my waist. Thoughts shot between us, consisting of doubts, fears, and the standard, "should we or shouldn't we?" but we knew the reality now. We probably didn't have time anymore to be "normal" about our situation. We didn't have the luxury to spend a year mourning lost loved ones, or waiting for a socially acceptable time to be together. Little had changed from two nights ago when we sat on the car, nearly kissing; it still wasn't our moment.

But I knew all we would ever really have is now.

The slight tug of his hand on my waist pulled me toward him. I slid onto his lap and his arms wrapped over my back, holding me against him. Emotions overwhelmed me then—at first I thought they were all mine, but then I found the constant barrier in his mind was gone. I felt what he felt...

I slipped his t-shirt over his head and cast it aside, then ran my hands along his chest and shoulders, then back. Each touch of skin sent more of his thoughts to me, and mine to him, and soon my mind was encased in a dream-like haze.

He untied the sash of robe with care, then pulled back to slide his gaze over me as he swept the fabric apart. Eager lips returned to my own, but they didn't linger long; instead he tenderly kissed my cheek, my throat, my bared shoulder. His arms brought more comfort in the face of so much tragedy and fear, that I was having trouble remembering why we hadn't been doing this for the past three days.

Already light-headed, my vision took on a hazy quality and I could no longer identify where my flesh ended and his began...and I didn't care. His fingertips brushed over my hypersensitive skin. I yanked open the drawstring of his pants. My body ached—cried out—with the need to feel him, to clutch him, to help drive us both to release. I sank down on him slowly, taking my time to experience every second, every inch.

For his every thrust, I matched him, rocking my hips downward and bracing my knees on the bed on either side of him. Picking up the pace so we resembled something near frenzied, we lost all vestiges of thought. Long suppressed love and lust collided, and we were all flesh and souls, merging at last.

Our minds completely unfettered now, we felt the rise of climax together and quivered with one another's final release.

His forehead fell to my shoulder. "I love you Eve," he said softly. "I always have."

I slid my hands through his hair, brushing back the locks from his face, and kissed his temple. "I love you too," I whispered back. "Colin."

He held me close against him, and I felt the beat of his heart against my chest begin to slow from its elevated rate.

"We're all going to die, aren't we?" I said.

"No."

"Yeah, we are. There's gotta be a rule somewhere that says when you and me get together, we perish for sure." *He'd only tell me these things if he really thought we weren't going to make it...*

"We'll get your sister, we'll find a way out of here, and we'll be okay."

I didn't believe him, but I wasn't exactly in the mood to argue. Hot sex will totally ruin a girl's resolve that way. He inched us back so we lay down on the bed, me atop him, my bathrobe falling over us both.

Consciousness was fading fast and my eyelids were heavy. "You're not going to disappear, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Last night...I opened a door and suddenly I was at my mom's house."

I sensed him biting back a comment about how I should have told him immediately. Instead, he held me tighter and listened.

"I managed to get back," I continued. "But I don't want to wake up and be there again, without the rest of you."

"I'll be here," he promised.

"You swear you won't leave me alone?"

"I'll never leave you alone, Eve."

Comforted by the thought that he'd be there when I awoke, I let myself drift to sleep.

"You need to wake up now, Evie..." Dez's voice startled me awake.

I tried to sit up, but the arms wrapped around my back held me against the person I rested atop. My eyes flew open and I recognized my hotel room in the dim light. I tilted my head up to see Rune looking down at me. He swept a few loose strands of hair back from my forehead. I figured he would have told me if Dez was in the room with us, so I accepted her voice had just been a part of a dream.

"You're still here," I said.

"I told you I would be." The corners of his lips turned upward in a smile, but it was more the sad, thoughtful kind than a joyous one; a smile that masked worry.

I shifted around. "Am I crushing you?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Cause I feel like I'm crushing you."

"You're considerably smaller than me—trust me, you're not crushing me."

"Okay." I laid back down. "You're not Evil-Rune, are you?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm not."

"How about Evil-Colin? Or are they one in the same?"

"I'm me."

"Good. I'm not Evil-Eve either, in case you were wondering."

He tightened his embrace. I guess he hadn't been wondering.

"Did you sleep any?" I asked.

"No."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"About an hour."

I tried to sit up again to stare eyelevel with him. "You're sure I'm not crushing you?"

In answer, he took my face in his palms and pulled me into a kiss. Now that was something I could get used to, and I might have if there hadn't been a sudden knock at the door. We separated, and I tied my robe back up while he slipped on his t-shirt and readjusted his pants. Though on the disheveled side, we were both basically clothed, so we went for the door.

Jupiter stood out in the hallway, his arms crossed at his chest, and still looking rather unimpressed with Rune.

"Jace wants to talk to you guys," he said, and started back toward the stairs.

"What is it?" Rune asked as he and I followed.

Jupiter glanced back at us. "He figured out where we are."

Chapter Seventeen: Found

"What do you mean?" I asked as Rune and I dashed after Jupiter.

"I mean he found out where we are and he wants to talk to you two," Jupe replied.

"Well, where are we then?"

"I'll let him tell you."

I don't think we possibly could have gotten down those stairs fast enough, at least not for my liking. I was tripping over my own feet to get there, while Rune maintained a calm, but brisk pace.

Jace and Kitty awaited us in their room, seated at the table where a map was spread out next to his laptop.

"What have you got?" Rune asked.

"You're not going to believe this," Jace said. "I'm not sure I do." He pointed to a dot on the map.

Rune picked up the map and looked it over. I stood on my tiptoes and leaned over his arm, but didn't have the slightest clue what I looked at.

"I don't get it," I said. "No, wait...that's my town over there, right?"

"And we're here." Rune pointed to another dot a few inches from my town.

"That does seem pretty far, I know, but—"

"You don't get it," Jace said. "We ended up exactly where we were going."

"Mexico?"

"Archangel's place," Rune replied quietly.

"Something brought us across the province to his little town? Oh my god, it is aliens, isn't it?"

"You're sure about this?" Rune asked.

Jace turned back to his computer and we all crowded around him. "I've been double checking for the past twenty minutes. I've got it here on MapQuest, and compared that with what Kitty and I made yesterday. This is it."

"Where does he live then?" I asked.

"An apartment building on Maple Court, over here." Jace pointed to a spot on the laptop screen. Rune moved over so I had a better look.

"Jesus, that's like six blocks from here!" I said. "And around the corner from that library...I passed that building at least twice the other day. You guys took that side of town yesterday—did anyone actually check the apartment out?"

Jace shook his head. "The doors were locked."

"What if Dez is there?" I exclaimed. "She could be! I mean, that makes sense, right?" The others looked fairly doubtful, so I turned to Rune. "We need to go there right now! This is it, it's gotta be. She's there, I know it." He seemed just as skeptical as the others, which immediately

set me on edge. *He* was the one who had just promised me we'd find her, and now he was being all grouchy like before? What the hell? "Don't you dare try to stop me; I'm going."

"I'm not going to stop you," he said. I saw a flicker of movement in his arm, as if he was about to reach for me, but decided against it. This matter of being with me was all fine and dandy when we were alone, but he was trying to seem more impartial now. I decided to meet him halfway and took a few steps toward him.

With some hesitation, he at last reached out and put a reassuring hand on my shoulder, then drew me closer to him. "But we're *all* going—prepared and with a plan."

"What's the plan? Beyond going to get her *right now*?"

"We stay together and get armed. I don't know what we'll find, but we have to be careful." *I promised you we'd find her and we will*, he thought. I leaned against him, and he wrapped his arm around me. Here I was still expecting he'd immediately fall back into "Eve is a mere acquaintance" mode, but I realized that something truly *had* changed.

Dammit, I knew we were going to die.

"I can't believe you guys," Jupiter muttered. I glanced over my shoulder to see him rolling his eyes.

"Jupe," Jace began. I suspected whatever Jupe's sudden problem was, it was something they had been discussing before we entered the room.

"All this time he's been saying we need to stay calm and shit," Jupe said, his face growing red with anger. "Now he's ready to run off—"

"My sister could be hurt!" I spun to face him.

"Right, *your* sister. If she was in so much danger, why weren't we looking earlier?"

"Because we didn't know where to look—"

"Everyone knows what's been going on between the two of you, and you," Jupiter pointed at Rune, "if you cared half as much about Martie as you do Indigo, you would have done something to save her!"

"That's enough!" I cut in. "Don't you think he did everything he could—"

"No, I don't! And it's nice for you two that you can finally get over your shit, but what about us? We don't have time for this! And if he wasn't so goddamn selfish, Breanna would still be a live, Martie would still be alive, and so would your sister!"

Now that stung. I could suggest something had happened to Dez all I wanted—she was my sister after all—but I wasn't going to listen to someone else say it, and especially when he was being an asshole.

"You cannot blame him for—"

"Yes, I can!" Jupe interrupted me. "He let your sister tag along because he didn't want to tell you no, he let Breanna come with us when he knew he shouldn't have, and he didn't do a thing to help Martie—"

"Like you've been so helpful—" I stopped as I felt Rune's hand on my shoulder.

"He's right," Rune said. "And we both know you think so too—"

"No, that was just me being angry and irrational before—you *aren't* responsible for everything! And just because you two suddenly agree doesn't make either of you right."

"For once, don't argue with me," he said. "Not on this. Jupiter's right—"

"Um, hello? Did you forget who you're talking to? I said you guys are wrong, and I'm always right, so shut up already."

"And what could have changed your mind, Indigo?" Jupiter glared at me. I think all of us knew he was referring to our recent frenzied lovemaking session, though he hardly seemed one to talk, given he and Martie the other night. My face shaded red, nonetheless.

"Jupiter," Rune warned, but Jupe ignored him and continued ranting at me.

"You're pretty quick to go along with whatever he wants after—"

"Stop it!" Kitty screamed.

We all looked over to her, each one of us momentarily bewildered at her sudden outburst.

"Rune has done nothing but look out for us!" she directed to Jupiter. "If it weren't for him, we'd probably be alone and dead right now so just shut up and let him and Indigo be!"

I was still too shocked to speak, but Jupiter regained himself.

"But Martie—" he began, some of the anger gone from his voice.

"Martie made a decision." Kitty's eyes teared up as she spoke. "Instead of trusting us to help her, she chose to leave. And Rune misses her just as much as you and the rest of us do."

"But why didn't he do anything? He knew and—"

"Why didn't you?" she challenged. "Why did you just tell him you thought something was wrong then expect him to take care of it? Why didn't any of us do something? Stop blaming everyone else because you feel guilty, and just leave them alone!"

"But—"

"No! This isn't getting us anywhere! If you, or anyone else, aren't going to say something helpful, then just shut the hell up!"

Jupiter stared in stunned silence for a few moments then bowed his head and nodded. Kitty looked around to find each of us watching her. The sudden fire in her dwindled and she bit her lip as she gazed down at the floor, embarrassed.

"We were coming up with a plan?" Jace prompted when it seemed no one else would.

"We go and get Dez back." I met Rune's pointed gaze. "Um...after arming ourselves?"

"What do we have in terms of weapons?" Rune asked.

"I still have a couple of hunting knives, I think," I said.

"I've got the gun..." He looked to Juve. "Jupiter? Anything?"

"The shovel," Jupiter replied. "I picked that up when we passed the library again."

"We go as a group then," Rune said. "No one goes anywhere alone anymore."

I started for the door. "Let me run upstairs and get changed—"

"Wait, and we'll go with you," he said.

"I'll be like two minutes—"

"Just wait until I get changed and we'll all go."

"That'll take too long."

"I'll go with her," Kitty said as she followed me to the door. "You guys get ready and wait for us in the lobby."

Eve.

I heard my name telepathically called, and I glanced back to see Rune looking at me.

Be careful, he thought.

Always.

"Wow, go you," I said aloud to Kitty when we were outside the room.

"You didn't think I was too mean or anything?"

"No, you completely kicked ass. We should probably be told to shut up more often."

"I know how he's feeling... But he shouldn't carry on like that. I think Martie was right—Rune's loved you, all this time. With Bre dying and your sister disappearing, you two probably need one another."

I was mildly uncomfortable with everyone around me knowing all these things—in some cases before I knew them myself—but I wasn't in the mood to bitch about it. That could come *after* I had Dez back.

We reached the bags at the bottom of the stairs that belonged to Dez and me. Kitty took one in each hand while I grabbed the third.

"These are all yours?" she asked.

"One you've got is. The others are my sister's."

"Either one of you packs light or the other packs very heavy," she said with a smirk as we ascended the stairs.

"A bit of both. I cram everything I can into a single bag, while ten bucks says that if we open up hers, we'll find five nightgowns, a semi-formal dress, and a t-shirt or two."

"Impractical packer?"

"To say the least. She probably just picked out some outfits that she liked rather than clothing she might wear."

"Well, that's a teenager for you. Indigo..." She didn't say anything for the rest of the way upstairs and into the hallway as she put her thoughts into words. "What do you think this means?"

"This?" I opened the door to my room and we set the bags down. I wasted no time rifling through my luggage until I found a pair of jeans, a tank top, and the all-important underclothes.

"Where we are, I mean."

"That this is where Archangel is?"

"Yeah."

I shrugged as I slipped around the corner into the bathroom to change. "It's weird, yeah, but so is everything else we've been through."

"I know, but...but I'm not even sure we should be going over there, to his apartment."

"Why not?" Fully dressed now, I slipped on a mid-thigh length dark cardigan and tied the sash around my waist, then slipped on my still-damp running shoes. I gave an involuntary shudder; I hated wet sneakers. Water squished around, soaking my fresh socks, and the shoes were old so they also made a weird squeaking sound whenever I walked. I definitely wouldn't be sneaking up on someone anytime soon.

"But look at what's happened since we got here," she continued. I forgot about my wet feet as I realized we did have more important things to worry about. "And if this is where Archangel is from...he might be the one behind it."

Honestly, that thought had never crossed my mind, and the idea sent a fresh batch of chills through me. Of course, it could just be that I was coming down with tuberculosis after cavorting in the rain the night before.

"Archangel wouldn't be...no, he couldn't..."

"I didn't talk to him much so I don't know him very well, but if you think I'm wrong..."

The truth was that I didn't know him either. Archangel was more a friend of Rune and Lisa's. "I didn't talk to him a whole lot myself," I said. "But we would have noticed something about him before this, wouldn't we? Like if he was whacko or something? That's kind of hard to slip past people like us."

"I think it's possible to keep things hidden, even from each other. We didn't know those things about Martie, or even Jupiter."

And even Rune didn't know a lot of things about me, I thought. Sure, I wasn't hiding the fact that I was secretly über-evil or anything, but there were a lot of things about me he didn't know until these past few days. Did any of us really know one another all that well? Could we trust Archangel?

Hell, could we trust anyone?"

"We have to try this," I said at last. "Everything this...this 'thing' has been doing has centred around splitting us apart. I think that means we're more powerful—or at least more of a threat to it—when we're together."

Kitty opened her mouth to speak, but another person's voice interrupted her. "Is that so?"

We spun around to see a familiar figure standing in the open doorway.

"Miss me?" Evil-Bre asked.

"Not really," I replied.

"That's too bad," she said. "because I really missed talking to you, Eve."

"I'm sure you did. Now if you don't mind, we have to be on our way."

"Oooh, where are you off to?" she asked, as if she didn't already know.

I ignored her and looked to Kitty. "Let's go." I started for the door, and with a bit of hesitation, Kitty followed.

Evil-Bre would not give in so easily though, and she stretched her arms out in the doorway to block our path. "Come on, you can tell me, you know."

"Look, this isn't even scary anymore," I said. "I've seen you how many times now? You'll have to put more effort in now if you're trying to wig me out."

"Oh, I understand," she said suddenly, the corners of her lips turning upward in a grin. "You think you've won him now, don't you? Enjoyed yourself earlier, I take it?"

"Thoroughly. And your mind fuck won't work on me anymore, so get the hell out of my way." I pushed past Evil-Bre and grabbed Kitty's arm to pull her along with me.

"It's too bad about your friend," Evil-Bre said, only it wasn't Breanna's voice anymore. Kitty halted mid-step and turned at the familiar sound.

"Kitty, come on," I said, but she didn't move. Instead, she stared straight at Evil-Martie, unable to look away.

"Yeah Kitty," Evil-Martie said. "Go back downstairs. Say hello to Jupiter. You'll do that for me, right?"

"It's not her, now let's go." Try as I may, however, I couldn't budge Kitty from that spot.

"I'm sure he misses me," Martie continued, pleased with the captive audience she had found in Kitty. I sighed with impatience and slouched against the wall. We were going to be here awhile.

"You aren't Martie," Kitty whispered.

Duh, that's what I said, I thought as I bit my tongue.

"You really think that would make a difference to him?" Martie challenged. "If I waited for him to leave the group and then cornered him?"

"We're sticking together and you can't hurt us, so leave him alone." There was less conviction in Kitty's voice than she probably intended, and Evil-Martie fed off her doubt like it was candy.

"I could go downstairs right now and he would go wherever I told him to. You know it."

"No he wouldn't—"

"He's weak," Martie cut in. Her gaze shifted to me for a moment, then back to Kitty again. "You all are. And when I decide I'm done with you, you'll die just like the others. All of you—"

"Blah blah blah," I interrupted. "You know, if nagging a bunch of people to death is all you have in terms of entertainment around here, you should probably get out more. At least invest in digital cable. Maybe buy a few Whedon shows on DVD."

"I don't know," Martie said. "Watching Rune watch you die would be quite entertaining. I should probably get some popcorn and a good seat for the event."

"Whatever." I turned to Kitty. "Can we go now?"

She nodded and we left the room.

"You can't escape this," Martie called after us. Kitty and I continued down the hallway, and though I didn't pause when the doppelganger spoke, my step slowed just a bit. "Martie knew it. The others suspect it. And pretty soon you're all going to have to choose your own path."

"Notice us walking away now?" I threw over my shoulder. "*That's* the path we're choosing—the one away from you."

"Have a fun field trip, girls."

"New rule," I said to Kitty as we raced downstairs. "No more engaging it in conversation."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I've had how many talks with it now? But nothing useful ever comes from it, so it's probably best not to acknowledge it at all."

"It's just...she...'it' talked about Jupe a lot. You don't think it might go after him next, do you?"

"I think if it was it wouldn't tell us." Rune, Jace, and Jupiter were standing near the front doors in the lobby. I didn't want to say anything further around them, so I sent Kitty a few quick thoughts.

They don't need to know what just happened, I told her.

But...

We stick together at all times and we'll be fine. I don't think they need to worry anymore than they already are.

She nodded.

And just in case it was right about Jupiter, I thought to myself, *he doesn't need to know we were just talking to Martie.*

"You're both ready to go?" Rune asked when Kitty and I reached the rest of the group.

"Yep," I said. "Now let's pay Archangel that visit."

~*~

Standing outside the apartment building where Archangel lived was pretty surreal. Like Salvador Dali surreal. Perhaps not to the degree of Napoleon's Nose, but certainly Persistence of Memory worthy—I wouldn't have batted an eyelash if melting clocks suddenly appeared.

Here was just an ordinary building, and yet within, there could be the key to everything.

We tried the door. It was locked. I did a quick survey, but no one knew how to pick a lock. Well, Kitty understood the mechanics of a lock, but doubted that even if she had the tools, she could actually pick one. The doors were glass, however, so a few swings of the shovel and lots of broken glass later we had entry into the building. Yes, it was breaking and entering, though after all the stealing, grand theft auto, and vandalism we had already done in the past few days—not to mention squatting in a hotel—it wasn't that big of a deal. I think there should be a legal clause that states when a town is abandoned and you're being hunted one by one by an evil shapeshifter, standard rules of law no longer apply.

"Hmm." I paused in the now-open doorway. "You know, there are buzzers here. We could have tried them first."

"Breaking the window was more fun," Jupe said.

"So which one does Archangel live in?" I asked, meaning the question for Jace. He didn't reply. "Jace?"

I looked around and did a quick head count; only three, plus me. Something didn't feel right...

"Jace?" I repeated, a bit louder this time.

Rune's face paled. "Jace!" He brushed past the rest of us to stand in the parking lot and I followed.

"Jace!" Rune hollered again. "Jason!"

We hunted around the parking lot, circled the building, and screamed until we were hoarse, but it was of little use.

Jace was gone.

Chapter Eighteen: Chaos

The next few minutes didn't exactly go well.

"Fuck!" Jupiter growled. "Where the hell could he have gone?"

"He was right behind us, wasn't he?" I said.

"When was the last time any of us saw him?" Rune asked.

"Not like you were paying attention," Jupe muttered.

"He got us to the building," I said with certainty. "I know that much."

"How about after we broke in?" Rune said. Suddenly all eyes were on me and I started to panic. I had no idea! Everything was so blurry...

"I...I don't know...definitely before..."

"Then he can't have gone far in only a few seconds," Rune said.

"Jace!" Jupiter yelled as he wandered through the parking lot. "Jace!"

Kitty met my eyes. "Indigo, what if...?"

I knew what she was thinking so I shook my head. "No. He was right with us, so that couldn't have been it."

"But she said—" Kitty froze as Rune and Jupiter turn their gazes toward her.

"What do you mean 'she?'" Jupiter asked. "Who were you talking to?"

Oh, shit.

Kitty sent a nervous glance my way. Of course, if one glance at her deer-in-the-headlights eyes hadn't done it, the fact that she looked immediately at me did; all the guys' attention turned my way.

"What happened?" Rune asked.

"Nothing," I said. "It's just while we were upstairs, we ran into Evil-Bre, but then we left. End of story. Let's go now."

"Why the hell wouldn't you tell us?" Jupe said.

"It didn't seem important."

"Martie just died and you didn't think to tell us you were talking with the thing that killed her?!"

"No, it's my fault," Kitty said. "I...I was the one who started talking to it—Indigo tried to get me to leave—"

"Don't bother," Jupiter cut in. "I know it was her—it's always her."

"Indigo..." I caught the disapproving tone to Rune's voice. Damn, I missed Martie. Even when she disagreed with me, she didn't let them gang up on me like this.

"Look, it was just trying to rattle us," I said. "No big deal."

"No big deal? Jace is gone!" Jupe took a few steps closer to me so I had to strain my neck to look up at him. "And if something happened to him, it's *your* fault!"

I was ready to smack him; I even pulled back my fist, readying it for a swing to his face. But Rune came between us and put his hand on Jupiter's shoulder in an attempt to guide him a few inches back.

Apparently backing the hell up didn't seem like a good idea in Jupe's eyes, however.

"Don't fucking touch me!" Jupiter shoved Rune out of his way and began pacing across the pavement.

"Just calm down and—"

"No, I don't need to calm down! And don't you dare start defending her—it's not just her life she's fucking with now! She's putting all of us in danger."

I thought for sure Kitty would jump in with more yelling—I think we all needed it at that point—but I found her sitting on the step in front of the building's broken door, with her head in her hands. For once I decided to bite my tongue, and instead chose to flop down next to Kitty and wait for the arguing to subside.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It's okay. I'm used to things being my fault."

"I tried to explain..."

"I know, but he doesn't want to hear it."

Rune still seemed determined to keep everyone sane. I hated to say his efforts were in vain, but really, they were. "Relax and we can sort this out—"

"What's there to sort out?" Jupiter said. "She knew something and she didn't tell us. Now Jace is dead too."

"We can't know that," I started.

"We don't know that it told her anything useful at all," Rune said. "Enough with the accusations, Jupiter."

"Fine." Jupe turned to me. "What did it say then, Indigo?"

"You can't escape me, blah blah blah, attempted mind games, yadda yadda. I'm going to get Jupiter, et cetera—"

"Wait, she threatened me? And you *didn't* think to tell me that?"

"It threatened me too, and Rune," I said. "And you don't see me freaking out about it. It's just trying to upset us, which, apparently, seems to have been a rather successful ploy, don't you think?"

"If we had known, Jace wouldn't have—"

"Wouldn't have randomly disappeared?" I finished for him. "I highly doubt that."

"Indigo, you should have told us," Rune said, his voice cold.

"Well, I didn't. So get over it."

"Get over it?" Jupe repeated. "He's gone! Because of you!"

"Jupiter, leave her alone!" Kitty shouted. He ignored her and continued ranting, so she buried her face in her palms again.

"Though she should have told us, Jace going missing isn't her fault," Rune said. "And you need to stop this. Right now."

"Then *you* need to stop taking her side and see that—"

"I see that she—once again—made a decision that perhaps wasn't the wisest, but these things happen regardless," Rune said. At first I was quite pleased that he was defending me, and then I realized what he said wasn't exactly a compliment.

"It *is* her fault and she's going to get us all killed! You both are!"

"Then leave."

Jupiter stopped his ranting and stared at Rune. Even Kitty looked up, her mouth wide open in bewilderment.

"Rune..." I stood and stepped toward him. "You can't be serious..."

"If he feels that way, he can go," Rune said. He met Jupiter's eyes. "Standing in an empty parking lot throwing accusations around isn't getting us anywhere. Now I'm heading up to Archangel's place." Without another word, he left us for the apartment building's foyer.

"Jace was the only one who knew where Archangel lives," I pointed out when I had caught up with him.

"Then we check every apartment."

"How the hell are we going to break down every door here?" Jupiter asked, apparently deciding to go with us, but still hell bent on being difficult.

"We don't need to." I nodded to a note taped above the mailboxes. It was a warning to keep the security door locked, and at the bottom was the superintendent's name and apartment number. "Super's always have the keys to all the apartments. We break in there and we can go anywhere."

"Then we head to the super's room," Rune said.

Luckily for us, the super's door was unlocked, so we strolled right in. Not-so-luckily for us, the keys took some time to locate. And here I was hoping they'd just be hanging on a special rack by the door, all with neat labels above them, one of which would say, "Archangel." No such luck. After some searching, Jupiter discovered a ring with about two-dozen keys stuffed in a drawer. It should come as no surprise that by this point, we didn't care about rifling through other people's things. Need I list all the crimes we'd committed once again? I think not.

Next came the rather tedious process of thoroughly searching every apartment. We decided to start on the first floor, then work our way up to the third. Or, rather, Rune decided, and there was really no arguing with him at this point. Jupiter tried, a few times actually. It didn't do any good, so he was left to just grumble behind us as we walked from apartment to apartment.

The rooms were all empty. None of us knew much about Archangel, so we couldn't determine if we might have been looking at his place or not...

Until we came to the apartment covered in blood.

"I'm going to take a shot in the dark and say this is it," I said.

"What happened here?" Kitty whispered.

"Archangel was killed?" I guessed.

Dried a dark, reddish brown, the blood was spattered across the walls, ceiling, floors, and furniture. Whoever it belonged to, I doubted they were still alive.

"This happened a few days ago," I said when it seemed no one else would be vocalizing any observations.

"When we got here, do you think?" Kitty said.

"Possibly, though I forgot my blood testing kit back at the hotel, so perhaps we'll never know."

"So what the hell do we do!" Jupiter shouted.

I noticed Rune was about to answer, but he stopped. Any reply he gave would likely be met with more shouting, and he knew we didn't need that right now. I wasn't well liked either, so that left Kitty. She took the hint.

"We look for clues?" she suggested.

Though I didn't feel remotely bad about going through a stranger's belongings, it was different at Archangel's place. Partially because of the blood, but also 'cause I sort of knew the guy. At least if he was dead, we could be sure he wasn't the one behind it all, though.

We didn't find a body. Rune didn't seem surprised, and he reminded us that several people ended up missing rather than dead. I think a body would have been more comforting—even a three-day-old one—but that could just be me.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Jupiter asked. "Just sit here and wait 'til it picks us off one by one?"

"Yes, Jupiter," I said. "That's *exactly* what we're supposed to do. Wait for it to kill us. I sure hope I'm next!"

"Me too," he muttered.

"If I am, I'm so haunting you."

"Should we check the rest of the apartments?" Kitty asked.

"Probably," I said. "It's not like there's anything else we can do."

I took the lead as we exited Archangel's place, while Rune brought up the rear. I suppose he wanted to make sure none of us disappeared again, though I couldn't say what precautions he was taking to ensure he stayed put as well.

As we neared the last apartment on the floor, I found myself lagging behind. Something about the bloody room was niggling me, but I couldn't place what was wrong...

A bang sounded back at Archangel's place. It was a sudden, heavy thump, as if a large dead weight had fallen.

"Did you guys hear that?" I asked as I rushed back to the room. Without waiting for any of them to reply, I flung open the door and stumbled into a room I recognized...a room that didn't belong to Archangel.

"Not again," I moaned. I was back at Mom's house.

Eviler-Mom was standing there glaring at me. I turned back to leave the room, but the apartment hallway was gone. Great.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Eve?" she asked.

"Honestly? I'm hoping I'm just clinically insane or something."

"I have given everything to you but you just don't care, do you?"

"You've given everything?" I repeated with a bit of exaggerated incredulousness. "Everything?! You're the most goddamn selfish person I know!"

"Dammit, I gave you everything I didn't have growing up—"

"Except a stable father who wasn't an abusive alcoholic!"

"Don't blame me because of what your father did!"

I remembered this fight. We had it while Malcolm was downstairs waiting for me to bring down all my bags. Mommy-Dearest had insisted I live elsewhere and I figured I had nothing to lose, so I got a "few" things off my chest. That was where the fight originally ended, though, as I took the luggage I was carrying and just sent Malcolm to get the rest. I started walking from the room then, ready to play out the original scene...

But I had no Malcolm sitting in the car this time. I just had me.

So I totally went for it.

"Then who the hell should I blame?" I shouted as I turned on my heel to face her. "Dad? *You* chose to have me! You *wanted* to get pregnant with a married man's baby—a man who was often drunk by five o'clock in the evening every day and who put his fists through doors!"

"You weren't his child, you were my child!" she countered. "He was just a sperm donor!"

I laughed. It was a bitter laugh though, and not one that lasted long because I was quite pissed off at that point. "Then why the hell did you allow him in my life for ten goddamn years? Why the fuck couldn't you just put *me* first?"

"I always—"

"No, you never have! It's been about you! You had me because *you* were old and lonely! And when I didn't turn out like a mini-you, you just wanted to get rid of me and then moan to everyone about what a terrible daughter you had."

"That's not true!" Tears were running down her face at this point. They were running down mine too, but they were more tears of rage than anything resembling sadness.

"Okay, Mom. Explain something to me then. Since everything was all for me, why did I see his heel coming at me through a windshield when I was six? Remember that one? How was

dragging me out of bed at midnight in order to cart me off to some hotel so I could see him throw a fucking chair at you helpful to me?"

"Your father was a womanizer. I've always told you that. He couldn't come down to see us and I knew he was with some other girl, so I thought that if I caught them together I could break it off with him once and for all."

I rolled my eyes. "Jesus Christ! You were nearly forty years old, and you needed to find him with a girl to break up with him? Maybe it was his wife."

"You were a child—how can you even remember that night?" she said rather than defend her choices. "You were asleep—"

"It's called trauma, Mother! I can recall the exact pattern of cracks on the windshield that night. And you still haven't explained how that was beneficial to me. You *knew* he was drunk. You knew how violent he was but you took me there anyway!"

"Then I made a mistake! What's wrong with that, Eve? Don't you make mistakes?"

"I wouldn't if my daughter was involved. All the times he said he was coming to see me and never did, all the violent memories, the broken promises—it's because you repeatedly made stupid choices that were never about me, but all about you and what you wanted."

"All I ever wanted was you, Eve! That's all! And this is how you treat me."

"Why did you have me? Hmm?"

"Because I wanted a child—"

"Nope, you're still not listening. *Why*. Why have me? Is it the maid excuse you always use? Or the friend one?"

"What is a good reason then, Eve?" she asked, once again changing the subject because she knew I was kicking her ass. "I waited until I was older and more mature and sure I was ready. Would you have preferred it if I was nineteen and knocked up by accident? If I wasn't ready and had you anyways?"

"I don't know, Mom. Would I have been as fucked up as I am now?"

"Right, everything is my fault, isn't it?"

"Well, considering you're a shapeshifting doppelganger, yes, yes it is your fault." I spun around and went for the door.

"Get back here, Eve!" she shouted. "I'm not done talking—"

"Yeah, well I am," I replied.

The whole room seemed to flicker for a moment. I paused my step and tried to regain my balance...God, my head was spinning... Where the hell was I? My mom's house...

The space around me withered into wavy lines, revealing a familiar place; the bedroom in Archangel's apartment.

I blinked a few times and I saw my mother's house again, as if it was superimposed over my view of the apartment. I saw my mother, still shouting something at me, but I could no longer hear her voice. Another shape was forming and all my attention was drawn to it.

"Dez?" I called as soon as I recognized my sister.

She didn't seem to hear me. Instead, the image of her wavered as the room flipped back and forth between the apartment and Mom's house. Dez walked backward, her movements sharp and unnatural. She hit the wall and sank down into a crouch, bringing her knees up to her chest.

Find me, Evie, she thought.

"I'm coming," I whispered.

I stalked for the door and threw it open. To my relief, I was back in the apartment hallway.

Now to find Dez...

I didn't see anyone and I was about to open my mouth to call the others when I heard, "Indigo!"

I turned to my left to see Kitty running down the hall. She threw her arms around me when she reached me.

"Hello there," I said, patting her back since I wasn't sure what else I was supposed to do.

"She's here!" Kitty shouted. Though she had been turning away from me at the time, I still caught most of it in my ear. I was glad she was so happy to see me, of course, but did she need to be so loud?

I heard thumping on the stairs and a moment later Rune and Jupiter appeared and came barreling down the corridor. Before I could say anything, Rune scooped me up into his arms. A nice hello, sure, but a little strange considering I hadn't been gone that long.

"Uh, feet dangling now," I said, but I don't think he was listening.

"What the hell is wrong with you!" Jupiter said. "Why the fuck did you take off like that?"

"That's Jupe's way of saying he was worried about you," Kitty said.

"Okay. Um...thanks?"

I waited, but Rune didn't seem ready to let me go just yet. "I swear, I'm not going anywhere," I said. "You can put me down now."

Don't do that anymore, he thought as he finally released me.

Sorry, was my sheepish reply. "I don't suppose Jace reappeared?" I asked aloud.

Kitty shook her head. "Nope, we just..." Her sentence trailed off as she looked at Jupiter. I followed her gaze to him and noticed he was staring at something down the hall behind Rune and I. We turned around to see a figure at the end of the corridor.

"Carin," Jupiter whispered.

"Jupe, it's not her," I said. "You have to remember—"

"I know," he interrupted. His eyes finally left Carin and he looked at me. "But I have to do this."

"But it's just trying—"

"I have to, Indigo. I hope you find your sister." With that, he started past us.

"You've got to stop him!" I clutched Rune's arm tightly, desperately. "He can't—"

"We'll all have to choose our own path," Kitty mumbled, more to herself than any of us, then she started after Jupiter.

I snatched her wrist to draw her back. "Kitty, what the hell—"

"He needs someone there," she said. Her face shaded red as she spoke, and she cast her eyes downward. "And...and I need to be the one." She pulled out of my grasp, and it wasn't a hard wrenching of her arm back—just a slight tug as she started walking again. I was still too stuck on the sudden "Kitty is crushing on Jupiter!" thought to put up a fight.

The two of them reached Carin. Kitty slipped her hand over Jupiter's, though he didn't notice. His attention was focused on the likeness of Carin, and he followed as she turned and walked down the stairs.

"Rune, stop them or something!"

He shook his head. "They're right."

"The hell they are! What, are you leaving now too?"

He looked at me and I immediately ceased any accusations planned in that direction; Rune wasn't going anywhere without me, and I knew it.

"I won't leave you. And right now, we have to find your sister."

"She's here," I said with complete certainty. "I know she is."

"We've checked all the rooms," he said.

"Yeah..." My words trailed off as I remembered what I had just seen. "Come on."

I went back into Archangel's place with Rune at my heels, his hand entwined with mine. He *seriously* wasn't letting me get away again, which was just fine with me.

"We've been through here," he said.

"Not everywhere." I walked straight for Archangel's bedroom closet and flung open the doors. There, shivering and crouched in the corner, was Desdemona.

Chapter Nineteen: Revelation

Though I had been certain she'd be there, I guess I still hadn't prepared myself for seeing her again, because at once I fell to my knees and started crying.

"We're here, you're safe now..." I tried to pull her into my arms, but she wouldn't budge—she even slid a bit away from me.

Desdemona's eyes were huge, dark saucers that stared off into space and barely blinked. She wore the same clothes as I had seen her in last, or rather rumped, dirty versions of them. Her long hair had matted in clumps and hung loosely about her, leaving me to wonder what the hell she had been through. I realized with a sinking feeling that this wasn't going to be as simple as *Yay, my sister is back and everything is peachy now.*

"Dezzie?" I touched her arm. Her skin was icy beneath my fingertips.

I jumped as someone took me by the shoulders and yanked me to my feet.

"Rune, what the hell—"

"Get her a glass of water," he ordered as he knelt down next to her.

"Why don't you do it..." I paused to observe him tilt her head back and look in her eyes, then check her pulse. He seemed to know what he was doing; I decided to leave it to him then and get that water myself.

I crossed the blood-splattered living room to fetch some water from the kitchen then returned to the bedroom closet.

"How is she?" I asked as he took the water from me.

"Dehydrated and likely in shock."

"That's not so bad, right? I mean, she's going to be okay—"

"She can die from either—get some blankets."

I didn't hesitate. I snatched the comforter from Archangel's bed and handed it to Rune. He eased Dez out of the closet. It wasn't an easy task; she still had her arms wrapped around her knees and Rune had difficulty inching her along. Once she was out of the closet, I grabbed a jacket from a hanger and slipped it over her shoulders.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Keep her warm," he said. "But don't have anything too tight around her."

I knelt behind her and enfolded her in my arms while he stretched her legs out. He took a few pillows from the bed and propped her feet up on them.

"Lay her down," he said, and so I lowered her to the floor with care. Rune spread the blanket over her and I sat at her head, brushing her hair from her face.

Dezzie, I'm here now, I thought. Please, don't leave me—it's all going to be okay...don't leave me, sweetie...

"We should get her to the hospital," he said after surveying her again. "She's not talking so we have to assume it's severe shock. She'd have a better chance if there were actual doctors around, though."

"How do you know all this stuff? Are you secretly a doctor?"

"No, I was in school for emergency medical services."

"Oh. That explains the take charge, *Grr Eve, get her a drink and get out of my way* thing. Does that also mean you can make her not die?"

He didn't even attempt a grin. Goddamn, why couldn't he just lie to make me feel better?

"If we can get her to the hospital, I'll see what—"

Dez bolted upright and shrieked.

I leapt backward, lost my balance, and fell flat on my ass. She continued screaming at the top of her lungs. Luckily, Rune was quicker to react than me; he was at her side in moments, sending all the calming vibes he could, and put an arm of reassurance over her shoulders. She yelped and backed away from him, and smacked straight into me.

"Dezzie, it's okay," I said. She jumped when she heard my voice, and swung her head around.

"Evie?" she whispered. Her eyes no longer had that dull, blank look they had before—I saw recognition in their depths now, and even a spark of the old non-comatose Dez.

"It's me, you're safe n—" I didn't get to finish my sentence as she dove into my arms and let out a deep sob.

So scared...Eve's here now...it'll be okay... she thought.

"Yes, it'll be okay," I confirmed for her aloud. "Everything is okay."

~*~

Try as we may, neither Rune nor I could get any information from Dez regarding what had happened to her during the past few days. She drank some water, and when she was able to stand, Rune insisted we head the hospital right away. He would have carried her, but she didn't want to be near anyone but me.

Dez clung to me the entire trip there, which made walking difficult. She didn't speak, and every time I tried to ask her how she was feeling, she would just sob and squeeze me tighter. Her thoughts gave me nothing at all; the only thing I got from her was fear. Pure, undiluted fear—fear that spilled from her into me.

The hospital was only a few blocks from Archangel's apartment. Strangely, Rune seemed to know exactly where he was going as he led us through the empty halls.

"You guys checked out the hospital before?" I asked.

"I wasn't sure what to do with Bre," he said quietly. "Martie and I brought her here, to the morgue."

"And Martie...?"

"Jace and I brought her here as well."

He had us stop in one of the emergency rooms. Several beds lined either side of the room, and about half the curtains were partially drawn. A doorway to the left linked the room to another one full of beds and gurneys, while the doorway to the right led to the nurses' station. I helped Dez onto one of the beds while Rune rifled through the supplies in the room.

"I'm going to check and see what they've got in one of the supply rooms," he said. "I'll be right back."

"Rune," I called as he was about to head out the doorway. I left Dez's side for a moment to speak to him privately. "Is she going to be okay?"

He met my eyes, started to speak then paused.

"Tell me the truth," I said. "I need to know."

He sighed heavily. "I don't think she's had any physical trauma. She's more responsive now, so if she is in shock, it isn't as bad as I initially thought. She seems severely dehydrated though, so it's critical that you pay attention to her vitals while I'm gone."

"I'm supposed to do what now?"

"Check her pulse and watch her breathing."

"Okay, just hurry then." As he disappeared down the hall, I returned to Dez. "Hey sweetheart, how are you doing?" I brushed the hair from her forehead and she looked up at me.

"Where are all your friends?" she asked, her voice low and hoarse. It was either from dehydration or all the screaming she had done earlier.

"They're around, it's okay. You don't have to worry. Rune's looking for some things to help you."

She gave me a weak smile that added yet another glimmer of the non-traumatized version of my sister to her countenance. "He *is* pretty cute."

I laughed. "I know."

"Did you two kiss?"

Ah, the bratty sister returns. "We did plenty of things I'm not telling you about."

She shuddered. "Gross. I definitely don't want to know."

"Good because I wouldn't tell you anyway. How are you feeling?"

"My throat hurts and my head's sore."

"Like head-injury sore?" I asked, ready to run for the hallway and get Rune if need be.

"No, like just a headache."

"It's probably the dehydration. Do you want a drink?"

She started to say yes, but shook her head and grasped my arm with surprising strength. Terror knitted her brows and visibly tensed her muscles. "I don't want you to leave."

"I'll see if I can get you some Gatorade or something—I saw a vending machine in the waiting room just across the hall—"

"Please don't leave me, Evie!"

"Okay, I won't." I sat down on the edge of the bed next to her and put my arm over her shoulders. "I'll stay here 'til Rune gets back, then I'll run and find you a drink."

"He'll be back soon?"

"He should be. Why?"

"Because I'm really thirsty."

I rolled my eyes. "Then let me get you something, stupid."

"You won't be gone long?"

"Nope, I'll be quick like a bunny. Well, I won't be hopping, but I'll be pretty quick...if, in fact, bunnies are all that quick. Are they, do you think? I've never been in the position to time one myself. Quicker than a snail, yes, but quicker than a cheetah? Now that would be stretching it."

Dez giggled. "Okay, be as quick as a cheetah then."

"Right, you say that to the girl who failed Phys Ed class! Anyway, you hold on and I'll be right back." As I left the room, I fished through the pocket of my sweater and found I had a few Loonies. That would be enough to get her some bottled water as well as Gatorade.

The hallway was bright, like that of a normal hospital. It was unnaturally silent though; the only sound to be heard was my own footsteps on the tile. Easily the strangest sight I'd encountered thus far was the empty waiting room. This was a Canadian hospital after all; an empty waiting room was like a sigh of the apocalypse.

I glanced back at Dez once more before I entered the waiting room. Her bed was visible from the doorway, and I saw her glancing around the room with worry.

"I'll be back in a sec," I called.

She looked to me. "You know, Mom would tell you to quit dawdling."

"But you wouldn't tell me that, would you?" I said as I left her view to go to the vending machines. "Because you know the things Mom says drive me nuts."

"Just hurry."

I popped the money into the machine and went through the list of flavours. "Hey Dezzie, what kind do you want—"

The lights in the waiting room blinked out. The vending machines gave a little beep each then died. All the lights in the corridor darkened one by one, a domino effect I recognized.

Uh oh.

"Dez?" I broke for the hallway.

A door slammed shut and I heard a scream.

"Dezzie!" I cried. My heart thudded in my chest—the door that had closed was the one to her room...

"Rune!" I hollered. "Get over here now!" I reached the closed door and tried the knob. It wouldn't budge.

I peered through the small glass window in the door. The sheets over Dez's bed were strewn, but she was nowhere in sight. I twisted the knob back and forth again and banged on the door, calling her name.

"Evie!" she shouted as her face came into view. She pressed her fingers to the glass. "Evie, get me out of here!"

"I will, baby, just hold on!" I glanced to my left and right, but found no sign of Rune. "Rune!"

"The doors in the room are all locked," Dez said. Fat tears dripped from her dark eyes and spilled onto her cheeks. "Please help me."

"What's wrong?" Rune called as he jogged toward me.

"The door is locked and I can't get her out," I said. "She said the other ones won't work either."

"I'll try going through the room next door," he said. "Hold on." He went around the corner and I turned back to Dez.

"It'll be okay, we'll get you out," I said, attempting to sound calm for her sake.

The door won't open, Rune's thoughts entered my mind. And I don't see an actual lock on the door.

Can't you use the gun? Just shoot the knob or something?

Hesitation and doubt filled him. *I'm not particularly useful with firearms and I'd rather not blindly shoot into a room with your sister in it.*

What the hell—you're American...I thought all you guys had loads of guns and stuff?

Right, and you live in an igloo, I suppose?

He had a good point there.

Tell her to stay away from the other door and I'll try to find something to get inside, he thought. A fire axe might do it.

"Okay, Dezzie, I need you to—"

Desdemona's entire body slammed flat against the door, her eyes huge. She swallowed a few times and tried to whisper something, but couldn't. Her voice seemed to catch in her throat and all she managed was a rough squeak. Her fingers, still pressed against the glass, flexed a few times.

"Dezzie?" I searched her eyes, but she only stared at me. "Hun, what's wrong?"

I heard something bang against the door about where her abdomen would be, and her eyes got even wider. Tears now freely flowed down her face and she coughed. A dark red liquid spilled from her lips...

Oh God.

"Please, hold on Dezzie." I turned the doorknob back and forth, twisting it until my hand hurt. "Rune, you've got to get us in there!" I grabbed the hunting knife I had tucked in my

sweater pocket, threw off the sheath, and slid the blade between the door and the doorframe in an attempt to force entry into the room.

It didn't work.

"I'm going to try to get through one of the other..." My voice trailed off as I saw the top of someone's head behind Dez. Who the hell...

Dez cried out, drawing my attention back to her in time to watch her slump out of view. The figure behind her was completely visible now, and I saw the creepy woman who had been tormenting us the past few days.

Eve... Dez's consciousness was fading fast. The original shapeshifter woman grinned at me and held up what I recognized as the missing crowbar from the library, the tip bloodied.

No, no, no...

"Rune, hurry!" I screamed.

I pounded both fists on the door as the woman reached for Dez. With a strength she shouldn't have had at her small size, she grabbed my sister in one hand and flung her onto the gurney behind her. Dez was barely conscious, her head slumping to one side as she tried to get up. A small, dark hole went straight from her back to her front and was oozing blood at an alarming rate.

...Eve...

The woman gave me one last cold smile, then turned and advanced on my sister.

"No, you leave her alone!" I shouted, but to no avail. I slammed my shoulder against the door again and again, willing it to break, but all that resulted in was an aching shoulder on my part.

She raised her weapon and plunged it downward once more, impaling Dez's lower abdomen again.

"No!" I cried, thrashing my fists against the door. My head spun and my knees gave out from beneath me. I crumpled into a heap.

"Indigo..." Rune reached my side then. He paused first to look through the window into the room then to tried unsuccessfully to open the door. He dropped to his knees next to me and cupped my face in his hands, holding my head up so I was looking at him.

"She's gone," I whispered. "She's gone...God, she's gone..."

"We don't know that until we're in the room," he said, sounding composed and in control. I might have berated him for it, but I understood he was just trying to calm me down so I'd get off the floor. "Let's go through the nurses' station and see what we can do to get in there."

Weakly, I nodded.

Nothing seemed real. I wasn't even sure I was in my body—it was like I was watching everything from the outside. That was it, wasn't it? This was all happening to someone else? God, I wanted that to be true.

I felt Rune's hand on mine, and then I was on my feet and walking. Next I saw a long, half-wall, behind which were several desks and the nurses' station. Dazed, I was faintly aware of us climbing over the wall then I was leaning on a desk, staring at the dotted tile floor while Rune rummaged through the drawers and ransacked every surface he came in contact with.

"Indigo," he called, breaking me from my stupor. He stood next to the door with a set of keys. I didn't know how much time had passed with me just standing there, but I cleared my mind and ran to his side.

Just as he turned the key in the lock, I grabbed his arm. "It was in there with her..."

"Then we'll be careful."

A twist of the key. The lock snapped open. My breath caught in my throat as he slowly turned the knob and pushed the door. It swung wide open, knocking against the wall. The room was empty...

Except for my sister's bloodied body.

I rushed to her side, not caring anymore about what "things" might be waiting for me in that room. Her eyes were closed and she didn't respond when I gently touched her shoulder.

"Dez..."

Standing at her other side, Rune felt the inside of her wrist, then her neck. He dropped her hand back at her side and said nothing, but then he didn't really need to.

"Can't you do something?" I whispered.

"I... Indigo..."

"You're a paramedic, right? You can do something for her..."

"She lost a lot of blood."

"Can't you do a transfusion?"

"I'm sorry... She's..."

My gaze was fixed on Dez, but I could feel Rune's eyes on me. I couldn't look at him. I didn't want to hear it. I knew—God, I knew. I think in some way, I knew the moment she became locked in that room that she wouldn't be leaving alive.

What if it's not her? my mind countered. *What if this is all just another trick?*

But it was Dez. I knew that too, though I couldn't explain why.

My vision went blurry and it took me a few moments to realize it was from crying. I let the tears stream down my cheeks without restraint as I clutched my sister in my arms. I sobbed into her shoulder and prayed to whatever might be listening. I begged them, too. I tried willing her back to life. I squeezed her tight against me, silently pleading with her just to wake up. But she remained dead weight in my arms.

Nothing mattered now.

I let her go and fell to my knees next to the gurney. My stomach was churning and I thought for sure I'd be sick if all my attention wasn't focused on my swirling brain instead.

Rune approached me, and without a word he lifted me up. The door to the hallway—which was locked only minutes ago—now opened with ease, and he helped me walk down the hall. I moved one numb foot after the other, barely even feeling the ground beneath me. Rune eased me into a chair in the waiting room. I looked down to find the front of my sweater and sleeves soaked in blood. *Her* blood. She was really gone, and I wished more than anything I had gone with her.

I lost her...God, not again...

"Indigo," Rune said as he sat next to me and turned in his chair to face me.

I stared at the floor. My mind was completely blank; no thought dared enter my head at that moment.

"Indigo?"

"What?" I responded at last, my voice a thin rasp that broke the silence.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Mean by what?"

"Not again."

"I didn't say..." Oh, I had thought it. I sometimes forgot that telepathy thing worked both ways. "I don't know what I mean...I'm just so confused..."

"Indigo," he gently took my hand in his and turned it over so my palm was facing up, "what happened?"

"Happened?" God, what the hell was he talking about?

He pushed up my sleeve with care and traced the thin line on my wrist, his fingertip barely touching my skin. "What happened? Why were you missing for so long earlier this year?"

"I already told you," I mumbled.

"No, you lied to me before."

I started to shake my head, but then I found his cool blue gaze fixed on my eyes and I couldn't lie anymore. Not to him. Not to myself. I never really forgot about it though—it was

always there, right at the back of my mind, hovering over my thoughts like a ghost. *She* was always there.

"You and everybody else," I began, "didn't hear from me because..." I took a deep breath. "Because I..." *Force it out, Eve...*

You don't have to say it, he thought. Just remember and I'll see—

"No." I shook my head with vehemence. I had to get this out—I had to say it. Just say it quickly and it'll be over and done with, like taking off a Band-Aid. A really upsetting, emotional Band-Aid.

"I was pregnant."

The simple act of saying it aloud made something in me snap and just as my tears were ceasing, they began again. In typical Eve fashion, after the initial admission, I couldn't stop myself from continuing.

"I was so scared. I didn't tell anyone, not even Malcolm. I wasn't ready, and I didn't know what I was going to do..."

"And then?" he prompted gently after a few moments of silence on my part.

"Then I suddenly knew everything was going to be okay. I'd manage somehow. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I just knew that, whatever it was, it would be okay."

"The last time I spoke to you before those months you were gone, you wouldn't say what was going on with you, but..."

I nodded. "That's when I thought I was finally ready to tell Mal." I let out a sob, unable to keep it in any longer. I took a few more deep breaths, brushed my hair from my eyes and forced myself to continue. "I remember I went to bed Thursday night feeling so calm about everything...then Friday I woke up and there was so much pain and so much blood...and she was gone. I lost her."

Minutes ticked by with me leaning into him, crying, while he just held me and waited while I got it all out. I had never told anyone. Never even considered it. Not even Dez, who never asked me why I started to slit my wrists the night she came to live with me. It was my burden that I'd kept for months, but somehow, finally telling someone else didn't make me feel any better. No, instead of even a moment of relief, I felt so much worse because saying it aloud made it real in a way that it hadn't been in my mind before this. I couldn't protect my daughter, just like I couldn't protect Dez.

"Did you tell Malcolm later?" Rune asked.

"Of course not," I muttered with a tinge of bitterness. "He wouldn't have understood."

"He would have," he said with certainty. "It was his child too—"

"No," I cut in. "He wouldn't understand and neither do you. She was in *me*. My body. I was supposed to protect her and take care of her, but I couldn't even do that."

"It wasn't your fault—"

"Then whose was it?"

"No one's."

"See, you don't get it," I snapped. I sat up, feeling a tangle of misery, grief, guilt, and good old anger. "Your daughter didn't die inside you, your sister wasn't just murdered in front of you, so don't sit here and patronise me, pretending you get it." He had loss in his life, and I knew it...though forgive me, but his nearly ex-girlfriend hardly compared to a sister and daughter.

We sat in heavy silence for a few long minutes. My tears had stopped; all sadness was replaced by the deep void I'd kept hidden for so long. Now Dez was gone too...nothing mattered...

"Why do you keep saying, 'daughter'?" he asked.

"Because *she* was a girl."

"You were far enough along to know that?"

"No, I just knew. I knew the moment of conception and I knew it was a girl. It's a chick-thing."

"And this is why you tried to kill yourself?"

"I didn't..." I cut the protest short; sure, I suppose that was the technical term for it, but it sounded so surreal when he said it like that. I wasn't one of those suicidal nuts or attention seekers. "I just wanted it to end."

"You were probably clinically depressed after the miscarriage and it's all right—"

"No, don't say it like that. Don't soften it. I didn't 'miscarry'; my baby is *dead*. And it nearly killed me before Dez showed up."

"Why did she come to live with you again?"

Christ, he was a little thick. "I told you, she was sick of living with Mom, and if you knew my mother, you wouldn't blame her."

Rune stared at me strangely for a long while, regarding me in silence. Though I tried to search his mind to find out what the dealio was, I came up with nothing—whatever it was, he didn't want me to know. I was tired of these games, however.

"What is it?" I asked.

Sadness crept into his eyes and his weak smile as he brushed several unruly strands of hair from my forehead. "It's nothing."

It was something, but I didn't care anymore.

The lights flickered on again and I blinked beneath the sudden fluorescent glow as my eyes adjusted. Without warning, Rune took my face in his hands and kissed me—first my forehead, then my lips.

"I'm sorry," he whispered then he abruptly rose without looking at me. After giving my hand a quick squeeze, he walked past me towards the hallway.

"Rune?" I called, my brows furrowed in confusion.

He glanced back at me with that same sorrowful smile, his face pained.

I love you, Eve, he thought then he turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

"Rune?" I said again, concern rising in me. When he didn't answer, I stood and strode for the hallway.

I stopped in the middle of the corridor and looked around. There was no sign of him.

"Rune?" Panic filled me. Where the hell did he go? "Rune!" I began wandering down the hall, swinging my gaze from side to side as I went. "Rune? Colin?"

"I'm right here."

I jumped at the sound of a voice behind me. As I spun around, I saw Rune peering around the doorway that led to the room Dez was in.

"Jesus, you scared me!" I walked over to meet him. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I thought I—or we, if you're up to it—should take the...your sister down to the...downstairs."

I tried to force words of agreement from my mouth, but all I managed was a slight nod.

He disappeared into the room then returned a few moments later pushing the gurney. A sheet was draped over Dez. Rune started walking and I followed behind him in silence.

This couldn't be happening. I couldn't really be taking my sister's body to a morgue...

We rode the elevator to the basement. My gaze was fixed on Dez. There she was, beneath that thin, light green blanket. After all the searching, all the promises that she'd be okay...and now this. She was gone.

The elevator shuddered to a halt.

The doors opened and Rune led the way, yet again. He pushed the gurney along and I followed a few steps behind.

Dez...I'll take care of you...I'll take such good care of you, honey, I promise...I promise...

"Eve?" Rune said, his voice jarring my thoughts. "We're here."

I blinked a few times and focused on my surroundings. We were at the end of a dark hallway, stopped in front of two thick metal doors.

"You can wait out here while I go in, if you want," he suggested, but I shook my head.

"No...no, I'm coming with you."

The morgue was cold in every sense of the word. There's really no other way to describe it. Bright lights shone down from the ceiling, reflecting on the steel tables, counters, and a wall of small doors. The temperature was low and I shivered through my sweater.

"It'll just take a minute," he said.

He wheeled the gurney across the room and opened one of the steel doors. This, I *couldn't* watch. I turned my back to him and wandered toward a table not far from the door where I stared absently at the array of creepy looking autopsy tools. There was the sound of metal-on-metal squeal as he pulled the stainless steel tray out and lined up the gurney next to it. I focused all my attention on *not* hearing the sound of fabric being rumpled and a body—her body—being set down on the tray. He closed the door when he was done.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Go where?" I mumbled. "What does it matter now?"

"What matters is we're still alive," he said as he started for the door. "And I'm going to get you out of here. Let's head back to the hotel. We'll get the car and we'll try driving out of here."

I tried to follow, but my feet wouldn't let me. Somehow, the cold and hollow room seemed like home. What was the point in going anywhere? We were the only ones left...and I doubted we would be around for long.

"Eve, come on," he said, looking at me expectantly from the open doorway. "It'll be okay."

It'll never be okay again...

"We'll beat this," he promised.

I sighed. "I'm coming." I didn't care anymore if I stayed where I was or not. *It* would be coming for us, regardless of where we went. If he thought we'd be safer at the hotel or on the road, then I'd silently follow and let him have that peace of mind for however brief amount of time we had left.

I stood only three steps away from him when he was killed.

Everything moved like a series of still shots. Rune was in the doorway, facing me and waiting for me to catch up. Then his eyes grew round and glazed over. I barely had time to process the sight of blood drenching the front of his shirt when he tumbled forward into my arms. I fell beneath his weight, and found myself pinned on the floor under his unmoving body. I have no idea if I spoke his name or tried to link with him telepathically or if I was even thinking at all. I don't imagine I did any of those things, though. I knew he was already gone and there wasn't anything I could do to save him.

I stared up at the figure that had replaced his in the doorway.

"What do you want from me?" I screamed.

The woman towered over me, her head tilted to the side at an odd angle as she regarded me with empty eyes. Then she turned and left the doorway, the bloody crowbar she dragged behind her scraping on the floor as she went. The doors swung closed behind her and I was left alone with Rune in my arms.

Rune...

I didn't move him just yet. For a few minutes, I simply laid there crying, holding him tightly. I cupped his face in my hands and lifted his head up. His eyes were frozen open, their blue depths void of life.

Why Rune and Dez? Why not me?

I heaved him off of me and rolled him onto his back. The woman's weapon of choice had done its job and gone straight through his back to his heart.

"I'm sorry," I whispered as I swept his hair from his face and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry..." This was my fault too. All of it was. If I had left Dez behind, like I should have, she would have been safe, and we wouldn't be in this morgue. Then Rune never would have stood there waiting for me to catch up, not knowing that thing was behind him.

I can't believe he's gone too...

There was no way I could lift him, so I couldn't even move him to where the others were. Instead, I rose, my legs shaking badly. I had no more companions, no weapon to defend myself although I wasn't sure I wanted either of those things now. Nonetheless, on impulse I grabbed a scalpel from a nearby table and clutched it in my hand. Shivering in the cold room, I started for the door, but stopped. Why bother going anywhere? Why not just stay here with the people I loved? I was going to die anyway...

I couldn't bear to be in that room any longer, though. Not with Rune's body at my feet. Not with Dez's body only steps away. I *couldn't* stay there.

I left the morgue, my pace slow and the scalpel thrust out in front of me in case I encountered anything else in my path. The halls were silent, as were all the darkening streets when I got outside. This was it. I was alone. The others were all likely dead now and there was no hope for rescue, no hope for survival. No hope to live.

As I started for the hotel, I gazed down at the scalpel.

Its blade was looking more and more appealing.

Chapter Twenty: Farewell

"Where the hell did all the Parmesan cheese go?" I stood in the kitchen in front of the open refrigerator, an empty shaker of cheese in my hand, as I stared at my sister in the living room.

Dez shrugged, still gazing intently at the television.

"Desdemona Shelby!" I said. "I bought this a week ago—"

"Don't say it like that," she said. "You sound like Mom when you do."

"I don't bloody well care—what the hell is wrong with you?" I tossed the empty shaker onto the counter and picked up my plate of cheese tortellini. After slumping down on the couch next to her, I turned to face her rather than eat right away. "I pay for things around here—"

"No you don't, Dad does."

"Yeah, well, I take the money to the grocery store to buy things. From now on, that stuff only goes on pasta!"

"If you ate normal breakfast stuff like normal people instead of tortellini at ten in the morning, you wouldn't need to worry about it."

I snatched up the empty plate from beside her and investigated the crumbs. "You put it on your toast this morning—you're hardly qualified to tell me how to eat."

"Whatever. Just go get some more tonight."

"I can't—I'm going out."

"With Mal?"

"Yeah, but it's not like that."

"Then what's it like?" she asked.

"Nothing, I'm just going out and I'll be back later."

"Ooh, you're going to meet that guy, aren't you."

I didn't reply.

"What do you think he wants?"

I still didn't reply. Instead, I elected to put a piece of now-cold tortellini in my mouth.

"You'll be careful, Eve?" she said, looking at me with a sudden seriousness. "I know Rune's your friend and all, but you don't know what he wants."

"I'm an adult—I can make decisions on my own, thank you."

"Fine!" she shouted as she abruptly stood and stormed toward her room. "I'm just worried about you!"

The door slammed behind her, and I continued eating my meal.

I'm sorry I didn't listen to you, I thought, folding my legs up into the foetal position as I recalled our last conversation before any of this had started.

After leaving the hospital that evening, I reached the hotel without incident and without encountering anyone then went straight up to my room. I peeled off my blood-soaked sweater, sat on the bed, leaned my back against the headboard, and waited.

No one came.

I'm not sure how, but eventually I dozed off. I don't remember if I even dreamed or not, but I slept fairly well and awoke around four in the morning, still alone in my silent room.

Forget the danger I had put Dez in by bringing her along—if I hadn't gone to meet Rune in the first place, none of this would have happened. No car accident, no missing sister... That woman wouldn't have killed Rune just to get to me. Even Martie might have been better off; Rune would have been more focused on everyone else and not as distracted by me and all my drama. Who knows, but Bre might have lived too.

No amount of regrets would bring them back or change what happened though.

But why hadn't she come back for me yet? Why not kill me when she had me pinned under Rune?

I glanced at the digital clock on the bedside table. 5:14. Twelve hours had passed since my sister and Rune were murdered, though what did I honestly expect? That we'd hop in the car and drive off, forgetting all this had happened? That Rune would move in and we'd live as a family, happily ever after?

I sat up and swung my legs over the edge of the bed, then sank down onto the floor. A glimmer of light struck my eyes, drawing my gaze to the nightstand. Light from the lamp reflected on the thin blade of the scalpel, calling me, urging me to pick it up and give in. Eventually I did pull the instrument from the stand, and I looked it over. It would be so easy. I'd merely be finishing what I started months ago. That's all. A quick slice of the blade and it would be over. I didn't believe in any of the conventional ideas of heaven and hell, and hadn't really given an afterlife much serious consideration, but after recalling everything that had happened, I supposed it was just as likely as being stuck in an abandoned town with a shapeshifting doppelganger bent on killing my friends. It was possible that I could end this life and get to see Dez and even Rune again.

This was it. *Please meet me there, Dezzie...*

I held the scalpel on my wrist, a centimetre away from the old scar, and gently applied pressure. With a pinch of pain, the blade slid through the skin easily, producing a well of blood that slithered down my arm.

I paused long enough to wipe the tears from my cheeks and listen. What I would give to hear her voice. The last time, she came at just the right moment to save me. For a few seconds, I let myself imagine it—the sound of the heavy front door opening, the thump of her luggage on the floor in the hall, soft footsteps on the carpet. I closed my eyes and willed her to my side, remembering when she pulled me into a hug and promised me it would be okay.

I waited, but she didn't appear.

So I cut deeper.

There's a little discussed fact about pain; someone else hits you or you stub your toe and it hurts like hell. You do it yourself, however, and it's suddenly bearable. Slicing through my own skin was little more than a discomfort to me.

I looked down at my wrist, which bled more and more. God, what had I become? Was this me now? *Yes Eve*, I thought. *You couldn't protect her. You're completely alone. It's time to just end it.*

All at once, I became aware of someone breathing—someone other than me. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a pair of feet planted on the carpet next to me. For a moment, I dared to think that they might belong to her, and my heart thumped faster as I turned to look.

My gaze followed the pale legs of the person beside me, from the ankles up to the edge of a long nightshirt, straight up to the long red hair that hung in wet, filthy clumps over her shoulders.

I flew back against the nightstand, shoving the scalpel towards her.

"So are you here to finish me off finally?" I shouted.

She reached down toward me, and in her hand I saw a white cloth from the bathroom. So now she was trying to clean me off? What the hell? I thrust the blade forward, slicing her inner forearm, but she continued reaching toward me with the cloth. With surprising gentleness, she rested it on my bleeding wrist and met my gaze. No longer were her eyes blackened spheres and glazed over; a brown iris emerged in each eye, the corners faded to white, and a black pupil dotted the centres. God, those eyes were familiar...

I left the cloth where it was and stared at her in utter confusion. Why would she be trying to stop the bleeding?

"You murdered my sister!" I said.

She shook her head.

"Uh, yeah, I just saw you do it! You stabbed her with a fucking crowbar! You killed her."

She shook her head again, took a few steps backward then laid on the bed. I stood and rounded the bed in a hurry, taking care not to get too near her. As I walked, the room swiveled and changed, and I found myself staring at a familiar looking bedroom.

The woman's gaze dropped from mine, and her eyes stared instead at the empty space in front of her as she turned on her side and wrapped her hands over her stomach.

"You can't lay in bed all day." I jumped at the sound of a deep male voice behind me.

"Mal! What the hell are you doing here..." My words trailed off as Malcolm stepped past me without so much as a glance in my direction. He sat on the end of the bed, resting his hand on the woman's thigh and gently shaking her.

"Sweetie," he said. "What's wrong?"

Oh God. I knew this scene. This was the apartment I shared with Malcolm...and that woman on the bed was...

No.

"Talk to me," he said.

"It's nothing," she muttered, purposely avoiding his gaze.

"What's going on? You lay in bed all day, you've barely eaten in weeks, the odd time you get up, you wander around like a zombie—what is it? Another big fight with your mother?"

The slightest twitch of her eyes as she fought back tears, then she gave a bitter smile that he failed to notice. "Yeah. That's it. Fight."

He sighed. I knew what he was thinking. She knew it too. *Can't keep living like that...she doesn't talk, doesn't do anything...I love her, but we can't keep doing this...*

But he didn't know what she was thinking. I did. *She's gone, I lost her... God, I wish I went with her...*

"I've got to go to work," he said.

She nodded. He leaned over to kiss her and she turned away so his lips caught her cheek. With another look of pain and defeat, Malcolm finally left.

Tears flooded her face as the door closed, but she forced herself to stand. She took a deep breath and started for the bathroom.

"No," I said as I followed her. "I don't know what the hell is going on, but I'm not—" I paused behind her as she gazed in the bathroom mirror. She hadn't turned on the light, and instead just stood there in the dark, staring at a reflection she didn't recognize anymore...that I didn't recognize anymore. Sickly pale skin. Dull brown eyes almost black in the dim light. Visibly thinner than she had ever been; beneath the white nightshirt she could feel her ribs sticking out. Barely able to drag herself out of bed, she hadn't bothered with a shower in a week, and her greasy locks of hair could attest to this.

"You're not me," I whispered. She ignored me and flipped on the bathroom light, and then ran some water to splash on her face. Resolved eyes stared back from the mirror.

She would go. It was that simple. He hated living with her and he'd never understand. And it wasn't like she could tell him about the baby. So she'd go.

She snatched the scissors from the counter and hacked off her long hair. It was a mess, but she could deal with that later. For now, she'd take a long shower, then check the paper for apartment listings and begin packing. Malcolm could get on with his life and she'd get on with hers...whatever that would entail.

"You're not me," I insisted.

This time, the woman's gaze drifted to mine, as though she was finally hearing me.

"You're not me," I said again.

She nodded.

"But I would never kill my sister! Or Rune! Or shapeshift into all these things and force people to kill themselves!"

"I didn't kill my sister," she said in an even, emotionless tone, while still looking at me.

"Uh, yeah, I saw you!"

She shook her head. "I killed my baby. I was scared to have her and I kept thinking I wasn't ready, and then she died."

I took a deep breath. That I couldn't deny. "I know. That was my fault. But that doesn't change the fact that I saw you stab Dez! And I never hurt her! I would never hurt my sister."

"But I don't have a sister."

I took a step back. "Of course I do."

She cocked her head to the side, studying me. "What's her name?"

"Desdemona Shelby."

"Her middle name."

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out.

"When's her birthday?" she asked.

"It's in a few months—"

"When?"

"Stop it," I whispered.

"Why hasn't Mom called her? Why did Mom never ask about her while she was living with you?"

"Because Mom's a bitch!"

"When was the last time she came to see you before you tried to slit your wrists?"

I struggled to remember...

"Why had you never mentioned her to Rune before last week?"

"Just shut the hell up!" I stormed out of the bathroom and found myself back in my hotel room. The woman followed me and stopped at my side.

"Why was the car empty when you woke up after the accident?"

"Because you—whatever you are—took her! You took her and then you hid her from me and you killed her!" My gaze settled on Dez's suitcases. There—that would prove it to her. Then she could shut the hell up about all this bullshit and just tell me what was going on. I rushed past her, grabbed one of the cases and flung it up on the bed, and then threw open the lid...

An empty suitcase met my eager gaze.

"What did you do with her things!" I screamed as I swung around. "What did you do!" I sank onto the floor, sobbing.

"I didn't kill my sister," she repeated, looking at me pointedly. "I killed my daughter. I didn't want her and my body didn't protect her and she died. I killed her."

I closed my eyes and forced her words from my head. No, this wasn't right! It couldn't be!

I'm not crazy, I'm not crazy...

I thought of Dez; her smile, her laugh...of how she argued with me and grumbled about things and...

Dez returned the letter to the drawer, complaining how Mom never mentioned her in the note...commented on how Mom never even called to speak to her, not once in the past five months...

But Rune had seen Dez—before he died, he saw her and he helped me take her to the hospital...though prior to that, he hadn't seen her once.

"Where's your sister?" he asked.

I gestured toward the car. "Sleeping in the back. Late night."

No, but there was a reason he didn't see her—she was sleeping. And she stayed in the car every time we stopped on the highway, still napping. Yes, she slept there all day and until late that evening, but she was just tired. That certainly wasn't proof...

But I had no photos of her. Martie asked to see a picture and I couldn't show her anything. I rummaged through my wallet, but still came up with nothing. All that meant was that I was a bad sister though—it certainly didn't mean she didn't exist!

Kitty's voice entered my mind from when she carried two suitcases—one of mine and one of Dez's—upstairs.

"These are all yours?" she asked.

"One you've got is. The others are my sister's."

"Either one of you packs light or the other packs very heavy," she said with a smirk...

No, no, this couldn't be happening! I wasn't crazy. She was real. I knew it—I felt it. She saved my life! A person does not just make up a sibling!

My dream from days ago drifted to the forefront of my mind, when Dez and I sat on the couch and talked about things I didn't remember until just now.

"I'm not Eve like you're not Camilla. We aren't the same."

"But you're part of me—"

"No, I'm just me."

She's not Eve like I'm not Camilla...not me in the way that I'm not my mother? Wait, that would mean...and it couldn't, it just couldn't—

"Eve."

A different voice spoke my name this time. I opened my eyes and looked up at the woman standing over me. My mother's brown eyes gazed back and she smiled sadly.

"Just shut the hell up," I whispered. "I don't know who you are and I don't care. Leave me the hell alone—I want this over with." I retrieved the scalpel from where I'd dropped it on the floor and wasted no time putting another slice in my wrist.

"You don't want this," my mother said.

"Oh really?" I snapped. "Cause, you know, all the blood here says otherwise. Now for some reason, you're all coming out of the woodwork to stop me. Why?"

"Because you don't really want to do this."

"No, what I want is my sister."

"Eve, you don't have a sister."

No, I did not just hear her say that. She was real. I knew she was. They were just fucking with my mind, right? I let out a sob and tossed the scalpel on the ground.

"Stop saying that! And what do you know about it anyway? You're insane. You disowned me, remember."

"I know, and I'm sorry, sweetie."

"Whatever."

"What do you want, Eve?" There was no shouting from her this time, no defensiveness. She spoke calmly and with an honesty to her tone that I had never heard before. There was no way this was my real mother.

"I want my sister, first of all. And second, you not being a lunatic would be a plus."

"You want vindication?"

"That would be appreciated."

"For me to tell you you're right?" she continued. "That I made bad decisions, one after the other? That I had you for the wrong reasons, that I had problems of my own to deal with and I never faced them before having you?"

I was silent.

"Is that what you want?"

"It's a start," I said stubbornly.

"And what would that solve?"

I looked away. I really wasn't impressed with where this was going; things were a lot easier when she was trying to kill people.

"You can't change the past," she said. "Nothing I say can do that. You have to let it go."

"But—"

"But what? But you're right?"

She waited until I eventually nodded.

"That doesn't matter, Eve. And being right makes it even harder, but you need to let it go."

"So I'm supposed to just get over it? Everything you've said? The fact that you disowned me?"

"Yes."

Right—easy for her to say. She was the crazy one, after all. "Whatever—just tell me I can have my sister back. Please."

"You don't have a sister, baby, and you have to let that go too."

No, no, not this again. I shook my head—this couldn't be happening. She couldn't really be telling me this... "But I'm not crazy! She's real!"

Mom nodded. "She's real. I know you're not crazy, hun. But she's not your sister."

But then that would make her...

"No." I shook my head furiously. "That doesn't make sense."

"Why?"

"Because I let her die," I cried. "I didn't think I wanted her and she died so she really couldn't suddenly age twelve years and come to live with me!" I let out a sob and buried my face in my hands. Why couldn't I remember her? Why was my memory of her up to five months ago such a blur? This couldn't be true...

"Aw, sweetie..." Mom knelt next to me and wrapped her arms around me. "You didn't do anything wrong. It just wasn't the right time. You can't feel guilty for losing her."

"I want her back," I whispered. "Please. I'll give up everything I have, everything I am...just let me have her back. I'll stop feeling sorry for myself and blaming you for everything—I'll be a good person... Just give her back to me."

"You know I can't do that, Evie." She pulled away, picked up the cloth from the floor, and wrapped it around my wrist. Sweeping my hair back from my eyes, she waited until I looked up at her. "I wish I could, but I can't, baby."

And I knew it too. I couldn't change what happened, no matter how I tried to convince myself otherwise.

"You're not my mother," I said.

A knowing smile. "No, I'm not."

"But you're not Carin or Martie's stepfather or Bre or Dez or me either?"

"No."

"What are you?"

"What you needed me to be."

What a stupid answer. "Okay, *who* are you?"

She didn't reply. Instead, she stood and took a few steps away from me. She nodded to the window. "It's dawn, you know."

I glanced behind me to see the early morning sun shining through the window.

"You should head outside—someone's waiting for you."

I turned back around, but she was gone. *Someone's waiting...* I hopped to my feet and raced across the room, then threw open the door and burst into the empty hallway. The hotel was silent as I ran through the corridors and flew down the steps into the lobby. Pushing through the front doors, I stopped short suddenly before the single figure standing there. The sun hovered in the horizon, but I knew that wasn't the source of the otherworldly glow around her.

Desdemona smiled. "Glad you finally decided to wake up."

"Dezzie, I'm sorry—"

"It's okay, Evie. You told me you weren't ready and that it wasn't time yet. There's nothing wrong with that."

Tears flowed down my face without restraint as I reached for her. She stepped into my embrace and I hugged her fiercely.

"Please, don't leave me," I whispered.

"I have to."

Please, please, please...I can't do it alone...

"Jeez, gimme some air now—you're crushing my lungs."

I pulled back and chuckled despite my tears. "You are such a brat."

"I know."

Desdemona sighed as she took a few steps back. "Well, your friends are waiting."

"They're alive?"

"Some of them. The ones that made it."

"Do you mind telling me then what the hell is going on? Why us?"

She shrugged. "You're asking the wrong person—I dunno."

My jaw dropped open. "Excuse me, but you're the mystical, glowing daughter I lost who's been pretending to be my sister for the past five months—who *else*, precisely, would I ask?"

"Good point."

The sun shone brighter and brighter, climbing over the buildings and forcing me to shield my eyes just to see her. Even then, she was fading from view...

"I'll see you later," she said. "Love you...Mom."

And she was gone.

I found the sun blinding now; it drove my eyes shut. A cool breeze dusted my bare arms, making me shiver. I wrapped my arms around my torso, hugging my stomach. Still, I clung to her, wishing this wasn't real, wanting more than anything to open my eyes and find her still with me.

"I love you too, baby," I whispered.

"Indigo!"

I opened my eyes. Looking around the front of the hotel, I found the parking lot filled with people going to and from their cars. Beyond that was the street, also filled with pedestrians and vehicles. I never thought I'd be so happy to see humanity en masse as I was at that moment.

"Indigo!" a girl's voice called again. To my left, I saw Kitty and Jupiter approaching. Juve reached me first and pulled me into a bear hug. Kitty joined us and soon we were both being crushed against Jupiter's broad torso.

"We're so happy you're okay," Kitty said.

"And you guys?" I asked as Jupiter released us from the hug. "Everything worked out and stuff?"

Kitty glanced at Jupiter, but he didn't seem to notice her gaze. Instead, he looked at me and nodded. "Yeah. I think so. What about your sister...?"

"That's a long story I'm not repeating." I thought on it for a moment, though, and nodded. "But yeah. I found her."

"C'mon," Kitty said. "Jace has been waiting for like a day!" She took my hand and led me a few metres to where Jace sat on a bench talking with a short, dark haired guy about our age that I didn't recognize. Both of them stood and Jace gave me a hug.

"Good to see you made it out okay," he said.

"Yeah, I'm alive," I said, thinking "okay" was a relative term. We all stood in a small circle, each looking thoughtful for a moment. "So who are you?" I directed to the guy I didn't know.

"Archangel," he replied.

"Ah. And is your apartment always decorated in blood splatters or was that the result of this little adventure?"

"It's new, but I was thinking of keeping it," he said. "It adds a uniqueness."

"That it does."

Eve.

I froze at the sound of my name being called telepathically. I knew that voice...

I turned slowly, almost afraid to look, but there he stood, just a few steps behind me, as real as any of the others.

Rune smiled, but though I wanted to approach him—to fly into his arms all dramatic and stuff—I couldn't force my feet forward. The sight of the pretty, dark-haired girl behind him had something to do with that.

"It's about time you came down here," Jupiter said.

"They've been waiting in your room for you to show up there all night," Kitty said. "Even though Archangel said he was told to wait for each one of us here."

I was still speechless. I saw him die. Sure, I also saw my sister die, but even though that wasn't actually real, I somehow thought... Then I remembered how he looked at me just before he left the hospital waiting room, and I realized that was him saying goodbye. Whatever I encountered after that—whatever died in the morgue—wasn't actually him.

With Breanna at his side, he took a few steps forward so we were nearly toe-to-toe, and I looked up into those clear blue eyes, unsure of what to say.

My gaze shifted to Bre. There was a stitched up gash across her forehead, presumably from the accident, but otherwise she was very much alive.

She gave me a small, half smile. "We're glad you're okay," she said as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear nervously, then she brushed past me, eyes downcast. She took a seat on the bench a few steps away from our group and I looked to Rune, feeling incredibly uncomfortable. So, his girlfriend was in fact alive. And that left us where, exactly?

He looked as though he wanted to say something to me, and for a few breathless moments I thought he might, but then I got the overwhelming sense that he felt this was neither the time, nor the place. I had to agree with that. I guess. Still, we stared at one another for awhile longer as the others talked quietly amongst themselves.

You left without me, I thought.

I'm sorry—

It's okay. You knew...?

He sent a mental confirmation that he figured out who Dez was and that I had to face it on my own; had to have a catharsis of sorts...and that somehow, letting go of me had returned him to the real world.

And I see Breanna's alive and well.

A little shaken up, but yes.

I gave a weak, but genuine smile. "I'm glad." I turned back around to the group, and Rune joined me. The six of us stood in a rough semi-circle.

If Breanna and Rune were still alive, did that mean...?

"Martie?" I asked eagerly.

Everyone's expressions dropped and I knew their answer even before Rune confirmed it.

"She didn't make it," he said.

I'm surprised I did, I thought to myself.

"Well, now we're all here, so I guess we should probably introduce ourselves," Jace suggested. "I'm Jason. Jason Eckhart."

"Mike Cruz," Archangel said.

We looked to Bre because technically she was the next one in the circle, but she stared at the road and didn't notice us looking at her. We turned to the next person.

"Alyssa Sue McKenzie," Kitty said.

"Dennis," Jupiter said. Jace gave him a pointed look that we all noticed, and Jupe rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Fine. Nigel Dennis."

I couldn't help but laugh; he certainly didn't look like a "Nigel."

Jupe crossed his arms over his chest, his face heating up with embarrassment. "I know. *That's* why everyone calls me Denny."

Rune was next. "Colin Faitel."

All eyes fell on me. "Eve Shelby."

"So," Jace began as we each looked at one another, processing the new names to old faces. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know," I said, feeling awfully like breaking out into song, singing, *Where Do We Go From Here?* "But personally, I'd like to get the hell out of this town."

The End.

(Well, except for all the stuff in the [Special Edition...](#))

About the Author



Award-winning author Skyla Dawn Cameron has been writing approximately forever. Her early storytelling days were spent acting out strange horror/fairy tales with the help of her many dolls, and little has changed except that she now keeps those stories on paper. She signed her first book contract at age twenty-one for *River*, a unique werewolf tale, which was released to critical and reader praise alike and won her the 2007 EPPIE Award for Best Fantasy. She now has multiple series on the go to keep her busy, which is great for her attention deficit disorder.

Skyla lives in Southern Ontario where she dabbles in art, is an avid gamer, and watches *Buffy* reruns. She's naturally brunette, occasionally a redhead, and currently blonde. If she ever becomes a grown-up, she wants to run her own pub, as well as become world dictator. You can visit her on the web at www.skyladawncameron.com for free fiction, book news, a community forum, and tons of other totally awesome stuff.

Enjoy *Catharsis*? Visit www.ApocalypseNovel.com to check out her newest eSerial, *Children of the Apocalypse*.