



THE MIDNIGHT TRILOGY

BOOK 1

CRAVING MIDNIGHT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MICHELLE ROWEN



The Midnight Trilogy, book 1, Craving Midnight by Michelle Rowen

CRAVING MIDNIGHT
THE MIDNIGHT TRILOGY —BOOK 1

PLAY IT SAFE? OR RISK IT ALL?

Samantha Day is definitely not a risk-taker. At least, not until the night she kisses her unattainable crush, and that kiss does something strange to her. Now she feels hungry all the time, but it's not for food. Her cravings are much darker than that, and far more frightening.

Only Bishop, a mysterious guy with unearthly blue eyes, seems to understand what's happening to her. He's the one chance Samantha has to stop the danger that's closing in around her. But it might mean losing everything she's ever wanted and embracing the darkness inside of her.

AUTHOR NOTE:

THE MIDNIGHT TRILOGY (CRAVING MIDNIGHT, *CURSING MIDNIGHT*, and CROSSING MIDNIGHT) is based on the novels DARK KISS and WICKED KISS, previously published in 2012 and 2013 by Harlequin Teen.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 1 - Cursing Midnight](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by Michelle Rowen](#)

CRAVING MIDNIGHT
The Midnight Trilogy, Book One

Copyright © 2023 by Michelle Rowen

THE MIDNIGHT TRILOGY is based on the novels
DARK KISS and WICKED KISS, previously published in 2012 and 2013 by Harlequin Teen.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review, without written permission from the author.

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, events, and places portrayed in this book are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales, is purely coincidental.

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-990309-10-6

Join [Michelle's VIP List](#) for the latest info about contests, new releases and more!

PROLOGUE

THIS IS GOING to hurt like hell.

The grim thought was confirmed by the look on the gatekeeper's face, but Bishop didn't want anyone's pity. After all, he'd volunteered for this.

"Are you ready?" the gatekeeper asked.

"Yes, I'm ready."

"And you know your mission."

"Of course."

Bishop glanced over his shoulder at the expanse of bright white behind him. This was as far as he could go before leaving Heaven entirely. He'd left before, many times, but this was different. He pushed aside a sliver of fear. He would return soon. This was not the end for him; it was only the beginning.

The gatekeeper studied Bishop as if looking for any sign of weakness. "You've been warned about the pain?"

"I have."

"The disorientation?"

"Yes."

Traveling to the human world was not normally a huge ordeal. However, there was nothing normal about this mission. An invisible barrier shielded his destination, preventing any supernatural being from entering or leaving the city through normal means. This gatekeeper had the ability to help him breach the barrier, but it wasn't going to be pleasant.

"First, you must find the others," instructed the gatekeeper. "If you don't find them within seven days, they'll be lost forever."

"I know this already." He didn't even try to keep the sharp tone from his voice. Patience had never been his strongest virtue.

The minds of the other team members would be protected during the journey, but not his. He was the only one who would remember their mission.

The gatekeeper's expression soured. "Do you have the golden dagger?"

"Yes." The weapon was tucked into the sheath he wore strapped between his shoulder blades. It was all he needed to take with him.

The gatekeeper nodded. "Come closer."

Bishop did as he asked. The gatekeeper pressed his pale, long-fingered hand against Bishop's chest. Bishop grimaced as an unpleasant burning sensation sank into him. Finally, the gatekeeper stepped back. He didn't smile. It was quite possible that he never smiled.

"Well?" Bishop gritted out. "Are you done yet? Is it time to—"

Without a moment of warning, the solidity beneath Bishop dropped away before he'd had a chance to brace himself. He'd imagined many times what this might feel like—a cleansing pain that would help him focus on the all-important task that lay ahead. Instead, it was an agony unlike anything he'd ever experienced. He struggled against it, but it was too much, and he had his very first doubt about his success.

But it was too late for doubts. Too late for fear. Too late for anything.

When he finally slammed through the barrier that surrounded the human city, it was the first time he'd ever heard himself scream.

CHAPTER ONE

CARLY SAID SOMETHING, but the music was way too loud for me to hear her.

“What?” I shouted back. My throat already hurt, and we’d only been at Crave for a half hour. So far it felt like every Friday night at the nightclub, elbow to elbow with other sweaty people on the dance floor.

My best friend and roommate clutched my arm to pull me closer, her face flushed with excitement. “Stephen Keyes is looking right at you.”

I definitely heard her that time, but the name took me by surprise. “He moved away.”

She shrugged. “I guess he’s back.”

As casually as I could, I sent a glance over my shoulder. Carly was right. Stephen stood at the edge of the dance floor, and he was looking at me. Or, at least, he seemed to be looking at me.

I turned back around, my heart pounding.

Stephen Keyes was twenty-one years old and utterly gorgeous with jet-black hair and caramel-colored eyes. He’d been my next door neighbor for years and I had a very clear memory of him mowing lawns in the summer with his shirt off.

I’d crushed on him through high school and, as embarrassing as it was to admit, he’d been the reason I’d decided to stay in Trinity for college, even after my parents split up, sold our house, and moved to opposite ends of the country.

A year ago, Stephen also decided to move away, to California, two thousand miles away, and I figured I’d never see him again.

“Go talk to him,” Carly suggested.

“No, I’m good, thanks,” I replied immediately.

“Sam! This is fate!”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s never known I existed. And, besides, he was dating Jordan the last time I paid checked.”

“That was a million years ago,” she said, with a dismissive flick of her hand. “Ancient history. Besides, she never deserved him.”

I had to agree with her there.

Anyone looking at us would think that Carly and I were the polar opposite of each other in looks and attitude. Carly Kessler was a curvy, flippy-haired blonde with a sunny personality whereas I was a skinny, non-sunny, long-haired brunette. And yet we were best friends and had been forever. Now we were in our second year of also being roommates.

Suddenly Stephen wasn’t just lingering at the edge of the dance floor looking distant and delectable. He was standing right next to me. Carly watched, her eyes widening as Stephen leaned close enough for me to hear him over the loud throb of the music.

“Can I talk to you?” he asked.

I literally pointed at myself. “Me?”

He nodded and smiled. “Yes, you. Follow me.”

With that, he walked away, weaving through the labyrinth of sweaty dancers.

Something wicked this way comes.

The line from *Macbeth* flitted through my head. The quote suited Stephen perfectly. He might have once been the boy next door, but to me he was also wicked. And dangerous.

I didn’t do dangerous. Not anymore. Even little dangerous things tended to lead to big trouble. During my senior year at high school, I’d been busted for shoplifting—my dumb way of psychologically dealing with my parents’ divorce—although I wasn’t arrested for it, thankfully. I’d learned my lesson in a very big way that sticking your hands in dangerous places could get them chopped off.

“Follow him,” Carly urged.

Carly would storm headfirst into danger if she thought it might mean that she’d have a good time. When she was a kid, she’d stuck her hand in a beehive because she wanted to taste the honey. It hadn’t turned out so well, of course, but I had to admire her for...well, *going for it*, despite all the signs not to.

Fine. My curiosity had won out over my common sense.

With a last look at Carly, I followed Stephen off the dance floor. He led the way up a spiral staircase to the second-floor lounge, which was surrounded by glass walls with thin, swirling frosted patterns on the otherwise clear surface. Up here, away from the crowd and loudspeakers, I could actually hear myself think. The lounge had a couple of pool tables and red couches and chairs. Stephen leaned against one of the couches and studied me.

My stomach fluttered.

“So...” I began when he didn’t say anything. “Do you come here often?”

I was normally proud of my smooth comebacks, my witty one-liners, and *that* was what came out of my mouth?

Stephen grinned, showing straight white teeth. “I’m here at Crave every night, lately.”

I twisted my hair. “Cool.”

Cool? Really? I mentally kicked myself.

“I thought you moved to California,” I said. “Figured you were gone for good.”

He shrugged a shoulder. “Actually, I’ve been back for a couple weeks. Had a little business to take care of here.”

I just nodded and tried very hard not to say “cool” again.

“You come here every Friday, right, Samantha?” he asked.

A flush of pleasure went through me. I was okay with friends calling me Sam, but I liked hearing Stephen say my full name.

“Usually,” I replied.

“You must like it here.”

I looked around. There weren’t many people in the lounge tonight. It was the first time I’d even come up here, myself. The majority of people here—who were mostly Trin-U students—were downstairs on the large dance floor and at the bar area, both visible through the glass wall that circled the lounge. I could even see the top of Carly’s blond head from where I stood.

“Yeah, it’s okay, I guess,” I said.

“Just okay?”

I shrugged. “Some nights are better than others.”

Stephen reached out a hand. “Come here.”

I moved closer to him, until I was only a few feet away.

There was something strange in his gaze as he studied me. “So, you’re the special one, are you?”

That was the last thing I expected him to say. “The special one?”

He nodded. “That’s why I’m supposed to do this.”

Stephen slid his arm around my waist so that his hand rested at the small of my back, and he drew me closer to him. His touch sank into me, cool against my hot skin.

It was suddenly difficult for me to breathe. “Do what?”

“This.” He leaned closer to me, and his lips brushed against mine. I gasped and he pulled back a little. “Is this okay?” he asked. “May I kiss you?”

My cheeks warmed. “I...uh...”

Stephen spoke softly into my ear. “It’s a very dangerous kiss. It’ll change your life forever, so you have to want it. Do you want me to kiss you again, Samantha?”

If I wasn’t feeling so flustered, I might have thought he was being cocky. A kiss that could change my life forever? But...I kind of believed him. And after all this time of trying to be a perfect little angel and not doing anything that might jeopardize my future, I was more than ready to push the edges of my comfort zone just a little

“Yes, I want you to kiss me,” I told him firmly. And when he did, I slid my fingers into his black hair and pulled him even closer as if I couldn’t resist. It felt right. In fact, it felt *really* right. My lips parted as the kiss deepened. His fingers dug into my waist.

“You’re delicious,” Stephen whispered before he kissed me again and my heart felt like it was pounding right out of my chest.

And...then it got weird.

An icy sensation began to slide down my throat to my stomach and then branched out to my arms and legs, freezing my entire body. Goose bumps formed on my arms and dizziness swirled through me. It was jarring, but I couldn’t exactly say it felt bad. It was exciting, a rush, like being on a roller coaster in the middle of winter.

I lost track of time. Nothing existed for me except Stephen. His lips never left mine—and I never wanted them to. Minutes, hours, I didn’t know how long it was that he kissed me. All I knew was that it felt like I couldn’t stop kissing him even if I wanted to.

But then, finally, he pulled back and held my face between his hands. He stared at me for a heavy moment. His eyes looked so dark in the shadows of the nightclub.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Then he let go of me and walked away.

Sorry?

Time slowed to a crawl as Stephen disappeared down the stairs, the dance music becoming a hollow echo in my ears. The scent of sweat mixed with perfume slowly pulled me out of my daze. To my left I could see the multicolored lights above the dance floor. Even up here, the ground shook with the force of everyone stomping on it.

Carly appeared at the top of the stairs and approached me, glancing back in the direction Stephen had gone. “Sam! What happened?”

I tried to find my voice. “He kissed me.”

Her eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” I confirmed, just before my knees gave out and everything went black.

CHAPTER

TWO

IN MY DREAM, something moved beneath me, twisting around my ankles like thick vines. I didn't know what it was, but it was trying to drag me into a black, bottomless hole. Before it succeeded, someone grabbed hold of my hand.

Frantically I looked up to see who it was. I couldn't see him very well since it was so dark, but he was definitely *not* Stephen.

"Hold on!" His eyes were blue—so blue that they seemed to glow. He was the only thing keeping me from whatever was trying to pull me downward.

I tried to concentrate on his face but still couldn't see him clearly—only his eyes, which burned into me with their strange light.

"They were wrong, Samantha." His voice broke as he said my name. "It never should have been me. This is proof that I'm not strong enough. I've failed you. I've failed everyone. It—it's all over."

His grip on me loosened.

"No—don't let go of me!" I cried out. "Don't let—"

I slipped out of his grasp and fell, screaming, into the bottomless darkness.

"Sam! Wake up!"

Carly's voice. She sounded like she was a million miles away.

My eyelids fluttered open, and it took a moment for everything to come into focus. I lay on a red couch on my back, and I was staring up at my best

friend.

She punched me in the shoulder.

“Ow!” I exclaimed.

“Don’t scare me like that!” Then her brows drew together. “Did you eat today? I have a Snickers bar in my purse if you need it.”

“No...I’m okay.” I sat up and ran a hand through my hair, forcing my way through a tangle. “What happened?”

“Stephen kissed you and then you totally passed out for a minute—not that I blame you. That must have been some kiss. Are you really okay?”

How embarrassing. Several of the other club-goers had drawn closer to get a look at me.

“I was only out for a minute?” I asked.

“Yeah. Any longer and I would have called 911.” Her phone was in her hand, its screen lit up as if she’d been about to make a distress call. She looked over her shoulder at the others gathered nearby. “She’s okay now. Back off and give her some air.”

They did, their curiosity about the girl who fainted leaving as quickly as it had arrived.

I watched them go back to their couches and chairs, talking amongst themselves. Then I scanned the rest of the lounge with growing dismay at the idea that I’d fainted. I *never* fainted.

“Where’s Stephen?”

Carly glanced over her shoulder. “I don’t know. I think he took off. What did you two talk about?”

Our short conversation was now a blur. “Nothing, really. I don’t even know why he wanted to talk to me in the first place. He brought me up here, said I was special or something and then he kissed me.”

Her worried look shifted to one of happiness. “That must have been one hell of a kiss.”

I cringed. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Stephen Keyes kisses you, you swoon like some girl in an old movie and you’re trying to tell me it’s not a big deal?”

“If it was that big of a deal, he wouldn’t have just walked away.” I wasn’t going to let myself be too disappointed by that, but my throat felt thick. He’d even apologized. Maybe he was sorry that he didn’t find me very interesting or attractive, or maybe he was sorry that I was a lousy kisser.

And that dream I'd had about falling and the guy with the glowing blue eyes—that had been seriously disturbing.

"Can we go back to the dorm?" I asked. "Sorry, I...I'm not feeling so hot."

Actually, I was feeling cold as ice.

She opened her mouth as if to protest, but then closed it, her expression growing worried again. "You don't look so good. Yeah, we can definitely go."

"Thanks."

"Stupid Stephen Keyes," she said darkly now. "Who gives a shit about him?"

"Not me," I lied.

Frankly, I wanted to put the entire experience out of my head. Following someone wickedly sexy off to be kissed hadn't led to danger; it had led only to a familiar feeling of disappointment.

If I looked at it objectively, maybe this was for the best. I didn't need any more trouble in my life.

CHAPTER

THREE

I DIDN'T LEAVE my dorm room all day Saturday or most of Sunday and I slept in past noon all weekend. It was highly unlike me to stay in bed so long. I figured I was coming down with the flu. That could explain the passing out and my recent chills.

Late Sunday afternoon, however, I forced myself to go to the movies with Carly, and then meeting up with a few friends at a nearby diner. Even though it was only mid-October and the temperature read sixty degrees, it felt like it was freezing outside.

We paid good money to see *Zombie Queen IV*, which turned out to be possibly the worst movie in the history of mankind. As a self-proclaimed horror movie aficionado—with a deep fondness for all things George A. Romero—it took a lot to impress me.

"I'm starving," I said as we exited the theater while the credits rolled over the bloody, severed head of the hero. Even after gobbling down a large popcorn with extra butter, I was famished. It was strange. I'd pigged out all weekend. I didn't normally have such a voracious appetite.

"Maybe you're pregnant," Carly joked.

I eyed her. "Highly doubtful. Besides, doesn't pregnancy make you want to throw up?"

"It would make me want to throw up. Actually, I feel sick just thinking about it."

Carly hadn't brought up what had happened—or, rather, *not* happened—with Stephen at the club. It was appreciated more than she knew. If I could, I'd take a pill to permanently forget about the embarrassment of him walking away after our kiss and leaving me standing there all alone.

"Hey, Samantha!"

I turned to see a guy I knew in passing waving at me—Noah Tyler. He stood in a line waiting to get into the next showing of *Zombie Queen IV*.

“Be warned, that’s a ridiculously bad movie,” I said as we passed him on our way out to the lobby.

“I’ll take my chances.” Noah grinned. “You’re looking good tonight.”

“Oh...uh, thanks.”

That was a strange thing for him to say. We’d never really spoken that much before. Maybe he was just being extra-friendly tonight.

Carly didn’t say anything until we’d moved out of hearing distance. “So, what’s up with you getting hit on today? That’s the second time since we got here. Am I totally invisible all of a sudden?”

The first time was when a guy named Mike—someone else I barely talked to at Trin-U—had sat right next to me in the theater and offered up some of his popcorn after I’d devoured all of mine. I honestly hadn’t thought anything of it, but I guess Carly had noticed.

I frowned. “Who said that? I could have sworn I heard a voice, but I don’t know where it’s coming from.”

She swatted me. “You’re hilarious.”

“I have no idea what’s going on,” I told her. “Besides, he was just saying hi. That wasn’t exactly an official hit.”

“Well, if whatever this is doesn’t pass, remember to share the spoils with your roomie.”

I nodded solemnly. “Understood. I promise to share with you the wealth of men who throw themselves at my irresistible feet.”

Something smelled delicious. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, seeking the new scent past the salty, greasy odor of popcorn that surrounded us.

Carly groaned. “I seriously can’t deal with him right now. I’ll just wait over here, okay?”

“What?” I opened my eyes as she wandered off toward the concession stand. In her rush to get away, she banged against the island that held the napkins and plastic straws.

“I hope she didn’t leave because of me,” a familiar voice said.

Oh, okay. Now I understood her quick getaway. Colin Richards, Carly’s ex-boyfriend, stood only a few feet away from me.

“How did you guess?” I asked.

Colin sat behind me in my Monday morning Western Lit class, and we'd forged a bit of a friendship since the semester started last month, which was awkward considering how much Carly hated his guts. He'd cheated on her over the summer and, understandably, she'd been crushed when she learned about it. Colin tended to do crazy stuff when he was drunk. One of the crazy things he'd done was Julie Travis, who'd allegedly had her eye on Colin's broad shoulders, cropped sandy-blond hair and wicked sense of humor for a while. However, once he'd sobered up, Colin had realized his mistake, tried to make up with Carly and failed spectacularly. Carly was a lot like me in that way—she didn't get over being hurt easily. She put on a good front, but I knew she was still heartbroken.

"New haircut?" Colin asked.

I touched my dark hair, twisting a long piece around my index finger. "Not lately."

"It looks good." When he smiled, my gaze was drawn to his mouth. I'd never noticed what nice lips Colin had. Carly had told me many times that he was an amazing kisser.

I moved a little closer to him. "You smell good. Are you wearing a new cologne?"

He shrugged. "Just soap."

I pulled myself out of my sudden daze to glance over my shoulder at Carly, who was currently out of earshot. However, she was still giving me the eye. The eye that asked: *Why are you smelling my ex?*

I cleared my throat. "I need to go. I'll see you in class tomorrow, okay?"

He nodded. "Bright and early."

I turned and walked over to Carly. Her cheeks were flushed.

"Sorry," I said.

"Don't be sorry." She sent a sneer in the direction of Colin, who'd rejoined his friends on the other side of the theater. "The fact that he's still breathing isn't your fault."

"He really wants you to forgive him."

"Did he say that?"

"Well, not exactly, but it's implied."

Her lips thinned. "When he dies, I promise to put flowers on his grave. How's that?"

I shrugged. "I guess it's a start."

I wasn't sure if Carly was still upset because she really loved Colin or if it was something else. Personally, I think what had happened stung so much because he was the first guy to pursue a serious relationship with her. Still, I knew at least two other guys who'd be happy to ask her out if she'd give them half a chance. Instead, she wallowed. Which was fine since I was a bit of a wallower myself.

Carly grimaced, her gaze locked on something over my shoulder. "Brace yourself for impact. Jordan's on her way over here and she looks pissed."

I tensed up.

Jordan Fitzpatrick had exited a neighboring theater with a few of her equally unpleasant friends and was headed our way.

Nearly six feet tall with flame-red hair and a few scattered freckles on her nose, she was one of the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. I knew through the grapevine that she'd wanted to be a model. A *top* model, of course, following in her mother's footsteps. Her mom currently starred in a soap opera down in Los Angeles. Apparently, she'd pursued the modeling goal every waking moment of her junior year in high school, but ultimately failed miserably at it. Just because you were gorgeous and tall didn't mean you were photogenic.

She'd randomly decided during Freshman year that she hated me just for breathing the same air as she did. And, of course, she was also Stephen Keyes' ex-girlfriend, which probably explained why she looked like she wanted to kill me.

"I heard what you did at Crave on Friday night," she snapped.

And...there it was.

"Great to see you, too, Jordan," I said as calmly as I could.

"Julie said you were throwing yourself at him."

I decided to play dumb. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Her green eyes narrowed. "My boyfriend."

"Stephen Keyes is still your boyfriend?" Carly asked.

"He is," she hissed.

"You should probably tell him that and maybe he won't kiss other girls."

Jordan's mouth dropped open. "What did you say to me?"

Carly might not possess bottomless self-confidence, but when it came to protecting me, she did a great impression of a blonde pit bull. "I think you

heard me.”

Jordan ignored Carly like she was a mildly annoying insect and focused on me. I could see the confusion in her gaze.

“I guess I don’t understand why Stephen would want to be anywhere near a nobody like you.” Her words were sharp as glass as she twisted them into me.

In the answering silence, my stomach growled again. Loudly.

Jordan’s expression soured further. “You’re disgusting.”

“Yeah, well, you’re—” I began.

“Go to hell, loser.” With that, she spun around and walked away.

“What a bitch!” Carly exclaimed. “Just ignore her, Sam. Let’s get out of here. We’re already fifteen minutes late to meet everyone.”

Jordan had succeeded in knocking my relatively decent mood right out of me. “I think I’m going to skip it, if that’s okay with you.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

On my way, I decided that I’d grab a sandwich to stifle this hunger of mine. Or...maybe ten sandwiches.

Carly nodded. “Okay, fine, I’ll see you later. And Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“Forget about what Jordan said. She’s a troll who’s just looking to get a reaction out of you to give her pathetic little life meaning. And forget about Stephen, too. Seriously. If he can’t appreciate how amazing you are, then who needs a loser like him?”

I finally managed a real smile. “What would I ever do without you?”

She grinned back at me. “That is an excellent question.”

My stomach grumbled again as I headed out of the theater. I didn’t know why I was so hungry now. But I had the strangest feeling that a sandwich wasn’t going to help me very much.

CHAPTER

FOUR

THE TRIN-U CAMPUS was a mile east of the movie theater. While there were still plenty of shops and businesses in this area, it didn't have the same cold, gray cement look of downtown. Here there were tall oak trees that had already turned gorgeous fall colors lining the side streets.

I'd lived in Trinity, New York, all my life. After my parents' divorce, my mother and I had stayed in the same house where I grew up for another year until high school graduation. She hadn't worked when they were married, but since the split, she'd gotten her dream job in fashion that had quickly taken over her life and opened up the opportunity for a permanent and well-paying position as a buyer for a huge Seattle-based department store.

She was going to turn it down, but I insisted she take this chance of a lifetime. It meant selling our house, and for me to live on campus. Finally, she agreed to embrace this new beginning for both of us. When I visited her for a month over the summer, she'd seemed happier than she'd ever been before. Which made me happy.

A distant rumble of thunder reminded me that a rainstorm had been forecast for tonight. I wanted to return to my room before it arrived, so I picked up my pace for a few blocks.

Then something slowed me to a dead stop.

Someone sat with his back pressed against the front of an office supply shop, the closed sign in the window just above his head. His long legs lay straight across the sidewalk in front of me. His hands covered his face. I eyed a couple of people as they passed by, but they didn't even glance in his direction.

He wore ripped jeans, scuffed black boots, and a dark blue T-shirt. No coat. I drew my own black trench tighter around me to help block out the chill.

Just after my parents separated and my father moved away, I'd reacted by running away from home after a huge fight with my mother. I'd been sick of her ignoring me and I'd wanted to make a statement, make her appreciate having her only child around a bit more than she seemed to. Even though I'd known that the world didn't revolve around me, I'd figured that *her* world should. At least, a little.

I'd lived on my own in the heart of downtown for three days, only a couple of miles from here. Early on my second day, some street kids had found me sitting on the sidewalk, crying my eyes out as I felt lost and sorry for myself. They'd taken me under their protection and brought me to a local mission, where I was given a hot meal. That night, they'd let me sleep in the basement of an abandoned house they'd found on the west side of the city. Then they'd told me I should go home, since putting up with a mother like mine was way better than anything they had to deal with. Also, after my frantic mother had contacted the police about her missing daughter, it was only a matter of time before I would have been found. Still, I was on the streets long enough for potentially bad things to have happened if I'd been on my own the whole time.

I'd never seen them again, but I'd never forgotten what they'd done for me. If I could help somebody like that to pay it forward, then I would give it my best shot.

"Hey," I said to the guy on the sidewalk. "Are you okay?"

When I didn't get a response, I leaned over and tapped him lightly on his shoulder. I hated to think he might be hurt. "Can you hear me?"

A streetlamp nearby picked that moment to flicker on, and he finally pulled his hands away from his face. He blinked long lashes a few shades darker than his mahogany-colored hair. The most incredible eyes met mine—a cobalt blue so intense it felt as if he could see right through me to the other side. My breath caught. He seemed familiar to me, but I had no idea why.

He was older than I'd first thought. Early twenties, I'd guess.

His brows drew together. "Who are you?"

"I'm Samantha. Samantha Day. Do you need help? Are you hurt?"

He gazed into my eyes as if hypnotized by what he saw there. “I don’t know what to do. My—my head. It’s not working right ever since I fell.” He grimaced as if he were in pain. “My thoughts are all jumbled together.”

Concern swept through me. “You fell? Did you hit your head?”

“My head?”

I fished in my black leather bag for my phone. “If you want me to call somebody for you, I can do that.”

“I can’t find them.” There was pain in his voice, but I couldn’t tell if it was emotional or physical. “I’ve been searching night and day. It’s my fault. All my fault. I’m going to fail, and all will be lost. Everything and everyone. Forever and ever.”

He said he’d fallen, but I wasn’t so sure about that. If I was placing a bet, I’d say this was either a mental thing or a drug thing.

I studied him. Maybe I’d seen his picture somewhere as his family searched for him out on the streets, and that was why he seemed so familiar.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Bishop.”

“Okay. Is that your first name or your last name?”

“It’s...just Bishop.”

“You have only one name?” Unless he was a rock star or a chess piece, it was another sign that he was having trouble thinking straight.

“Right, only Bishop. Nothing else now.” The expression on his face was one of deep confusion. “When I volunteered for this, they told me I would be a great leader. They said there might be difficulties, but they thought I could handle whatever happened. It wasn’t supposed to be this hard. I thought I’d go back to normal when I arrived. But this...this is not normal.” He frowned and rubbed his temples. “Who are you?”

“I told you already. I’m Samantha. So, you’re looking for somebody? Is there anyone I can call to come pick you up?”

He pushed himself up from the sidewalk. He was easily a foot taller than me, although I was pretty short at five-two and currently wearing flats. The T-shirt he wore fit tight across his chest like it was a couple of sizes too small, but he didn’t have an ounce of fat on him. I felt uneasy now that he was towering over me rather than sprawled on the sidewalk, and yet I didn’t turn away from him. Those eyes—they seemed to lock me in place. And he smelled so incredible—spicy and sweet—I couldn’t even describe it properly.

Definitely, an odd reaction to a confused guy I'd randomly found on the streets.

"*Samantha*," he repeated. He cocked his head as he continued to study me with those vivid blue eyes. He was definitely attractive, but there was a coldness to his appearance, to the hard, sharp lines of his face.

I shifted back again as he drew closer to me. "What are you looking at?"

He held my gaze. "You're...beautiful."

"Thanks, I think?" I cleared my throat. "Maybe I should just leave you alone. You look, um, sturdy enough now." He might be in distress, but I wasn't going to put myself in harm's way. "But you really should call someone you know and tell them you're okay. There's a mission on Peterson Avenue. They can help you if you go there."

The chill in the air had gotten worse now that it was dark out. I began to move past him, feeling it was time to exit stage left. Besides, my strange hunger seemed to be getting worse by the minute. I needed to eat something soon. Even if it didn't really help, at least it would take the edge off whatever was wrong with me.

"Samantha, wait."

I froze and slowly turned back to the person who'd just called me *beautiful*. Not something I heard every day, that was for sure.

Bishop's expression clouded and he rubbed his temples again. "It's like a million images are hitting me all at once. Even more now that you're here with me. I only have four more days to find the others before they're lost to me. But...there's no one. Nowhere. Maybe I'm alone. Maybe they're not here. But they're supposed to be, and I'm supposed to be able to find them."

"Are you high?" It was a guess, probably a good one. I needed a reason for his odd behavior, to label it so all of this would make some kind of sense to me.

Bishop looked up at the dark sky. "High, yes. I need to be high above the city. That might help me find them."

I looked up. There were no stars tonight. The heavy clouds were threatening rain. A bright beam of light shone up above the tall buildings, back in the direction of the movie theater.

"Above the city, like...flying?" I asked, following his gaze.

He shook his head. "I can't fly here. None of us can. And it hurts so much—I can't explain it properly because I can't think properly. I—I'm damaged." He raked a hand through his dark, messy hair. "I hate feeling

this way, but I can't seem to snap out of it and get control. There has to be another way."

He leaned back against the store window, slouching as if it was difficult for him to remain standing.

I didn't want to feel responsible for this guy, but I did anyway. I liked to think I wasn't like the other coldhearted people around here. I couldn't sidestep someone just because they were in trouble.

I let out a shaky breath. "It's going to be okay, Bishop. I'll help you."

He looked at me with surprise. "You will?"

"Of course. Come with. I'll take you to the mission, okay?"

I reached for his hand. The moment I touched him, I gasped as a strong crackle of electricity coursed up my arm. And then a vision slammed into me like I'd just been flattened by a truck.

A city in darkness, melting and draining away like water in a bathtub—falling into a dark hole in the center of everything. People, thousands, and thousands of them, trying to run away but getting pulled into the vortex. There was no escape.

Bishop was there trying to help. To save everyone, including me. I reached for his hand as he yelled my name, but he was swept away from me before I could touch him.

Then it was all over.

Where there had once been a city, there was nothing but darkness.

The horrifying image left me shaking and gasping.

Bishop looked down with shock at my hand in his before I pulled away from him. Thunder rumbled in the skies above us.

"Did you see that?" I asked, my voice trembling.

He shook his head. "I didn't see anything. But when you touched me...I can suddenly think clearly for the first time in days."

I stared at him with surprise. The strange vision...had it only been my imagination?

And my dream after Stephen kissed me...the guy with the glowing blue eyes...

No. It wasn't Bishop. Of course, it wasn't.

"You're not making sense," I told him gruffly.

There was way more clarity in his gaze now. "I don't understand how this is possible, but...do you feel it, too?"

"Feel what?" I asked.

"That we have a connection. Maybe you were sent to help me. Maybe they knew I needed you to find me. That has to be it. This can't be a coincidence."

The sharp edges of the disturbing vision had softened in my mind like they were nothing more than a remembered dream. Touching him had chased his confusion away—although that made absolutely no sense. I suddenly realized it had chased my chill away, too. Warmth slid slowly up my arm and through the rest of me.

"Maybe I'll be able to find the others now," Bishop said.

"What others?" My voice sounded hoarse. "Your family?"

"No. The...the *others*. They're supposed to help me. But now you're here." He raised his blue eyes to mine, and a smile played on his lips for the first time. "I don't know what you are or where you came from but thank you."

"What do you mean, what I am?"

"To make me feel this way you must be very special...and you don't even realize it, do you?"

I almost laughed at that, but what came out sounded like a nervous hiccup. "Trust me, I'm not special. But you do seem better now. Still very strange, but better than before. Not sure I can take the credit for it, though."

"You have no idea what I've been through since I got here. I'm not used to making mistakes, but now it feels like that's all I do. I hope it'll be better now."

"Who are you looking for?" I asked.

His expression grew pained again, and he craned his neck as he looked up into the sky. "I was told there would be searchlights to help lead my way, but I can't find any. They were to be my guide and I'm lost without them."

I glanced back in the direction of the movie theater. "You don't happen to mean something like that searchlight, do you?"

His brows drew together. "I don't see anything."

I frowned and thumbed in the light's direction. "You can't see that bright beam of light over there?"

“No.” He gave me a hard, skeptical look. “But you can?”

“I don’t know how anyone could miss it. I thought it was coming from the movie theater.”

He searched my face, frowning now. “If you can really see the searchlight, you need to show me where it leads.”

I remembered the story about Carly and the hive of bees. She’d been stung five times and the doctor said she was very lucky it hadn’t been worse than that. If it were me, I wouldn’t ever have eaten honey again because of that painful memory. But not Carly. She still loved honey.

“You said you’d help me,” he said. “Did you mean it?”

Bishop wanted me to lead him to the column of bright light that he said he couldn’t see. And I was going to do it because...well, I didn’t really know why, but I was going to do it anyway.

I let out a shaky breath. “Okay, fine. It’s not too far away. Follow me.”

I’d been certain the light was coming from the movie theater. Instead, it led us to an alley behind a fast-food restaurant. When we turned the corner, the light disappeared as if someone had flicked off a switch.

At the end of the short alley, a tall guy with dark blond hair rummaged noisily through an overflowing Dumpster. He looked about the same age as Bishop. I grimaced as he put something in his mouth and started chewing. It looked like a half-eaten hamburger.

Bishop had stopped in place and was staring at the guy with an expression on his face I couldn’t put a name to. Confusion, doubt, and something else. Something bleak.

“Everything okay?” I asked him.

His shoulders tensed and he looked at me. “It will be.”

“Well, good. I assume you know that guy?”

“Don’t worry about him.” Bishop took my hand in his, and a breath caught in my chest. “I really don’t understand this.”

“That makes two of us,” I admitted.

“You saw the searchlight when I couldn’t.” He shook his head, as if trying to make sense of it all. “You were sent to help me when I needed it most—when I’d nearly given up hope. Thank you.”

I couldn’t help but grin at how dramatic he was being. “You’re very welcome.”

His expression turned tense, and he let me go so suddenly and completely that I nearly lost my balance. “You need to go now, Samantha.”

I inhaled sharply. “What?”

He nodded toward the Dumpster-diver. “I need to talk to him alone.”

“But—”

“Just go. And forget you ever met me.”

It felt like I’d just been punched in the gut, and it took me a moment to catch my breath. The cold splash of a raindrop hit my face.

“Fine. I guess you should grab your friend before he finds a dead rat to nibble on.”

There was a sliver of regret in Bishop’s blue eyes—or maybe that was just wishful thinking. He’d gotten what he needed from me and now he was giving me the brush-off.

“Goodbye, Samantha.”

“Whatever.” I turned and walked away, forcing myself not to look back.

But even as I left the alley, my steps slowed.

Did he need professional help to deal with his mental issues? And who was the garbage-eating dude in the alley Bishop had needed a beam of light in order to find? I couldn’t just walk away and forget all about this without having any of my questions answered. Even if he didn’t want me around, I still wanted to know what was going on.

Ignoring the sharp needles of cold rain, I returned to the small alley and peered around the corner.

The other guy finally noticed Bishop and abandoned his secondhand meal, dropping the remains of the burger to the dirty, wet ground. “Who the hell are you?”

Bishop didn’t speak right away. He cleared his throat first. “You don’t know me?”

“No, should I?”

“My name’s Bishop,” he said evenly. “I’m here to help you.”

“How are you going to help me?”

“Do you remember who you are? Do you remember anything at all?”

The guy ran a hand through his dirty blond hair, now damp from the rain, his expression tight and uncertain. “I woke up three days ago in a park north of here with no idea how I got there.”

“I know how,” Bishop told him.

Relief flooded his expression. “Yeah? And you can help me?”

“That’s my job.” Then, after another moment of hesitation: “Come closer.”

Bishop's voice sounded stronger now, no babbling or disjointed thoughts like before. His shoulders were broad, and he stood straight and tall, his back to me, the rain soaking through his T-shirt.

The other guy moved away from the Dumpster to stand in front of Bishop. They were the exact same height and build.

"Show me your back," Bishop instructed.

He frowned. "My back?"

"Please, it'll only take a moment. I can't make any more mistakes, even if I think I'm absolutely sure who you are."

The blond guy looked bewildered as he turned and pulled up his shirt. It was fully dark now, and the only light came from a single security lamp on a post against the gray brick wall, but I could still see enough. On either side of his spine was a detailed tattoo of wings, so large that it extended down past the waistband of his pants. I squinted a little and noted that the wings were outlined and shaded in black. Not feathery like a bird's. They were more webbed and...bat-like.

"I've seen enough," Bishop said.

The young man lowered his shirt. Just like Bishop, he wasn't wearing a coat despite the chill in the air and the falling rain.

"So now what?" he asked.

"Now you need to be brave," Bishop said.

The young man's attention shifted to the gold-bladed knife Bishop pulled from a sheath on his back that I hadn't noticed before. "What the hell are you going to do with that?"

"What I was sent here to do," he said. "My mission."

Bishop plunged the knife into his chest.

CHAPTER

FIVE

A SCREAM TORE from my throat. “No! What are you doing?”

Bishop sent a fierce glare over his shoulder at me. “You weren’t supposed to see this.”

I ran toward the young man and grabbed hold of his arm as he staggered backward. A flash of lightning forked across the sky followed by a crack of thunder, and the rain came down even harder.

He clutched at me, his eyes widening with pain and shock. I looked with horror at the blood soaking through his dirty white shirt as his grip on me grew painfully tight. ““You...you’re a Gray.”

“A what?” I managed.

But then he slipped out of my grasp, dropped to his knees and, with a last hiss of breath, fell face forward onto the pavement.

“You killed him!” I could barely breathe. I’d never seen anyone murdered before. Not in real life.

Bishop grabbed me and slammed me up against the brick wall. I shrieked as he pressed the sharp knife against my throat.

“A Gray,” he growled, and there was nothing remotely confused in his fierce expression anymore. “He’s right. That’s exactly what you are.”

“Let go of me!” I wanted to struggle, but I couldn’t move much for fear that the knife would cut me. His body pressed against mine, effortlessly pinning me. His short hair was now slicked to his forehead from the rain and his eyes glowed—literally *glowed*—with blue light. Before, I’d found his eyes beautiful, but now they were absolutely terrifying.

Just like the dream where he’d let me fall into the horrible darkness.

Somehow, some way...it *was* him. I’d dreamed about Bishop before I met him.

Something slid behind his gaze, past the fierceness. It looked like bitter disappointment. “How many souls have you devoured since you were turned?”

Tears burned my eyes and the knife at my neck made it difficult to speak or breathe. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“You’ve been kissed. Your soul is lost. You’re one of them now.”

Kissed.

The bitter taste of bile rose in my throat as I remembered what it felt like when Stephen kissed me. At the time it had felt like riding a roller coaster in the winter. Exhilarating and thrilling. It hadn’t been a normal kiss. I’d known it then, but I’d tried to pretend it never happened at all. Even though it had.

I should warn you, it’s a very dangerous kiss, Stephen had told me. It will change your life forever.

Bishop looked pained and the knife eased off a fraction. “I don’t understand why you helped me—why you *could* help me. They said that Grays would be completely controlled by their insatiable hunger. But when you touched me...”

Oh, I’d touch him, all right.

I drove my knee up between his legs as hard as I could. He gasped and let go of me. I didn’t think twice before running away. I ran as far and as fast as I could through the maze of alleys and backstreets we’d taken to get there, before looking over my shoulder. My vision was blurred by tears and rain, but I could see that he wasn’t chasing me.

Bishop was a killer. And I’d led him directly to his victim.

I stopped the first police cruiser I saw and ran to the driver’s side. “There’s been a murder!”

I quickly took the cop back to the alley, but by the time we got there it was empty. Completely empty. The cop looked at me skeptically as I craned my neck, looking for any sign of what had happened here. I knew it was the right alley. The half-eaten hamburger was still lying on the ground in a puddle.

“It happened only a few minutes ago,” I told him. “Please, you have to believe me!”

My insistence seemed to get through to him and he started to take me seriously. He asked me questions about what I’d seen and where I’d been

tonight. He told me that there had been several missing persons cases recently and that I should be careful.

I didn't pay very much attention to the news, so I'd had no idea. If I had, I never would have walked back to campus alone with my head in the clouds, stopping to help out a good-looking guy on the street. Bishop could be the reason behind these disappearances.

"I'll come back tomorrow morning to check the alley again," the cop told me. "Even with the rain, a murder like you're describing would leave blood evidence behind, but I don't see any here." He paused. "Is there any chance this was your imagination? You said you'd gone to see a horror movie earlier, right?"

I opened my mouth to argue with him, but then closed it. He was right. If I said that I'd witnessed a murder, but there was no body, no blood, only minutes after the crime had taken place, then what was he supposed to think?

What was *I* supposed to think?

He drove me back to campus in his cruiser and told me again not to worry about anything, that the police were on top of it. He assured me that the city was safe and that he was quite sure I'd just been imagining things. I nodded, my brain spinning as I felt sick to my core. He walked me to my dorm room and waited until I unlocked the door and went inside before he left. I was soaked to the skin from the rain and shaking from cold and fear.

Carly wasn't back yet. I wanted to tell her everything, but I knew I had no proof that what I'd seen was even real. I didn't think Bishop had had enough time to pick up the body and carry it away with no trace.

But I'd seen it. I *had*. It hadn't just been my imagination.

I glanced out the large window that faced the street, to make sure I hadn't been followed.

Grays are controlled by their insatiable hunger.

A sob caught in my chest. I didn't even know what a Gray was, other than a drab color. All I knew was that I was hungry all the time. And I knew, down deep, that it wasn't just for food.

The blond guy's face haunted me. He'd looked so alone and confused. I'd seen the hope in his eyes when he thought Bishop was going to help him. Instead, Bishop had stabbed him in the heart.

And then they'd both disappeared.

Despite the fact that I couldn't stop shaking, I managed to eat three slices of cold pizza from our mini fridge before I went to bed. My stomach didn't seem to care as much as my brain did that I'd been a witness to murder.

I couldn't get to sleep, staring up at the ceiling and finding scary images of monsters hidden there. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to block out my thoughts, but what I'd seen in the alley filled my head like a nonstop horror movie marathon. I normally loved horror movies; they were my escape. But they weren't nearly as much fun when you experienced them in real life.

When I finally fell asleep, I had another dream about Bishop. This time I could see him clearly as he approached me on the street, his hand held out toward me as if he wanted to touch me.

I cringed away from him. "Leave me alone!"

His face was strained and haunted. "You know I can't do that. Not anymore."

I realized I had a knife—Bishop's knife—clutched in my hand. "Stay away from me or I'll do it! I'll kill you!"

Despite my warning, he still drew closer as if he couldn't help himself.

I didn't remember stabbing him, but I must have, because the very next moment, he fell to his knees and touched the hilt of the knife sticking out of his chest with shaking hands.

His intense blue eyes locked with mine. "They can't have you. Promise me, Samantha. You won't let them have you."

When he fell heavily to his side, the light from his eyes extinguished, and he didn't move again. A cry rose in my throat. I wanted to make it all better again, make everything go away, but it was too late.

Shadows began to creep toward me from every direction. As they moved over Bishop's body, he disappeared as if he'd never been there in the first place.

"You must come with us now, Samantha," the shadows said as they drew closer and closer. Icy hands gripped me, stripping away any warmth left inside me and leaving only fear behind. "You're one of us now. You'll always be one of us."

"No!" When I tried to fight them, they began to rip me apart. But instead of blood, darkness spilled from inside me.

I forced myself awake with a blood-curdling scream.

“Holy shit,” Carly exclaimed from her bed. She must have gotten back after I fell asleep. “What the hell, Sam? Are you okay?”

I searched for her through the darkness. “Bad dream. Really bad dream.”

“A bad dream? That’s all it was? I thought you were being murdered.”

I flinched at her choice of words, wanting to tell her everything but knowing she wouldn’t believe a word I said. Why would she? I barely believed it myself. “Sorry I woke you.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay. Better now?”

“I’ll survive.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” I replied.

I had an old teddy bear named Fritz that had been relegated in the corner of our room next to a pile of textbooks. He was missing an eye, and his left arm was partially detached. I grabbed him and pulled him into bed with me, clutching him to my chest. But whatever comfort he’d given me when I was younger, he failed to deliver tonight.

An hour later, I gave up on sleep. I grabbed my laptop from the floor next to my bed and went to the website for the *Trinity Chronicle*, searching for the latest news to see if anyone had reported any stabbings or murders. There was nothing. Between this and the dismissive “it was just your imagination” reaction I’d gotten from the cop, it was like it never happened.

But it had.

I read up on recent disappearances, but none seemed related to what had happened tonight. Trinity was a big city with over a million residents. Bad things happened year-round to people all ages, all genders, all skin colors. It didn’t seem to matter who or when or why.

I propped my pillows behind me and gathered my thick duvet closer so I wouldn’t feel so cold. Then I did a Google search for *Gray*, but that didn’t give me anything useful. I mean, it was just a color, that was all. But that was what the blond guy had called me. That was what had made Bishop freak out and look at me like I was a monster, when really it was the other way around. *He* was the monster.

I closed the computer, swearing to put him and everything I’d seen and experienced completely out of my mind.

Yeah, right. As if that was even possible.

CHAPTER SIX

MONDAY MORNING LOOMED PAINFULLY bright and early. I wanted to stay hide in our room, but I knew I couldn't. Instead, I forced myself to get up and get ready for class. I stopped by the cafeteria first and had a breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast—and *more* toast—none of which made a single dent in my hunger.

When I made a pitstop in the restroom, the full-length mirror on the wall showed that I looked exactly the same as I ever had—short, skinny, with long, wild dark hair that I'd pulled back into a messy bun to keep off my face. A smear of peach-colored lip gloss and a swipe of black mascara was the sum total of my beauty regimen. Same as always.

But something had changed. Students at Trin-U were looking at me differently.

I tried to ignore the curious looks and outright stares I got as I made my way toward the lecture hall. Maybe they were staring at me because I looked like someone who'd hung out with a blue-eyed murderer last night. A murderer who'd disappeared into thin air along with his victim, making me question my own damn eyes.

"Miss Day," Professor Saunders said near the end of class. His thick glasses made him look like a disapproving owl peering down at me from a tree branch. "Are you paying attention this morning?"

It was a small class compared to some of my others, and he was notorious for publicly shaming his more inattentive students.

I straightened in my seat, flattening my palms against the cool surface of my desk, and tried to pull myself out of my thoughts. "Of course, I am."

"Then what did I just say?" he asked curtly.

I felt everyone watching me, waiting to see if I'd make a fool out of myself.

"You said—" I gulped and scanned the whiteboard for a clue "—something very important, I'm sure."

This earned me a few snickers from other students.

"Everything I say is important, Miss Day. But what *precisely* did I just say?"

The walls felt as if they were closing in on me and I suddenly had trouble breathing. I had a very strong urge to get out of there and I didn't have time to explain why. I'd face the consequences later.

I grabbed my leather bag and books before getting up from my seat. "I'm sorry. I—I'm not feeling so good."

"Miss Day?" He watched with surprise as I left my desk and escaped from the hall without another word.

The harder I tried to think about something else, the more the memories of last night clutched me like a giant, monstrous hand. I needed some fresh air.

"Hey, what happened in there?" Colin had followed me out of the hall. He held his backpack casually at his side. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I told him.

"Glad to hear it."

I crossed my arms to try to warm up. Colin wore short sleeves, which made me think that I was the only one with a temperature problem today. "You left class just to check on me?"

"Well, yeah. Of course, I did. I told the professor I wanted to make sure you're okay. He seemed concerned, so he didn't have a problem with it. You're lucky he likes you."

I shrugged. "If you say so."

"I do say so."

"You're sweet to check on me," I told him. "Thank you."

I could have sworn his cheeks flushed a little. But it was true. He *was* sweet. Except for his inability to deal with parties without drinking and then making ridiculously bad hook-up choices, he was basically the perfect guy.

"Listen, Samantha..." He raised his gaze from the scuffed floor to look at me. "I know Carly and I didn't end on good terms. Seeing her trying to avoid me last night wasn't fun."

I tensed at the mention of their breakup. "That's an understatement."

He rubbed his hand over his forehead and looked down at his feet again.
“And I know you’re her friend—”

“*Best* friend.”

“Right. Best friend. But you’re still talking to me. You haven’t given me the cold shoulder.”

Good point. I hadn’t. I couldn’t help it, I liked Colin. Him coming after me just now to make sure I wasn’t going to spontaneously combust proved that feeling was mutual.

“I know Carly doesn’t approve,” I said with a shrug, “but I make my own decisions when it comes to people I choose to talk to.”

“Good. So, yeah, I’m not sure if this might cause some friction between you two, but I just have to ask...”

“What?”

Colin raised his gaze to mine. “Do you want to go out some time?”

I wasn’t sure I’d heard him right. “Go out?”

“You and me, maybe the movies on the weekend. Or we could go to Crave. I know you like it there.”

Oh, boy.

I suddenly had the very clear image of me telling Carly about this and her not speaking to me for a few decades, even though it totally wasn’t my fault. Or maybe it was. I was still talking to Colin after everyone else associated with Carly had collectively decided to give him the death glare whenever he was nearby.

He’d drawn closer to me until there was barely a foot separating us. Too close. Anyone who saw us might get the wrong idea.

I twisted a piece of hair that had fallen out of my ponytail tightly around my index finger and inhaled deeply. “Oh, Colin. I, uh, really like you. Seriously. But—”

I stopped talking.

His scent. I didn’t believe it was just soap, like he’d said last night at the movie theater. He smelled incredibly...*edible*.

“But what?” he prompted.

I shivered, now focused entirely on his mouth. “I’m so hungry right now.”

Colin grinned. “How is it possible that you can make that sentence sound so sexy?”

“Sexy?” I repeated.

“Yeah. Very sexy.” He leaned closer to me.

No, he wasn’t leaning closer. I was pulling him closer, sliding my hands over his shoulders and around his nape to tangle into his hair.

Just as his lips were an inch from mine, I came to my senses. I braced my hands against his chest and pushed him away from me.

He looked at me with confusion. “Uh, what was that?”

“I don’t know. Sorry, I need to go.” I walked away from him. Quickly. I didn’t stop until I got outside and felt the cool morning air on my face. I gulped it in and tried to push against the hunger that had almost made me kiss Colin. The need was nearly impossible to resist.

But I’d resisted.

Something caught my eye. A blond guy stood at the bottom of the stairs by the path that led to the parking lot. He was watching me.

It was the blond guy from the alley last night. The one Bishop had killed.

He casually turned and started to walk away. Without thinking twice, I ran after him so fast that I nearly fell on the narrow path that wound through school grounds. He’d taken a seat on a bench and watched my approach. His dirty and bloody clothes from last night were gone, replaced by dark jeans and a long-sleeved black T-shirt.

“Hi there,” he greeted me casually. “Samantha, right?”

“You...” It was difficult to form coherent words. “It’s you, isn’t it?”

“Depends who you mean by *you*.”

“You’re alive.”

“Am I?” He looked down at himself, holding his arms out in front of him for inspection, then his gaze swept the length of me. “Hey, so are you. What a coincidence.”

A cloud of confusion swirled around me, making me dizzy. “But I saw you get stabbed in the chest last night.”

He got to his feet and closed the distance between us in only a couple of steps. I staggered back from him and looked around, realizing that we were all alone.

He cocked his head. “Did you *really* see me get stabbed?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Are you completely sure about that?” he asked.

I glared at him. He was mocking me, and I had no idea why. “Completely.”

He rubbed his chest. “Funny, because I feel just fine.”

“I didn’t imagine it.”

He walked a slow circle around me, and it felt like he was studying every inch of me. Like, *every* inch.

“Name’s Kraven.” His lips curled into a smile that didn’t look friendly. “I’d say I’m pleased to meet you, but that would be a lie. I mean, things like you are the reason for this little mess, aren’t they?”

My stomach churned and I wrapped my arms around myself, trying not to shiver. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I continued to deny it, even to myself. There wasn’t anything else I could do. The moment I accepted that something was seriously wrong here—and with me in particular—was the moment my entire world turned upside down.

He smirked. “Sure, you don’t. You’re totally normal, right? And that relentless hunger you’ve suddenly developed...what do you think that is? Just a regular case of the munchies?”

I shook my head, trying to block out how much he seemed to know about me. “Bishop stabbed you. I saw it with my own eyes. So why aren’t you dead?”

Kraven’s mischievous grin widened, and his amber-colored eyes began to glow bright red. “Because it takes a hell of a lot more than that to kill a demon.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

FEAR CRAWLED through my gut like a fistful of cockroaches. “A demon?”

“Impressed?” he asked.

The cold feeling grew deeper, sinking so far inside me I didn’t think I’d ever feel warm again. I was sure all the color had drained from my already pale face.

Other than his eyes, there was nothing that made him seem anything other than human. He had a small freckle at the left corner of his mouth. His hair was the kind of blond that people got if they were normally light brown but spent the entire summer outside in the sun. He looked so normal. Like someone I might see at the mall, or the movies, or...eating garbage in an alleyway.

Unlike Bishop, there was no confusion in his expression. Kraven appeared to be totally lucid.

“What do you want from me?” I managed.

“I want to do my job,” he told me. “The sooner the better.”

“What’s your job?”

“Why would I tell you all of my secrets?” Kraven brushed the front of his shirt, straightening out a wrinkle in the fabric, before his gaze, which had changed back to its normal amber color, returned to my face.

A cold line of perspiration slid down my spine. “I swear, I’m not what you think I am.”

“A hungry little Gray with an appetite for human souls?” Kraven touched my hair, and I swatted his hand away. Then he grabbed my wrists and pulled me closer to him.

Sabrina, a girl I knew from a couple shared classes, passed us and I craned my neck to track her. She was notorious for cheating off whomever

was seated next to her, including me on several occasions.

I'd never been so happy to see anyone before in my entire life.

"Sabrina, help me!" I shouted. "Please!"

She didn't even glance in my direction.

"Why can't she see me?" I struggled to pull away from him, but Kraven held me firmly in place.

He watched the girl disappear down the path. "Because I don't want her to. I cloaked us so we could have a little private chat." He looked at my mouth for a moment as if mesmerized by it. "Let's get down to business, sweetness. How many have you kissed since you've been turned?"

"I haven't kissed anyone!"

He raised an eyebrow and brought his mouth closer to mine. I could feel his warm breath on me as he spoke. "But you want to, don't you? It's a hunger you can't resist, a raw desire, an...aching need. Tell me the truth. You want to, don't you?"

"No!" I clenched my jaw, glaring at him for making it sound dirty, but inside I felt sick. I'd ached to kiss Colin just now, and it had taken everything I had to pull myself away from him. I'd tried to ignore my cravings, feed them with food each time they'd appeared, but nothing had helped.

Kraven knew that. He shouldn't have known anything about me, but he knew what I was feeling inside right now. And he saw the answer on my face even though I hadn't said it out loud.

His smile faded. "Even if I believed you, it's only a matter of time before you can't control it any longer."

He grabbed me by the throat so tight that I couldn't breathe. I scratched and beat at his arms as hard as I could, but it didn't do any good. He raised me off the ground so I was on my tiptoes.

No one could see that he was strangling me right in the middle of campus. I strained to get a breath, to scream, but I couldn't. My fingernails dug into Kraven's iron grip.

"Let go of her," someone snarled.

Bishop had appeared a dozen feet away by the bench. My eyes widened, and the fear I'd felt the last time we'd been face-to-face came back in full force along with an almost giddy elation.

The demon finally tore his gaze away from me. "Or what?"

"Or I'll kill you. Again."

Kraven slowly set me back down on the ground, releasing my throat. I wheezed and gasped for breath. “You know, you’re a serious pain in the—”

Bishop launched himself at the demon, tackling him to the ground and slamming a fist into Kraven’s jaw. Before the next hit landed Kraven grabbed him and twisted his arm away. I recovered enough to leap back as they continued to fight. More students strolled past without glancing at them or at me.

“Some angel you are.” Kraven laughed as they finally pushed apart. “Can’t even take a lowly demon like me in a fight?”

“I can take you,” Bishop growled. “I can *end* you.”

“Thought we were supposed to be working together like good friends and business partners.”

“Still up for debate as far as I’m concerned. They shouldn’t have sent you.”

“Too bad. They did. Deal with it.”

I’d been a half second from running in the opposite direction but froze in place at what I’d just heard.

“You’re an angel?” My voice sounded pitchy.

Bishop took a step toward me. “Samantha...”

I held up a shaky hand. “Don’t come any closer or I’m going to scream.”

He stayed put, his fierce gaze focused on me.

On my bedroom wall at home, I had a framed poster of an angel by a fantasy illustrator I really liked—it showed a peaceful, beautiful being of light. If anything, I would have guessed Bishop was a demon, like Kraven, from every horrible thing he’d done so far. Seeing him again had knocked every bit of confidence right out of me.

But those blue eyes of his—they were every bit as beautiful as they’d been last night.

“If you’re an angel, why are you working with a demon?” I asked.

His lips thinned. “It’s a long story.”

“Yeah, a *really* long story.” Kraven was studying me again. “Why’s she so different?”

“I don’t know.” Bishop kept his attention on me. “There’s something special about her. When she helped me with her touch—”

“Exactly what was she touching that was so memorable for you? Was it above or below the waist?”

“Watch your mouth.”

A smile tugged at Kraven’s lips, and he leered at me in a way that made me feel naked. I fought the urge to cross my arms over my chest. “You’re a mystery, Gray-girl.”

“Her name is Samantha,” Bishop growled.

Kraven rolled his eyes. “If this is going to work, you really have to loosen up. Like, seriously.”

My mind reeled—from what I was feeling to what I’d just been told flat out. I couldn’t deny that I hungered for something I couldn’t name, and my cravings had been getting worse every hour since Stephen had kissed me. When Colin had gotten too close, I’d wanted to kiss him so much that I’d practically attacked him just now. But I hadn’t. I could control it. I had so far, and I’d continue to do so.

Kraven’s unpleasant smile returned, and he moved closer to me again. I froze as he placed a hand on my shoulder. “You know, you’re kind of cute. Maybe I won’t kill you if you make it worth my while.”

My fear turned to anger, and I grabbed his hand. “Don’t touch me!”

Electricity crackled down my arm. Kraven gasped in pain and staggered backward.

“What the hell was that?” he managed to ask.

I stared at him with surprise. Good question. What just happened?

Bishop glared at him. “Stay away from her.”

Kraven frowned. “She zapped me.”

“That’s impossible.”

“I didn’t just imagine it. She did.” His grin slowly returned, and he eyed me with that hatefully amused expression. “Curiouser and curiouser.”

For a second I was reminded of when I’d first touched Bishop and the vision had slammed into me. Zapping Kraven had felt that powerful and that uncontrollable. My skin still tingled from the shock I’d given him, as if I was slowly recovering from sticking my fingers in a light socket.

“Ignore him,” Bishop said, throwing a look of pure disdain toward the demon. “Samantha, I had to find you again. After what you were able to do last night, I...we need your help.”

I regarded him with shock. “You need my help? You have got to be kidding me. I want nothing to do with you.”

His gaze shadowed. “You’re different from the other Grays—I don’t know why or how. But you are. How you found Kraven last night...there

are others like us. I need you to help me find them before they're lost forever."

My ponytail had come loose from the elastic, and I redid it firmly. "I want both of you to leave me alone."

"I know you're confused, but this is important."

Emotion lodged in my throat, making it hard to talk without sounding choked. "You're the one who's confused, because I don't care what's important to you. I hate you, whatever you are. And I want you to stay the hell away from me."

His gaze began to grow cloudy, and he pressed his fingers against his temples. "I don't know what else to say right now."

"Say goodbye," I told him. "You were more than ready to say it to me last night."

"Hey, Samantha!" Carly shouted. "What are you doing out here?"

My head whipped toward her. The shield making us invisible must have disappeared. I turned to look at Bishop and Kraven again, but they were gone.

Just like last night, they'd vanished into thin air.

"Hellooo? Earth to Samantha!"

I composed myself and hitched my shoulder strap higher, and then walked toward her, willing myself to stop trembling. "What are you doing tonight?" I asked.

"Me? Nothing. Why?"

I bit my bottom lip. "I want to go back to Crave."

Carly crossed her arms. "Why?"

"I want to try to find Stephen again."

She gave me a guarded look. "Are you sure about that?"

"I am."

"I just thought after the other night..." She frowned. "You're not really interested in him, are you?"

I gritted my teeth. "Oh, I'm interested, all right."

I was interested in getting to the bottom of what had happened to me and how I could fix it as soon as possible. And Stephen Keyes damn well better have some answers for me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I'D BURNED all day with the need to get back to Crave and confront Stephen, but now that I was here cold doubt had arrived right along with me. I guess I'd focused on my plan—weak though it was—as a way to keep from thinking too much about what had happened with Bishop and Kraven.

I wasn't convinced that I was some sort of soul-devouring monster now. No way. I was still me, nothing had changed that. But something was wrong. Really wrong. And I had to fix it.

"Okay, so where is he?" Carly scanned the floor looking for him. "Let's do this."

She thought my feelings were hurt and I wanted to lash out, and as my best friend, she was ready to back me up. I hadn't breathed a word to her about what was really going on. I wasn't sure what was stopping me, exactly. Carly, of all people, would probably believe there were angels and demons roaming the city. And ghosts, and fairies, and probably a werewolf or two.

But still, I didn't speak up. She liked to protect me from people who might pick on me. Well, I'd like to protect her from people who might do worse than throw out a few insults. Cruel names might hurt feelings, but sharp golden daggers could kill.

"I need to talk to Stephen on my own," I said. "You should stay here and wait for me."

She eyed me. "I don't get a chance to tell him off, too?"

"This is just something I need to handle myself. Less embarrassing that way."

She considered this. "Fine. But what if he's all schmoozy? All, 'I really want to kiss your delectable lips again'? You're just going to ignore it?"

“Trust me, that isn’t going to happen.”

Even if Stephen was one hundred percent innocent, his dismissive reaction to me after the kiss spoke volumes. It was funny how completely that had doused my crush on him. Like a bucket of ice water thrown on a lit match.

“Are you interested in somebody else now?” she asked.

There was a catch in her voice that made me direct my attention away from scanning the dark club to her again. “What?”

She cleared her throat. “Jordan saw you talking to Colin this morning. She said you were standing really close. Like, *really* close.”

I winced. Damn Jordan. My personal nemesis *and* a total gossip. “It was nothing.”

Her eyebrows went up and she finally raised her gaze from the ground to meet mine. I saw relief there. “Really?”

It wasn’t nothing, but getting into details about him asking me out and then me wanting to kiss him probably wouldn’t earn me any brownie points as a loyal best friend.

“I know Colin’s off-limits,” I confirmed instead. “I promise, there’s no way I’d be interested in him like that.”

“I’m done with him. But...I guess I still get jealous.” She rubbed her temples. “My brain is going to explode just thinking about this.”

“Let’s hope not. That would be Zombie-Queen-level messy.”

“I don’t want to be with him anymore, but I don’t want him to be with anyone else. Does that make some kind of psycho ex-girlfriend kind of sense?”

“Sure, it does.”

She laughed before sobering. “No, it doesn’t. I know that. He’s just the first guy who...well, you know. My first everything.”

My heart felt heavy for her. I had to be really careful how I acted around Colin from now on. I didn’t want to give him—or Carly—the wrong impression. “Sorry this sucks so much for you. And you need to open your eyes when it comes to other guys. Paul is into you, but you’ve never even looked in his direction. If you want to start dating again, you should give him a chance.”

She frowned. “Paul? Paul McKee?”

“The one and only.” He was a friend who regularly ate meals with us on campus grounds. A pal, really. But I’d have to be blind not to see the very

non-pal way he gazed at Carly on a daily basis. Of course, she never noticed because she was usually gazing somewhere else.

I scanned the nightclub. It wasn't nearly as busy as it had been on Friday. Tonight, it seemed more like a restaurant that only looked like a club. The dance floor was deserted. A quick inhale brought forth the scent of chicken wings, fries, and onion rings. Not healthy, but definitely delicious.

Something else smelled delicious in here, but I couldn't put my finger on exactly what.

Souls, a little voice inside me said. You can smell the souls of all the people near you.

The thought nauseated me. Hopefully nobody would get as close to me as Colin had earlier today. That seemed to be what set me off.

"There's loverboy now," Carly said, snapping me out of my daze. "You're right, he *is* here every night."

Sure enough, looking every bit as gorgeous as ever in black pants and a white shirt unbuttoned at the collar, Stephen walked along the side of the empty dance floor toward the spiral staircase leading to the upstairs lounge.

"Okay, I can do this," I said aloud, trying to summon some inner strength.

"Are you going to talk to him?" Carly asked. "Or just punch him in the nose?"

An excellent question.

"I haven't decided yet," I replied.

He'd done something to me. He'd even warned me about it first. He'd given me this hunger I couldn't get rid of, this craving that now haunted me every moment I was awake and the chill that stayed with me from morning till night.

I was ready to confront Stephen.

Something wicked this way comes.

This time I was talking about myself.

"Wait here," I told Carly. "Please."

"You sure you don't want me there for support?"

"I'm sure," I said. Kissing Stephen had led to me almost getting killed. It wasn't something I wanted Carly involved with. Her being here tonight was bad enough.

She nodded. "Good luck. Give him hell."

I grimaced at her choice of words after meeting a demon today. Slowly, I started up the stairs.

It'll change your life forever, so you have to want it.

I wondered if Stephen said that to all the girls. But I didn't want a kiss tonight. All I wanted was answers.

Stephen sat in the corner of the upstairs lounge on a plush red velvet chair. He watched my cautious approach as if not at all surprised to see me again.

"Samantha," he greeted me. "How are you this evening?"

My mouth felt dry. Very dry. I tried to ignore how nervous I was. "I need to talk to you."

"But you didn't answer my question. How are you?"

"Not great," I admitted.

"Sorry to hear that."

"Are you?"

"Of course, I am." He waved at the chair beside him. "Please, have a seat."

I wanted to resist but decided to do as he said. I glanced around the lounge as I took a seat on the soft chair. There were about a half dozen other people in this area, scattered around. Some were reading books, as if this was a relaxing hangout. Some were talking to each other. I didn't recognize any of them.

Doubt clouded my mind when I met Stephen's eyes again.

"You walked away after you kissed me," I said, and immediately felt silly. Like some jilted girl who drew hearts in her binder all day long and daydreamed about boys.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Really."

His answer surprised me. "You are?"

Stephen's dark brows drew together "I needed to take care of something important. And it couldn't wait a moment longer or it would have been too late."

I eyed him skeptically. "What did you do to me?"

"Excuse me?"

"When you kissed me. You did something bad."

"Is that what you think?"

"That's what I know."

Stephen leaned back in his chair, studying me as if looking for clues to the same mystery I wanted solved. “It was just a kiss, nothing more. Sorry if you took it to mean more than that.”

There was no time for eloquence, so I just blurted it out. “Did you do something to my soul?”

His brows went up. “Excuse me?”

“Answer my damn question.” Now I sounded impressively strong, considering I was quaking inside.

Stephen stood up and moved toward the glass barrier to look down at the rest of the club. He didn’t reply.

After a long moment, with only the boom of the music below filling my ears, I got up and approached him. “It did something, that kiss. It changed me, didn’t it?”

“I did warn you,” he said.

I’d wanted him to look confused or annoyed by me talking to him about this. I’d wanted him to not know what the hell I was talking about. But it was all too clear that he knew exactly what I meant. This wasn’t a misunderstanding or an epic practical joke. This was real.

I chanced a look around the lounge to see that our discussion hadn’t earned so much as a curious glance from the others. “You did something to my soul, I know that much. They called me a Gray. Why would you do that to me and then just let me walk away with no warning of what might happen?”

He frowned. “A Gray? Who have you been talking to about this?”

“I’m the one asking questions here, not answering them,” I told him.

Stephen sat down again, looking like a handsome prince on a velvet throne. “You’re supposed to be different from the others. Otherwise, I would have at least warned you about the hunger...” He trailed off and then studied me quizzically. “But you’re able to fight it, aren’t you? Even without me telling you anything about it first. You don’t seem any different than you were before.”

I shook my head. “I’m different. I’m hungry all the time now.”

“But you’re not feeding. Not yet, anyway.”

My shivering increased. I knew he wasn’t talking about potato chips or cheeseburgers.

“Tell me what you did to me,” I demanded. “What is this hunger? I keep eating and eating and I can’t get full.”

He shook his head. "Food won't satisfy you. Not anymore."

My bottom lip wobbled as I started to lose my composure. "What am I?"

Stephen stood up and reached toward me, gently tucking a piece of long, dark hair behind my ear. His expression regained its previous confidence as he smiled. "You're something special now. Something amazing."

Bishop had called me special, too, shortly before he'd put that knife to my throat. The word put me on edge.

"I'm a Gray," I said, my throat tight enough that it was difficult to breathe.

Stephen's smile wavered and an edge of confusion slid behind his gaze as if he wasn't familiar with the term. But that was what Bishop and Kraven had called it. "What you are isn't a bad thing. It really isn't. But you do have to be careful. There are ways of controlling the hunger through the kiss." He leaned close to whisper in my ear. "You and me, if you like, without doing any harm. Whenever we want to. As much as we want to."

A week ago, an opportunity like this might have sounded like a dream come true, but now...

It didn't feel like a dream. More like a nightmare.

I half expected him to rip off his face to show a literal monster underneath, just before he attacked me. But he didn't do any ripping or attacking.

When Stephen took my hand in his, I yanked it away from him. His skin was cold, and it made me shudder.

He blinked. "Our body temperatures are lower now. Yours is getting there. It's one of the side effects of not having a soul."

Finally, confirmation. He'd somehow managed to steal my soul in that kiss.

"How do I get it back?" My voice broke.

He cocked his head. "Why would you want it back? You're better now."

How could he be so infuriatingly calm about something like this? "Because it's my soul. You took it and I want you to give it back. Now."

His expression didn't change. "I can't give it back to you. It's gone."

My soul was gone. Something I hadn't really thought about as a tangible piece of me had been ripped away and destroyed without my permission.

My hands clenched into fists at my sides. “You can’t just steal something so important from me and expect I’m going to be okay with that. Why did you think I’d be different from the others? Why did you pick me?”

“That doesn’t matter right now.” Stephen’s eyes narrowed. “A soul is a burden on a human, an anchor. Trust me...you’re better off without it. I never knew how much my soul held me back, but it did. I was miserable—self-doubting, worried, anxious, living a life others planned for me. I had no control over myself. Now I do. The world has opened up to me. It was my soul that held me back. You’ll come to see that I’m telling the truth. The hunger can be managed. It’s all worth it.”

He’d done it. My soul was gone. And now I hungered to do the same to others as Stephen had done to me. This wasn’t going to get any better; it was only going to get worse. That must be what had happened with Colin outside of the lecture hall this morning. I’d been so close...too close...

I turned and stalked away. My mind was a jumble of information, and I had no idea how to process it all.

“Where are you going?” Stephen’s hand closed on my upper arm, and he jerked me to a stop before I reached the staircase, wrenching me back around to face him.

“Let go of me!” I snarled, trying to fight the burning sting of tears in my eyes.

Unfortunately, no protective zapping occurred to blast him back from me like it had this morning with Kraven. I half expected his eyes to glow red like the demon’s had, but they remained the same caramel color as always.

“I have some questions for you, too, Samantha. You can’t just walk away from me yet.”

I looked around at the others for help, but they still weren’t paying attention to us. Considering our heated discussion and the fact he was now physically restraining me from leaving, that shocked me.

“Help!” I called out, loud enough to be heard over the constant musical background to Crave. “He won’t let me leave!”

“Don’t bother,” Stephen said. “They’re all with me—my new brothers and sisters. Your new brothers and sisters.”

A gasp caught in my throat. “They look so normal.”

“They’re better than normal.”

A second glance showed they were all very attractive, well dressed and had an air of self-confidence. Stephen had said losing your soul was a freeing experience. Looked like these Grays agreed with him.

If that was so, then why didn't I feel that way too?

"Now, my question..." Stephen drew me closer to him. "Who have you been talking to about this since Friday night? I need to know."

"Why do you care?"

"If there's someone out there with knowledge of us, they might not understand. They might try to get in the way. She won't like that." His grip tightened. I tried to pull away, but I couldn't. "Answer me, Samantha. Who were you talking to?"

Before I could say anything, a deep, familiar voice answered instead.

"She was talking to me."

I whipped my head around. Bishop was standing at the top of the stairs. Our eyes met for a brief moment before he shifted his focus to Stephen.

"Who the hell are you?" Stephen snapped.

"Let Samantha go and maybe we'll talk about it."

Stephen released me. His tight grip had left a red imprint on my skin. His angry expression shifted to neutral as he eyed Bishop.

"There," he said pleasantly. "I let her go."

Bishop glanced around the lounge area. "You grab girls a lot around here?"

Stephen smirked. "Usually, it's the other way around."

"How nice for you. So, you're the one who did this to her, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Bishop's gaze flicked to me as I rubbed my arm. "Are you okay?"

While I was glad he'd gotten Stephen to let go of me, I wasn't running into Bishop's arms with gratitude. "Did you follow me here?" I demanded.

"Something like that."

I let out a frustrated groan. "Why is everyone avoiding my damn questions tonight?"

Bishop's brows went up. "Okay, fine. Yes, I followed you here. Better?"

"Yes. Stalkery, but better."

"I'm not stalking you."

"Spoken like a true stalker."

"So let me start again." Stephen eyed Bishop with distaste. "Who are you and what do you want?"

There was nothing pleasant about the way Bishop studied him back. In fact, he looked predatory. “You’re the one who kissed Samantha, aren’t you?”

Again, Stephen didn’t seem inclined to answer that particular question, so I did it for him.

“It was him,” I said. “Here on Friday night.”

Bishop’s glare turned into a glower. “Why wouldn’t you explain what it meant to her? What she could expect? It was the least you could do.”

“Luckily for her, you filled her in on the details. Didn’t you?” Stephen walked an appraising circle around Bishop. “I don’t know you. You’re not one of us, which makes me wonder what business it is of yours.”

“Trust me, it’s my business.”

Stephen shrugged. “She liked it. She was practically begging me to kiss her.”

“What an asshole,” I growled. “Begging? Hardly.”

A muscle in Bishop’s cheek twitched. “She didn’t understand what it meant.”

“She’s with me now.” Stephen drew closer, as if challenging Bishop to shove him back. “You got a problem with that?”

“Excuse me?” I said. “I’m with you? Not the last time I checked.”

He gave me an amused look. “You’ll get used to the idea eventually. Be happy about it, even.”

“Don’t count on it.”

“Where’s the Source?” Bishop asked evenly.

Stephen didn’t speak for a moment, but then he laughed. “Again, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do. The one who created you. Created all of you. I need to meet with her. Soon. We have important things to discuss.”

Stephen grabbed hold of the front of Bishop’s T-shirt. “No, what you need to do is leave. And Samantha is going to stay right here with me, where she belongs. Give her a few minutes and she’ll be enjoying herself.”

The next moment, he gasped as Bishop pressed the tip of his golden dagger up under his chin.

“Get that thing away from me,” Stephen managed.

“Why would I? From what you’ve told me so far, I’m thinking you’re just a minion. You’re meaningless. You turned Samantha against her will and gave her the hunger. I don’t care if she wanted to kiss you or not. She

didn't know what it meant. That she isn't now consuming souls all over the city is her saving grace in my eyes. She's different than the rest of you. She's special."

There was that word again in relation to yours truly.

Bishop had finally gotten the attention of the others hanging out in the lounge area, but not one made a move to help Stephen. Couldn't say I blamed them. That knife was very sharp.

And...I think it was glowing a little, just like Bishop's eyes had last night. That was no normal knife. And Bishop was no normal guy.

But I already knew that.

The corner of Stephen's mouth turned up in a half grimace, half grin. "You're going to kill me right here? In the middle of a club full of people? You'll never get out in one piece."

"Nice of you to worry about my well-being. Thanks for that. Now, why don't you make things easier on both of us. Where is the Source?"

"I don't know."

"Then you're not much use to me, are you?" Bishop dug the sharp tip of the knife deep enough that a thin trail of blood ran down Stephen's throat.

Stephen's voice turned pitchy. "She doesn't just stroll in here every night shaking hands and kissing babies. I don't find her, she finds me."

"At least now you've confirmed she's here in Trinity."

An edge of defeat went through Stephen's eyes. "Are you going to kill me?"

"And risk opening up the Hollow in here? Not tonight."

Stephen frowned. "What's the Hollow?"

Bishop gave him a wry grin. "Guess your boss hasn't told you everything, has she? Sucks for you. When was the last time you fed?"

"Friday. With Samantha. The others here aren't feeding."

"And why is that?" Bishop actually looked amused by this. "You know what happens if you feed too much? Have you seen it with your own eyes?"

Stephen's expression shadowed and, if you ask me, went a little green. "The one you're calling the Source tells us what to do. She warned us what could happen if we get too greedy, and most of us believed her."

"Does she come here?"

"No. This is where I hang out. She's never been here before."

Bishop's eyes narrowed. "Don't approach Samantha again."

"I didn't approach her. She came here."

“I don’t care. From this moment forward, she’s under my protection.”

“Your protection? Who the hell are you?”

“Tell your boss that this entire city is now protected by me and others like me and I will find her for that conversation I mentioned. I’m sure she already knows she can’t leave—that none of you can. You’re trapped. There’s an invisible barrier surrounding this entire city that things like you can’t breach.”

Stephen frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“That’s painfully obvious. We’re done here.” Bishop finally let him go and Stephen staggered back a couple steps. His gaze returned to the golden dagger as Bishop sheathed it. “By the way, if I ever see you again, I will kill you, whether you’re feeding regularly or not. Have a nice night.”

Then he turned, took my arm, and guided me down the stairs.

Nobody followed us.

CHAPTER

NINE

AT THE BOTTOM of the spiral staircase, I pulled away from Bishop's grip. I wanted to find Carly and get out of there as soon as possible.

He eyed me. "You're welcome."

A million insults swelled inside me, battling the relief that I was away from Stephen. "You think you can just push me around like that?"

Bishop didn't look much friendlier than I felt. "What were you thinking, coming here, and seeking him out? Are you looking for trouble?"

"Have you been following me? Hiding in the bushes? Do you have a pair of binoculars trained on my dorm room window, too? Trust me, I always pull the blinds before I get naked."

His eyes burned into mine. "Are you always this irrational or is this just my lucky night?"

I took a deep breath and wondered when the serenity Stephen mentioned might start. "Where's Kraven? Is he stalking me, too?"

"I'm not stalking you. Once I met you, touched you, I became able to track you. It's a talent I have—one of the very few I haven't managed to lose."

"Oh, that sounds much better. *Tracking me*. Nothing weird about that."

"You could have been hurt confronting that thing up there," he told me. "Not the smartest move."

"Says the guy with the big, sharp, glowy concealed weapon."

His annoyed expression turned to one of concern. "Tell me what happened."

I crossed my arms. "I wanted to know how to get my...my soul back. Before that I wanted to know if it was even true, that it was gone. I don't feel any different."

His blue eyes met mine directly. “Yes, you do.”

“What, are you in my head or something? I don’t. I’m hungry and I’m always cold, but other than that there’s nothing wrong with me.”

“Which is one of the things that is wrong. You should feel different.”

“But I don’t.”

Bishop scanned the club as if assessing it for incoming threats. I was surprised he hadn’t insisted we leave, but I wasn’t going anywhere until I found Carly again. He was the one who should leave. Even though it was a weeknight, the music playing on the main floor was still loud. I had to stay closer to Bishop than I liked in order to hear him. Close enough to smell him—and he smelled just as good tonight as he had last night. Warm, clean, spicy. Maybe it was a special angels-only cologne.

He smelled way too good. I forced myself to take a step back.

“How are your hungers right now?” he asked, as if he’d read my mind.

“Bad.” They’d ramped up to an impossible-to-ignore level in the past few minutes, actually. I eyed a passing tray of chicken wings. “Maybe I should eat something.”

“You think food will satisfy you?”

“I’m not loving the alternative.” My attention was irresistibly drawn to his mouth as I remembered Stephen’s offer. “Unless you’re volunteering.”

Immediately my cheeks heated. Where had that come from?

Bishop raked a hand through his short, dark hair. “Sorry, but angels don’t have souls. I wouldn’t be able to help your hunger very much.” He watched me with cautious interest, as if he expected me to burst into flames at any moment.

Now I had a vivid and unwelcome image of kissing Bishop lodged in my head and couldn’t shake it loose.

Pulling off his T-shirt so I could feel his bare skin against mine. Pushing him down on my bed and then...

Shit.

No. No, no, no. Where had that come from?

Think about something else, I told myself firmly.

Angels didn’t have souls. Okay. I added that to my very limited knowledge about him. “I wasn’t sure who I hated more, you or Kraven, but I’ve decided that it’s you.”

He didn’t seem surprised. “And what brought me ahead in the race?”

“The fact that I originally liked you.” That seemed to shut him up. Nice to know that the angel had no comeback for once. “How’s your head?” I asked.

“It’s been better. I don’t like feeling this way.”

“But you’re feeling relatively okay now?”

We were tucked into a corner, away from everyone, but Bishop still looked around to check whether anyone was eavesdropping, even though the music was more than loud enough to shield us. “No. The confusion hasn’t gone away. It’s still circling. It’ll come back...it’s only a matter of time.”

“Kraven seemed fine.”

That earned me a sharp look. “Kraven was protected when he entered the city. I was not. That’s why he had to go through the ritual, so his true self could be returned to him.”

I stared at him. “Your lips are moving but I’m not understanding a damn word.”

“Seems to be the theme of the week.”

I glanced around the club for Carly and spotted her chatting with a couple of our friends. I hoped she’d be done soon so we could leave—the sooner the better. Reassured of her safety, I turned back to Bishop. “So, the ritual involves you stabbing him with that big, shiny knife of yours,” I said.

“Yes.”

I shuddered at the memory. “That sounds like the worst ritual ever created. Like, ever.”

“His temporarily mortal form had to die in order to be reborn with his memories and his true self returned,” he explained. “And, yes, it has to be done with this big, shiny knife of mine. But trust me, there are worse rituals that have been created.”

I swear, most of the time it felt like he was making fun of me. “So, demons can be stabbed in the chest and just bounce back from it like it’s no big deal?”

“Regular knives won’t hurt demons. They’re immortal, just like angels. This dagger, however, is very special.”

Why was I still talking to him? Why couldn’t I just turn away and go get Carly?

I shook my head. “I’m officially not a part of this. I’m walking away, going back to my normal life, okay? And that means I don’t want you

anywhere near me—tracking, stalking, harassing, whatever.”

Bishop hissed out a sigh. “You can’t be normal again, Samantha. You’re a Gray now. It’s been confirmed both to me and to you. Even though you’re different from the others, it doesn’t change what you are. What you need.”

To kiss someone. Badly. Even a soulless, dangerous, and frustrating angel. My cheeks now flushed more from anger than embarrassment. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know *exactly* what I’m talking about. I’m here because of Grays. That’s why the others are here as well, like...Kraven.” He said the demon’s name with distaste. “Grays can’t leave the city—no supernatural can. I need to find the Source. She’s the one who’s responsible for this new infestation. It’s like a disease that will keep spreading if we don’t stop it. And we’ll use force to stop Grays whenever necessary.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but I felt even colder at that. “With that shiny dagger of yours?”

He didn’t flinch. “Grays consume souls. If they give in to their hunger, it will kill a weaker human. Stronger humans can survive losing their soul, but they will become infected—they’ll become a Gray, too. Being Gray changes them, and Grays who feed too much, get too greedy, are incredibly dangerous. I’ve already seen it.”

Fear shuddered through me. “Change how?”

Bishop’s gaze searched mine as if he was looking for more answers there. “Being soulless strips humanity and reason away from the very start. But if a Gray feeds, it makes it more uncontrollable.”

“But I don’t have a soul and I feel the same as I ever did,” I countered. “I definitely know right from wrong.”

His dark brows drew together. “You’re different. I don’t know why or how it’s possible, but you are. Maybe it’s because you haven’t fed yet. You can’t give in to the hunger, Samantha, or it will change you.”

I shook my head. “You’re lying to me. About all of this.”

“Angels don’t lie.”

I gaped at him. “I still don’t believe you’re an angel.”

“Do you believe Kraven is a demon?”

“I don’t know.” I thought back to the scene in the alley last night. “Do you have a tattoo like he does? Is that some sort of a sign of what you are?”

“It’s not a tattoo. Our wings are made of energy that isn’t visible or accessible in the human world. But their imprint remains on us.”

“Show me.”

“You can’t just take my word for it?”

“No. Show me your...your imprint, or whatever it is.”

“Will that be enough to convince you?”

“I don’t know.”

Bishop gave me a stern look. “I don’t take orders from anyone. I’m the leader on this mission.”

I felt sick and confused, but determined, too. All I could focus on was one thing at a time or I would be overwhelmed. *More* overwhelmed.

“Here’s how I see it, Bishop. You were sent here to take care of a problem. I’m part of that problem, according to you. However, you already figured out that I’m different. I saw that light in the sky when you couldn’t—and you don’t know if you’ll be able to. You can’t find the others, not without me. And you have only a short time to find them, or they’ll be lost forever.”

Bishop didn’t look pleased by the reminder that he wasn’t necessarily the one in charge at the moment. “Go on,” he said thinly.

“That guy up there.” I thrust my thumb in the direction of the upstairs lounge. “No question that he’s a total creep, but he also promised to help me. Stephen said I was like him, like the others. That I had a place to belong now. So, my question is, why would I want to have anything to do with you when I can hang out with my new friends?”

It was the last thing I wanted, but currently my only bargaining chip.

Bishop was silent for a long moment. “Because if you say you really haven’t changed, then you must see how wrong all of this is.”

The angel was right, but I didn’t want to let on that was how I felt. Something was off about Stephen. Really off. He was cold, in both body and mind. He said this had freed him from his previous problems, but I wasn’t convinced. Something that felt this bad—feeding off other people’s souls—just couldn’t be right, no matter how he tried to spin it.

To my knowledge, a soul didn’t have substance. But it existed and it was priceless. It was what went to Heaven after you died. Your spirit that lived on even when the rest of you was dead.

And mine was gone.

I swallowed past the thick lump in my throat and forced myself to stay strong. To not let Bishop think he had the upper hand. I had something he wanted, and I still wasn’t sure I wanted to give it to him. But I needed

something to believe, something that might make all of this remotely okay again.

“Show me your imprint,” I said firmly. “And maybe we can work something out between us.”

Bishop’s blue eyes sparked with emotion as he studied me. Nobody had ever looked at me like that in my entire life, like he could overpower me in an instant but was trying very hard to hold himself back.

When he turned away from me, my heart lurched, and I thought he was going to leave. But he didn’t. After doing another sweep of the area, probably to make sure we didn’t have an audience, he grabbed hold of the bottom of his shirt and pulled it up. Not all the way, but enough for me to see some skin.

It was dark in this corner of Crave, but there was enough light to see the imprint on his back. It was different from Kraven’s black, bat-like tattoo. This was more of an outline with some light shading. It looked like actual feathers. Then again, Kraven was a demon and Bishop was...

An angel.

I still wanted to deny it, but that was getting harder with every passing minute.

“You see it?” he asked, glancing at me over his shoulder.

I nodded. He was about to pull his shirt back down, but I wasn’t finished yet.

“Wait.” I drew closer to him so I could get a better look. If it wasn’t ink, then what was it? I ran my fingers over the lines to find it didn’t feel like anything but smooth skin. But I felt something else—an energy, a hum, one that warmed me being this close to him.

When I’d touched him the first time, I’d had that strange vision that had since faded. For a while, I’d assumed it was just my imagination running wild, but now I wasn’t so sure. Bishop looked like a painfully attractive guy in his early twenties with dark hair and vivid blue eyes, but he wasn’t that. Not at all.

“You’re an angel,” I finally said.

“Thank you for the confirmation. Done yet or should we get a room?”

I pulled my hand away from him so fast it was comical. Bishop lowered his shirt and glanced at me as if he, too, was surprised I’d been running my hands over his body only minutes after telling him how much I hated him.

An angel. Here in Trinity.

And I'd just totally groped him in public.

"Sam...?" Carly was approaching us slowly.

I cringed and turned to look at her. "Uh-huh?"

"What's going on?"

Good question. I wondered how much of that she'd witnessed. By the look on her face, probably too much.

"Nothing." Denial was always a nice thing, even when it didn't help at all.

She flicked a glance at Bishop. "Who's he?"

"Nobody. We should go now." I grabbed her arm and started to direct her toward the exit. I felt a strong urge to get Carly somewhere much safer. And I needed to regroup and decide what to do about my problem.

"Leave? Right when it looks like you're starting to have some fun?" She was actually smiling. My life was falling apart, and she thought it was hilarious.

"No, Samantha," Bishop said. "We're not done here. There's too much to do to wait another day. I need your help now."

Carly wagged her eyebrows. "He needs your help, Sam."

"It's not like that." I pulled her farther away from the blue-eyed angel. We were so close to the exit. Just another dozen feet to freedom. I stole another glance at Bishop, who'd stopped following and was now staring at me, and I tried to ignore my racing heart.

"I knew there was a reason we came here tonight," Carly whispered. "I thought it was so you could confront Stephen, but it was so you could meet this guy. He's a total hottie. Guess you're breaking that no-romance rule of yours, aren't you?"

I grimaced. "It wasn't what it looked like."

"Sure, it wasn't." Her smile faded a little. "I'm all for you finding someone gorgeous and amazing. As long as it isn't Colin."

Oh, right. Colin. I dreaded seeing him again tomorrow. He'd asked me out and then I'd nearly accosted his mouth. There was no way he wasn't going to take that the wrong way. He probably thought I was into him.

For the record, I wasn't. However, just thinking about how close I'd come to kissing him made my hunger rise.

Carly slanted another glance in Bishop's direction. He stood with his arms crossed, leaning against the wall near the staircase. He wasn't

watching me now; his gaze was on the rest of the club as he did another security check.

“Can you give me a second?” I asked Carly. “I need to talk to him.”

Her smile returned. “Go for it.”

“Wait here.”

As I walked toward Bishop, his gaze locked with mine and my breath caught. It was kind of annoying how affected I was by this guy.

“It’s been a long day,” I said. “I want to go home now.”

He shook his head. “You need to come with me.”

“I just told you a few minutes ago that I never want to see you again,” I replied firmly.

“If I don’t find the others, they’ll be permanently lost, wandering the city, unsure of how they got here or who they are.” Frustration crossed his expression. “I should be able to find them myself, but I can’t.”

“Why can’t you?” I asked.

Bishop shook his head. “The searchlights were my only clue, but they’re invisible to me. I must be damaged from entering the city. They told me I might be disoriented, but this is worse than that, and I don’t know why. It could jeopardize my entire mission. But there’s no way I can get a message to them that things went wrong. I’m on my own.”

I twisted a long piece of hair tightly around my finger. “Why can I see the searchlights?”

“No idea.” His dark brows knitted together. “Maybe it was prearranged—a plan B nobody told me about. How else could you have found me last night?”

“I was on my way back to my dorm, that’s all. I’m no plan B.” I swallowed hard. “I can’t deal with this right now. I need time to think.”

“You need me, Samantha. Without me, you’ll be back here again looking for that Gray’s help.” He cast a poisonous glance at the lounge over our heads. “Trust me when I say that would be a big mistake.”

Tears burned my eyes, but I forced myself to blink them away. “According to Stephen, losing a soul’s a great thing, but I know this hunger is bad. And according to you, I could kill people if I lose control. And I could change into something else, right?”

He nodded. “If you can’t control your hunger, you’ll become mindless, like a zombie whose only desire is to feed.”

He wasn't easing my mind, and yet I hadn't pulled away from him. "So, what am I supposed to do?"

There was a short hesitation before he spoke again. "Help me. And I'll help you."

My breath caught. "You can help me?"

"I can."

"But...how? My soul, it—it's gone. Stephen said it's gone forever. I can't get it back."

Bishop sent another glance through the club before locking gazes with me again. "He was wrong. I believe I can help you restore your soul."

I felt a sharp, hopeful lurch in my chest. "How?"

"Here's the thing. I'll help you, Samantha, but you have to help me in return. That's the deal."

I looked at him bleakly. "I thought only demons and car salesmen made deals. Not angels."

"I need you to find the others for me. I'll make a deal with you to make that possible. It's that simple."

His controlled expression gave nothing away, but his eyes—they told another story. They were filled with worry, with hope, and all of it was directed at me. I held the fate of his mission in my hands—according to him, anyway. And he held my entire future in his.

Even though I was essentially one of the monsters, he was willing to bargain with me. If there'd been an outbreak of vampires in the city, I wouldn't blink at the thought of vampire hunters running around with wooden stakes taking care of the problem.

Then again if I was one of the vampires...

"Would you have killed me last night in the alley if I hadn't gotten away?" I finally asked. "Despite our 'connection,' despite me being 'special'? Would you have?"

Bishop's brows drew together, and it took him a moment to answer. "I hadn't realized what you were until Kraven pointed it out, so it took me by surprise. I should be able to sense that, too. But you aren't feeding, you aren't putting anyone at risk. You're coherent and thinking rationally. No, I wouldn't have killed you."

"Liar."

His eyes flicked sharply to mine as if I'd insulted him. After all, he had just told me that angels didn't lie. "I can't change what's happened so far or

what you think I would or wouldn't have done. The question is, what do you want to do next?"

"If I help you find your friends—and you help to restore my soul—you also have to promise to keep me safe, just like you told Stephen you would."

I was revising the contract as we went along. My father was a successful lawyer, so I supposed it came naturally.

He raised an eyebrow. "Deal. I also have another condition of my own."

Great. Although, I supposed it was only fair. "What is it?"

"When I need you to, you'll help clear my mind."

"You need me to...?" I began, but then I got it. "That magic, mind-clearing touch of mine."

"Yes," he said, his expression tight as if it pained him to admit it.

I'd twisted my hair so tight that the tip of my finger had turned a lovely shade of purple. "Fine. It's a deal."

I'd help him. I had no other choice from where I stood, other than going back upstairs and getting cozy with Stephen and his new "brothers and sisters."

Carly must have gotten tired of waiting, because suddenly there she was, stretching her hand out to Bishop.

"I'm Carly, by the way," she said. "Nice to meet you."

Bishop hesitated a moment before he shook Carly's hand. "Bishop."

"So, are we leaving or what, Sam?" she asked. "What's going on?"

That was the question of the day. What was going on?

I might not feel like a monster who hungered for human souls, but kissing Stephen had changed me and could eventually take me down a very dark road if I didn't do anything to fix it. Bishop had said he could restore my soul, which would take away the hunger I now constantly felt.

Stephen had offered no such solution.

"You need to go back to the dorm, Carly," I said.

She frowned. "But—"

"Please. It's important. Don't ask me why, but you need to get out of here right now."

"Okay, Ms. Dramatic. Are you coming with me?"

"No, I have to do something first."

"With him?"

My jaw tightened. "Yeah."

Carly looked confused. “So, you’re ditching me for some guy you just met?”

I wasn’t the kind of girl who ditched her friends for some hot guy, so I could understand her confusion. Giving him my time and attention was one thing, but leaving with him was another.

“I’m not ditching you,” I said firmly. I didn’t have time to argue about this. “Just—please, trust me and go. I’ll see you later.”

“Fine, whatever,” she said with a shrug.

I turned back to Bishop. “Let’s go.”

“Sam!” Carly called after me as Bishop and I moved toward the exit. “You never told me what happened with Stephen.”

“Later, I promise,” I told her. Then I looked at Bishop. “You have one hour. That’s it.”

He shook his head. “That won’t be enough time.”

“Too bad. That’s all I’m willing to give you tonight. Take it or leave it.”

He glared at me. I mean, contrary to what Carly might think and any confusing feelings or momentary sexy flashes I needed to sort through, I wasn’t interested in Bishop romantically. If I’d thought Stephen was trouble, then this guy was trouble times a thousand.

“Fine,” he said, his jaw tight. “I’ll take it.”

I cast a final glance over my shoulder. Stephen stood behind the glass barrier on the second floor, watching us as we left the club.

CHAPTER TEN

IT WAS JUST BEFORE nine o'clock on Monday night and I was walking the streets with a literal angel who looked like he could be a Trin-U student.

My mother once read this book that said when she was overwhelmed by stuff she couldn't control, she should focus on what was happening right at that moment. Basically, it meant that what happened in the past was over and what might happen in the future was not worth thinking about yet if it was only going to cause anxiety.

Live in the now. Right here. Right now. Nowhere else.

So, I focused on doing just that. I didn't think about my missing soul or who'd stolen it from me in a kiss that, for a few fleeting moments, I'd honestly thought had meant something—that the guy I'd had a huge crush on last year had finally noticed me, thought I was worthy of his attention, but instead had turned out to be a monster in disguise.

Nope. Instead, I thought about how tight my shoes felt and how they'd never been meant for long walks like this. And how chilly the wind felt against my face. Instead of thinking about what my swirling hunger meant, I focused on the gorgeous soul-free angel walking next to me who smelled like Heaven, which, I guess made sense.

Information—that's what I needed. And there was only one way I could think of to get it: Ask.

I braved a glance at Bishop. "I have a question."

"What?"

"Why are you working with a demon? Angels and demons...well, I'd assume you should be enemies."

"More like adversaries."

“Whatever. So...what’s going on? I mean, you and Kraven, you don’t seem to like each other much.”

He hesitated. “We don’t.”

“You hate him?”

“Angels don’t hate.”

Bishop seemed to talk like that. Short answers and sometimes a little too formal for someone who looked to be his age. “How old are you? Do angels even have ages?”

That earned me a look. “How old do I look?”

“Twenty-one? Maybe twenty-two? I’m guessing?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “Close enough.”

Okay. “So, the non-hating thing. What about, like, fiery vengeance and smiting the unholy? Angels do that, right?”

This earned me a half grin, which drew my gaze back to his lips. I wondered if all Grays constantly thought about kissing people—with or without souls.

Bishop didn’t look directly at me when he replied. “It’s a little different than you might think.”

“Okay, then what’s up with the demon/angel interaction?”

“Do you see a searchlight yet?” he asked instead of answering.

I glanced around. “Not yet. You’re sure there are others?”

“I’m sure.”

“Angels or demons?”

“A mix.” He was quiet for a moment. “Angels and demons—we’re two different but necessary ends of a scale. Demons are on one end and angels are on the other. Balanced numbers—of both light and dark forces—keep everything properly aligned.”

I had an image in my head of a huge weight scale with a bunch of demons sitting on one side and an equal number of angels on the other. “Could you tell what Kraven was last night? I mean, if you hadn’t checked his back to see the imprint? He looked so normal to me.”

His lips thinned. “He could have been an angel or a demon. I couldn’t tell for sure at first sight.”

I remembered Bishop’s initial hesitation when we found Kraven in the alley. “Do you know him? Like, have you met before?”

He looked at me sharply. “Why would you ask me that?”

“I don’t know. It just seemed like it to me. I figured that could be why you dislike each other so much.”

He turned his gaze to the direction we were walking. “Angels and demons have a natural aversion to each other. It can’t be helped.”

That wasn’t exactly a direct answer. “Then why work together? Why not just team up with other angels?”

I got the distinct feeling that my questions were making him uncomfortable. Well, that made two of us. But I needed answers so I could figure out how I fit into all of this and how Bishop might be able to help me.

“It wasn’t exactly in my mission parameters to discuss the situation with one of...” He trailed off before flicking a glance at me, his blue eyes guarded, but I knew what he meant.

“One of the bad guys,” I finished for him. “But you know I’m different, right? You said that already. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have asked me to help you, no matter what I could do. I mean, you have that knife of yours...” This time I was the one to trail off. Some things really didn’t need to be spoken aloud.

He watched me carefully and there might have been a little bit of regret in his expression. I wasn’t sure. “You’re afraid of me now.”

I swallowed hard. “Do you blame me?”

“You don’t need to be. I mean you no harm, Samantha.”

His deep voice sent waves of warmth through me. It made me want to believe him. But while words might be persuasive, actions were even better. “Okay. Then prove it.”

“How?” he asked.

“Let me hold your dagger.”

Bishop raised an eyebrow. “You think that’ll help?”

“It might. I mean, if you let me hold something so important, something that could actually kill you, that might give me a bit more confidence.” The more I spoke, the more sense it made. At least, to me. “Consider it a symbol of trust between us.”

He held my gaze steadily, his brows close together as he considered my offer. Finally, he pulled the dagger out of its sheath. I eyed the hilt with surprise as he held it out to me.

“Really?” I said.

He nodded. “I want you to trust me, Samantha.”

I had a flashback to my stomach-churning nightmare, when I'd used this knife to kill Bishop before the shadows pulled me apart. "Aren't you afraid I'm going to stab you?"

"Not really."

"You don't think I'm dangerous?"

A glimmer of humor lit up his eyes. "Oh, you're dangerous, all right. But not when it comes to something like this. I'm going to take a wild guess that you haven't had much experience with weapons. However, I have. A lot of it."

Despite my lack of experience, he thought I was dangerous? I finally reached out to take the dagger from him. My fingers brushed against his as I did, sending that strange electric sensation through me again. No nightmarish visions this time, thankfully. The knife felt heavy, and I held it at my side, close to my leg so anyone who drove past us on the street wouldn't be able to see it. And actually, yes, it did make me feel better.

I looked at him again with astonishment that he'd agreed to this. This weapon was incredibly important to his mission, and he was letting me—a so-called *Gray*—take it for a test drive.

But he was right about one thing—it would take a lot of motivation and strength for me to be able to stab someone in the chest with it.

"You are different," he said after a moment, studying me as we passed under the light of a streetlamp. "Different from anyone I've ever met. I wish I knew why."

Ever? "Is that a compliment or an observation?"

The edge of a grin touched his lips. "Both."

I wished I knew what he was thinking. He kept saying things that made me believe he thought of me as more than just a friendly neighborhood soulless monster. He watched me out of the corner of his eye as if he wasn't sure how to deal with me being this close to him.

"So, if I'm helping you, then I'm sort of on your team, right?" I asked.

He did look at me this time, his eyes an intense shade of indigo in the moonlight. "I don't have much longer to find the others, or the searchlights showing their locations will go out. Then I won't be able to find them at all. They'll wander the streets not knowing who they really are or why they're here. There's not enough time for us to play around."

Again, he was sidestepping my questions. "I'm not feeling very playful at the moment."

“You’re helping me find the others, that’s all. You’re not really a part of this.”

The frustration inside me bubbled over. “If I’m not a part of this, why do you need my help? Maybe I should call it a night. I have a ton of assigned reading to do. Even a Gray like me needs to focus on her GPA.”

“You won’t need a GPA if you don’t help me,” he replied evenly. “You’re trapped in this city with the others for as long as you’re missing your soul.”

“Because of this barrier you told Stephen is around the whole city right now keeping Grays from leaving.”

He nodded. “If it’s any consolation it contains angels and demons, too. Anything supernatural. Anything nonhuman.”

I didn’t want him to see that this possibility had completely floored me. “I guess it’s different where you come from, but here if you want somebody to do something for you, you’re supposed to be nice to them. Letting me carry your shiny weapon isn’t nearly good enough.”

Bishop glared at me. “I’m nice.”

I laughed out loud. “Try again. Look, I know you’re having issues with relying on me to do these bizarre errands for you. But you do need me, right?”

He pressed his lips together, which I took as a yes.

We passed a bookstore with several people standing outside smoking. I tucked the heavy dagger under my jacket until we were out of view again. It wasn’t the most natural thing to be carrying around.

“So, you need me,” I said. “And you’re telling me I need you if I want my soul back. And I definitely do. I’m still reeling from what all of this means, but when there’s a problem, I try to fix it. Seeing as this is the biggest problem I’ve ever faced in my entire life, I will fix it, no matter what it takes.”

He nodded. “Then we understand each other.”

Bishop was the most infuriating person—angel, whatever—ever. “No, I don’t understand. That’s the whole reason I’m asking you questions—or trying to, if you’d stop trying to avoid them. I need to know these things. If you want me on your side, you have to stop treating me like some sort of weird, stinky thing that you don’t want anywhere near you.”

His lips curved to the side. “You don’t stink. Your scent is very pleasant to me.”

I nearly walked into a lamppost, but I managed to swerve just in time. “Well, okay. Then I’m just a weird thing.”

“If you say so.” Amusement fading, he scanned the black, star-studded skies. “Anything yet?”

I looked up. “Not yet. Believe me, I’ll let you know if a bright beam of light suddenly appears. That is, if you stop being so secretive with me about everything.”

He raked a hand through his dark hair, his jaw tight. “Fine. I’ll tell you a few things to do with my mission.”

“I’m listening.”

“Angels and demons have been asked to work together in the past, but only a handful of times. Even though Heaven and Hell are both necessary to keep the balance, we’re not friends. We work together only when there’s a threat that affects both Heaven and Hell and the balance we need to maintain. And there’s a threat like that right now.”

Another chill cut through me. “Grays.”

“Yes.”

“They’re—” I really didn’t want to say *we’re* “—really a threat to Heaven and Hell? Enough to send a team of angels and demons to stop them?”

His expression turned pensive. “There was a similar situation once before, caused by a demon who had the ability to devour human souls. This ability marked the demon as a dangerous anomaly.”

“Funny,” I said shakily. “I’d think that’s exactly what a demon should be able to do. It’s like a...a succubus. Oh my god, am I a succubus? But that’s full-on soul-devouring sex, not just kissing.”

He snorted. “No. I suppose there are some pointed similarities, but this is much different. Besides, succubi are a human-created myth, not reality.”

“Oh, well. Good. I guess.” It seemed I would remain a PG-rated monster, which wasn’t a huge relief in the grand scheme of things.

“Souls are incredibly important to the universal balance,” Bishop continued. “The original demon who could do this was vanquished. But now, with the current rise of this particular problem...” He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “The question is, is this a new demon with the same ability? One who can now spread this affliction like a disease through the kiss? Or is it the same demon as last time? But that would be impossible.”

“Why impossible?”

“Like I said, she was sent somewhere she shouldn’t have been able to return from—somewhere no one returns from.” His jaw tensed. “But if she found a way, then that’s a sign that something very bad is on the rise—possibly worse than what we’re already dealing with.”

I gripped the dagger tighter. “So, this demon...that’s the Source you were talking about? The Source of the Grays? Like Patient Zero?”

“That’s right. I’m to personally find her and learn where she came from and what her master plan is—if she has one. My team is here to keep the city safe from Grays whose insatiable hunger is putting humans at direct risk.”

I thought it through. “So, she’s like a vampire drinking blood and creating more vampires who want to drink blood, right?” I desperately needed an analogy I could understand. Zombies I understood. Vampires I understood. Hell, even Succubi. I’d seen a lot of movies about all of the above. But, quite honestly, compared to soul sucking—the X-rated or PG versions—biting necks seemed almost quaint.

Bishop shook his head as we crossed the street at an intersection. “Blood is not a soul. A soul is the very essence of a human life, a precious and invaluable thing. When that human dies, their soul remains in existence—immortal—just as many of your religions believe. It’s judged and sent to either Heaven or Hell. Each soul is important to maintain the balance—be it a soul of darkness or of light.”

I frowned hard, trying to process all of this. “Wait. You’re trying to say, just like angels and demons, that Heaven and Hell need an equal number of souls to keep this balance? Does that mean that it’s a fifty-fifty split? Half of all humans go to Hell while the other half go to Heaven?” While I didn’t consider things like this very often, I wanted to do everything possible to avoid going to Hell when I got my soul back—now that I knew for sure a place like that existed. “I thought that if you’re good in life, you automatically get a ticket to Heaven. But you’re saying it’s more of a lottery system?”

“No, it’s definitely not a lottery.” This statement had brought a glimmer of amusement back to Bishop’s face. So nice to know that I helped him find the funny side of this incredibly nonfunny situation. “Souls are... How can I explain it so you’ll understand? They can change as a human lives life and makes his or her decisions. The better decisions one makes, the lighter a

soul becomes. The more evil the soul grows heavy with darkness. Don't worry, Samantha, more souls do go to Heaven and a human is fully in control of how light or heavy a soul is by his or her actions while alive. Being judged means having your soul weighed."

I blinked, stunned by all of this. "Like, on a scale?"

"It's not quite that literal, but yes."

I swallowed hard. "So, if Grays are devouring human souls, then there's nothing left to go to either Heaven or Hell. And that throws off this all-important balance."

"Correct."

My heart started pounding harder. "So...what does that mean? For me? What happens when I die?"

He didn't answer. His focus was on the sidewalk as we continued to trudge along. I grabbed his arm and forced him to stop and look at me.

"Bishop, what does it mean if I die without a soul?"

His jaw tightened and he looked away, scanning the street, before meeting my eyes again. "If you're careful you won't have to worry about that for a long time. Besides, I agreed to help find a way to restore your soul."

That didn't set my mind at ease in the slightest. Fear raced through me. "But—but what if I am killed? You're planning on doing that to other Grays, right? With this dagger?" I held it up. My arm had started to ache from clutching it for so long, but I wasn't ready to give it up quite yet.

He didn't speak for a moment. "Then it's the end. Just like when an angel or demon is destroyed. You will cease to exist."

I staggered back a step and felt my face blanch.

"It's going to be okay," Bishop whispered, drawing closer. "Don't cry."

I frowned and looked up at him. I hadn't realized that I was crying until he'd pointed it out. He gently stroked the tears off my cheeks. The heat of his skin sank into mine, making my breath catch. He cupped my face in his hands and looked down at me, his brows drawing together.

"I promised I'd keep you safe," he said. "I promised I'd help restore your soul. I know I haven't shown you much reason to believe in me but believe it when I say this—I know you're different from the others. And I swear I won't let anything bad happen to you. Okay?"

Bishop leaned forward and brushed his lips against my forehead.

His lips left a heated impression on my skin. Talk about living in the now. Everything fell away from me, every worry, every fear. When he leaned back, something had shifted in his gaze. So far tonight I'd seen confusion, annoyance, and a healthy portion of distrust there. But now I was sure I saw naked desire.

My entire world closed in on his lips. Even though he'd said he didn't have a soul, I still wanted to kiss him so desperately it was impossible to ignore the deep need to pull him to me and do just that. The dagger fell from my grip and clattered to the ground as I took hold of his T-shirt, drawing him closer to me. Closer, until our lips were only a breath apart.

Nearby, someone noisily cleared his throat. "Sorry, am I interrupting something?"

Bishop stepped back from me, a look of surprise on his face. He bent over to snatch up the dagger and then turned away from me. I felt like some sort of spell had broken with the abruptness of a hand slapping my face.

Kraven leaned against a brick wall, his arms crossed over his chest. He was grinning.

"See, dude?" he said. "I just knew you could convince her to help out."

"We're searching for the others," Bishop replied tightly.

"I'm sure you are. Just taking a little break right now to get to know each other better, right?"

Bishop sent a look toward me, his eyes stormy. Was he angry we'd been interrupted? Or angry that we'd nearly kissed?

"I think you freaked her out." Kraven studied my distress. "Bad angel breath, maybe?"

"We need to keep searching," Bishop replied.

He still seemed disturbed, but I was composing myself quickly. Something about the demon made that easy. Probably because I despised him so much. Angels might not hate, but I didn't have a huge problem with it.

"Surprised Gray-girl's even willing to pitch in." Kraven studied his fingernails. "You know, being one of *them*. Are you really sure we shouldn't just kill her and get it over with?"

The only reason I knew he was fooling around was his smart-ass grin, which I wanted to wipe off his face. Preferably with the sole of my shoe.

"Do that and you won't find your team," I replied. "I'm getting the feeling you two are stuck here together until you finish your job, asshole."

His grin only stretched wider. “Asshole? Is that the best you’ve got? How disappointing.”

“I need to talk to you for a moment,” Bishop said to Kraven.

“Be still my heart.”

“Privately.”

I let out a shaky breath. “Yes, sure. Go ahead. I’ll just wait here and think up some better insults.”

Bishop followed Kraven around the corner and out of earshot. It didn’t take long before the night felt like it was closing around me. The cold sank deep into me even with my coat wrapped tightly around me.

I had to admit, I was curious about what they were currently discussing. Probably me.

I moved slowly toward the edge of the building until I could hear them. I pressed my back up against the brick wall and strained to listen.

“...a liability to the mission. You never should have brought her in. How much have you told her?”

“Enough for her to understand.”

“Great. I didn’t think you were a complete idiot, but I guess I was wrong. But I’ve been wrong about a lot of things, haven’t I?”

Bishop’s voice turned sharp. “That makes two of us.”

“She’s one of them.”

“She’s different.”

“Sure, she is. Maybe you can’t see clearly since you’ve got a hard-on for her. I mean, she’s cute enough, but is she worth risking everything over?”

“The mission is all that matters to me.”

“Yeah, right. You’d never risk anything for a girl. Not you.” Kraven snorted. “So, what I just interrupted—you weren’t about to go at it right here in the alley? Or are you going to try to convince me that as an angel you’re totally priestly all the time? All self-denially?”

Bishop hissed out a breath. “I have everything under control.”

“I sure the hell hope so.” I could hear the sneer in Kraven’s voice. These guys really hated each other; I didn’t care what Bishop said about angels not hating. Their interaction felt personal, like there was bad blood between them. “I know she works some kind of hocus pocus on your brain when you two touch. Can you imagine what she might do to you if it’s full naked-on-

naked contact? Maybe you should get it out of your system and just throw her down and—”

The next sound was a grunt of pain after a fist connected with some part of a body. I chose that moment to round the corner and saw Kraven now crouched on the ground favoring his stomach before he slowly rose to his feet. His eyes glowed red in the darkness. Bishop stood with fists clenched at his sides as if ready for the demon to attack. Both their fierce glares turned in my direction.

I faltered for a moment under the heat of those glares, but then forced myself to lean against the wall with my arms crossed, an echo of Kraven earlier. “So...am I interrupting anything?”

“Not at all,” Kraven said, regaining that hateful, twisting smile. “Thought you might have run off already.”

“Not yet, but it’s tempting,” I replied.

Bishop didn’t look happy. Whether he was more upset with the direction of their argument or that he’d resorted to violence to end it, I wasn’t sure. Personally, I was secretly thrilled he’d defended me like that. He wouldn’t have done that if I was only a means to help him find his team, would he? That had been personal.

Still, I was a little surprised that he’d let Kraven’s cheap shots bother him. He’d obviously never gone to public school. I’d known guys like Kraven all my life. All talk. Emotional manipulators. And yes, *assholes*. Just because he was a demon didn’t mean I didn’t have his number.

Him I could deal with. The angel—well, he was brand-new for me. The whole situation had me so off center that I had to focus on keeping my balance.

That seemed to be the entire reason behind their mission. Keep the balance. Get rid of the threat that was consuming the souls that Heaven and Hell needed to keep their all-important universal balance. I got that. It was frightening and way too big for my head to wrap completely around, but I got the gist of it.

“You want to go back to your dorm now, don’t you?” Bishop asked. The question wasn’t filled with anger or accusation.

“More than you know,” I told him honestly.

“We need you.”

“So you say.”

“It’s true.”

I looked at Kraven before summoning my faltering bravery and moving closer to him. I wouldn't let him believe I was afraid of him. I couldn't give him that kind of power over me.

"Do you need me, too?" I asked.

He sneered at me. "No."

"Can *you* see the lights to find the others?"

He stepped closer to me as if challenging me back, and he reached down to take a tight hold of my wrist. I tensed but didn't try to pull away. "You're kind of bright and shiny, Gray-girl."

The demon held my gaze, half his mouth turned up in that patronizing grin.

And suddenly...I could read his mind.

I saw past his bravado, past his sneering exterior, down deeper into those amber-colored eyes of his. It felt a little like what had happened this morning, when I'd zapped him to protect myself. This ability drew from the same place. Eyes were the windows to the soul, I'd heard. Since demons didn't have souls, I figured I was just seeing down to Kraven's true self.

I don't know if I can do this. Not with him here. I didn't know it would be this hard.

It was his thought, not mine. I knew it. I felt it.

"You're doubting yourself," I said. "You're worried you're going to fail. You're just like Bishop that way. You two have way more in common than you might admit."

Kraven snatched his hand back from me. The amusement had completely left his expression, replaced with confusion.

"How did you—?" he began.

"They wouldn't have picked you if they didn't think you could do this," I told him. If Kraven had been sent on this mission, he must be skilled. Someone who could be counted on to come through in a tough situation. Didn't he realize that?

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about." He cast a dark glance at Bishop, who stood watching us intently.

Bishop raised an eyebrow. "See? I told you she was special."

Kraven turned his fiery glare back on me, and this time it took a lot of effort not to flinch. "Don't do that again."

"You don't want anyone to see the real you?" I asked.

“You don’t want to see the real me, trust me on that.” He shot a look at Bishop. “You don’t want her to see the real me, either, do you? Or how about the real you?”

“I’ll take my chances,” Bishop replied evenly.

Kraven’s steely gaze met mine again. “How did you do that?”

Whatever it was felt natural. Felt easy. Like it was simply an extension of who I already was, which I knew made no sense at all. “I honestly have no idea.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“That’s your problem, not mine. And you didn’t answer my question.” I tried to keep my voice steady. “Not properly anyway. Can you see the searchlights that lead to the others?”

He answered through clenched teeth. “No, I can’t.”

I nodded. “Well, I can. And I just spotted a new one, so I guess you do need me. And if you keep looking at me like you want me dead, I can’t say I’m all that interested in helping you out.”

“Kraven,” Bishop growled. A warning. “Be nice to Samantha.”

The demon studied me a bit longer with that disturbed and angry look on his handsome face before a smile finally snaked across his face. It didn’t reach as far as his eyes. “Of course. Welcome to the team, sweetness. Looks like we’re going to make a big fat exception for you.”

I pulled my coat closer around me, cinching the belt tightly at my waist, and tried my best to swallow my fear. “Okay, follow me.”

Great. I’d never been much of a team player before and, if I had been, I would never have picked one like this.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

BISHOP'S GAZE stayed on me as we walked—a heated sensation on the side of my face that I couldn't ignore even if I tried to.

I glanced at him warily. "What?"

"How did you get in the demon's head?" he asked.

That was a very good question. I hadn't wanted to do it. I didn't want to have anything to do with him at all if I could help it. "I don't know."

"Can you read my mind?"

"I don't know," I said again.

"Try."

We slowed for a moment, and he looked into my eyes. I concentrated, but I didn't exactly know how to access this ability, only that it had been really easy with Kraven. "I don't think I can. No—there's nothing."

"Maybe there's nothing in his skull to read in the first place," Kraven grumbled. "Or nothing that hasn't already been all shaken up like a snow globe when he slammed through that barrier."

"Or maybe his mind is stronger than yours," I countered.

"Doubt that."

"Have you had moments of psychic awareness in the past?" Bishop asked, ignoring the demon's jibes.

I shook my head. "Never."

"No mind reading? No uncanny intuition of things that might happen in the future?"

"Like I said, never."

"Only since you've been turned." Bishop and Kraven shared a look. For an angel and a demon who hated each other, their confusion about my newfound skills had finally given them some common ground.

“When I first touched you, I had a vision,” I said to Bishop. “And even before I met you, I had a dream about...well, I’m pretty sure it was about you.”

I decided not to mention the dream in which I’d killed him.

He studied me intently while we continued to walk toward the searchlight. I kept my eyes locked on it in the distance.

“What did you dream?” he asked.

“Sex dream, probably,” Kraven said with a smirk. “Right?”

“No.” Did I mention I hated this guy? I could definitely see why he lived in Hell. I wanted him to return there as soon as possible. “It was a bit fuzzy, but I was about to fall into a black hole and Bishop...well, he had a hold on me until he let go.”

Kraven snorted. “Nice. Maybe that was a premonition that he’ll come to his senses and kick you straight into the Hollow.”

Bishop had used that term in Crave earlier as a threat to Stephen. “The what?”

The angel glared at the demon. “Shut your mouth.”

Kraven shrugged. “Why? She’ll find out soon enough. Thought we were in sharing mode tonight. Or is that only okay when it’s you doing the sharing up against a brick wall?”

Again, Bishop chose to ignore the demon and turned his gaze back to me. “What about the first vision, Samantha? What was it?”

“I don’t really remember. At first it was vivid and then it, like, started slipping away. It was bad, though. *Epically* bad. Something about this city—about Trinity.” I glanced around at the tall buildings that surrounded us. The darkness tonight felt like a living, breathing thing closing in on me. “Destruction. Everything and everyone gone.”

Silence was my only answer to that. Even Kraven didn’t have a snappy comeback, which wasn’t reassuring.

“I figure I was sensing you were going to help save the city. I don’t know.” I shrugged and shoved my hands deeper into my pockets to try to warm them, so I’d stop shivering.

“But you didn’t see that I succeeded,” he said. “You saw only destruction.”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember. Why? Is that what happens if you fail? The city goes boom?” I said it flippantly, but the looks on their faces was so collectively bleak it sent a deep chill through me. “Will it?”

“No,” Bishop said firmly, flicking a glance at the demon. “Because we won’t fail.”

“Just a Gray,” Kraven mumbled as if he was talking to himself more than us. “I know you are. I don’t get anything else off you. But what’s with the sight? Nothing all that special about you that I can sense.”

I glared at him. “Then why can I see the searchlights? Why could I zap you before? Why can I read your mind when I look into your eyes?”

The reminder earned me a sour look from the demon. “That is the question of the day, sweetness. But a warning...don’t try it again.”

“Why? Afraid of what I might find in there?”

Kraven grabbed my arm and drew me closer.

“Just don’t,” he snarled, and a shudder of fear ran through me.

“Let go of me,” I snapped.

He did. I wasn’t sure if I could zap him again like I had at school this morning, but I didn’t have to try.

“We’ll figure it out, Samantha,” Bishop said. “Doesn’t have to be all at once. Okay?”

I tried to ignore my rapidly pounding heart. “Okay.”

“How much farther?” he asked.

“We’re nearly there.” I started walking again. The light was just around the corner, in a small park flanked by office buildings. It was like a tiny oasis in the middle of the concrete city, with trees, grass, a walking trail, and several park benches. The leaves had mostly fallen off the trees by now and blanketed the ground. It would be very pretty in daylight.

By moonlight, it was eerie.

There was another guy, around the same age as Kraven and Bishop, sitting on a park bench. As soon as I spotted him, the searchlight that led us there disappeared.

“That’s him?” Bishop asked.

Mouth too dry to speak, I nodded.

“I wish I knew how many we’re looking for,” he said.

“There’s supposed to be four of us,” replied Kraven.

Bishop looked at him. “Four?”

“Yeah. Two demons, two angels. That’s what I was told.”

Bishop rubbed his forehead. “I don’t remember. Maybe I was told that. It’s kind of jumbled up. So much to figure out.” He pressed his hands to his temples. “Spinning and spinning like a top. Never stopping.”

Kraven frowned. "You okay?"

No, he wasn't okay. Far from it, and he wasn't getting better. He'd said this wasn't how it was supposed to be—that he was more disoriented than he'd expected.

Without thinking about it, I reached for Bishop's hand and felt that breathtaking crackle of electricity between us. Slowly, his eyes cleared of the growing confusion.

"Will you be okay?" I asked him.

He squeezed my hand and I saw the frustration in his eyes. "Hopefully long enough to do what I'm here to do. When I go back to Heaven it'll be better. I'll be healed immediately."

"When will that happen?"

"After we've found and dealt with the Source. After we've made sure the city is safe. A week, at the most." He looked down at my hand in his and shook his head. His lips curved into a small but devastating smile. "Amazing. One touch and you're able to clear my thoughts. What would I have done if you hadn't found me?"

I didn't even try to reply to that, since I had no idea what the answer was. If nothing else, I had a time frame to work with. A week was how long he thought he'd be here. Then I could have my soul restored, get back to my normal life and try to forget about all this.

Kraven made a snoring sound. "Can we get on with this?"

I cast a glance toward the guy sitting on the bench. I think he'd been sleeping before we arrived, but his eyes were bright and aware as I moved closer to him.

If he was one of the four, then that meant he was a demon or an angel, unaware of where he was or why he was here. He looked totally human to me. Reddish-brown hair with a slight curl to it. Green eyes. A few light freckles on his nose.

He looked up at me. "I know you, don't I?"

I pointed at myself. "Me?"

"Yeah. I think I had a dream about you."

"You had a dream about *me*?"

I exchanged a look with Bishop, whose dark brows were drawn together as he considered this. Maybe this was a sign that I was meant to be a part of this after all, as strange as that sounded.

“Samantha’s everybody’s dream girl this week,” Kraven said. “Except mine, of course. I have much better taste than that.”

I wondered if they’d be okay with the team being reduced to only three? I was fine with Kraven being the expendable one. Maybe they could send a replacement.

“What was the dream about?” Bishop sat down next to him but made no immediate move for that nasty golden dagger of his. It was a relief, but I already knew where this conversation was leading. The ritual. The one that still haunted me even though I now knew why it was so necessary.

He looked confused but calm. “She was like...guiding me. I was lost and she helped me find my way.”

It was shocking to think that he would have dreamed about me. Or maybe it wasn’t a sign of anything, and he just had me confused with someone else.

“Do you know who you are?” I asked.

He glanced around the park. “I don’t know who I am or how I got here. I’ve been sitting here waiting. Hoping somebody would come by who can tell me how to get home.”

Kraven crossed his arms. “Nobody’s here. Tick tock, Bishop. I could be back out patrolling right now. The Source could be doing a song and dance in the middle of Main Street and we’re missing it.”

Bishop looked at me. “You should go now.”

“No, please,” the new guy said. “Don’t go. Stay here. Help me.”

He reached out a hand to me. There was something in his eyes, something that made me want to stay with him even knowing what was about to happen. I felt a sudden and overwhelming sense of compassion toward him. If I could help him through this, I wanted to do just that.

This ritual was brutal and ridiculous. Was it really the only way they could get here and avoid ending up having the disorientation like Bishop had? Sucked either way, if you asked me. Either you were clueless wandering the city about to get a knife through the chest or you were aimlessly wandering the city uncertain of what to do or where to go next.

If this was supposed to be a slick mission involving both Heaven and Hell, I would have expected something much better planned out and controlled. There were too many things that could go wrong.

“Can you do me a favor?” I took hold of his hand. He’d dreamed I’d help him. I would try my very best to do just that.

“What?” he asked.

“Can you show my...my friends”—I couldn’t think of another word to describe Bishop and Kraven at the moment—“your back? They need to see if you have a certain mark.”

He glanced over his shoulder at the two other guys. “My back?”

“It’s not as weird as it sounds,” Kraven said. “Well, mostly.”

“All right.” He stood up from the bench and raised the back of his shirt up so we could see the imprint he had. It was a lot like Bishop’s—feathery, open lines, some shading. Still huge, but not as dark and ominous as Kraven’s.

Another angel.

“Disappointing,” Kraven muttered. “But, whatever.”

Bishop nodded, seemingly satisfied. “Thank you. You can sit back down.”

He did, and he looked at me again. “You’re going to help me. You promise?”

I nodded, ill at the thought of what was to come.

Bishop glanced at me again and our eyes met and held. “Go now. We’ll handle this.”

“No.” The redhead gripped my hand, keeping me from getting up. “Stay, please.”

Just like with Kraven, when I looked into his eyes, I had an effortless connection with him. He was scared, but he was trying to be brave. And he’d been telling the truth. He’d been waiting here, knowing deep down that help would be on the way. That someone was looking for him.

“You’re brave,” I told him.

“I am?”

I tried to smile, but it was shaky. “Yes. And it’s going to be okay. I swear it will.”

While I was more than convinced this was all real, it didn’t mean I wanted to accept it. My brain kept trying to deny everything I’d been told and everything I’d seen since last night with Kraven and...the dagger...

The dagger that Bishop now pulled from the sheath while the redhead kept his attention on me.

“Heads up,” Kraven said and began whistling loudly as a couple of people strolled past us on the nearby path. They didn’t even glance in our direction.

“Are we shielded?” I asked nervously.

Kraven nodded. “We are now.”

Bishop took hold of the redhead’s shoulder and pushed him back against the bench.

The redhead’s gaze locked on the now-glowing knife. “What are you —?”

It was the last thing he said before the dagger met its mark.

Everyone in a two-block radius would have heard my scream if we hadn’t been shielded. But no one could hear me. No one could see this.

“Look away, Samantha,” Bishop snapped, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t look away from the victim who’d just been stabbed in the chest right in front of me. The redhead’s grip on my hand grew tighter, nearly tight enough to break my bones, before it slackened and fell away. His eyes closed and he slumped backward.

I got to my feet, staggering back from the body. It looked so real. It was one thing to know in your head that something was a supernatural ritual and that an otherworldly being like an angel could bounce back. It was another thing to be two feet away from somebody who just got a knife through their chest.

Maybe Bishop had been wrong, and this had been a mistake and it was my fault because I had led Bishop and Kraven here. I’d heard the sickening sound as the knife sliced into flesh and bone.

“Hey, relax,” Kraven said, frowning at me. “Same thing happened to me, and I recovered quickly, better-looking than ever.”

I must have looked *really* bad he was offering me words of comfort.

The demon reached for me, but I scooted away.

“Don’t touch me,” I growled at him.

Bishop didn’t offer me any comforting words. Instead, he sent a sharp glare at me. “You should have left when I said you should,” he said.

“You’re right, I should have,” I agreed.

Bishop closed his hand around the dagger and pulled it out of the redhead’s chest. The blade was covered in blood that looked black in the surrounding darkness.

I couldn’t breathe. I needed to get away from here, away from the blood and death so I could clear my head.

I turned away from the angel and demon and started to run as fast as I could.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

I'D KNOWN what was coming and why it had to be done, so I wasn't sure why it had freaked me out as much as it did. Maybe because I'd had a front row seat for the action this time instead of watching from behind a corner.

"Samantha!" Bishop called out to me after I'd run about a block. "Stop!"

I'd crossed over a side street. Very few trees in this neighborhood. Mostly concrete and tall office buildings. A car drove up through a tunnel leading from the underground parking, splitting the space between Bishop and me. It would have given me a chance to keep running, but I held my ground.

Bishop crossed the street and stopped half a dozen feet away from me. A streetlamp shone above us, which made the scene feel marginally better than if we'd been in complete darkness. It was an illusion of security.

"You know I had to do that, right?" he said.

"Yes," I managed, shakily.

"I had Kraven wait back there for the angel to wake up. And he will wake up. He'll be fine. Better than before. And he'll remember why he's here in the first place."

"To help you hunt and kill monsters like me."

Bishop's jaw tightened. "We're to patrol the city mostly at night—that's when most of the Grays who've lost their reason and humanity come out and threaten humans. We end them—there's no saving them. Other Grays, like Stephen, haven't given in to their hunger enough to turn completely. I need to find the Source and talk to her."

"And say what?"

“I’ve been told to give her the choice to retreat—to go back where she came from. If she refuses, I must send her there myself. Then I can figure out how to deal with the remaining Grays, and I’ll have the team in place to assist me.”

His meaning couldn’t be clearer. “Deal with” would likely have a lot to do with that dagger of his. “Can Grays that aren’t feeding, that are in control of their hunger...can you help them like you’re going to help me?”

“It’s possible. But they would need to be willing to be helped. You are. However, I can’t guarantee they will be.”

Good point. Stephen said he liked himself better as a Gray. If given the option to have his soul restored, there was a strong chance he’d refuse. “I always thought angels were supposed to be peaceful.”

Bishop scanned the street. No more activity since we’d stopped to talk. This wasn’t a busy area after business hours. “We do what has to be done. We follow orders. We protect humans from supernatural forces, so they never need to know they’re being protected.”

“You do this a lot?”

“It’s my job. And I was honored to be chosen for this mission.”

Yeah, honored. Thrown out of Heaven so hard that he landed on his head, and he was honored.

“Are they always this violent?” I asked, trying hard not to think of the redhead with the chest wound whom I’d run away from in the park. “These missions?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“It’s a stupid ritual. Whoever thought of it is...stupid.”

“You’ve mentioned that before.” His lips twitched as if he was fighting a smile, but his expression remained serious. “I’ll be sure to relate your opinion when I return. Maybe they can take it under advisement in future ritual creation.”

“You’re making fun of me.”

Tentatively, he closed the distance between us and took hold of my shoulders. I tensed but didn’t pull away.

“I’m not making fun of you,” he said. “What you did tonight, leading us here...you did it perfectly. Even Kraven can see how important you are. How...”

“Special?” I finished for him.

His smile widened. “Incredibly.”

“I’ve never felt all that special before,” I admitted.

“Well, I guess you should get used to it.”

He’d drawn closer still and he held my shoulders gently. Being this close to him made my head spin. I pressed one hand against his chest to push him away, but suddenly realized something very important.

“You have a heartbeat.” I wasn’t sure why finding something so human about him surprised me so much—enough to knock away some of my previous fear and summon my curiosity again.

He nodded. “Of course. What did you expect?”

“I don’t know.” I remembered Kraven foraging through the Dumpster. “Do you need to eat?”

“Yes.”

“Sleep?”

“More than I’d like to considering how much there is to do.”

“I see.” I didn’t really, but I was faking it as best I could. “Do you look like this where you come from? Same appearance, I mean. Just, maybe, with wings?”

He nodded again. “Except here, sometimes our eyes...”

“They glow.”

“It’s a little celestial energy. It’s what gives us our angelic abilities.”

“And the demons...their eyes glow, too, but it’s red instead of blue.”

“Hellfire. Same sort of principle.”

“Right.” I felt dizzy. “I think I need to sit down.”

“It’s a lot to process, I know.” Bishop slid his arm around my back to help keep me on my feet. I braced both my hands against his chest now. Our eyes met and there it was again—just that easily, my heart did a cartwheel worthy of an Olympic gymnast. I suddenly had the urge to wrap my arms around him and hold on tight—just like I had earlier, before the demon interrupted us. Despite what he was, despite what I’d just seen him do, I felt safe with Bishop.

At least, I felt safe right now.

“So now what?” I asked, my voice a whisper.

“Now you’re going back to your dorm room. You said you’d give me an hour of your time. It’s been an hour.”

“You hold true to all of your promises?” I asked.

He grinned a little. “I try.”

“I have another question.”

“I’m not all that surprised. What is it?”

“Is this how you plan to treat all the Grays you come across to make sure they’re not the zombie kind?” I asked. “This, uh...personal attention?”

It took a moment before he replied. “Not really planning on it. You’re different.”

“Why am I like this?” I asked, frowning.

“I wish I knew.” Bishop’s hold tightened on my waist, the heat of his touch sinking through my coat, before he finally let me go. “I must be seriously messed up if I’m feeling this way.”

It was a reminder once again that he might consider me special, but I was still a hungry Gray. “I’ll try not to take that personally.”

“No, I...” He sighed. “This isn’t like me, Samantha. Trust me. I was completely and utterly dedicated to this mission from the moment it was put into effect. Nothing should distract me. And now I find I’m all too easily distracted. By you.”

The clarification made my heart leap. “Oh.”

He shook his head. “This is complicated. More than you even know.”

“I know. You’re going home in a week. It’s like you’re on a really messed-up business trip, that’s all. When you get back, you’ll be cured.”

He held my gaze. “I meant what I said. I promise I’ll help you.”

“Why? I mean, I understand that you’re an angel...” I was still having trouble accepting that as being a real thing, even though I knew it was. “And you’re going back home soon. But I’m supposed to be your enemy.”

“You’re not my enemy. I should have known that the moment I met you. I did, but for a second I doubted my instincts. I won’t make that mistake again.”

I thought of Stephen and the others who were in the Crave lounge. “If I’m different, maybe other Grays are too.”

“It’s possible,” he allowed. “There could be others who can consistently control their hunger as well as you can. Others who never feed at all.”

My stomach picked that exact moment to grumble. “So, what happens if they don’t? If *I* don’t?”

He didn’t reply for a moment. And then, “I don’t know.”

“Great. That’s helpful, thanks.” Then I swallowed hard. “It’s not easy, you know.”

Bishop’s brows drew together. “Are you having trouble with the hunger?”

“It’s a constant issue for me now.” I grabbed hold of a long dark lock of my hair and twisted it nervously. “Now I have the urge to kiss pretty much everyone I come across.”

“Everyone?”

I thought about it. “Not everyone. There are only a couple people I really want to grab hold of and kiss really hard. It’s like I can barely control myself. But I can,” I assured him.

“Of course, you can.” Then something dark slid behind his gaze. “The original demon was said to have an irresistible allure that humans were drawn to. Maybe that’s what happened with Stephen. You couldn’t help but be drawn to him. And maybe that’s what it’s like with you, as well.”

That would explain why lately I’d been attracting more attention than I normally did. “There was someone at school this morning. He got too close to me and I nearly...” Well, I didn’t have to finish that sentence to make my meaning clear. “And...and there’s also someone else who I have a strange craving for whenever I’m near him. Luckily, he doesn’t have to worry about his soul around me since he doesn’t have one.”

It took a moment before he understood that I was talking about him.

“Then I guess I’m safe, aren’t I?” he said, the edge of a smile touching his lips.

My cheeks warmed. “I guess so.”

I wondered if angels kissed, if they went on dates, or how things worked up there in Heaven. I’d always had an image of them being very clinical, very pure, and untouched. Flawless. Then again, Bishop had already changed most of my preconceived notions about angels.

Another car drove up out of the underground parking and made a left onto the street, interrupting the heated moment between us before it had a chance to change into something else.

Stupid car.

“I should walk you back, so I know you’re okay,” Bishop said. “I’ll catch up with Kraven and the other angel later.”

Something caught my attention in the night sky. “There’s just one problem,” I said.

“What?”

Reluctantly, I pointed toward the new beam of light. “I think I’ve found your fourth team member.”

He craned his neck to look then turned back to me with confusion. "There's another searchlight?"

"There is," I confirmed. We were one team member away from me fulfilling my side of our bargain. "Let's go get him, so there will be the four of you, just like Kraven said. Then it's your turn to help me."

He nodded. "All right, show me where it leads."

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

I KEPT my attention on the searchlight as we walked toward it. “It’s not fixed in place. It’s moving this time.”

“He’s lost and wandering aimlessly, trying to find his way,” Bishop replied. “That’s all. We’ll catch up to him.”

And we did. A few blocks away and we were on one of the busiest streets in Trinity, known as the Promenade. The Trinity Mall—the infamous location of my shoplifting incident—was located here as well as the rest of the shopping district, only a couple miles away from campus. Everything had shut down for the night, but the sidewalks were thick with pedestrians, the streets filled with traffic.

I followed the beam of light through the crowd of people. It shone on the head of one person in particular. Human appearance, check. Early-twenties, check.

“Doesn’t Heaven or Hell have any female warriors?” I asked aloud.

“Sure, they do,” Bishop replied.

“I guess none signed up to be part of this mission of yours.”

“Guess not. Do you see him?”

“I see him.”

As soon as I locked eyes on the guy, the light switched off. I now had to work hard to keep him in view as we drew closer.

“The guy over there,” I said. “Just like you and Kraven, looks like he could go to Trin-U. Black hair, tall. Leather jacket. Hey, where’d he get that cool jacket?”

This guy was definitely not eating burgers out of Dumpsters or waiting patiently on park benches. Instead, he eyed the crowd around him with a

keen and appraising look. I watched as he bumped into a woman who turned to glare at him.

He gave her a killer grin. "So sorry, ma'am. My fault."

The woman's unpleasant expression shifted to a pleased one. He was extremely attractive, kind of like an actor or a male model, with tanned skin, dark eyes, and black hair long enough to brush his shoulders. Even though she looked to be at least twenty years older, she'd have to be blind not to notice his good looks.

"Oh, don't worry about it," she said.

"Have a nice night."

"You, too." As she walked away, she was smiling.

The woman hadn't noticed that he'd slipped his hand into her purse during their exchange and stolen her wallet.

"Did you see that?" I asked Bishop with shock. "Not really lost and wandering aimlessly, is he?"

"We can't lose him. Come on."

We picked up our pace and followed the pickpocket down the street, past the crowd and around a corner. The other two had been lost, confused and grateful for anyone who noticed them. This guy seemed like he knew the city like the back of his hand.

He stopped in front of a store window with a display of glittering jewelry, his hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket, which looked new and expensive. Bishop slowed as we approached him, and I sensed his wariness. This one was different from the others.

"Hey," Bishop said.

He glanced at us with disinterest. "Hey yourself."

"Saw what you did back there."

"Oh, yeah? What's that?"

"You stole that woman's wallet."

An edge of unfriendliness moved through his dark eyes. "So what? Are you a cop?"

"Do we look like cops?" I asked.

He flicked a glance at me. "She was rich, I could tell. She'll survive just fine."

"Is that what you're trying to do, too?" Bishop asked. "Survive?"

"Aren't we all?" His gaze moved to me again and swept the length of me. "Why don't you do yourselves a favor and fuck off?"

Bishop finally let go of my hand. "Because I need to talk to you."

"Sorry, I don't feel like talking."

Something was wrong, but I didn't know what. I'd been positive he was the right guy, but now I wasn't sure. I didn't feel anything from him, even when I met his eyes and concentrated. But maybe I wasn't close enough.

Or maybe I'd tagged the wrong person. The real one could still be out there in the crowd.

"Where are you from?" I asked. Bishop shot a glance my way. He probably thought I'd just be the silent, well-behaved finder of searchlights. Wrong.

"Around."

"Around Trinity? Or somewhere else?"

He gave me a tight smile and turned away. "Remember that fuck off thing I just said? It still applies. I'm going now."

"Where?" I asked. "Do you have somewhere to stay? Do you have any friends?"

His shoulders tensed as he glanced back at us. "Don't follow me."

He started walking.

I grabbed Bishop's arm. "Maybe I was wrong about him."

"You weren't," he replied.

"How do you know? You said you couldn't tell what Kraven was until you saw the imprint."

"Gut instinct. He's a team member and I'm guessing he's a demon." Bishop began trailing after him. "Go home, Samantha. You know what I have to do now."

For a moment, I considered my options. I could go back to campus and try to forget everything, but just because it wasn't easy didn't mean I should run away with my tail tucked between my legs. This wasn't over until my soul was restored, until my hunger was gone once and for all and I could focus on my normal life again.

So, I didn't go back. I followed Bishop as he trailed after the thief with the bad attitude.

As Bishop rounded the next corner, the thief was waiting for him. He grabbed hold of Bishop and threw the angel into an open space, a parking lot in front of a large grocery store. Bishop slammed into a car, setting off the alarm.

Two people wandered past, but they didn't seem like they could see us or hear the blaring noise. I had to assume, even with his decreased abilities, that Bishop had managed to cloak us.

"What do you want from me?" the thief demanded.

"To talk, for starters. You could have made this easier on yourself." Bishop leaped up from the ground, his eyes blazing with anger. He kicked the car hard, which somehow managed to shut off the alarm.

"It was just a damn wallet. I needed the money, okay? Now you need to leave me alone or I'm going to hurt you." He cast a cold look over his shoulder. "And her."

Bishop wasn't wasting any time. He pulled the golden dagger out of the sheath strapped to his back. "You're not hurting anyone tonight."

The thief barked out a laugh. "You're shitting me, right? You think you can cut me with that?" He pulled his own knife out of a holder at his waist. "Think again."

Panic gripped me at the sight of the other knife. It wasn't all gold, glowy and supernatural, but it was still sharp and deadly.

I stepped forward, trying to bring some sort of control back to this situation before things went too far. The ritual was bad enough without extra conflict.

"You're lost," I said. "We're here to help you."

He moved so fast I wasn't able to scramble away from him in time. I shrieked as he grabbed a thick handful of my hair to hold me in place, my back crushed up against his chest.

"Maybe your boyfriend needs a louder warning to leave me alone. Drop the knife or I'll make her bleed."

"I told you we wanted to help you," I managed to say.

"I don't want your help."

"Let her go," Bishop growled.

I grabbed hold of the thief's arm to keep the knife away from me, but it felt like it was made of iron. Then I tried to summon the same ability I'd used to zap Kraven when I'd felt threatened. I did manage to touch part of that power, as if reaching into a shallow pool of water that I never knew existed within me, but it didn't work. Nothing happened. It was as if I hit a wall.

"I know it must seem really bad for you." I wanted to keep him talking so Bishop had a chance to stop this. "But you're not alone anymore."

“I am alone,” he snapped. “And I’ll protect myself no matter what I have to do.”

“Have you dreamed about me?” I blurted out. The other angel had said it earlier, so it was worth a shot.

He froze at my words. Bishop drew closer, his eyes still glowing blue. Someone got in the car right next to us, the one that’d had its alarm blaring a minute ago and drove away as if he didn’t see our standoff only a few feet away.

“You have, haven’t you?” I continued, craning my neck a little so I could see him out of the corner of my eye. “Maybe it’s faded a bit, but you have. You knew I was coming. You know I’m here to help you.”

He shot a look at Bishop. “Drop the knife. I won’t say it again.”

I focused on that invisible wall I’d felt, the one that seemed to surround the thief. With a part of myself I’d never even known existed—a sixth sense, I guess—I managed to find a crack in it, and I again sought that pool of power within me.

“Let...me...go.” My teeth were clenched together so I barely got the words out. “*Now.*”

This time, thanks to that crack in his wall, the zapping worked. He let go of me and staggered back as if he’d been electrocuted, his dark eyes wide with shock.

“What just happened?” he snarled.

“You let her go,” Bishop said, striding forward.

And then he plunged his dagger into the thief’s chest.

I screamed. It seemed to be my usual reaction to seeing someone get stabbed. The calmness I’d felt a moment ago ripped away, leaving me panicked and uncertain. “Why did you do that? We didn’t check his back to make sure he was the right one!”

“He’s the one. You proved it yourself by repelling him.”

The thief dropped his knife then looked down at the dagger in his chest, which Bishop then yanked back out. He fell to his knees on the hard pavement.

His stunned gaze moved to me. “I did dream about you last night. How...did you...know that?”

A shiver coursed through me. “Lucky guess.”

He fell face forward to the ground. Bishop crouched at his side and looked up at me, his expression grim as he took in the shock on my face.

“Stay,” he said firmly. “See what happens next. It’ll prove I’m not just doing this to be cruel, even though this one deserved it.”

I just nodded, shivering. I moved back until I felt a pickup truck behind me, which helped support me so I didn’t crumple to the ground, as well. Bishop rolled him onto his back. I gagged as his leather jacket fell open to show the bloodstain from the knife wound in the center of his chest, soaking through his shirt. Bishop wiped his dagger against his black jeans to clean it off.

Angel. Warrior. Killer.

Just a ritual. I kept repeating it to myself. *It’s just a horrible but necessary ritual.*

More people arrived and departed from the grocery store, oblivious to the murder scene right in front of them.

My soul had been taken, so why did I care? I thought a soul gave a human morals, humanity, and an ability for goodness. But now I wasn’t so sure. I’d lost mine and I still felt the difference between right and wrong. I hadn’t suddenly turned into an unrepentant monster. I felt everything that happened vividly, even when it was happening to someone else.

The thief stayed dead for a long time. Even Bishop began to look uncertain.

I gave him a sharp look. “Don’t start doubting this now.”

“He is the right one,” he replied firmly.

“You didn’t check him first.”

His expression was dark and haunted. “He never would have shown us his back if we’d asked politely.”

He was probably right about that. I slowly moved toward them, looking down at the thief lying on the ground. His dark, glazed eyes were still open, staring straight up at me. Bishop leaned over and finally closed them.

I fought against my welling nausea. “Great, that’s helpful.”

Bishop eyed me. “You hate me right now, don’t you?”

“If he doesn’t wake up soon, I’m going to have to hate myself, too.” I kneeled down at his side. “Check him now. Please.”

Bishop rolled the thief over and pushed aside the jacket. I reached forward, my hand shaking a little, and gathered the thin material of his shirt before pushing it up his back so I could see.

I let out a long, shuddery sigh of relief. There was an imprint there. And just as we’d thought, it was a thick, black tattoo of wings, just like the one

Kraven—

The demon rolled over and grabbed hold of my throat. He pushed me back and then slammed me down on the pavement, knocking the breath out of me. His eyes glowed red in the darkness.

There was no mistaking his intentions right now—he was going to kill me. It had happened so fast, I couldn't concentrate enough to summon my ability to repel him, to find that crack in his wall, and it wasn't coming naturally to me at the moment as it had before. This guy wanted me dead, and he wanted to be the direct cause of it.

Then the metaphysical wall he had around him thinned. I was able to read his mind as I stared up into his eyes.

Gray...she's a Gray. Kill her. Have to kill her. Have to kill all of them.

Bishop had his arm around the demon's throat, trying to pry him off me.

It had all happened so fast. And I still couldn't breathe with his hands tight around my throat as he squeezed the life out of me.

Then I heard a sharp crack and felt intense pain for a white-hot moment before it disappeared completely. The world began to grow dim at the edges. Blurry and dark. There wasn't even enough time to get scared. It had all happened in a matter of seconds.

Off...get off! They were only words in my head. I couldn't speak, but I forced every bit of conviction I could into them, burrowing into that wall, wearing it away until the crack finally widened, and I accessed my inner pool of power. A lightning-like shock exited me and entered him. He literally flew back from me and landed hard, a dozen feet away.

I couldn't move, could barely breathe. I couldn't feel my body. My consciousness, my very life, was draining away.

Bishop loomed over me, touching my face gently with a shaking hand. "Samantha." My name was no more than a ragged whisper. "No, don't close your eyes. Look at me."

He pressed his warm hands to my throat, much gentler than the demon had. In the periphery of my vision, I watched Kraven storm up to us and slam hard into the new demon, taking him down to the ground just as he'd started to get up.

"What the hell's wrong with her?" Kraven demanded.

"That bastard," Bishop snarled. "He just broke her neck."

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

THAT WOULD EXPLAIN why I couldn't feel anything from my shoulders down.

My life was slipping away. I'd been under the impression they needed the dagger to kill a Gray, but I guess I'd been wrong. Maybe the dagger just helped make it a quicker death.

"Why aren't you healing her?" Kraven snapped. "We might still need her."

"I'm trying," Bishop gritted out, but there was a sharp edge of panic in his voice. "It's not working."

"Let me try." Someone else kneeled at my side, nudging Bishop away. Warm hands touched my throat. I could barely see anything except for his outline. Reddish hair. Green eyes that began to glow blue locked with mine.

You're going to be okay. Angels can heal if we get to the injury fast enough, even something this severe. This only just happened. Try not to be afraid.

It was his thoughts, and he'd sent them to me as if he already knew I could read his mind. The angel—he was the one we'd found sitting on the park bench.

His touch heated up until it became so painful, I cried out as it burned through me, but then it was gone as quickly as it had arrived. My heart pounded hard—but it was still beating, which was a good sign.

The angel helped me sit up. "Do you feel better now?"

I touched a shaky hand to my throat and stared up at him with shock. "You healed me."

"I did my best."

“What are you doing?” the new demon snarled. “Why did you save her, you idiot?”

Bishop got up off the ground next to me, walked to the demon currently being forcibly held down by Kraven and slammed his fist into his face. The next moment, he ripped him out of Kraven’s grip, threw him up against a nearby SUV and began to beat on him harder. It took both Kraven and the new angel to pull the two apart.

They looked so much alike—angel and demon. I would never be able to tell what they were if I didn’t already know.

Blood trailed out of the demon’s nose and the side of his mouth, courtesy of Bishop’s fists. He also bore a cut on his forehead, marring his movie star good looks, but then the red-haired angel touched his skin and the injury healed instantly with a soft glow of blue light.

“Get the fuck away from me,” the demon snapped.

“You need to calm yourself,” the angel told him.

“She’s a Gray!”

“She’s with us,” Kraven said. I was surprised by this admission, given our shaky history. He didn’t want me dead anymore, but I knew it wasn’t because he liked me. He thought they might need me again.

I’d just come as close to seeing everything vanish forever. I’d never given my mortality a whole lot of thought before.

Almost dead. Right here, only minutes ago. But now—it was like it had never happened. I’d had my neck broken by a demon and then been healed by an angel.

I was definitely in shock.

Slowly, I got to my feet and crossed my arms tightly over my chest to try to stop trembling. The cold of the night pressed in on me, even worse than before. My throat, though, it still felt warm, as if I had a thick and comforting wool scarf wrapped around it.

“I’ll kill you and send your ass straight to the Hollow, demon,” Bishop snarled. He was still being held in place by Kraven, despite fighting hard to break free. “If you touch her again, if you even *look* at her again, I swear I’ll do it.”

The demon stopped struggling against the new angel and stared at Bishop incredulously. “Why are you defending a Gray? I’m just doing what I was sent here to do. You know...the reason you found me and brought back my memories? Stupid ritual, by the way.”

Looked like we agreed on something at least.

Bishop appeared to be having trouble getting himself under control. There was a crazed look in his eyes now.

“That Gray over there was able to find us,” Kraven explained. “Find you, too.”

“She’s got some freaky power,” the new demon said. “She zapped me.”

“Yeah, I know. Doesn’t tickle, does it?”

“What is she?”

“A pain in the ass. But bottom line, you need to chill the hell out. Now. Or there’s going to be a big problem.”

“I’m fine.”

“Yeah, looks like it. I strongly suggest you don’t give us any more trouble if you know what’s good for you. If you screw up this mission, you’ll have me to answer to.” Kraven flicked a look at the new angel. “We have to keep a close eye on Bishop, too. He’s a mess right now.”

Bishop laughed then, a broken and humorless sound that made a chill run down my spine. “A mess. Yeah, I’m a mess for others to clean up. Can’t see the light, can’t find the others. Can’t heal. Can’t do much except stand and wait and watch and wonder why and where and how and who...”

Kraven eyed him. “Uh, right, whatever you say. Gray-girl? You feeling okay enough to help out a bit here?”

What I desperately wanted to do was to leave, to run away and leave them all behind. But I was still here, mostly because what just happened had weakened me to the point that I couldn’t do much of anything except wait to see what happened next. And I couldn’t turn my back on Bishop when he needed me the most.

Giving the new demon a wide berth, I made my way over to Bishop. His knuckles were red and bleeding.

“I’m sorry,” he said, shaking his head. “I said I’d protect you, but I failed. I’m sorry, sorry, so sorry.”

I was feeling better. Physically, anyway. Mentally—well, I knew I had some brand-new nightmares to look forward to. But right now, I just wanted to help Bishop.

“Take my hand,” I told him.

Bishop watched me with glazed eyes, but he didn’t move. Finally, I reached for his hand myself. It scared me how quickly he’d lost it, lost his control, his mind, everything. I knew he hated this. But I couldn’t be with

him all the time to help him out. Thankfully there were the others we'd found to help patrol the city when he wasn't feeling one hundred percent. But was he really going to get better when he went back to Heaven?

I couldn't think that far ahead. I could think only about this moment. Live in the now. The eternal now. If I didn't, I was seriously going to freak out.

When I touched him, the now-familiar energy crackled between us. He squeezed his eyes shut and I glanced over at Kraven, who was watching us carefully.

He nodded at me. "So that went smoothly, didn't it? Awesome plan, don't you think? Who says angels and demons can't work well together?"

I just stared at him blankly. I guess my shock hadn't totally worn off.

He grinned. "Oh, yeah. *Everybody* says that. With everything that's gone wrong, you'd almost think we'd been set up to fail, wouldn't you?"

I considered that with a gnawingly sick feeling in my gut. "Do you think they knew this would happen to him? That slamming through the barrier would screw up his mind so much?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. Maybe his noggin was weaker than they expected. Not a huge shock there. But luckily, he found you. Can you imagine how screwed we'd all be if he hadn't? Work that mojo, Gray-girl. Consider me a true believer now. Hallelujah."

I'd take it as a compliment if he didn't sound completely sarcastic. "I don't want anything to do with you. Any of you."

"Any of us?" He gave me a knowing look. "Come on, now. Don't lie. We all know you've picked your favorite."

I just glared at him.

"I still don't get it," the new demon said miserably. He'd stopped struggling as if he'd finally accepted that he was outmatched. "Can somebody explain to me what the hell's going on? I thought we were supposed to kill Grays, not hold hands with them and exchange Valentines. Was there a memo I missed somewhere along the way?"

"Nah," Kraven said. "This is new. But it is what it is. What's your name?"

The demon hesitated, giving Kraven a look that clearly showed he didn't trust him...or anyone else. "Roth."

"Well, Roth, welcome to the team. Unless you give us a hard time, and then we'll have to kill you—for real next time. The angel who nearly broke

your nose has the annoyingly self-indulgent name of Bishop. The other angel is Zachary, but he's okay with us calling him Zach."

Zach was the one who'd healed me. I looked over at him. "Thank you for what you did."

"You're very welcome," he replied with an easy grin. Where Roth was all fire and hatred, Zach made me feel comfortable just being around him. Plus, the fact that he'd saved my life definitely earned him a few million brownie points and my eternal gratitude.

"I'm better now," Bishop finally said, his voice steady and his blue eyes cleared of any previous confusion.

"Hooray," Kraven said dryly.

Bishop did what he usually did and ignored him. He searched my face as if double-checking that I was really okay. "I never meant to put you in this kind of danger."

"I know that," I managed.

I wasn't going to say it was okay because it wasn't. It would take me a while to recover from this.

"You should go now," he said.

"And then what?"

"Then—lead your life as you normally would. Go to your classes. Try to be as normal as you can. I think it'll help you deal with all of this."

"Beats wallowing in my misery, right?"

He held my gaze with his. "Kraven will see you back to your dormitory."

"He will?"

"I will?" Kraven raised an eyebrow.

Bishop's jaw tightened. "Yes, you will."

"Wait," I said. "Can't you walk me back yourself?"

"I need to talk to the others. I need to try to be the leader I was sent here to be. Kraven will get you safely back."

Kraven snorted. "Are you sure about that?"

Bishop didn't look amused in any way. "You won't hurt her."

"If I do, I'll have you to answer to, right?"

"There won't be enough time for you to answer. Next time I stab you with my dagger, you're dead. Permanently. Remember that." Venom dripped from every word he spoke. "So will you see Samantha home safely or not?"

Kraven's grin faded at the edges. "Whatever you say, boss." He glanced at me. "Let's go, Gray-girl."

Even though I wasn't afraid of Kraven anymore—although, maybe I should have been—I wasn't jumping at the chance to have him as my chaperone. Still, I wanted to go back to my room, and I did understand that Bishop, as the leader, needed to deal with the introduction of Roth and Zach into their new group dynamic.

"Go to my classes, be normal," I said to Bishop. "That's what you think I should do."

He nodded. "I'll be in touch soon."

"I'm counting on it."

Finally, I reluctantly let go of his hand.

I gave Zach a weak smile but didn't even glance in Roth's direction even though the weight of his unfriendly glare on me was hard to ignore. Finally, I started walking away. Kraven tagged along silently, a few feet behind me, as if he'd prefer no one we passed knew we were together.

Forcing myself to stay strong was harder than it had been before. Roth had very nearly killed me. I wasn't used to dealing with violence. Even when my parents were having problems, their fights were all verbal rather than physical and they tried to have the worst yelling matches away from me. It didn't always work, but while it wasn't pleasant, I was accustomed to words being thrown around as weapons. But not actual weapons that could make someone bleed.

I'd dealt with my personal family stress through my dark sense of humor, and later through shoplifting. I didn't do well with holding it all in. Before too long it came spilling out in one way or another.

Tonight, it felt like it wanted to be tears. I felt a sob building in my chest. When I inhaled, it sounded ragged.

"How much farther?" Kraven asked from behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder. "Another ten minutes or so."

We kept walking for a while before he spoke again. "You can tell me, you know."

"What?"

"What you really are. You can tell me the truth." Kraven increased his pace so he walked next to me, and he studied me with a strange look on his face. Confusion, curiosity, a bit of anger—but not all directed at me. Maybe he was mad at himself for not figuring out all of my secrets yet.

I shook my head. "I know you think I'm trying to hold something back, but I have no idea what's going on. Seriously."

"You have power over us, and I don't know why. I don't like that."

I wish I knew what made me so different. It would help. "I don't know what to tell you. I was normal before, and now I'm not."

"You give the angel back his mind when you touch him, you can see the searchlights to find us when we're lost, you can control the hunger of being a Gray so much that you haven't needed to feed yet, you can zap us at will...and the reading minds thing—I don't understand it, but there's a reason for it. And I'm going to figure it out."

I glared at him. "Is that some sort of threat?"

Kraven's jaw was tight. "More like a promise. This mission is too important to let anything trip it up."

"Yeah, I'm sure you can't wait to get out of here, just like Bishop. But I'm not sabotaging anything. In case you've been asleep and haven't noticed it, I've been helping."

He was silent for a moment. "I don't trust that easily."

I swallowed hard. "Look, Kraven, I know you hate me and don't want me to be a part of this. We have that in common. I want this over with. Quickly. And then I want to forget all about it."

"Bishop told you to attend your classes like normal. Are you going to do that?"

I hadn't really thought about it yet. "Maybe."

The demon's expression soured. "I think you should focus on staying out of trouble. Just fake being sick and hang out in your room and wait it out. You'll be less of a problem for us that way."

I gave him a withering look. "You just helped me make my decision. I'm definitely attending my classes tomorrow, just like Bishop suggested. Thanks for making it easier for me."

I picked up my pace, leaving him a few steps behind me again. He was such an asshole I didn't even know how to handle it.

"Wait, I want to test something," he said. "Stop a second."

Reluctantly, I stopped and turned to face him. "What now?"

The light from a streetlamp shone down on Kraven's hair, making it seem much lighter blond than it had earlier, a fiery gold color. "I'm thinking of a name. Can you read my mind right now when there's no drama involved?"

There was no humor on his face. He was being dead serious. I hissed out a sigh, met his gaze directly and tried to focus. He wasn't fighting me and there was no wall up around him like I'd felt with Roth in the beginning. What he was thinking about came to me easily, as if I was reading it off a page in a book. In my mind's eye, it even looked like fancy handwriting—black ink on yellowed paper, being written with a quill.

"James," I said. "That's the name you're thinking about right now. Isn't it?"

His brows drew together. "Let's keep going."

Kraven started walking again, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jeans. Nothing was said the rest of the way to my house. For a second, I tried to read his mind again, but my attempts hit a wall similar to Roth's. He was shielding his thoughts from me now.

I guess I'd passed the test.

I walked along the familiar pathways on campus until we finally arrived at my residence building.

"We're here," I said. "You're free to go now."

"Tell me about your parents," Kraven said.

I eyed him with surprise. "What do you want to know?"

"Who are they?"

"Normal people," I replied. "My father's a lawyer. He lives in Miami now, has since shortly after they got divorced a few years ago."

"And your mother?"

"She moved to Seattle for a job just before I started college."

"Do you have a picture of her on you?" he asked.

I blinked. "Why are you—?"

"Humor me," he replied.

Reluctantly, I pulled out my phone and scrolled to the last picture I'd taken of us on my birthday a few months ago. I held it out for him to see. "Here."

Kraven eyed the photo grimly. "Are you adopted?"

That was the last thing I expected him to say. "No."

"You sure?"

"I think I'd know something like that," I replied.

He shrugged. "Maybe you look more like your father."

My father was as blond as my mother was.

"I'm not adopted," I said firmly.

“Sure, whatever.” He sighed. “For a second I forgot that I don’t care. I’m out of here.”

The demon turned and began walking down the sidewalk, dismissing me without so much as a goodbye.

“Wait!” I called after him.

He cast an unfriendly look over his shoulder at me. “What?”

“Who’s James?” I asked.

Kraven didn’t answer me for a moment. And then, “That was my first name back when I was human.”

He turned and started to walk away, but I caught up to him and grabbed his arm, looking up at him with shock. “You were human?”

He didn’t smile. “Didn’t you know? A whole lot of angels and demons began their lives as human.”

“No, I didn’t know that.” I couldn’t find my voice for a moment. “Was Bishop human?”

He snorted. “You didn’t read that in my mind before? Would have thought you’d home in on that info immediately. There’s a bunch of memories of him stuck in my brain, whether I like it or not.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Do you...did you know him? Before?”

“You could say that.”

I knew it. Finally, confirmation that they had history. “How did you know him?”

“Bishop,” he said very softly after a long moment of silence passed between us, “was my brother.”

Without another word, he pulled his arm out of my grip disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

I STOOD outside of my dorm staring at the empty street after Kraven had disappeared. Had he just said that Bishop was his brother?

His *brother*?

That was impossible. And yet...I knew was something between them. Something that went deeper than the expected animosity of a demon and an angel having to work together for a short time.

Bishop and Kraven had once been human. And they'd been brothers.

Bishop hadn't told me. But he knew, it wasn't as if he'd forgotten. From the moment he'd seen Kraven in the alleyway, I'd sensed something—sensed that Bishop already knew him. It had been a subtle hesitation on his part, but it was there. I wondered how long it had been since they'd last seen each other.

How did one brother become a demon and the other an angel?

It hadn't been a heartfelt family reunion between them. There was bad blood simmering just under the surface.

Brothers. Wow. I really hadn't seen that coming. I mean, they didn't even look very much alike. Same build, same height, both gorgeous, but totally different hair and eye colors.

But they were brothers.

I forced myself to turn away from the dark street and head inside, navigating the narrow hallways until I got to my room on the second floor. I stopped outside the door and pulled out my phone again, thumbing a number I hadn't called for over a week.

"Sam, honey," my mother's voice greeted me. I could hear activity behind her, voices, and music.

"Hi Mom," I said. "Am I interrupting anything?"

“No, I’m just out for dinner with a few friends.”

“Oh, okay. I can call back.”

“Not necessary, honey. I can talk for a sec. How are classes?”

“Good,” I said. “How’s work?”

“Really good.”

Okay, time to get to the reason I called. “Can I ask you a very strange question?”

“Of course, honey. What is it?”

I nervously licked my dry lips before I spoke again. “Am...I adopted?”

I could still hear the background noise of the restaurant, but my mother didn’t reply right away.

“Mom?” I prompted. “Are you still there?”

“I’m here,” she finally said. “What did you say? Adopted?”

Hearing her say it out loud made me realize how ridiculous it sounded. I wished I hadn’t said anything at all. “Forget it, it’s nothing.”

“What on earth put that into your head?”

“This guy I know...he saw our picture and made that guess. Which is ridiculous of course.”

Bishop and Kraven had different coloring, but they were related. This had to be the same thing.

I’d been ready to put it out of my mind and apologize for bothering her with such a silly question if it wasn’t for the echoing silence on the other side of the phone.

“Well, am I?” I began again, starting to feel ill. “You’d tell me something like that, right?”

Finally, she laughed lightly. “Of course, I would. Something that important, you’d have a right to know.”

“Well...good. Uh...I’ll let you get back to your dinner now.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

I ended the call and tucked my phone back into my bag. While she’d all but denied Kraven’s suspicions, it still didn’t set my mind at ease. She’d hesitated when I’d asked her if I was adopted, something that hadn’t occurred to me one single time in my entire life.

I was probably just imagining things. After all, it had been a really tough day.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I DIDN'T SLEEP much that night. Instead, I stayed awake, staring at the scary shapes the shadows made on the ceiling and playing "worst-case scenario" while listening to Carly's even breathing from across the room. Not exactly the most fun game at three o'clock in the morning. My alarm clock couldn't go off fast enough.

When it did, I had second thoughts about going to my morning class. For a moment, I wanted to hide like Kraven had suggested. However, being that he'd been the one to suggest it was enough to prompt my ass out of bed and off to class. Hiding was for people who waited for others to save them. That wasn't me.

Once Bishop got his team organized and did what he had to do to find the Source of the Grays, then he'd promised to help restore my soul.

I wondered if I'd ever see him again after that. After he went back to Heaven, and everything got back to normal for both of us. Maybe he'd forget all about me.

I'd only known him a couple of days, but I knew I'd never forget about him.

In the meantime, I'd focus on being normal. If I didn't, then there'd be too much damage to clean up when everything went back to life as usual.

When I swung out of bed, I was met with Carly's smiling face, which was surprising on several levels. She wasn't a morning person by any definition of the term.

"You look happy this morning," I said cautiously.

"I am happy this morning," she confirmed.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Did you have fun with...what was his name? Bishop?"

“Sure. Fun. That’s what I had.” I threw my bedsheets into some sort of order before grabbing a bottle of water from our minifridge. “You probably want to know all about it, right? And about Stephen, too.”

“We’ll talk later,” she said. “I promise. Bye!”

And that was that. She was gone, like a blond streak out of our room toward her first class.

After everything that had happened last night, that she wasn’t pissed at me should have made me feel a lot better. One less thing to deal with. But for some reason, her super cheery attitude felt a bit fake. And after being her best friend since we were kids, I knew fake Carly from real Carly. And this was definitely fake Carly.

Still, staying true to what Bishop had suggested, I showered, brushed my teeth, got dressed, and headed to class. It wasn’t long before someone fell into step with me. I knew who it was without even looking.

Yet another problem I wasn’t sure how to deal with.

“So, you never gave me an answer yesterday,” Colin said.

Oh, yes, yesterday. When I’d practically inhaled him through my mouth when he got too close to my orbit of hunger. By the look on his face, I think I’d given him the wrong impression. Couldn’t say I blamed him. I would have gotten the wrong impression if some guy seemed to have trouble keeping his hands and lips off me, too.

We moved along the paved campus pathway thick with other students, all moving in different directions.

“We should probably talk,” I told him, trying hard to keep at least three feet between us at all times.

“I totally agree.”

Best that I let him down easy. Rip the Band-Aid off nice and quick so it wouldn’t hurt any longer than it had to.

“This isn’t going to happen, you and me,” I said.

Colin’s smile faded and he slowed his pace just before we reached the stone staircase that led to the Humanities building. It was empty now apart from a few stragglers like us.

“You aren’t even giving it a chance,” he said. “I felt it yesterday, there’s something between us.”

I couldn’t exactly tell him that the reason I’d been so attracted to him was that when he got too close to me, I hungered for his soul. It wasn’t something he’d likely take at face value.

I'd been paying close attention to my interaction with other people. And it had everything to do with personal space. On campus, surrounded by students, I felt hungry all the time, but I didn't lose my mind and attack anyone with my lips since most people kept their distance. But Colin had decided he liked me as more than a friend. That meant he tried to get closer to me. And closer was a bad thing. Too close and my brain stopped working normally and my hunger shifted into overdrive.

He was getting too close right now.

Not that Colin wasn't appealing on other levels. Colin was very attractive. He'd gotten even hotter since last year, when he and Carly had been seeing each other, and had clearly been hitting the gym. However, his shaggy sandy-blond hair could use a bit of a trim.

Suddenly I found myself stroking that sandy blond hair back off his forehead like I had no control over what my hand chose to do.

Bad. This was bad. He'd gotten too close. Only a foot away now and my brain started going blurry at the edges. And his scent, like cinnamon, apple pie—spicy and warm—became impossible to ignore. Bishop smelled even better to me, and I was drawn to him like nobody else, but he didn't have a soul to worry about.

Colin's brown-eyed gaze had darkened, and he slid an arm around my waist, pulling me up against him. "Don't tell me you don't feel it, Sam."

"I don't." I sounded breathless. *So hungry.*

"I know you don't want to hurt Carly. I get that. But just give me a chance."

I was shaking my head. *Too close, way too close.* "I can't do this."

He didn't seem deterred in the slightest. "I want to kiss you so badly right now."

"Me, too," I whispered.

Why had Bishop suggested I go to school, knowing what I was and what I had to deal with? I didn't feel at all normal right now. All I felt was ravenous.

"I *knew* it." He grinned. "We'll figure this out. Nobody has to get hurt, I promise."

And then, suddenly, he slipped out of my grasp to head into the building through the large wooden double doors. My daze immediately vanished, and I inhaled deeply to try to clear my head.

Nobody has to get hurt. I really wished he was right about that.

I knew one thing for certain—even though we were in the middle of campus, I would have kissed him just now, even knowing exactly what that meant. Maybe I would kiss anyone with a soul who got within a foot of me.

I wouldn't let that happen again until I got this under control.

Just before I went into class, I noticed somebody watching me. It was my redheaded nemesis, Jordan.

A frown creased her forehead. "You're all over everybody's boyfriend this week, aren't you? How pathetic."

I gave her the finger and an icy glare then pushed through the door. For the entire hour of class, I felt Colin staring at me while I struggled to control my insatiable hunger.

So much for trying to act normal.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AT LUNCH, I chose to become a total loner and stay away from the tantalizing scent of other students. I got a ham and cheese sandwich at the cafeteria and shoved it into my mouth practically whole, kind of like a python swallowing a small, bread-encased pig. Unfortunately, ham and cheese sandwiches weren't even making a dent in satisfying my hunger today.

But I managed to control myself. I managed to appear vaguely normal. I guess, if I looked at it that way, it was a successful day.

I avoided Colin and I didn't see Carly at all until late afternoon. Likely she was avoiding *me*. I stared bleakly at the screen of my phone as I sat on the steps outside her last class, waiting for her to appear, clutching my leather bag to my chest.

Finally, Carly exited the building. She didn't look nearly as shiny as she had this morning.

"We need to talk," she said.

Uh-oh. I had a strange feeling I knew what the subject was going to be. Big-mouthed Jordan had witnessed me practically climbing Colin like a rope this morning. Had she told everybody? I was going to kill her. But first I'd have to get through a very unpleasant discussion with Carly about why I needed to keep my greedy, hungry paws off her ex.

"It's not what you think," I began, when we went down the stairs and stepped onto the path—the same one I'd used to follow after Kraven only yesterday morning. Dry leaves crunched under our feet.

Carly eyed me. "What are you talking about?"

She looked genuinely confused, so before I admitted to something I didn't have to, I took a deep breath. "Okay, well, what did you want to talk

to me about? Oh...wait, I know. I said we'd talk about Bishop and Stephen. That's what this is, right?"

"You're acting strange today," she said.

I hitched my bag up on my shoulder. "I am strange. But you already knew that."

"Yeah, but this is extreme even for you. It's that Bishop guy, isn't it?"

Oh, she had no idea. "You could say that," I admitted.

Carly pulled a pair of dark sunglasses out of her purse and slid them on. "Is he a student here?"

"He's—uh...no, not at the moment," I replied.

"How did you meet him?" she asked. "Just last night at Crave, or somewhere else?"

Dangerous subject matter there. I raked my hair over my shoulder and played with it nervously. "I met him Sunday night after the movies when I walked home. We, uh, hit it off."

"Are you screwing him yet?"

Her question took me by surprise and my cheeks heated.

"No." I crossed my arms over my chest. "Wow, what's with the twenty questions?"

Carly's lips thinned. "I guess I feel like he must be someone really special in order for you to ditch me last night like you did."

And there it was. Her shiny, happy outlook today was just an act. There was something else about her, though. Something deeper. She seemed different. "I knew you were upset about that. But you were acting all 'I'm so happy' this morning."

"I am happy. But I want you to tell me more about Bishop."

I shrugged. "He's just a guy."

"Just a guy," she repeated like she didn't believe me. Then again, she knew me as well as I knew her. I was certain she sensed something was seriously off with me, too.

"What's the problem?" I asked. "Like, seriously, what's the problem? Is it just the ditching thing? I'm sorry. It won't happen again. You don't know what it was like, though. After I confronted Stephen—"

"You weren't the only one to confront Stephen last night," she said.

My mouth dropped open. "Excuse me?"

"I was mad at him, too, you know. I don't like it when people mess with my friends and hurt their feelings. I wanted to give him a piece of my

mind.”

A shiver went down my spine and it had nothing to do with the temperature. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“I knew you wouldn’t like it, but I had to. After you left Crave, I stuck around until he came downstairs. Then I had a talk with him.”

My heart was now hammering in my chest, so loud it made it difficult to think.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I said, feeling dizzy now. “You don’t know what— Oh, my God, Carly. You don’t know how bad of an idea that was! When he kissed me—”

“He kissed me, too.”

For a moment, I was sure I’d heard her wrong. “He kissed you.”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Carly...no, please don’t tell me that. You don’t know what it means. When he kisses you, it could mean that—”

“It means that I’m like him now,” she said calmly. “Just like you are. I know, he told me everything. Well, first I kind of yelled at him for using you and then walking away, but after he kissed me, everything started making a whole lot more sense. Well, after I woke up. I passed out for a minute there, just like you did. He took off on me, too, but he came back.” She frowned. “You look like you’re going to puke.”

This couldn’t be happening. I was having a nightmare and I was going to wake up any minute. “No, no, please, Carly—tell me you’re just messing with me right now.”

“It’s okay, Sam. Everything’s okay. Stephen explained to me how you’re having a hard time with this—that you can’t see how great it is. But it *is* great. We’re improved now, can’t you feel it?”

“How can you say it like it’s no big deal?” I needed to sit down. Either that or I was going to drop. I found my way to the curb and slumped down heavily on it. All the stress I’d been fighting all day came back in full force. “I’m going to kill him. I’m going back there tonight and I’m going to kill him for doing this to you!”

Carly sat down next to me and put an arm around me. “No, you’re not. What you’re going to do is take a few deep breaths. It’s okay, Sam. Really.”

I stared at her with horror. “This is not okay! And you being all blasé about it is freaking me out even more!”

She grabbed hold of my hand. “Look, I know this Bishop guy has been filling your head with all sorts of lies. Stephen wants what’s best for you, Sam. He was worried when you took off last night and he knows he didn’t handle things the right way. Just relax. Everything’s going to be fine.”

No, this was not fine in any way, shape, or form. Stephen turned Carly into a Gray as some sort of revenge against me for running off with Bishop and leaving him behind.

I tried to gather myself, to think rationally. At this point, I couldn’t fall apart. I’d wanted to protect Carly from finding out anything about this, but she’d stumbled on to the truth anyway. It was all my fault she’d been at the club last night in the first place, and then I’d left her alone and run off with Bishop.

But Bishop said he could restore my soul. If he could do that for me, then he could do it for Carly, too. I could fix this; it wasn’t too late. Carly was in control of herself and taking all this bizarre information in stride. Now it was out in the open and we could deal with it.

“It’s going to be okay, Carly,” I finally said, squeezing her hand.

“Of course it is. So, tell me...who is Bishop? Where did he come from? What does he want?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her, but I forced myself to hold back. She was too eager for this information, too inquisitive—like an investigative reporter. That wasn’t like her. I bet Stephen had asked her to find out everything she could about Bishop from me. Stephen had fooled her into believing he was a tall, dark, and handsome guy helping girls free themselves from the burden of their souls.

I hated him more at that moment than I’d ever hated anyone in my life.

Despite the dark feelings swirling inside me, I forced myself to give her a casual shrug. “Like I said before, he’s just a guy.”

“Okay, fine, if you say so.” She got to her feet and helped pull me to mine. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You and I are going to Crave tonight. Stephen says there’s somebody who’s going to be there who wants to meet you.”

“Who?” The thought of going back to the nightclub didn’t appeal to me in the slightest.

She shrugged. “All I know is she’s someone important. A leader. Someone who makes sure everything runs smoothly.”

A shiver of fear went through me. Every instinct I had was screaming at me that this had to be the Source—the one Bishop was searching for.

Carly looked at me with concern. “It’s going to be okay, you know.”

My first instinct was to laugh, but there wasn’t anything funny about this. “Is it?”

“Of course, it is.” Carly pushed her sunglasses off her face so I could see her eyes. They weren’t glazed or dazed or anything other than totally sincere. She was actually worried right now. About *me*. There was nothing about her that looked remotely like an out-of-control, soul-sucking monster.

Come to think of it, I had yet to see one of these mindless zombielike Grays Bishop had told me about. Carly seemed just like me—rational and levelheaded. And not running around trying to devour anybody with lips.

“Do you trust me?” she asked.

I didn’t have to think about it long. “Of course, I do.”

“More than anybody?”

I nodded. A lifetime of being best friends had to count for something.

“And you want the whole truth about what’s going on in this city right now?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then you’re going to get it tonight. Stephen was worried I wouldn’t be able to convince you to come back. He knows he made a really bad impression on you. I don’t think he’s half as cool as he tries to pretend to be.”

“This is not news to me,” I replied dryly.

“So come on, come to Crave with me again tonight.” She grinned. “Tuesdays are half-price chicken wings night.”

I let out a shaky breath and ignored my stomach rumble. “That does sound tempting.”

“Thought it might. This hunger—it’s not that easy to deal with, is it?”

“You feel it, too?”

“Hell, yes. You should have seen what I ate at lunch. I went to McDonald’s. I think they’ve put up a Customer-of-the-Month poster of as the girl who gulped down four Big Macs in one sitting. And three large fries.”

“Wow. Impressive.”

The only thing that tempted me to return to Crave tonight was the promise of answers. Real ones, this time, not half-truths and shiny sales

pitches from Stephen. I needed Bishop to restore my soul, but in the meantime, I might as well do a little research of my own. It could help him, too, if this led me to the Source.

“Fine,” I finally said. “I’ll go.”

Carly gave me a tight hug and I hugged her back.

“Everything is going to be fine,” I told her.

“Of course, it is,” she replied. “No question about it.”

Best friends till the end—that had always been our philosophy. Both of us were now missing our souls thanks to Stephen Keyes. And so far, nothing seemed like it had changed except our increased desire for chicken wings and fast food.

Maybe Bishop was wrong about Grays. Maybe he’d been given some lousy information and this mission was a big waste of time and effort—something had totally been blown out of proportion. Maybe everything was going to turn out okay, whether or not my soul was successfully restored.

No, I didn’t think it would be nearly that easy, either. All I knew for sure was that I’d be getting some more answers tonight.

I just wished the questions weren’t getting so damn scary.

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

THERE WAS no sign of Bishop all day. Even if I'd wanted to contact the angel, I had no idea how.

Instead of focusing on that, I worked on getting ready to go out. I chose a short black skirt, black tights, a sparkly tank top, knee-length boots, and my leather jacket. I took extra time with my makeup, going heavy with the black eyeliner, and then I brushed every last tangle out of my hair, so it hung in a fairly orderly manner all the way down to my waist.

I inspected the results in the mirror. Not exactly a supermodel, but not too shabby. It gave me a bit more confidence at the thought of facing Stephen and this mystery woman.

Bishop would likely be mad that I'd decided to go to Crave again, but what choice did I have? I wanted answers and I'd been given the opportunity to get more than I already had. I couldn't say no to that.

Carly looked hot, too, in a red dress that hugged her curvy body. Twenty minutes after we left the dorm, we arrived at Crave.

As we walked toward the club, I noticed a man sitting on the curb with a small cardboard box in front of him and a sign asking for spare change. His face was dirty, his black hair matted and messy, and his beard wasn't much better. His fingernails were caked with grime. He watched me through pale eyes as Carly and I moved past him, close enough to see a handful of coins in the box.

"Greetings on this lovely evening, young ladies," he said.

I felt an immediate surge of empathy for the guy. Some of the people I'd come across during my brief impersonation of a street kid were down on their luck like this and looking for a break or a kind word. Both, if they could get it.

After fumbling in my bag for a five-dollar bill, I dropped it into the box. He smiled as he watched it flutter to the bottom.

“Thank you.” His teeth were whiter than I would have expected, given his otherwise unkempt appearance. “Beauty bright like the stars above, it shines in her eyes. Eyes that have seen too much—more than they should. But she’s lost and can’t find her way. Who to trust...who to trust?”

His ramblings made me think of Bishop and my heart clenched.

“You’re welcome,” I said. “Go to the mission on Peterson. They’ll give you a good meal and some help if you need it. Although, you probably already know that.”

This guy had to have been on the streets for years by the looks of it.

He crossed his legs, squinting up at me. “So many speak with forked tongues. But the moon is high in the sky, and it won’t be long at all until the tides rush in and sweep everything away. Beware, for the time grows closer with every night that passes.”

“Um, Sam?” Carly looked uncomfortable. She teetered on her treacherously high heels. “Let’s head inside, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” I began to move past the man, but his hand shot out to grab my wrist.

Electricity zapped up my arm and, with a yelp, I yanked my hand away from him.

His eyes were wide. “I’ve waited, watched...so many years. And here you are. Finally. Like a beautiful star sent to save us all.”

Save everyone? At the moment, I could barely save myself.

Carly took hold of my arm and began dragging me after her toward the entrance. I stared over my shoulder at the homeless man who’d touched me. That felt a lot like the same electricity as when I touched Bishop.

Who was he?

“Okay, that was creepy,” Carly said after we entered through the main doors to Crave.

“Yeah.” My throat suddenly hurt, and I felt sick inside. Was he like Bishop—an angel who’d been damaged from entering Trinity? But touching me hadn’t cleared his mind. I’d seen in his eyes that he’d felt the shock, too, but he hadn’t started speaking coherently afterward.

It was nothing. Some static electricity and an overactive imagination, that was all.

“You okay?” Carly asked, putting a hand on my shoulder.

I cleared my throat and tried to compose myself. “Other than being eternally cold and hungry, I’m just fine.”

“Talk first. Eat second.”

I nodded. Last night with Stephen, I’d had a feeling I’d be seeing him again soon. I just hadn’t known how soon it would be.

Carly led the way up the spiral staircase to the second-floor lounge, not missing a step. Of the two of us, only I seemed nervous about this. I wished when Stephen had kissed me that he’d given me a little of the confidence he seemed to have given my best friend.

I expected that Stephen would look at me with anger or distaste after his standoff with Bishop last night, but the moment he saw me enter the lounge all he did was smile.

Smile. At me. And it was as amazing a smile as I’d ever seen on his face. One that once would have made my heart flip. But my heart only seemed to do flips for one guy now—and it sure wasn’t Stephen. Still, it didn’t exactly set me at ease. I’d been lured off the dance floor last Friday night by a smile just like that.

He glanced warmly at Carly as he approached us. “Thanks for handling this. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem.” She actually gave him a hug. “I’ll let you two talk.”

“No, wait a minute—” I began.

But she’d already wandered off to join a couple of other people sitting on a long red couch to the left of the stairway.

Stephen’s gaze moved to me again and his grin finally slipped a little. He actually looked awkward all of a sudden. “I’m really sorry about last night, Samantha.”

My brows went up. “You’re sorry?”

“Yeah. I handled it very badly.”

“Do you mean before or after you sucked the soul out of my best friend?” My words were cold as ice and my hands clenched into fists at my sides.

“Soon you’ll realize that all of this is for the best,” he said. “But I understand why you’re upset. Like I said, I handled things badly. I try to be confident, always have, but despite my best efforts, sometimes I come off like I’m a total...”

“Asshole?” I finished for him. “I’m just randomly picking words out of the air. Tell me if you think I’m close.”

Despite how blasé everyone was being about this life-changing experience, I harbored nothing but rage over what he'd done to both me and Carly. It would take a whole lot of convincing to make me see it any differently.

"Yeah." A grin played at his lips. "I was a total, unforgivable asshole to you. Carly let me know in no uncertain terms that my behavior Friday night was unacceptable. She's very protective of you."

"The feeling's mutual." I couldn't keep looking at him. It was making me ill. "She said there was supposed to be someone else here tonight. Someone who might be more open with the truth than you've been. That's the only reason I came back—because trust me, it wasn't to see you again. When do I get to meet this person?"

"How about right now?" someone else said. There was a beautiful young woman near the glass barrier overlooking the rest of the club, watching our uncomfortable exchange. She looked about twenty-five and had dark hair and brown eyes.

I tensed. If she was the one Bishop was looking for—the Source—she could be a demon who was able to devour souls. An anomaly, he'd said. One who was now able to create more who could do the same thing and had gotten Heaven's and Hell's attention in so big a way they'd slapped a quarantine over this entire city and sent a team of angels and demons to find her.

She approached and extended her hand to me. "Samantha Day. I'm very glad to finally meet you."

I eyed her hand with trepidation but made no move to shake it. I wasn't feeling much like being polite tonight. "Who are you?"

"A friend."

Terrific. Yet another person who liked to avoid direct questions. Finally, I forced myself to shake her hand. No spark, no electricity, nothing there but a normal handshake. I met her gaze, trying to at least appear to be brave right now. There was something about her eyes—she seemed kind of familiar to me.

With the way my week had been going, maybe I'd had a vision about her, too, and I just couldn't remember it.

"Do I know you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "We've never met before. My name is Natalie."

"So, you're the one with all the answers?"

“First, I wanted to apologize for how things have gone so far. Stephen has been...” She glanced at Stephen, who stood next to her with his arms crossed over his chest, looking more uncomfortable with every moment that passed. “Like you already said, a total asshole.”

I stifled a nervous laugh at that before sobering immediately. A chill moved down my spine. “Did you ask Stephen to do that to me on Friday night?”

Natalie held my gaze. “Yes, I asked him to kiss you.”

I took an involuntary step back from her. At first glance, she looked so normal, so pretty...so harmless. But she wasn't. “Why me?”

She glanced around at the half dozen other people up here, minding their own business. Except for Carly, who cast curious glances over her shoulder at us every few seconds.

“There was no other choice,” she said.

“He stole my soul.” Fury edged my words, even though I was trying very hard to remain calm.

She shook her head. “It might be hard for you to believe, but he actually set you free from it.”

“No, he took it without asking. That's stealing. And now I'm cold and hungry all the time and I can't get it back. Explain to me how that's so damn freeing.”

She wasn't giving me the same shiny “this is awesome, trust me!” look Stephen had given me last night. She observed my stress and anger and recognized it, rather than dismissing it. “Please hear me out, Samantha. That's why I hoped Carly could convince you to come back, despite your previous problems with Stephen. This is difficult for you, I know that. And I completely understand why you're so upset.” She nodded at a nearby table. “Let's have a seat. Stephen, give us some privacy please.”

Stephen nodded and wandered off without any argument.

Another surprise. Before, I'd thought Stephen was the one in control here. Now I clearly saw that it was Natalie—a pretty, dark-haired woman wearing a tight black dress and four-inch designer heels.

I'd give her a chance. One chance, that was all. I tried to summon up some of Carly's newfound confidence and took a seat across from her.

“Ask me anything you want to know,” she said.

I exhaled shakily. “Why me? Why did you ask Stephen to kiss me on Friday night?”

She didn't shift her attention away from me for a moment. "Because you're special, Samantha."

I made a sound then that sounded like half hiccup, half hysterical snort. "I've been told that a few times this week. But I don't feel that special."

"You are."

"Why? What makes me so damn special that I got tagged to become a Gray?"

She looked at me with a sliver of amusement in her brown eyes. "A Gray? Is that what they've termed it? How...dull. Literally."

I didn't want to say anything that might turn attention toward Bishop. "I don't know."

"You can't feel that you have something inside you that no one else here has? I knew it from the moment I first saw you here on Friday night. It's what makes you stronger than all the others."

I looked at her with shock. "Wait a minute. You saw me on Friday? Have you been watching me?"

"Take it as a compliment, Samantha, not something nefarious. I had to know for sure you were the right one. And you are."

My head began to spin. More double-talk. "I just want my soul back. I don't care about anything else."

"You'd be wise to accept this and make the most of it. You have no idea how incredible this opportunity is for you."

She actually didn't sound cocky when she said it, like Stephen would have. She sounded sincere and matter-of-fact. So much so, I almost believed her.

Almost.

"Stephen told me about your friend Bishop," Natalie continued. "What exactly does he want? Why is he here?"

I couldn't tell if she was a demon. I didn't get any sort of supernatural vibe off her at all at first glance—just like I couldn't immediately tell with the others. I looked into her eyes and tried my best to focus but didn't sense anything. I couldn't read her mind.

"Samantha," Natalie prompted. "Please tell me what you know about him. He knows about us—about *me*—doesn't he? He thinks I'm a threat."

She knew quite a bit without me saying a single word, which made me nervous. All she was looking for was confirmation and some extra details.

“He’s a friend of mine,” I finally said. “He saw Stephen manhandling me last night and came to my rescue.”

“Your knight in shining armor.”

“Something like that.”

“You don’t know who to trust, do you? Him or us?” She gave me a look of concern. “I didn’t realize how hard this would be for you. So much has been presented to you in only a few short days.”

I shrugged. “I trust Bishop.”

She shook her head. “If you really did trust him without question, you wouldn’t have come here again tonight seeking more answers—answers he’s unable or unwilling to give you. But that’s smart, Samantha. You shouldn’t trust anyone but yourself. Your heart and your gut. They won’t lie to you.”

“I agree,” I replied tentatively.

“What does your gut tell you about me now that we’ve met?”

I studied her, breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth, trying to remain calm and controlled. “I don’t know yet. You tell me I’m special, but you want me to take that at face value. I have nothing but words right now, no hard proof about what that means.”

“Words can be both powerful and dangerous. Not as dangerous as a golden dagger, though, are they?”

“Depends on the words, I guess.” I chewed my bottom lip, tasting my lip gloss I’d applied earlier. “I want my soul back, Natalie. And Carly’s, too. That’s all I want.”

“Can I tell you the truth about a human soul, Samantha? Will you listen to me before you make any final judgment about me—about all of this?”

I studied her, trying to see if she was mocking me or humoring me. She seemed sincere, but I wasn’t sure. Finally, I nodded. I’d hear her out.

“A soul exists inside a human while they live out their allotted years of life,” she began. “When they die, that soul is judged and sent to either Heaven or Hell.”

My throat tightened. “I already know this.”

“What you might not know is that a soul, at its very essence, is not actually the spark of humanity. Not the essence of a human’s life. Not something immortal that is either rewarded or punished upon death. Not completely, anyway.”

I frowned. “What is it, then?”

“At its base level, a soul is the fuel that powers Heaven and Hell and helps them keep their universal balance. Without a steady stream of human souls, both would soon wither and die. Humans wonder why it seems as if they’re always left to their own devices—war, famine, destruction, sickness—and no omnipotent supernatural being steps in to help save humans from their own poor decisions and bad luck. The answer to that is simple. It’s not human lives that keep Heaven and Hell in existence, but human deaths. Death frees the soul to be sent to one of these places to keep the balance of the universe.”

What a horrible idea—a soul as nothing more than fuel.

“You’re lying,” I said shakily. I bit my tongue to keep from saying anything that might show how freaked out I was getting.

Natalie’s expression was tense, serious, but then a smile spread across her face, which helped her look much less grim, given the subject matter. “I know it’s a lot to accept. And I am simplifying it a lot. But the bottom line is, without your soul, you’re no longer just an energy source required by Heaven or Hell. For the first time in your life, you’re free from those chains.”

I didn’t like what I was hearing at all, but I wanted to learn more. I’d sift through it to see if there was any truth that could help me.

I wrung my hands together on my lap. “How did you learn all of this?”

“The hard way.” Her grin faded and she got up from the table and moved to the glass barrier to look down on the rest of Crave. When she turned back to face me, again I was struck by how strangely familiar she looked.

“There’s something about you,” I murmured. “Something I...I can’t figure it out. I feel like I know you.”

“Is that what your instincts are telling you?” she asked. “You should listen to them. They’re telling you that you can trust me, that I want the best for you even though my methods might seem harsh. I know it’s a lot to grasp, but please try your best. You’re important to this, Samantha. More important than you even realize. You’re the center of it all. That’s why I needed to find you.”

I shook my head. “What do you mean, the center of it all? I just got dragged into this because Stephen kissed me.”

“By now, you must know that’s not the whole truth.”

There were no coincidences here.

“You’re the reason the other Grays exist,” I said quietly. “You’re their leader, their boss. You’re the one in control here.”

“Yes, I am,” she said evenly. “So, you can see why I need to know about your friend Bishop and that very special golden dagger he has in his possession. I know he’s looking for me—even now, at this very moment. If he finds me, he’ll kill me because he thinks he’s doing the right thing. But he’s not.”

My mouth went dry. I didn’t want her to know the truth about Bishop, but at the same time my gut was telling me that Natalie wasn’t simply the evil entity I’d expected her to be. There was more to this story, a vital seed of truth here, but the picture was still too blurry for me to see it clearly.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” I finally said. “I don’t have the answers you’re looking for.”

None that I was prepared to share right now, anyway.

She moved away from the glass barrier and approached me. “You’re protecting him.”

I shook my head. “No, I’m not.”

“I understand why you’re confused. Frankly, I don’t really care about Bishop that much, other than out of concern for my own survival. All I care about now is you.”

“Why do you care about me?” I searched for deception in her expression, but I saw none. She moved away from me to sit back down at the table.

“Have you discovered your psychic gifts since Stephen kissed you?”

My breath caught. “How did you know about that?”

“It’s part of what makes you so special. You have gifts—gifts you’ve had since you were first born, but you haven’t been able to access them until now. Your soul cut you off from them like a lid on a box. Now that lid is gone.”

Before I’d been kissed, I was totally normal. Stunningly normal. But now I wasn’t. And it wasn’t just the hunger and the chills. It was everything else. Kraven couldn’t figure out why I could do the things I could—the visions, seeing the searchlights, my zapping ability, reading the minds of angels and demons, helping Bishop regain his clarity. Was it all related?

“I don’t know,” is what I ended up saying. “Maybe.”

Natalie nodded as if satisfied with that answer, or at least that I wasn’t trying to deny it. “I need your help, Samantha.”

“With what?”

“Right now, there’s a barrier preventing myself or any other supernatural being from leaving the city limits. We’ve been trapped like defenseless mice for a cat to pick off for entertainment. I think you already know that.”

I hadn’t tested the barrier theory, but I didn’t think she was lying about it. “It’s a big city. There’s more than enough room to move around here.”

“We’re still imprisoned here. I don’t know what Bishop has told you about me, but he’s wrong. He’s the one you shouldn’t trust, Samantha. He’s our enemy. *Your* enemy. But he needs you. He’s using you for your gifts, isn’t he?”

The music playing downstairs shifted to something with a harder bass thump. I felt it through the bottoms of the tight boots I wore. I’d been so focused on my strange conversation with Natalie that I’d barely felt how much my feet had started to hurt.

I didn’t like her accusing Bishop of using me, but I couldn’t say she was lying. Bishop *was* using me. He’d even admitted it, which was why he’d made the deal to restore my soul to even things up between us.

“So, what am I supposed to do?” I asked.

She studied me carefully. “It’s very simple. I need you to bring the golden dagger to me.”

My heart skipped a beat. “What for?”

“It’s powerful, magical. It’s the key to leaving this city. And your newfound gifts will allow you to use it to help save me—to save us all—before it’s too late.”

I just stared at her, in shock from what she’d asked of me. Steal Bishop’s dagger. Save her life. Or she was going to die. We all were.

Bishop had said he wanted to *talk* to her.

After all I’d seen, I wasn’t even slightly convinced it would end there.

“Think about everything I’ve told you,” Natalie said. “Think hard. It’s very important that you make the right choice now. I mean you no harm, Samantha. I only want you to realize your full potential. I can help you do just that. I know you can feel the truth in what I’ve told you. Believe in me, Samantha. I can help you accept what now you are rather than what you once were. You’re better now in every way.”

I literally felt sick to my stomach from everything I’d heard from her. “I want to go now.”

She nodded. “I won’t try to stop you. I’m leaving now, too. Thank you for coming here and giving me a chance to talk to you. It means more to me than you know.”

I turned away from her, half expecting her to tackle me at the top of the stairs and demand that I bring her the dagger right now. But she didn’t. I grabbed hold of the railing as I started down the twisting stairs. A few seconds later, Carly was beside me.

“Did that go okay?” she asked. “You look really pale. Paler than normal, which is a feat in itself.”

“Fine. It’s fine. Everything’s fine.”

I didn’t sound all that convincing, but considering how swollen my brain felt, it would have to do. I’d wanted answers—I’d gotten them, although I wasn’t sure how to deal with what I’d heard. I now had a whole lot of information to sort through.

“So, what now?” she asked.

“Forget half-priced chicken wings,” I told her. “I just want to go to bed.”

“Okay, no problem. Let’s go.”

Part of me wanted to dismiss everything Natalie had told me, but I couldn’t. Despite who she was, she’d seemed so genuine. And there was that strong sense of familiarity about her that made me want to believe that she’d been *mostly* truthful with me just now.

What she’d said about my soul holding back the gifts I’d had since birth, like a lid on a box—she was right. It was like a puzzle piece snapping into place and showing me a little more of the mysterious picture underneath. But not quite enough for me to figure out what it actually was.

If she’d been telling the truth about that, was she telling the truth about how I shouldn’t trust Bishop?

As I left the club with Carly, I tried to ignore the chilly air that closed around me. The sky was clear and dotted with stars, and the moon hung low, lighting things up enough to see easily.

As we turned the corner, I suddenly found myself face-to-face with Bishop.

CHAPTER

NINETEEN

THE ANGEL WAS FRAMED by moonlight and his gaze immediately locked with mine.

Kraven stood next to him. Roth and Zach were nowhere to be seen. Believe me, the first thing I did after getting past the shock of seeing Bishop was to check the area for the demon who'd broken my neck last night.

"Hey, sweetness," Kraven greeted me, his gaze sweeping the length of me. "Looking good tonight. I hope you didn't get all hot just for little ol' me."

Ignoring the demon was becoming a habit.

Bishop didn't say anything at all, which surprised me until I realized that he didn't appear to be completely lucid. It had been a whole day since I'd last touched him to help take the confusion away. I wanted to touch him right now, even after my mind-jarring conversation with Natalie. I wanted so much to help him, to trust him.

But I forced myself to hold back.

He seemed to struggle to hold on to his concentration. His jaw was set as his gaze flicked to the club behind me before it narrowed into a glare. "Why, Samantha?"

"Why what?" I asked.

"He means 'why are you here when it's so horribly dangerous and he's worried about his little girlfriend,'" Kraven paraphrased with a smirk. At Bishop's sharp look, he shrugged. "Just trying to help."

I shifted my feet. "Half-price chicken wings on Tuesdays. That's why."

Bishop laughed and the sharp sound made me jump. His gaze twisted into me and suddenly it felt more threatening, almost like how he'd looked

at me that night in the alley when he realized what I was. Natalie's warning about him being my enemy echoed in my mind.

"Shouldn't be here," he said in that broken-up, staccato way of his. "Not again. Bad things play here."

"You told me to act normal," I told him. "Coming here is normal."

That earned me an even sourer look. He opened his mouth as if to argue but closed it.

Kraven seemed happy to take over. "It's naughty and you know it. We're here to check the place out. We were here earlier today, too, but there wasn't anything interesting to see."

Of course, they were. Even though Stephen had told Bishop the Source never came here, why would he believe that?

"Speaking of dangerous..." Kraven cocked his head, his attention now on Carly who was studying him back just as intently. "Looks like you're not the only cute Gray in the general vicinity."

This wasn't a double date in the making between the four of us. This was trouble. I had a free pass right now with Bishop and the others, but I didn't want anything bad to happen to Carly.

"Who are you?" Carly asked Kraven. She didn't seem either swayed or impressed by the two tall, good-looking guys facing us.

"Nobody you'd want to meet in a dark alley," Kraven replied. "Trust me on that."

She snorted. "You don't look so scary to me."

"You might be surprised." Despite the lightness in Kraven's tone, his glare spoke volumes. He wasn't staring at someone he really thought was cute, he was staring at someone he considered an enemy. A monster.

I would know, since that was exactly how he'd first stared at me. In fact, he still regarded me that way most of the time.

When he took a step forward, fists clenched, I stepped between them. "Don't. Just don't."

He narrowed a look at me. "Get out of my way."

I didn't move an inch. "Carly's not going to hurt anybody. She's just like me."

His expression darkened. "You're not harmless, either you just don't realize it yet. It's called denial and it won't last much longer, no matter how much your boyfriend might like to think otherwise."

I tried to shove him backward, but he didn't budge. Then I tried to zap him. That also didn't work. He had a wall up around him and I knew it would take me a while to find a crack in it.

"Get away from us. I'm not in the mood for this tonight."

"Leave her alone, Kraven," Bishop growled.

He laughed. "Defending your little girlfriend? Isn't that adorable?"

Bishop's gaze had lost some of its previous confusion. Either that or he was able to fake it pretty well now that he knew he had an audience.

"Don't try me tonight," he said evenly. "I'm really not in the mood."

I eyed Bishop, uncertainty sweeping over me about absolutely everything to do with him. "So, this wasn't planned? You came here to try to find the Source? Were you going to try to find me, too? Or..." My mouth felt dry. "Or are you finished with me? I finished finding the others and now I'm just another Gray?"

He frowned, as if trying to focus on my voice. "Not just another Gray. Special. Don't know why. Wish it were different. Wish I didn't..." He swore under his breath and rubbed his temples. "I hate this. All of it."

Kraven put an arm around Bishop's shoulders and squeezed, but it was more of a mocking gesture than a supportive one. "Bishop's been having a tough night. We've been dealing with some other important business with our two new BFFs. They're out on patrol right now. Just one big happy family, aren't we?"

"Let go of me," Bishop snarled "Or I'll kill you."

Kraven let go of him. "See? Fun, fun, fun."

I looked at Bishop. "Is he really your brother?"

His gaze snapped to mine. "What?"

I wanted him to deny it. I wanted him to say that Kraven was a liar. Then my trust in him would be restored one hundred percent. "Is it true or not?"

Bishop sent a dark glare in Kraven's direction.

The demon shrugged. "Sorry. Didn't realize it was a big secret. Guess you might have second thoughts now about letting me walk your girlfriend home from now on. All sorts of fun information might come out in the open, thanks to her special little abilities."

Bishop's attention moved back to me, and he searched my expression. "I didn't tell you because it's not important."

“Not important?” My heart slammed against my chest. “Why would you possibly think that isn’t important? He’s your *brother*.”

“That was a long time ago. Things change.”

“What does that even mean? What’s your real name? I know his.”

“My name is Bishop. There’s no other name for me that matters anymore.” There was deep pain in his blue eyes for a split second before it vanished, and he searched my gaze. It felt as if he could look right down to my soul—if I still had one.

“I want answers,” I said as firmly as I could.

“I don’t have any for you. Not about this.”

He was seriously the most frustrating and secretive person I’d met in my entire life. Ever. And yet I still wanted to know everything—who he was, where he’d lived, *when* he’d lived, what his real name was. Because I now knew for sure that it wasn’t really Bishop.

“Sam,” Carly said. “Can we, like, leave?”

“Tick tock,” Kraven said to Bishop. “Let’s get a move on. We check the club and then we have to get back out on patrol with Roth and Zach. Priorities, remember?”

Natalie had said she also planned to leave when I did. For all I knew, she was already gone.

Bishop hadn’t looked away from my face. That sliver of confusion mixed with something else I couldn’t put a name to. He didn’t like that I’d found out his little secret—that he’d been a human just like everybody else. And somehow, he had a brother who was a demon.

Again, I wished I could read his mind. I wanted to believe in him so badly, even now that my previous trust had been shaken.

“Are you going to hurt my friend?” I asked him softly.

He finally, with effort, tore his gaze from mine to sweep a glance over the blonde next to me. “Have you kissed anyone yet?”

“No, she hasn’t.” I looked at her.

“No,” Carly confirmed. “No kissing. Stephen warned me it would only make my hunger harder to deal with.”

“He should know,” I muttered.

“Found two tonight so far who met my dagger. Out of control.” Bishop gave Carly another hard look. “Don’t kiss anyone or you’ll be very sorry.”

She mock-saluted. “Understood. Yes, sir.”

I cringed at her fearless sarcasm, then regarded the angel. “Do you have everything under control?”

Bishop seemed to fight to find his words. “We’re doing our best. For some reason, those with the most severe hunger come out only at night. It’ll be better when I find the Source.” He glanced past me at the club. “Have you met her yet?”

The truth froze on my tongue. Something stopped me from spilling everything. If Natalie had been an out-of-control monster who was forming an army and wanted to wreak havoc citywide and hurt people, I might tell him everything. But she wasn’t. And I needed more answers before I’d know for sure who to trust.

I didn’t know her. But I didn’t really know Bishop, either.

“No,” I said, forcing myself to look into his eyes again. *Give me time*, I thought. *I might be able to find something out to help you.*

Or to help myself.

Hopefully both.

I was book smart, but I had to be street smart now, too. I couldn’t give Bishop every ounce of my trust—not when he hadn’t been totally open with me in return.

Carly eyed Kraven with distaste. “Let me get this straight. You two run around town killing people?”

“Only the monsters.” Kraven gave her a dark grin. “Even if they have bouncy blond hair and pretty blue eyes. So, you better stay on your new diet, honey.”

“Such a hero,” Carly said with disgust. “You think you’re doing the right thing? Like you’re some sort of savior to mankind stomping out anything that’s a little different?”

Kraven let out a humorless laugh. “Nah. I’m way more of an opportunist.” When Carly rolled her eyes, he said, “You think I’m lying?”

“Whatever. Come on, Sam. We’re out of here.” Carly grabbed my arm and started dragging me past them.

I looked over my shoulder at Bishop and my heart twisted. “Wait...I have to...”

“To what? These guys are trouble.” She glared back at Kraven. “Unless you’re going to try to stop us?”

He smiled, an expression that didn’t come close to touching his eyes. “Have a good evening, girls. And nice meeting you...Carly, right?”

Carly hooked her arm in mine and directed me in the opposite direction.

"I know that Bishop guy gets to you big-time," she said as we began putting distance between us and the club. "You started losing it there for a second. Thought you might ditch me again and run off with him."

That almost made me laugh. "No, I'm not ditching you."

He did get to me, though. More than I liked.

I played with the edge of my skirt and tried to breathe normally. I had half a mind to go back into Crave and warn Natalie that they were there, but she wasn't a fool. She knew enough to be wary of Bishop. I had a funny feeling that if she didn't want him to find her, he wouldn't. Not easily, anyway.

"Not sure why you're so into him," Carly continued. "I mean, he's definitely gorgeous, but he seems like a complete weirdo. And that other guy—he's hot, but a total asshole, isn't he? And you said they're brothers?"

"Yeah." I wanted to tell Carly everything, unburden myself of all my problems from the past few days. Tell her the truth about who and what Kraven and Bishop really were, beyond their confusing biological relationship. I mean, I trusted her. And now we were in this together, no matter what.

But I still kept my mouth shut.

She eyed me after a couple of minutes. "How are you feeling right now?"

"Hungry and cold, but that's nothing new," I replied.

"Can I do anything to help?"

"Yeah, you can give me a little bit of your self-confidence. Not sure why I didn't get that gift with purchase when Stephen kissed me." I actually managed a smile, remembering how she'd faced off with Kraven. "You're kind of a force to be reckoned with now."

She grinned. "I know, right? Fake it till you make it, isn't that what they say? If I'd been all shy and demure, I think they might have given us a harder time."

"You're probably right." I went quiet, lost in my thoughts, until we finally arrived back at our dorm. "Thanks for being so cool about all of this, Carly. I know it's a lot to process."

"We'll get through this together like we always do."

"Of course we will." I shook my head, remembering my strange and confusing conversation with Natalie. Also, that odd sense of familiarity I'd

had with her. “It’s so weird. That girl—Natalie—she reminds me of somebody, but I can’t quite put my finger on it.”

“Yeah, she reminds me of somebody, too.”

I frowned at her. “Who?”

She gave me a sideways glance. “Really? You can’t see it?”

My breath sped up. “No, I can’t.”

“The hair, the eyes? I thought it was kind of obvious. A bit freaky, actually.”

“What?” I grabbed her arm. “What’s so freaky? Who does she look like?”

She turned to fully face me, her brows drawn together. “Well, she looks like *you*, of course. You two could be related.”

I blinked. She was right. Natalie did look like me. Same hair color, same eye color. Even the shape of our faces was similar.

“Brown hair and brown eyes,” I said out loud, rationalizing it all. “Just like at least half of the population. I don’t have the most unique look, you know.”

She shrugged. “I mean, I’m not saying you *are* related, but it would kind of make sense that she was so interested in meeting you, right?”

True. But it was just a coincidence. It had to be.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Do me a favor, Sam?”

“What?” I asked.

“Stop worrying so much. It’s all going to be okay.”

I wanted to believe her. I really did. But something told me that she was dead wrong about that.

CHAPTER

TWENTY

WEDNESDAY PASSED WITHOUT INCIDENT.

I know. I could barely believe it myself.

Again, I considered hiding out in my dorm room, but ended up forcing myself to go to attend my classes and try to act normal. Carly was by my side during breaks, and she was doing a much better job of it than I ever could.

I wasn't sure if it had to do with her lacking a soul or not, but her confidence had blossomed even more. She had started taking more time and attention when picking out sexier outfits to wear. She practically glowed.

I was able to observe how a Gray is regarded by other people—especially guys. They checked her out behind her back, murmuring to each other about how hot Carly Kessler had recently become.

For the most part, they seemed to feel the same way about me. I saw it now, the appreciative looks I was getting, even though I wasn't wearing a tight skirt and heels to classes and lectures like Carly was. Even in my jeans I still received way more attention than I ever had before.

I didn't like people staring at me, though. Never had.

There was a big difference between the two of us. I wasn't filled with the confidence Carly now had. I felt exactly the same as ever before, apart from the hunger and constant chills, which didn't seem to be going anywhere. Carly appeared to handle those problems way better than I did. Lucky her.

What Natalie told me about souls being fuel had definitely stayed with me. That seemed monumentally important. As if I'd just been told the secret of the universe.

It wasn't a secret I wanted to know.

Colin tried to corner me again, but I managed to slip away before I let him get close enough that I'd become too drawn to his scent. Making the mistake of kissing him and finding out what happened if I actually gave in to my hunger wasn't something I wanted to explore. *Ever*, if I could help it.

And I could. I had control over this.

No sign of Bishop or the others. No sign of Natalie or Stephen. I was either being ignored or I was being given time to process everything I'd been told.

Probably both.

So, really, in the grand scheme of things, Wednesday was kind of wonderful. I could almost pretend that all was well with the world.

But then came Thursday.

It all started with a note slipped under my dorm room door.

We're squatting in an abandoned church on Wellesley. You can't miss it. By the way, your boyfriend needs your very special touch. You might want to drop by for a visit before he completely loses it.

There had been that edge of confusion in Bishop's eyes Tuesday night, and nearly two full days had passed since then. He could only have gotten worse.

The note wasn't signed, but I knew who it was from. Somehow Kraven had managed to find my room and left me a handwritten note. I guess the demon didn't know how to text.

The thought of showing up at that church at the demon's request didn't sit well with me. The flippant tone of the note had left me with a bad taste in my mouth. If Bishop had asked me himself, I might feel differently.

I'd figure out what to do about him later, even though I knew it would be very hard to get him out of my mind so I could focus on my classes today.

“Crave again tonight,” Carly said as she shut her locker. “You’re in, right?”

I hesitated, stuffing the note from Kraven into the pocket of my jeans. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, come on. We’ll have fun. We can hang out after my date with Paul.”

I looked at her with surprise. “Paul? The guy who’s been crushing on you for two years? *That* Paul?”

She grinned. “Yup. But it’s not an official romantic date or anything. I know that’s not a good idea until I figure out how to deal with my hunger properly. I hope he’s okay with my current chicken-wing addiction and doesn’t think it’s too nasty. But we’re going to hang out and get to know each other better. No big deal.”

“I think it’s fantastic. Just...be careful, okay?” I felt a small surge of optimism over this. If Carly’s new self-confidence was helping her get over her Colin issues, then it was a very good thing. I’d always thought she and Paul would be perfect for each other, even if there was no kissing allowed until I figured out how to get our souls back and go back to our normally scheduled lives.

Even after my conversation with Natalie, I still hadn’t changed my mind about that.

“See you later!” Carly said before leaving our room.

“Yeah, see you.” I really wished I could accept everything as easily as she could. It was as if missing her soul hadn’t fazed her one little bit.

The day dragged on. As I navigated the campus pathways, I pulled Kraven’s note out of my pocket and read it again. I wanted to be confident and strong, but just reading about how bad Bishop was getting made my heart ache. I didn’t want Bishop to get hurt, but now I didn’t want Natalie to get hurt, either.

I was stuck in the middle.

Both Bishop and Natalie had told me different sides of the same story. All I had from either of them at this point were words. Words, even though they weren’t daggers, were still dangerous if they turned out to be untrue. Both had their reasons for not being completely honest with me. Was Bishop leaving important pieces of this puzzle out, so I’d continue to help him?

Maybe these zombie Grays didn't even exist. They were like monsters in the closet. Once you opened the door and shone a light into the darkness, you realized that there was nothing there in the first place except for your own fear of the unknown.

Seeing Bishop again would have to wait until I made some sense out of the confusing mess that my life had become. And I had a feeling that Natalie had more answers I needed right now. I just hoped she'd be at Crave again tonight.

Without putting on quite as much eyeliner as Tuesday night, and foregoing the heels for flats, I got ready to leave at seven-thirty.

But then I got a call from my mother.

"Mom?"

"Honey, I need to talk to you."

She sounded as serious as I'd ever heard her before, which worried me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She drew in a shaky breath. "You have a right to know this."

"Know what?"

"I always planned to tell you when you turned eighteen, but that birthday came and went. After the divorce, I didn't want to burden you with anything else. And time...just passed. Too much time. I'm sorry."

I think I stopped breathing. "What is it? Tell me now."

She paused for what felt like an eternity before she finally said it. "You are adopted."

My mouth fell open. "What?"

Words spilled from her now like she couldn't get them out fast enough. "Your father and I couldn't conceive on our own, after trying every option. I sometimes felt that it was fate that led us to the agency that gave you to us. Like a gift from God. We were supposed to be the perfect family, but I've learned that nothing's perfect in life. But we try. And I've tried, Samantha, I've really tried to be the best mother I could be and provide everything you've needed, and...despite how it ended with your father, I know he loves you and always will. I'm sorry I didn't tell you this before and I'm so sorry if it hurts you to hear it now."

I couldn't have been more stunned if I'd just been hit by a truck.

Kraven had been right. He'd taken one look at that picture of my mother and me and he'd guessed something I'd never even considered once in my entire life.

“Who are my birth parents?” My voice was croaky, like I had to force the words out when they’d rather stay safely inside.

She cleared her throat. “There wasn’t much information on them. The agency did tell me your mother was desperate to find a good home for her baby. That’s all I know. I’m sorry, honey.”

Some girl who’d gotten in trouble and needed to fix her mistake by giving her baby up for adoption.

“Do you know her name?” I managed to ask, my throat thick.

“No. I was told she dropped you off and then disappeared. For years I thought she might come back for you and take us to court over custody, but she never did. I can contact the agency and try to find out more information if you like.”

I felt cold now, and it didn’t have much to do with missing my soul. This information just wedged into my mind, trying to find space amongst everything else I’d learned this week.

“Yeah...” I let out a shuddery breath. “I, uh...maybe. I don’t know. I need time to think about this. But I...I’m glad you told me. I am.”

“I’m so sorry it’s taken so long. Of course, you had every right to know the truth.”

“Yeah, I...I can’t talk more tonight, Mom. I need to go.”

With that, I ended the call.

I couldn’t believe I’d never seen it. I’d never been anything like my tall, blond, blue-eyed, sociable parents—they were like Barbie and Ken, practically. I was short, dark-haired, pale, and had pretty much been a loner all my life.

I held back any tears that wanted to fall as I headed to Crave. The homeless guy was sitting outside the nightclub again and he watched our approach.

“Facing fate at a fearless rate,” he said. “Despite what she’s lost, she’ll find her way in the dark city, guided by those who protect us from the shadows. Some craving daylight, some craving midnight. Some are friend, some are foe. But who’s who? Who’s to know?”

Something resonated in his words, freezing me in place, but I tried to shake it off. I didn’t have time for his Dr. Seuss-sounding babble. He freaked me out too much, especially after feeling the electricity when he’d touched me last time. I didn’t want to try to wrap my head around what that

might mean. Not tonight. My head was wrapped around enough stuff already.

“All is not as it seems,” he called after me.

“Not exactly a newsflash there,” I muttered.

Ever since my mind-blowing conversation with my mother, I’d known I had to be here again tonight. And it wasn’t just to hang out with Carly and eat greasy food by the armful. I needed more answers.

I scanned the dim interior, searching for her. As promised, she was with Paul, in a corner booth. He stared across the table at her like he’d just won the lottery. She laughed at whatever he was saying. It looked like they were having a great time.

Let them. She’d promised this wasn’t a romantic date that would involve kissing. I trusted her. He was safe.

I had other things to deal with.

I summoned as much courage as I could and climbed the spiral staircase to the second-floor lounge. As usual, there was a scattering of other Grays—at least, I now assumed that was what they were. I scanned them to see if I recognized anyone from my classes, but there was no one. They looked older than me, now that I was paying attention. Natalie sat on a red couch in the far corner wearing a tight blue dress, and Stephen leaned against the glass barrier near her.

I walked toward them and ignored my racing heart.

“Samantha,” Natalie greeted me with a smile. “I’m glad to see you again.”

“Why am I so damn special?” I demanded.

Her dark, arched eyebrows went up. “Stephen, please leave us.”

“Yeah, sure.” Stephen eyed me warily as he moved to the other side of the lounge and out of earshot.

My heart pounded. My mouth was dry. And to top it all off, my stomach was rumbling. I’d meant to grab a piece of pizza from the minifridge before I left the room but hadn’t had the chance.

“Please, Samantha,” Natalie said. “Sit down. Make yourself comfortable.”

“I don’t want to be comfortable. Why did you pick me? Why were you watching me in particular? How did you know about my gifts? Who am I? Who are you?”

This was why I'd come here. This was what I needed to know now that I'd learned I'd been adopted. I desperately needed another puzzle piece to snap into place.

She just leaned back in her seat and regarded me calmly. "Those are a lot of questions."

"We look alike," I said, when she didn't immediately offer up all the information I needed on a silver platter.

"Do we?"

"I mean, we have the same hair color. Eye color." I'd already started to doubt myself. It didn't take much. "But—is that why you targeted me? Why you told Stephen to kiss me? Why you think there's something special about me? Right now, I don't feel very special."

"What would make you think that, Samantha?"

"I'm adopted. I only found out for sure tonight. I'm just reaching, I guess. Maybe I'm wrong. Am I wrong?" My voice caught. "Are...we related in some way?"

Natalie crossed her lean legs. Her silver stilettos glinted under the spotlights above the seating area. A small smile played at her lips that ignited both fury and doubt inside me.

"The moment I arrived here I searched for you," she said. "Only you. I knew that you needed me as much as I needed you."

I waited, holding my breath.

She held my gaze before she finally spoke again. "I'm your aunt, Samantha. And I'm the only person in the world who can tell you about your birth parents."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE NOISE from the club swelled in my ears and my head swam.

“You’re my aunt?” I managed to say after several stunned seconds ticked by.

“I am.”

I tried to process this without passing out. We had a family resemblance. I’d seen it before, but this was confirmation that we were related. “But you’re so young.”

Natalie’s brown eyes, so much like mine, began to glow red. “Demons remain the same in appearance as when we died as humans.” Her lips curved. “You already guessed I was a demon, didn’t you?”

My mouth was so dry it was nearly impossible to form words. “I...I had a feeling.”

“Just you? Not your friend Bishop? I think he knows too much about me.”

I had to sit down, or I was going to fall down, so that’s exactly what I did, slumping onto a plush red sofa. I forced my mouth to make words again. “Why should I even believe you? You could be lying to me.”

She gave me a steady, patient look. “Because I know your gut is telling you that what I’m saying is true.”

She was right, it was. It felt as if another piece of my puzzle had clicked into place. I suddenly wasn’t totally sure I wanted to see the full picture. But I had to stay strong. I’d wanted the truth. I’d pretty much demanded it.

This was the truth.

Natalie—she was my aunt. And she was a *demon*.

There was so much more I needed to know, I couldn’t just stop here. I was in it up to my neck, this swimming pool of truth I’d been thrown into.

I'd either sink or swim now.

"My—my birth parents," I croaked out. "My father...my mother. Who are they? Where are they?"

Natalie had taken a seat next to me, but she made no move to get closer to me or try to hold my hand. That might have been too much, and I'd have run away from this, away from her, before I learned everything I could.

Her expression remained serious. "Your father is my older brother. His name is Nathan."

I had to ask the next question, but I was afraid of the answer. "And if you're a demon..."

Then what is he? went unspoken.

She looked me steadily in the eyes. "He's also a demon."

I shivered. It had been possible he was human, of course, but I'd had a horrible feeling that he wasn't. I immediately wanted to push back against this information, but again it settled into me with a soft *click*. "And my mother? Was she a demon, too? Or a human?"

Her lips thinned with distaste. "Neither. She was an angel."

A wave of shock crashed over me. "An angel? Wait. My father was a demon...and my mother...was an angel?"

"Yes."

"Were they human when they got together?"

"No. Your parents were already supernatural when they met—an angel and a demon."

"Then...what does that make me?" I asked.

A smile now played at her lips. "Special."

Snap goes another puzzle piece.

I stood up so quickly I got dizzy. I needed fresh air, but I was frozen in place and couldn't move. It was like there were lead weights in my shoes. I felt numb, but as I forced myself to breathe in and out, in and out, everything slowly became clearer, and my heart stopped pounding so hard.

"But angels and demons don't like each other," I said, remembering what little I'd learned from Bishop. "They hate each other."

"Usually. Personally, I despise angels." She shrugged. "But you know what they say...love works in mysterious ways."

How could she be so flippant about this? "What happened?"

She twisted her index finger through a long, dark piece of her hair. It reminded me immediately of my own nervous habit. However, this woman

—this *demon*—didn't seem like she got nervous very often. "The same thing that's happening now. A team of angels and demons were sent to take care of a problem. Your parents met. Hate swiftly turned to something else—although, don't ask me how. True love." She said it dryly as if she couldn't quite believe it herself. "Problem was, it's forbidden. Angels and demons can't be together like that. Especially not in the human world."

"Why not?"

Natalie gaze ran down the length of me. "Because there can be a price for such uncontrollable and unnatural passion. Angels and demons don't breed with each other or amongst themselves. *Unless* they're here in the human world. And true and passionate love plays a great role in making the biology click. You are an anomaly, Samantha. An extraordinarily rare result of a forbidden love affair." She gave me a bright, wide smile. "And you're rather fabulous, if I do say so myself."

"I'm an anomaly." That was the same word Bishop had used to describe the Source, a demon who could devour human souls. Aka: my aunt. He'd wondered if she was the same one with the ability from years ago. Sounded to me like he was absolutely right about that.

"Officially, what you are is called a Nexus," she said. "It means the link, the connection. The offspring of a demon and an angel. You were born human—but a special human with gifts that draw from the powers of both Heaven and Hell. These gifts were held back by your soul."

This was why I could do what I did with the other angels and demons. Finding them, repelling them, reading their minds. I had a connection to them, a deep connection that had been born in me. And it was only with my soul missing that I could properly access it.

The powers of Heaven and Hell—angel and demon—were in me.

"So, I'm not really a Gray," I said quietly.

Her amusement faded. "I honestly thought that Stephen's kiss would simply get rid of your soul and free up your hidden abilities. It was a surprise to me that you developed the hunger, too."

I glared at her. "So, it was just a hunch you had? And you went ahead and did it anyway? Without explaining anything to me first? Without giving me a choice?"

Natalie had the grace—for a demon, anyway—to look guilty. "I am sorry. I know the hunger is unpleasant. But it didn't even occur to me that it

would cause a problem. For what it's worth, I think it's possible that your hunger will fade as your body adjusts to being without its soul."

"Is that another hunch?"

"You're not like the others, Samantha. You're special."

"Screw you," I spat out. My anger was rising with every new piece of information I got. "You damn well should have asked me first. Because I would have said no."

"The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you." But then her tone turned sharper. "But it's done and there's no going back, only forward. Because of what you are, I believe you have the power to use Bishop's golden dagger as a key to open a temporary exit in the barrier Heaven and Hell created to trap us here."

"Bishop..." I wished I knew where he was right now and if he was okay. I'd tried to be strong, but I wanted to go to him as soon as I could. I just wished he'd come to see me if he needed my help.

"He's an angel, right?" A dim red glow lit up her eyes again as her expression soured. "He's been using you for your gifts from the moment you met."

"Sounds like you're trying to do the exact same thing." It did scare me that she knew what Bishop was without any confirmation from me.

"I'm trying to save both of us. Not just myself. Family comes first, Samantha. Always."

I grabbed hold of the edge of the red sofa and squeezed it, as if it might act as an anchor for me. "Where are my parents? Why did they abandon me? Did they just leave me with an adoption agency and take off to Tahiti or something? Why has it been nineteen years, and this is the first I'm hearing about any of this?"

Any remaining amusement faded from Natalie's pretty face. She sat down on the edge of the couch again and indicated for me to do the same thing, casting another glance toward the other Grays, who continued to keep their distance. No one was within hearing range.

"It's my fault," she said. "All of it. What I can do...what I've done. I'm not proud, Samantha."

"What are you talking about?"

"My hunger." She bit her bottom lip. "My *curse*. It's been hard to control since I first became a demon. The conversion to demon is harsher than the conversion to angel. Lucky bastards. My brother and I...we both

had complications. Nathan could absorb life energy—he could kill with a touch—but he had it totally under control. I hungered for a different kind of energy, and I couldn't control it no matter how hard I tried."

I watched her with widening eyes. "A hunger for souls."

She nodded, her expression bleak. "It became an addiction, one I knew would lead me to trouble every time I came to the human world. But I couldn't stop. Nathan tried to help me, but I finally ran away. I hid out here and my hungers only got worse. Of course, that meant that I showed up on the proverbial radar screen of Heaven and Hell like a bright blip of trouble. I was destroying what they valued most. I was a renegade that needed to be hunted down. They sent a team of angels and demons to do just that. On that team was my brother—whom they'd enlisted in the hope that he could help control me—and your mother, Anna. That's how they met."

Anna. Her name immediately seared into my brain. "So, what happened?"

"They found me, of course. But it took them many months. By then, Anna was already very pregnant." Natalie let out a humorless laugh. "Believe me, they were shocked that it happened as much as anyone else could be—at the time, they hadn't even known it was possible. But..." She turned to clutch my hand and looked deeply into my eyes. "They wanted you, Samantha. They loved you even before you were born."

I didn't pull away from her, but my palms were sweating. "Then what happened?"

"Even though they tried to keep it a secret, the other team members figured out they had an illicit relationship. They were torn apart and told they would never be allowed to see each other again. You'd been born and hidden away by then. Anna planned to get you back as soon as she could."

"But she didn't."

"No." Natalie's grip on me grew so tight it was nearly painful. "There was a fight. A big fight. Anna—she was stabbed with a dagger just like the one Bishop now carries. The Hollow opened up and swallowed her. Nathan was so devastated at the thought of losing her, he jumped right in after her." Her face tensed. "And the rest of the team made sure to shove me in right behind them. Wouldn't want to waste an opportunity to get rid of three problems at the same time."

I stared at her in shock. My heart was pounding three times as fast as normal. "They killed her?"

Natalie nodded. "I'm sorry."

Tears welled in my eyes. "The Hollow. I keep hearing that word, but I don't totally understand what it is. It's where supernatural beings go when they die. Right?"

Her lips thinned. "It's a black pit where all the unwanted garbage from Heaven and Hell is tossed—and it doesn't discriminate. It opens up here in the human world only when a supernatural is destroyed—like a vacuum that will suck up anything in its immediate path. Nothing has ever returned from there. It's the ultimate garbage disposal."

It sounded like a nightmare. A horrible, endless nightmare.

But then something occurred to me. "Wait a minute. You said that nothing has ever returned from there. But...you're here. You returned."

The haunted, serious expression was still there, but then a mischievous glimmer appeared in her eyes. "I did, didn't I?"

"What does that mean?"

"It means that the Hollow isn't what they think it is. It's changed." There was a large helping of disdain in her voice, and some smugness, too. "They have no idea what's possible now. They dumped me in there like garbage because I was different. Did they think about helping me, like my brother wanted to? No, of course not. I was a problem. And their solution to a problem is stomping their foot on it and kicking what's left into the trash. But I'm back."

I stared at her with cold shock. "You're back and...now you can create more who do the same thing that you do."

"That was a surprise, believe me. It never used to be like this, and I'm sure Heaven and Hell were shocked when that little news item showed up on their radar. When I kiss someone—like I did with Stephen—it changes them. Turns them into something like me. But they need to be careful not to take too much. Their bodies have transformed to become supernatural, but their minds are still frail as a human." She gave me a small shrug. "And humans are traditionally very greedy creatures. Give them a taste of something delicious and they come back for more."

"So, you kissed Stephen without knowing what it would do to him," I said.

Her lips curved into a genuine, wicked smile. "What can I say? He's cute. I like cute young men. They're fun." She cast a glance across the lounge toward him. "He had a girlfriend, but he broke up with her. I vainly

thought it was so he could be with me full-time, but I have a funny feeling he wanted to save her. He didn't want to take her soul."

That shocked me. Jordan had been hurt that Stephen had dumped her and had been seen with me. But maybe he'd been trying to save her.

Maybe. I wasn't convinced that Stephen was capable of anything that selfless.

Natalie got my attention again by grabbing my hand tightly and I looked at her with alarm.

"You must get the dagger so we can escape, Samantha. They can't find me. And if they find out what you are, they'll see you as just as much of an anomaly as I am. My hunger isn't as bad as it was. I can control it now. I'll admit I did some damage here before I realized what was happening. I'm not proud of it." She scanned the lounge with dismay. "But just like with you, I believe the others' hunger will fade in time if they resist it. A human can survive just fine without their soul. It's not really needed, and it frees them in so many ways. Stephen is a perfect example of this. He's stronger now than he ever was before."

He'd told me the same thing. Having a soul had weighed him down, filled him with doubt and unhappiness. Now he was improved. Better. If Natalie was right and the hunger began to fade, then could it really be okay for Grays—unsouled humans—to live side by side with regular humans?

If they felt anything like I did, then I didn't see why not.

"You and I need to get out of this city tonight," she told me firmly. "Tomorrow at the very latest. There's no time to waste. No one else needs to get hurt. Please, Samantha. We're family. We need each other, especially now."

"Your brother..." I whispered. "Is he okay? Can I see him?"

"Bring me the dagger and I'll take you directly to Nathan. He's the one who wanted me to find you again."

"So, you're saying that he got out, too? He escaped the Hollow with you?"

Natalie shook her head. "I can't tell you anymore right now. First you must prove yourself to me. But let me say that he will be so happy to see you, so proud of how beautiful you've become. He'd do anything for you, just as he would have for Anna."

My birth father. A demon who fell in love with an angel. Who'd followed her without hesitation into an endless black pit knowing that there

might be no way back. But there was—Natalie was the proof of it. This Hollow place...it wasn't what everyone thought it was. It wasn't the end.

I would have thought that I'd be afraid of a demon, but I wasn't. I wanted to see him. I wanted to know him.

But to do that I had to help Natalie. I had to get my hands on Bishop's dagger.

"I want to go now," I said softly.

"Please think about everything I've told you. You're my only hope now, Samantha. And both Nathan and Anna—I know they would be so proud of how you've turned out. You are so very special, never doubt it."

Slowly, carefully, I got up off the sofa, testing my legs and finding them solid enough to walk on. Stephen watched from a distance as I moved toward the stairs, but he didn't make a move to stop me.

Was it all true, what Natalie had just told me? Grays were under control except for a few exceptions that Bishop's team could take care of. Their hunger would fade if they didn't give in to it. My gifts came from the powers of both Heaven and Hell combined. And I had the ability to open a hole in the barrier with Bishop's dagger and help my aunt escape before she was hunted down and killed for being different.

I started down the stairs, barely able to focus on the direction I was headed. My conversation with Natalie buzzed in my head.

Bishop didn't know what I was. He'd been just as confused as anyone else about why I was able to do what I did.

Carly was still with Paul in the booth in the corner. I didn't want to interrupt them, but I did want to say a quick hello before I took off. By the looks of things, their date had progressed at a rapid rate. They'd moved straight from chicken wings to rounding first base.

It was sort of funny, actually. Carly had never been the most forward girl in the world. I knew for a fact she and Colin hadn't even kissed until their third date. This was only her and Paul's first date and—

Wait a minute.

Carly was *kissing* Paul. Passionately. Didn't she remember what that meant?

I raced over to their table and grabbed her arm. "Carly, wait! You can't —"

When she turned to look at me, I almost screamed. Her eyes were black, completely black, and the look in them, like a predator that had been

interrupted while feasting on its prey, turned me ice-cold inside.

Paul slumped next to her in the booth. His breath came in rapid gasps, like he was having trouble getting any air into his lungs. His expression was frozen, his eyes glazed and there were strange black, branching lines around his mouth that immediately faded away. His skin was pale, like a ghost.

That wasn't just a kiss...Carly had been feeding on his soul. Right here in the middle of Crave.

As I watched her with horror, her eyes shifted back to their normal blue, and the cold look on her face vanished. She smiled up at me. "Hey, I didn't know you were here yet."

"I'm here." My gaze quickly moved between her and Paul. He was recovering himself enough to pick at the French fries in front of him.

"Hey, Sam," he said. "How's it going?"

"Great," I squeaked out. "Really fantastic. You?"

He shrugged and grinned at me, still looking extremely pale. "I'm with Carly, so I'm pretty happy."

"Yeah." I swallowed. He didn't even realize what had happened. He thought he'd just kissed a girl he liked while they were on their very first date.

"Join us." Carly scooted over.

She looked so normal now I could almost forget what I'd just seen—a black-eyed monster feeding on a human soul. A monster who, for a moment, had looked at me as if she wanted to tear me apart for stopping her.

She'd said she wouldn't do this. That she had it under control. That I should trust her.

The monster was gone now, without a trace. Carly was back to normal.

But she wasn't normal. I glanced behind me, but it looked as if no one had noticed what happened except for me.

"I can't stay. I just wanted to say hi." I looked at the plate in front of her, still half full of food. If that had been my plate, it would have been shiny clean by now.

She frowned and reached out to touch my arm. Her skin felt ice-cold, and I flinched away from her. "You don't look so good. You sure you can't sit down for a minute?"

This was not the time for accusations. Maybe she didn't even realize what she'd just done.

I shook my head. "I really need to go."

"Me, too," Paul said. "I didn't realize how exhausted I am. It's been great, Carly. Sorry I have to take off early. Maybe we can do this again?"

"Absolutely," she said with a big grin. "Thanks so much for dinner."

I knew she wasn't talking about the daily special.

I lingered to make sure Paul got safely out of the club, watching him walk wearily to the exit as if he couldn't keep his eyes open. Carly gave me a big hug then studied my face. A frown creased her brow.

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "But it's no big deal, okay? He's fine. I barely took anything. But...I had to. I couldn't help it. I was so hungry."

I just nodded. "Sure. If you say so."

As I headed for the door, I looked over my shoulder to see she was on her way upstairs to hang out with the other Grays.

"Find your answers?" the homeless guy asked when I passed him after exiting Crave. "Or just more questions? You saw her, didn't you? She's just like she was last time only worse...much worse."

He knew about Natalie. That she'd been here before. I'd planned to keep walking, but instead I crouched down in front of him, so we were at eye level. He looked at me with surprise, as if he'd expected me to ignore him.

I reached out and grabbed his dirty hand in mine.

Electricity sparked up and down my arm—shocking, but not painful. And familiar. I watched him closely and, yes, just the slightest edge of that confusion seemed to disappear from his eyes this time.

He was an angel, just like Bishop. He had to be.

"Can you think clearly now?" I asked, squeezing his hand. "Does this help?"

He looked down at my grip on him. "Nothing eases my pain, not for long. I try and try and try, but I can't escape it. The shackles are heavy. I feel them even now. But one day I will be free."

"I have a friend, his name's Bishop," I said. "He's like you, I think, but he just got here. Can you tell me anything that might help him?"

"Watcher of midnight, angry and vulnerable. Won't be long now. Without you, he'll be lost as I am as his chains grow thicker and thicker. Help us, beautiful star. You're the only one who can."

"I don't know how."

He was an angel stuck here for some reason, and his mind had been permanently damaged. Bishop said that when he went back to Heaven he'd be fixed. This guy—how long had he been here? Natalie said that demons and angels remained the same age as when their human self died, so I knew I couldn't go just by appearance alone.

I didn't have time tonight to help this angel, even though I wanted to.

"I'll see you again," I told him, my chest tight. "And if I can, I'll try to help you, I promise."

He didn't try to stop me as I walked away. I needed to find the other angel, the one I knew I could still help. The one I desperately hoped could help me in return.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ST. Andrew the Apostle, the abandoned church I'd been looking for, stood tall in front of me despite being run-down and boarded up. The sign out front was broken, the glass from it scattered on grass that looked like it hadn't been mown in a couple of years. The building was both ominous and sad looking.

This part of the city had been hit hard by the economy, and most of the stores and businesses had shut down. I guess the same applied to churches.

I approached it apprehensively, eyeing the front doors as if they might swing open and suck me inside. It was difficult to get the image of black-eyed Carly out of my head. One moment a monster, the next my best friend who'd known what she'd done would upset me.

And now I had to deal with what that meant. Bishop had to promise me to restore Carly's soul, too. I didn't want her to lose herself to this. To the hunger. As afraid as I'd been *of* her in that moment, I'd been more afraid *for* her.

I could fix this. I could. I grabbed hold of that belief with both hands and promised myself I wouldn't let go.

Along the side of the building, a door was ajar with a brick placed in it to keep it that way. It was the only indication that the church might not be totally deserted after all. No, a small group of demons and angels had set up camp here.

I wondered fleetingly if a demon could enter a church that wasn't abandoned.

The need to see Bishop pushed me onward. The door made an eerie creaking sound as I pushed it open farther and I stepped into the cool, dark halls of St. Andrew's.

Voices echoed down the narrow hallway. Keeping close to the wall, I made my way into the church. It smelled old, like mildew and rotting wood.

Even though I was cold, always cold, a trickle of perspiration slid down my spine. Fear was alive and well in this currently soulless body.

"...should be here by now," Kraven said, although I couldn't see him yet. "I left the note first thing this morning."

"This is none of your damn business." Bishop's voice sounded angry. And shaky.

A shiver coursed through me.

"Not my business you're in bad shape? You're part of this. You drop your end, that's a quarter more responsibility the rest of us have to carry. And this isn't over yet."

Zach spoke then, his voice calm and even-toned, as if he was accustomed to coming between the two. "It will all work out. I have faith."

"How nice for you," Kraven replied dryly.

"I hate this!" Roth snarled, joining the conversation as something crashed to the floor. I glanced around the corner to see the demon kick a stack of chairs at the front of the hall up toward the pulpit. Two of the large stained-glass windows along the walls were broken, but the one at the very front was still intact and beautiful, even at night.

"What's your problem?" Kraven snapped at him.

"My problem?" Roth grabbed a vase from a side table and looked as if he was going to hurl it at the window behind him. Kraven caught his arm to stop him. Roth pushed the other demon back. "My problem is this sucks. All of it. What are we waiting for tonight? I want out."

"You signed up for this. You were given a choice, remember? You can't go back yet."

"I don't mean back to Hell, I mean *out*. I want to go out on patrol. I'm so bored. I killed three of those soul-suckers last night and I want to find at least as many tonight when they crawl out of their holes. Give me the dagger."

"Bishop's not giving it up," Zach said. "He thinks you'll go after Samantha."

"I don't need the dagger for that. I can kill a Gray like her without it, just takes a bit more effort. Nearly did, but you had to go and heal her."

Zach turned away from the demon and moved toward Bishop, who stood with his back braced against the wall as if it was an effort to stay

vertical. “What can we do to help you?”

Bishop shook his head. “Nothing. Just...give me time. I’ll be fine.”

Kraven groaned. “I’ll go get her. I’ll drag her ass back here myself even if I have to knock her out first.”

“No,” Bishop replied sharply, glaring at the demon. “Harm her and I swear I’ll tear you apart.”

This was ridiculous. I put on a brave face, stepped out from behind the corner and walked up the aisle toward them. The other three eyed me with varying degrees of surprise. Bishop slowly raised his gaze up to meet mine.

I wanted to go directly to him, but I stopped myself.

“Well, what do you know?” Kraven said. “Were your ears burning, sweetness?”

“A little,” I admitted.

The greeting between us was almost friendly, at least compared to the death glare I got from Roth. After all, I was one of the things he wanted to head out tonight and kill to help combat his boredom. If he said he’d killed three last night, how many others were there? How big of a problem had Grays become in the city?

There wasn’t widespread panic. There weren’t cops stationed on every street. They had to have it under control. At least, I really hoped so.

Still, considering what I’d seen Bishop do with that dagger as he performed the ritual on the others, it seemed like an excessively violent end for anyone. While what Carly had done scared the hell out of me, I wouldn’t say she deserved a dagger through her heart for it. Paul had walked away, even though he was missing part of his soul now. I could only hope that she hadn’t done any lasting harm to him.

“What are you looking at?” I snarled at Roth.

A cold smile played on his lips. “Lunch.”

I shuddered. “Dream on.”

“Every night.”

“You need to stay away from me.”

He shrugged. “Maybe I will and maybe I won’t. Heard what you can do, though. Read our minds. Don’t try to do that with me.”

I focused on him, holding his gaze for longer than I wanted to. “Too late. Already done.”

I didn’t need to touch them; I just needed eye contact and an open mind. Tonight, it seemed as if his walls were down whether he realized it or not.

Roth's brows drew together. "So, what was I thinking just now?"

I felt stronger with every moment that passed. The power of Heaven and Hell—yours truly had access to it, at least according to Natalie. This was just a small taste test. "You're thinking that you hope nobody here can tell how scared you are. How out of your league. How a meaningless loser like you could have been picked for a mission this important." I forced myself to smile at him. "I'm paraphrasing of course, but am I close?"

He flinched as if I'd actually struck him. Roth's self-hatred issues made Kraven look like Mr. Well-Adjusted.

I wasn't quite finished, though. "I guess you don't want anyone to know what a coward you really are underneath it all, do you?"

His eyes narrowed. "Be careful."

"Oh, I intend to."

He stormed out of the room. Yes, I'd definitely hit the mark with him, which I wasn't so sure was a good thing. He was going to hold a grudge against me.

Zach touched my arm. "Ignore him, Samantha. Are you okay? You recovered from the other night?"

I looked up at him, meeting his pale green eyes. I searched for any kind of deception or cruelty there but found nothing but an earnest angel who really wanted to know if I was okay.

"I'm better. Thanks to you. If you hadn't been able to heal me—well, I don't even want to think about that."

He nodded toward Bishop. "I only wish I could help him, too."

Kraven watched me a bit warily after my exchange with the other demon. "So, are you here to work your mojo with my darling brother or do you want to do some card tricks first?"

Zach didn't react to this at all. I guessed the news that Bishop and Kraven were related wasn't a secret anymore.

I approached Bishop slowly, my gaze moving over his tall form, broad shoulders, dark hair. His muscles strained against the sleeves of his T-shirt. He'd barely taken his eyes off me since I'd entered. I'd noticed him tense up when Roth sounded like he was going to get violent with me again, as if ready to jump in and beat the other demon down to the floor, but now he leaned heavily against the wall as if it was the only thing keeping him on his feet. There was a sheen of perspiration on his forehead and his blue eyes were unfocused.

My heart twisted. “What am I going to do with you?”

He let out a short bark of a laugh. “Good question.”

I thought of the homeless guy I’d seen a few times now—the other messed up angel. “Why would Heaven let this happen to you?”

“Got banged up coming here...they didn’t know it would happen. Not this bad.”

“Is that a guess or a hope?”

Bishop didn’t look away from me, but the glazed look in his eyes scared me. “Both.”

I clenched my fists at my sides. “Honestly, Bishop. You should have found me before this. Why did you wait until I came here?”

“I wanted to handle this on my own.”

“Nice thought. But everybody needs a bit of help sometimes.” I held my hand out to him. “Well?”

I wasn’t going to force him; he had to choose this for himself. He’d asked me in the beginning to help him. It was even part of our deal. But I knew he’d rather find a solution to this problem on his own.

Finally, he reached forward and grasped my hand tightly in his. And just like the first time we’d touched it was like lightning struck us. He gasped out loud. The electricity that sparked was even stronger than before. Warmth slid through me, chasing away my chill. Our eyes met and held, and I swear this connection we had felt like magic. Pure magic.

Bishop inhaled, squeezing his eyes shut as his grip on me tightened. When he finally opened his eyes again, they were clear blue and totally lucid.

“Better?” I asked.

He nodded slowly. “Much.”

I smiled. “I’m here to help.”

He didn’t let go of my hand. He reached down to take the other, as well. “You still shouldn’t have come here. It’s too dangerous.”

“But here I am anyway. So, get used to it. I mean—” I looked down at our hands “—is this so bad?”

His gaze caught mine again. “It’s too good. That’s why it’s so bad.”

When he entwined our fingers, for just a moment I forgot about everything else—it all slipped away and there was only him.

“I can practically hear the violins playing,” Kraven drawled. “So romantic, I could die. Should Zach and I leave the room so you two can go

at it, or what?"

I gave him a sharp look. "Are you ever not a jerk?"

"Not ever," he confirmed.

"What about when you were human?"

The demon's smart-ass grin faded. "I don't talk about that."

"But you wanted me to know your human name. And that you and Bishop were brothers. Care to share any more about that? Either of you?"

His unfriendly gaze moved to the left as the door clanged shut. Roth had returned from his temporary pity party. He looked at us sullenly but didn't say anything.

"That was just a test of the emergency broadcast system, sweetness," Kraven said. "Don't let it go to your head that I was trying to get personal with you."

"Wouldn't dream of it, *James*." I think I'd just discovered the demon's Achilles' heel. Talking about his human life was off-limits. But I guess I wanted to test those limits just a little. It had been one of those nights.

My using his real first name earned me a look of sheer disdain. "Sucked any souls out of mouths tonight, Gray-girl?"

"No. Stabbed any helpless victims?" I countered.

"Our victims aren't helpless," Bishop said.

My gaze shot back to him. "Sure, they aren't."

"You haven't seen a Gray after they've fed too much."

The memory of Carly flitted through my mind, and I grimaced.

"Samantha." Bishop squeezed my hand to get me to keep looking at him instead of the jerk of a demon. "What happened? What did you see?"

My throat thickened. "My friend...I think she's in trouble."

"The blond one you were with the other night?"

I nodded, a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. "I'm worried about her."

"Did you see her feed?" Zach asked.

I didn't reply right away, and they all exchanged a look that made me nervous. I couldn't admit what Carly had done. I couldn't put her in danger. I knew what they'd do to her if they learned the truth. "Bishop, you said you can restore my soul. I want you to restore her soul, too."

"Restore souls?" Roth finally spoke up. "Somebody's living in a dreamworld, aren't they?"

I looked at him sharply. "Excuse me?"

“You can’t restore a human’s soul once it’s gone.” He glanced at Bishop who was sending a dark glare his way. “What?”

I gaped at him. “But Bishop said...”

“Yeah, I’m sure he would have said anything to get access to that mysterious mojo of yours, right? Good going, angel.” A smile stretched across Roth’s handsome face. “Nice and devious. I approve.”

For the second—or third?—time tonight, it felt as if the floor had fallen away beneath my feet, and I was about to fall into a pit of darkness. “Bishop...is that true?”

Bishop gave Roth a look that might completely shrivel a weaker demon to the size and consistency of a raisin. When Bishop finally turned his gaze to me his fierce expression had only softened a fraction.

“If there is a way to restore your soul I will find it,” he said.

I staggered back from him. “You lied to me? You told me angels don’t lie.”

“Oh, angels can definitely lie when they need to,” Kraven said. “Trust me on that. They just prefer not to since it makes them feel all dirty inside.”

Bishop’s jaw tensed. “It wasn’t a lie. I told you I’d help, that I believe there’s a way. And when I get back to Heaven, I’ll find it.”

Panic gripped my throat. “That’s not what you promised me!”

His brows drew together. “Yes, it was.”

“Uh-oh. Trouble in paradise,” Kraven murmured. “News at eleven.”

Despite my other misgivings, I’d had faith that Bishop was being truthful with me about this. And now, to learn that it had all been a lie—that this was it for me and for Carly...

He was no better than a demon.

Before Bishop had a chance to say anything else, I stormed away from him and back down the dark hallway to the open door. I made it outside the church by the broken sign before I had to take a moment to try to get control over myself. I braced my hands on my thighs and gulped in big mouthfuls of air.

I’d agreed to his deal and done everything I’d promised to do, and all the time he’d known he might not be able to hold up his end of the bargain.

I’d fallen for a guy who’d promised to save me only so he could get something in return. My heart felt like it had broken into pieces, scattered on the front lawn of this abandoned church just like that sign.

I didn't remember his exact words, but he'd left me with the certainty that he had a solution. *The* solution. I wanted so much to trust him, but how could I ever do that again?

"Samantha, stop!" Bishop rushed after me while the others stayed inside. He grabbed hard onto my wrist to keep me from going any farther.

I shoved him back from me as I felt something hot and wet on my cheeks. The tears I'd been holding back all night were starting to fall. I wiped at them with annoyance. "Why would you do this to me? I believed in you, I helped you, and you lied to me! This is my life we're talking about. And Carly's life, too!"

He let out a snarl of frustration. "What? You think I'm a shameless asshole who gets off on lying to innocent girls? I thought you knew me better than that."

"I don't know you at all! You and Kraven *are* brothers. Maybe you're more alike than I thought. Maybe you should be a demon, too."

His jaw tightened. "You're right, I should be."

It was the last thing I thought he'd say to that. "What?"

"I was one of the bad guys." His face was stone. "A long time ago. Real bad, Samantha—you have no damn idea. But I've changed. New name, new job...new existence. Everything's different now."

He'd knocked me totally off balance with this unexpected glimpse into his past. But, really, for all I knew he was just lying again. "You're *still* one of the bad guys, Bishop. This just proves it."

I forced myself to turn away from him, but he grabbed my arm again and spun me back around so he could look at me fiercely. "Did I knowingly lead you to believe something that wasn't one hundred percent true? Maybe I did. But you said you hated me. I had to say something that would keep you around. No matter what."

"I do hate you."

"That's your decision. But when I go back to Heaven, I will find an answer. I will save you."

"Leave me alone." I pulled away from him and started to walk again.

He was persistent, though. He still followed me, which only made this harder. Having him near me, even now, made it too difficult to think straight.

Bishop said he was one of the bad guys.

I shivered. Who was he? What had he done—and how long ago? And how had he become an angel if Kraven became a demon?

Finally, I stopped and turned to face him. I glared up at his face. Despite the shadows surrounding us, there was a dim, unnerving glow in his beautiful eyes as he watched me.

As I was trying to form words around my racing thoughts, something surprising caught my eye. I stared up into the sky behind him.

He frowned. “What is it?”

It took me a moment to find my voice. “Kraven said there were supposed to be four of you on your team, right? Two angels and two demons?”

“Yeah, four.”

I kept staring at the column of light that had just appeared in the night sky. “Looks like you’re getting a bonus member.”

He turned to look in the same direction. “You can see another searchlight?”

I just nodded.

He stayed silent, but I knew what he wanted to say. He wanted me to lead him to the right spot, just as I’d done with the others. Sounded like somebody had their signals crossed—literally—when it came to the total number of demons and angels currently in the city. If there was another one tonight, then there might be even more than that.

My possibility of getting back what Stephen had taken from me had fizzled and died tonight, no matter what the angel was ready to promise me now. The question was, did I completely blame Bishop for what he’d let me believe? Would I have done the exact same thing in his position, knowing what was at stake if I couldn’t find the others?

Damn it, I probably would have.

It didn’t make any of this right, nor did it lessen the betrayal I felt, but part of me did understand.

Bishop wanted to help me. He just wasn’t totally sure if he could. If he’d put it that bluntly, maybe I wouldn’t have agreed to help him in the first place.

I hissed out a long breath. “This is it, Bishop. This is definitely the last time I’m ever going to help you.”

He was quiet for a moment. “Thank you, Samantha.”

Natalie wanted the dagger so I could help her leave the city. My heart ached from learning the story about my birth parents, but I couldn't do what she wanted me to do. Not yet, anyway.

But I also couldn't lead Bishop to the Source and let him destroy my aunt—the only connection I had to my birth father.

Looked like I was still right in the middle of this supernatural teeter-totter. It sure didn't feel like the best location to hang out for very long.

It almost felt routine now, following the searchlight that would lead us to an angel or a demon. I kept several feet between us so I wouldn't feel as drawn to him as I normally did. But, even now that I knew more of the painful truth, it didn't help as much as I would have guessed.

This searchlight didn't lead us too many blocks away from the abandoned church. It was practically deserted in this neighborhood, compared to where we'd found Roth on the busy downtown sidewalk in the shopping district. Abandoned, empty, lonely—depressing, really. A good chunk of Trinity was like this now, as if any life that had existed before had died off, leaving a shadowy ghost town behind.

The light led us to another young man. At least six feet tall, with dark brown skin. His black hair was so short it was nearly shaved. Attractive, of course, no big surprise there, either. He wore ill-fitting khaki cargo pants and a black button-down shirt.

He had his arms crossed and he trudged along the sidewalk, headed slowly toward downtown.

"That's him?" Bishop said.

The sound of his smooth, deep voice sank into me. I wanted to forgive him, even while memories of his betrayal still swirled all around me. My conflicting emotions toward Bishop weren't helpful right now. All they could do was distract me.

"Yes," I finally said. "I don't get it, though. Why would they tell Kraven there's supposed to be four of you and then send another one?"

"No idea." He didn't sound happy about that.

I had a flash of what happened last time with Roth and the worry over us making a mistake and actually killing some innocent person. "Just make sure to check him first. Don't just, you know, *do it*."

"Agreed." Bishop hesitated. "You should leave now."

I gave him a sidelong look while we kept walking, and I drew my coat closer to block the chill of the crisp October night air.

“And miss all the excitement?” I replied.

He kept his tense attention on the young man. “I know you don’t like this part.”

“Bishop, the day I start to like witnessing someone get stabbed through the heart is not a day I’m looking forward to.”

He shook his head. “You’ve been so brave about all of this.”

That made me snort humorlessly. “That’s not exactly a word I’d use to describe myself.”

“I just wish I understood how you can do this,” he said.

My heart betrayed me by skipping a beat when he met my gaze.

He had no idea what the truth really was—that I was a *Nexus*, like Natalie said. Since I wasn’t ready to share that at the moment, he’d just have to keep guessing.

Bishop pulled me to a stop. The guy had also stopped walking and turned to face us.

“Are you following me?” he asked.

“Us?” I was the first to speak. “Um, maybe. Hi there. How are you tonight?”

“This is a bad neighborhood, you know,” he told us. “Dangerous at night.”

“Your point?”

“What do you want with me?”

Bishop stepped forward. “We know you’re lost, and we want to help you.”

His eyes were a medium brown, flecked with gold. “Do I know you?”

“Me?” I pointed at myself.

“Yeah, you look familiar.”

Bishop and I exchanged a glance. “It’s all yours,” I told him, waving my hand and reluctantly stepping backward.

That earned me the barest hint of one of his rare smiles. It worked like a lightning bolt right to my heart. My heart honestly couldn’t make up its mind about the angel—it was either broken or doing backflips worthy of an Olympic gymnast.

Bishop turned back to him. “Have you dreamed about Samantha? Is that how you know her?”

“Dreamed about her?” He frowned. “Actually...yeah, I have. Is that strange, or what?”

“Not strange.” Bishop shook his head. “It was a sign that we’re here to help you right now.”

The young man’s attention shifted to something behind us, and his eyes widened. “I’ve dreamed about something like that, too.”

When I turned to look a gasp caught in my throat.

A large man was barreling down the sidewalk. He wore a dark blue business suit, which was wrinkled and dirty. I could smell him from ten feet away—like something rotten found at the bottom of a garbage can. His face was so pale white it seemed to glow.

And his eyes—they were black and glazed, with no emotion or intelligence in them. Only hunger. Like Carly’s had been.

Bishop shoved me out of the way as the Gray stormed toward us, and then Bishop was tackled to the ground, landing hard on his back. I shrieked, thinking that this monster was going to hurt him, but the angel had been chosen for this mission for a reason. I’d only seen a glimpse of his fighting skills before. Tonight, I got to see more. He slammed his fist into the Gray’s face and used the leverage to flip him onto his back. The Gray fought back, but Bishop had taken full control of the situation.

“Can you understand me?” Bishop demanded, a knee on the Gray’s chest to keep him down. “Can you still think clearly enough to answer me?”

A line of drool slid out of the Gray’s mouth as he powered forward, fighting wildly against Bishop, but not giving any indication that he understood what he was asked.

“Last chance,” Bishop growled, getting to his feet to stand in front of me, as if trying to block me from any harm. “Can you hear me? Or has the hunger taken your mind completely?”

The Gray was back on his feet, and he surged toward Bishop.

Suddenly the golden dagger was in Bishop’s hand, and he arched it toward the Gray’s chest where it met its mark. I clamped a hand over my mouth to stop from screaming. It had all happened so fast.

A high-pitched screech that didn’t sound human escaped the Gray’s throat as Bishop yanked the blade back out. The Gray fell hard to his knees.

“Samantha, get back!” Bishop grabbed hold of my coat sleeve and pulled me away so there was a dozen feet between us and the monster who’d just attacked us.

A swirling black vortex appeared out of absolutely nowhere. Even in the dark of night, this was even darker, a pitch-black hole hanging in the

middle of the air about four feet in diameter. With its appearance came a horrible whirling sound, like a tornado, so loud it made it nearly impossible to think.

It felt as if a powerful vacuum was drawing us into it. The four of us slid forward on the pavement toward the vortex. I just stared at it with wide eyes, terrified. Bishop kept a tight grip on me to keep me from moving any closer to it, his rubber-soled shoes braced against the ground as an anchor.

The Gray was closest to the vortex. I felt his gaze bore into me for a long, horrible moment. Finally, he hissed out his last breath and slumped backward.

The very next moment, it was as if the vortex literally reached out and yanked him back into the darkness. One moment the swirling, thunderous darkness was there, the next it shrank away and disappeared, leaving nothing behind but silence.

My heart thundered in my ears as I stayed exactly where I was for a few seconds, not moving, not breathing. The new guy next to me was staring in shock at the space where the black hole had just been.

“What in the holy hell was that?” he managed to ask after a moment.

“That,” Bishop said, “was the Hollow.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

HE STARED AT BISHOP. “You killed that man and he got sucked into a big black hole.”

“Pretty much,” Bishop confirmed.

“And you’re supposed to help me?” He shot a confused look at me. “What about you? How can you be so damn calm about what just happened?”

“Do I look calm?” I gripped my hands together to keep them from shaking. “I guess I’m only screaming on the inside right now.”

“What’s going on?”

Bishop eyed him. “Show me your back.”

“What?”

“Do it,” he snapped like a pissed-off drill sergeant. Whatever small amount of patience Bishop had had earlier had all but disappeared.

He glanced warily at the knife Bishop still held. “Yeah, okay. Whatever you say. You really want to see my back so much? You got it.”

He turned a little and pulled up his shirt enough for me to see there was an imprint of wings on his dark skin—and it was just like Bishop’s and Zach’s mark.

A third angel.

“Weird tattoo, right?” He pulled his shirt back down. “I can’t remember much of anything lately, but I have no idea what would have possessed me to get something like—”

He gasped as Bishop sank the dagger into his chest. I watched in horror, not expecting it to happen so quickly. I hadn’t even had a chance to catch my breath.

He dropped to his knees and looked at me with confusion on his pained face. “I thought you wanted to help me.”

“This is helping,” I choked out. It was all I could think of to say. All that I could say.

He fell all the way to the ground and let out his last breath.

I braced myself, thinking for a moment the vortex would open again. I jumped when Bishop touched my arm.

I couldn’t look at the body. “Why doesn’t the Hollow open again?”

“This is not the same as a true death. The ritual is specific, and the dagger knows the difference. Think of it like an invisible shield surrounding each of the team members, protecting them when they entered the city—enough to fool the city’s barrier. It also blocks their memories and any abilities they have. This dagger cuts through that so their true selves can be returned.”

The dagger knew the difference?

It could cut through the shield. Natalie thought it could also cut through the barrier surrounding the city—if it was in my hands.

I just nodded, stunned. “That’s a talented dagger. Does it talk, too?”

“Not recently.” Bishop wiped the weapon off on his jeans before sheathing it. He crouched down next to the new angel to check his back again. “Maybe Heaven felt that reinforcements were needed already. It’s been a week since I arrived. That was as long as I was originally given to find the others.”

I just stared back in the direction where the entrance to the Hollow had been. It wasn’t something I ever wanted to see again. Natalie had returned from that—from somewhere that was supposed to be one-way only.

“That man was the type of Gray you’ve been telling me about,” I said, my voice shaky. “The ones you can’t reason with, who have no self-control when they feed too much.”

“That’s right.” Bishop rose to his feet again. “There’s no coming back from that.”

“He *was* like a zombie.” I’d always loved zombie movies, even the really crappy ones like the *Zombie Queen* sequel. But that—what I’d just seen—that had been real.

“That’s why we’re out patrolling the streets every night. This one...” He nodded at the new angel’s still form, “can help with that while I focus on finding the Source.”

I bit my bottom lip. “Are you close? Any leads?”

Bishop scanned the dark street before his gaze returned to mine. “I’m positive she hangs out at that nightclub of yours. Stephen was lying to me. I think I saw her the other night—she matches the description of the demon from last time. Dark hair, brown eyes, mid-twenties.”

I fought to keep my expression neutral. “You’re like a detective.”

“The sooner I finish this, the sooner I can get back to Heaven and find a way to help you.”

I felt so torn. I didn’t want him to hurt Natalie, even though he claimed to only want to “talk” to her. I worried what that talk would lead to if he didn’t get the answers he wanted.

I paced back and forth on the sidewalk. Not one car had driven by since we’d arrived. It just showed how deserted this part of the city was. At the moment, that was a blessing. This wasn’t an unseen alley, this was the middle of the street, and we were currently babysitting a temporarily dead angel.

Since we were stuck here waiting for him to wake up, it gave me a chance to ask questions that Bishop had no chance of dodging.

“If you stabbed that angel again with your dagger, it would kill him for real, right?” I said.

“Yes,” he confirmed.

“And would the Hollow open up?” I asked. “Or is it just for demons and Grays?”

“The Hollow takes anything supernatural that dies here in the human world—even angels. It’s something to be avoided at all costs. But it happens.”

“Wrong place, wrong time. Doesn’t seem fair.”

“Sometimes it isn’t.”

Bishop thought the Hollow was the end. But Natalie was proof that it wasn’t.

“Are you all right?” he asked tentatively.

I nodded. “I’ll be better when that angel stands up again.”

“He will.”

“You have faith?”

“I try to.”

The cold breeze in the air picked up and I cinched the belt on my coat tighter and shoved my hands deep into the pockets.

“I meant what I told you before,” Bishop said after a moment of silence passed between us. “When I get back to Heaven, I’ll find a way to help you.”

“And Carly, too.”

A small smile brushed his lips. “Carly, too.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “Why didn’t you tell me about Kraven?”

The smile was gone just like that. “Because there’s nothing to tell.”

“How long ago were you human? You said it was a long time ago.”

“Not long enough.” Despite his vague answers, there was no mistaking the bitter tone to his voice.

“And when you said you were one of the bad guys—”

“I shouldn’t have told you that.”

“I want to know more. I mean, you’re an angel now, so...you were redeemed, or whatever, for what happened.”

Bishop’s expression darkened. “Sometimes I wonder.”

“Tell me more. Tell me...”

I was about to say something else, ask something else, when I heard a groan. The angel was waking up. His eyelashes fluttered open, and he slowly propped himself up on his elbows and looked at us.

“I wouldn’t exactly call that a good time,” he said, “but it is entirely effective.”

Without thinking twice or worrying that he might react the same as Roth had, I went to his side and helped him up to his feet. I checked his chest to find a tear on his shirt and blood on the fabric, but the wound had healed completely.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Bruised, but intact.”

Bishop moved closer to give the new angel his own inspection. “I’m Bishop.”

“Yeah, they told me all about you before I left. And what to expect from that dagger there, not that it helped, since I promptly forgot everything, including my own name.” The guy grinned and clasped Bishop’s outstretched hand. “I’m Connor.” He glanced at me. “And you are?”

“Samantha,” I told him.

Connor looked at Bishop. “You know she’s a Gray, right?”

“Well aware,” he replied. “But she’s different from the others, so take it easy. Without her, we wouldn’t have been able to find you. She can see the searchlights. We can’t.”

“Okay.” Connor still looked more guarded now that his senses had alerted him to the fact that I was one of Trinity’s monsters. “So, you have superpowers, huh?”

I tried to smile at him. “I can also read your mind if I’m so inclined. And zap you if you’re mean to me.”

Connor cocked his head to the side as he regarded me. “Interesting. Sounds a bit like a Nexus.”

I stopped breathing. Then I struggled to keep my expression neutral. This was a secret that I didn’t want revealed to anyone.

“Sure,” Bishop said with a genuine grin. “The daughter of an angel and a demon is standing right here in front of us. I think I’d already know something like that.”

Connor shrugged. “I don’t know. It was just a wild guess.”

Slowly, the grin faded from Bishop’s face and a frown replaced it, as if he was giving the possibility more consideration. But when Bishop spoke again, I was deeply relieved it was to Connor. “I’d heard there were to be only four of us. You’re the fifth.”

“I’m always late to the party. Sorry about that. Feel free to pay me back by stabbing me through the chest.” He rubbed the spot over his heart. “Oh, wait. You already did that.”

“How long have you been here?”

Connor scratched his head. “A couple of days. Is this a fun city to hang out in? I have been needing a vacation for a while.”

“This isn’t a vacation.”

Connor slapped him on the back. “Sarcasm, my friend. It’s my thing. Get used to it. So, are you going to introduce me to the others, or what?”

Bishop eyed him skeptically. “Oh, they’re going to *love* you.”

The three of us walked back to St. Andrew’s in silence, apart from a few random comments from Connor. I knew who the joker of the group was going to be, but I didn’t mind. Frankly the fact that he wasn’t a demon had already won me over.

He’d guessed what I was without missing a beat. It had seriously unsettled me.

I felt fragile, like a piece of glass left on the edge of a tall counter, about ready to crash to the ground at any moment. My emotions were hard to control, but that was exactly what I had to keep doing. I couldn't let myself break down now.

Seeing that Gray for myself, though, the proof I'd been hoping didn't exist...had terrified me. I'd wanted to believe that all Grays were like me. That they thought like me, not wanting to feed. Not wanting to hurt anyone.

The image of Carly kissing Paul in the booth at Crave earlier haunted me. She hadn't seemed to realize how bad it was and what it could do to her. But she hadn't seen what I had.

Natalie told me that losing a soul wasn't harmful to a human, that it freed them. Had that been a lie, as well? Was anyone in this damn city telling me the truth?

The thought was like a clawed hand that took hold of my throat and kept squeezing tighter and tighter. It was best that I didn't say anything right now. Best that I went back to my dorm and thought through all of this on my own.

"I should go," I said when we got back to the church. "I don't want to go back in there and deal with Kraven and Roth again."

Bishop turned to me. "I understand. But wait here. I'll take Connor inside and then walk you back to your dorm."

"Okay. I'll wait." I crossed my arms and leaned against the brick exterior near the open door.

He looked surprised that I'd agreed without any argument. A smile touched his lips. "Two minutes."

I just nodded, and he and Connor disappeared into the building.

Those two minutes felt like a long time to be left alone in the dark. And my hunger continued to rage. It had gotten worse since I'd left Crave, going from a dull throb to a thunderous roar.

When Bishop returned, the expression on my face must have caused him some alarm. He was at my side in an instant.

"Samantha, what's wrong?"

And that did it. My already shaky composure finally shattered, and I started to cry. Sob. I'd even go so far as to say I was wailing uncontrollably. It was like I couldn't hold it in any longer.

Bishop put his arms around me and pulled me against him. He stroked the long hair back off my face. Through my blurry vision, all I could see

was him. It was all dark behind him, cold except for his touch.

“What?” he said again, almost demanding. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

I choked out my admission. “I’m scared.”

“I know I’ve kept the full truth from you, I’ve frightened you over and over, I’ve put you in danger so many times.” He frowned deeply. “I’m really not helping my case much with this line of reasoning, am I?”

I managed a small, shaky laugh. “Don’t become a lawyer.”

“What I’m trying to say is that, despite our shaky start, I’m here for you. I’m here for you like you’ve been here for me.”

I searched his face. “You are?”

He nodded. “You told me earlier that I had to learn to accept help from others. That’s hard for me. I’ve always done my own thing, thinking I was invulnerable. Trust me, I have a whole lot of pride for an angel. It’s one of the reasons I was first in line to volunteer for this mission without being shielded like the others. I thought I could handle it, no problem.”

“You’ve done really well,” I said.

“No, I haven’t. I’ve been a mess from day one. I was cocky to think it wouldn’t be a big deal. It is. I tried to deny it, to fight it, but I can’t. Not on my own. Not without your help. And now you need help, too.”

“I do need help,” I agreed. “And it’s not because of what happened between us. It’s...something else.”

“What is it?”

Still, I was afraid to say it out loud. I didn’t even know how to get into this and sound halfway coherent. “What Connor said about me earlier. About me being a *Nexus*...”

He studied me. “It’s true, isn’t it?”

I just nodded. I half expected him to push back from me, maybe go inside and tell the others, but he stayed right where he was.

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” he asked softly.

I tried to catch my breath, but that seemed impossible right now. “I didn’t know, not until tonight.”

“How did you find out?”

I hesitated before I said anything else. “I didn’t know for sure that I was adopted until earlier tonight. All my life, I had no idea...”

Bishop held my gaze with undivided attention. “Who told you about this? How did you learn the truth?”

I spoke so softly it was no more than a whisper. “The Source. It’s my aunt. My birth father’s sister...she’s a demon.”

Anyone else would have reacted with shock or, more likely, total disbelief. But not Bishop. He took it in stride.

“You’ve met her,” he said evenly.

I nodded and it took a moment before I could continue. “Natalie’s the one you’ve been looking for. And you were right...she does go to Crave regularly. That’s where I saw her tonight. Tuesday night, too.”

“Is she the same demon as last time? The anomaly I told you about?”

I nodded, feeling ill. “She was pushed into the Hollow.”

“How did she escape?”

“I don’t know, but she did. And now if she kisses someone, she can create more who have the same hungers as she does. Before, it was just her.” My brain felt like it had the consistency of mush as I tried not to make the situation even worse than it already was. “She told me my birth mother—an angel named Anna—was killed. And my father jumped into the Hollow after her. He must be back, too. He and Natalie both escaped the Hollow. So, it’s not what everyone thinks it is. It must mean that if they can, then there are others that aren’t killed, that were just sucked in by accident, or whatever, that can escape. It’s not one-way—or at least, it isn’t anymore.”

If my words shocked Bishop, he didn’t let on that they did. He braced a hand against the brick wall behind my left shoulder, absorbing every word I spoke.

“Thank you for telling me this,” he said.

“I was going to keep it a secret, but I couldn’t. You needed to know.”

Bishop cast a glance back at the door to the church. “Don’t tell the others the reason behind your abilities. Connor was only guessing before. Like I said, it’s incredibly rare. Heaven and Hell...well, they don’t have a great appreciation for anything that breaks their precious rules and regulations. And that’s exactly what a Nexus is, especially the ones they don’t even know exist. They’d view you as something dangerous.”

I took that in. “And how do you view me?”

“Yes. Very dangerous.” His gaze sank into me for a moment, but then his jaw tensed. “I want you to introduce me to your aunt.”

I tensed. “Bishop, I don’t know...”

“I need to understand what her plan is, what she wants. And if she can stop this before it gets any worse.”

“She told me she thinks the other Grays’ hunger will fade. That my hunger will fade. Then Grays won’t be a risk anymore. Is that possible?”

His brows drew together. “I don’t know. I hope so. This is why I need more information.”

My breath caught. “Roth seems to go hunting for the fun of it. Does he care which kind of Gray he kills?”

“Roth’s different. The demon views this mission as more of a scoreboard. But I’ve made him well aware of the rules. And if I can talk to Natalie, figure out some other solution, maybe this can end without anyone else getting hurt.”

“Do you think you might be able to help her?” I asked.

He nodded. “If she wants to be helped.”

“You mean it?”

“I mean it.” He stroked my hair back again and pushed it behind my ears, keeping his warm hand on the side of my face. “When we first met, I thought there was something special about you.”

“And what do you think now?”

He raised an eyebrow. “You really want to know?”

I nodded.

“I think,” he whispered, “that even though you keep saving me, I’m still in great danger whenever I’m this close to you.”

I could barely breathe. “Why?”

“Because I want to do this.”

When Bishop brushed his lips against mine, I stopped thinking. My hands tangled in the soft material of his shirt, then slid up over his shoulders.

“That’s kind of a coincidence,” I whispered. “Because I feel exactly the same way.”

I kissed him then, softly at first, but it quickly grew deeper. Until this moment, I would have had to say that my kiss with Stephen had been the best I’d ever experienced, even though it had ended badly. I would have been so very wrong. This was the far and away the best.

“You taste so good,” I murmured against his lips.

He did. He tasted good—heavenly. Delicious. My hunger rose up and spilled over and as the kiss grew and grew, my hunger finally started to

fade. I'd never experienced anything so satisfying in my life, anything so good, so sweet and intoxicating. I never wanted to stop kissing Bishop. There were no more worries, no more problems, only him. His kiss.

I wanted it all. I wanted every delicious piece...

Until there was...

Nothing...

Left...

Suddenly, I felt a tight and painful grip on my arm. I released Bishop with a yelp and glared into the face of Kraven. Roth stood right next to him.

I wanted to kill them both.

"What?" I snarled.

I expected some smart-ass reply, but both demons just stared at me with eyes filled with shock before moving to Bishop. I turned to look at him to see he had begun to sink down to the ground. His eyes were glazed, his skin pale white, and there were dark lines fanning out around his mouth.

Watching through the thick fog that currently cloaked my mind, I tried to piece together what I was seeing, what it meant, but it didn't make any sense. Bishop looked just like Paul had after I'd stopped Carly from kissing him.

She'd been feeding on his soul.

"Sorry, but angels don't have souls. I wouldn't be able to help your hunger very much."

Bishop had said that.

But now I knew he'd been wrong. So very wrong.

Bishop did have a soul, whether he realized it or not. I'd been drawn to it from the very first moment we'd met, a dark and bottomless craving that went far beyond any normal attraction.

Carly had fed on someone's soul tonight.

And even though it should have been impossible, I'd been doing the exact same thing to Bishop. And the worst thing was...I wanted more of it.

No. I wanted *all* of it.

I desperately wanted to devour every last piece of Bishop's soul until there was nothing...absolutely nothing...left.

TO BE CONTINUED
IN
CURSING MIDNIGHT
BOOK 2 IN THE MIDNIGHT TRILOGY

Thank you so much for reading!

If you enjoyed *Craving Midnight*, [please leave a review or rating](#) to help other readers decide on the book. Word of mouth is an author's best friend.

Turn the page for the first chapter of THE MIDNIGHT TRILOGY, BOOK 2—CURSING MIDNIGHT, or [get the full book now!](#)

Join [Michelle Rowen's VIP List](#) for the latest info about contests, new releases and more!



The Midnight Trilogy Book 2,
Cursing Midnight, is available now!
Read Chapter one!

CURSING MIDNIGHT

THE MIDNIGHT TRILOGY – BOOK 2

CHAPTER 1

Once upon a time, there was an angel named Bishop who fell from Heaven so he could save a human city from soul-devouring monsters. One night, he met a girl he believed could help him with his mission.

But the angel didn't know that he now had a soul.

And he also didn't know that the girl was one of the monsters.

I was that girl. And, trust me, this was all a surprise for me too.

Or...it would have been a surprise if I'd been thinking clearly after he kissed me, and I tasted his soul for the first time. But I wasn't thinking clearly. I wasn't thinking that this was wrong, dangerous, and deadly.

I was only thinking that wanted more.

No, not just more. I wanted it *all*.

As I moved toward Bishop again, Kraven grabbed tightly onto my arms to stop me and peered into my eyes.

"Oh, hell, Gray girl," the demon said grimly. "Just couldn't keep your pretty little lips off my brother forever, could you?"

"Let go of me," I snarled at him. It was like I was hearing myself from a mile away. I had to get back to Bishop. I struggled against Kraven's hold on me, trying to push and claw my way out of his grip.

"Sorry about this," the demon said.

"Sorry about what?"

He smacked me hard enough to make my ears ring. I yelped and my hand shot to my burning cheek.

And reality set in as fast as a bolt of lightning. The fog surrounding me disappeared and the horror of what I'd done became crystal clear.

I stared at Kraven. "What the hell just happened?"

"What happened?" Kraven repeated, the mocking tone returning to his voice. "Don't you think that's painfully obvious by now, sweetness?"

We weren't alone. It seemed that everyone had gathered to see the monster at work, apart from Kraven. There was Zach, an angel, with red

hair, freckles, and a shocked expression. Connor, also an angel, shaved head, brown skin. And Roth, a demon with dark hair, golden skin, and a scowl on his face.

Three angels, two demons made up the team sent by Heaven and Hell to take care of their mutual problem. Souls were apparently essential to how the universe remained intact and running smoothly, to put it extremely simply. When something threatened those souls, immediate action had to be taken to put an end to it.

Bishop seemed to be slowly recovering. The lines around his mouth had faded to nothing and color was returning to his face. Shakily he got up from the ground, still leaning back against the cold brick wall, and he touched his mouth, staring at me with shock and confusion—a mirror image of how I looked at him.

“Sorry to have interrupted your romantic interlude,” Kraven said. “But we can sense when an attack occurs nearby.”

I felt sick right down to my bones.

“But I don’t have a soul,” Bishop argued.

He hadn’t looked away from me for a moment. While he still looked confused and shaken, there was still desire in his gaze that only continued to grow. I remembered my kiss with Stephen, who was definitely human, not supernatural in any way. It hadn’t been unpleasant, despite what it was doing to me. It had been exciting, exhilarating and filled with passion. I would have kept kissing him if he hadn’t stopped.

And the kiss with Bishop had been so much better than that.

“Why were you kissing a Gray in the first place?” Roth asked, clearly confused and disgusted by the thought of it. “Some sort of experiment?”

“Doubt that,” Connor said. “Bishop doesn’t strike me as all that scientific.”

“Bishop...” Zach moved toward him, concern on his face. “How do you feel?”

“Angels don’t have souls,” Bishop said again, more insistent this time.

“Fallen angels do,” Connor said. He leaned against the wall a few feet away from him, watching us warily.

Bishop blinked at him. “Yeah, it’s an anchor to keep them in the human world—a punishment so they have no hope of returning to Heaven. They’re cast out forever. But I’m here only temporarily, for the mission. I’m going back.”

Connor didn't reply to that, but his expression remained grim. It was different from the sarcastic guy we'd walked back to the church with.

I almost said something to defend Bishop, but I bit my tongue and stayed where I was, shivering in the shadows. There was nothing in the other angel's expression that made me think he was speaking anything but the truth right now.

"Did you know already?" I asked Connor, my voice barely audible.

The angel looked at me. "Yes."

"How?"

"It's why I was sent here." He turned to study Bishop. "Something went very wrong when you left. Somebody screwed up. They made you fall. For real."

Bishop stared at him, his brow furrowed. "How could that happen?"

Connor's expression tensed. "There are those who want you to fail, for this mission to fail. The gatekeeper who sent you was one of the old guard—the *very* old guard. A zealot who thought the only answer to purge the human world of this new infection would be to destroy the city all Sodom-and-Gomorra style. But to do that, you'd need to fail. When I got here, I expected you to be in bad shape, but you weren't. So, I figured maybe they'd been wrong and didn't say anything. A soul usually messes up a fallen angel's head big-time."

Bishop just stared at Connor with shock as this sank in.

Zach's expression was tense as he ran his hand through his red hair. "The rest of us were protected. But if nobody found us...we'd still be wandering the streets with no idea who we were."

"Yeah," Kraven agreed, eyeing me. "If you hadn't found us, Gray girl, we would have wandered the city forever."

"She's a damn Gray," Roth snapped. "Is this enough proof for you? She needs to die."

"Back off," Bishop growled at him. "She didn't know this would happen."

"She found us and that gives her a pass," Kraven said. "This time, anyway."

Roth sank back into the shadows. I was surprised they weren't all ganging up on me at this point. I'd just proven that I was every bit as horrible as they thought I was.

I wanted to go to Bishop, to touch him, but I knew that would be the worst thing I could do right now. “This—gatekeeper who did this to him. Where is he now?”

“Punished. I hope he sees the irony when he’s cast out of Heaven for his crimes.” Connor swept his gaze around the group. “There was no way to know how badly Bishop was affected by this. The barrier blocks nearly all attempts to monitor the situation. So, they sent me to help.”

I stared at him. “But if he couldn’t find the others, he couldn’t find you, either.”

He nodded grimly. “See, I didn’t know he couldn’t spot the searchlights. I just knew he’d be messed up mentally. Hindsight’s a bitch, isn’t it? But now I’m here and I’m in it to win it. Five are better than four, I say. The mission stands. This is just a minor setback.”

I gazed around, as if the night might have answers. The only light out here came from the full moon above and a lamp over by the street. A pair of headlights moved along in front of the church from a rarely seen car. I scanned the sky, but it was dark. No more searchlights, just stars.

“Sodom-and-Gomorra style,” I murmured. “Just like my vision.”

“What?” Connor asked.

“I—I had a vision that the city was destroyed. Everyone gone. It was... horrible.”

He frowned. “Do you usually have disturbing visions of the future?”

I cleared my throat. “Not usually. But is that a possibility? If the old guard wants to do that, will they? If the mission fails?”

“The mission won’t fail,” Kraven said. “So, it’s a moot point. Put that out of your mind, sweetness. We have it covered.”

Somehow, his assurance didn’t help. A chill went through me then, which was surprising. I thought I’d gone completely numb.

Bishop raked a hand through his hair, his posture slumped as if he’d grown very tired. “I can’t go back now.”

“Don’t say that.” I moved toward him but stopped myself from getting too close. Even a few feet away his scent made me dizzy and triggered my hunger again. I clenched my hands until my short fingernails bit into my palms. The pain helped clear my mind.

“Why? It’s true.” He tore his attention from me to look at Connor. “I was supposed to be extracted early once I dealt with the Source. I got in through the barrier, so I could be pulled back out. That won’t happen now.

And with this soul inside me, I might not get back at all, not if they can't reverse this."

"I'll do what I can when I get back," Connor said.

"Have you ever heard of a fallen angel returning to Heaven?"

Connor didn't speak for a moment. "No."

"Exactly my point."

Going back to Heaven and being cured of the uncontrollable confusion that plagued him—it was all he'd wanted since he'd arrived, his beacon. If he couldn't go back, he'd be like the homeless guy outside of Crave.

"I met someone," I said, breaking the silence. "He was kind of out of it, rambling. When I touched him, I felt the spark similar to when I touch Bishop. I think he's an angel, too. A...fallen angel."

"Not surprised," Kraven said with a shrug. "There are plenty of fallen angels in the human world. Heaven has a way higher fail rate than Hell. When a demon stays in the human world, it's usually a reward, not a punishment. Unless he's been officially exiled."

Bishop's gaze flicked to Kraven. "Did you know this?"

"Which part?" the demon asked. "I'm having trouble keeping track."

"That I was fallen? That what was wrong with me wasn't just disorientation caused by the barrier?"

Kraven's lips thinned. "I saw the signs. And yeah, I thought it could be this. I wasn't sure."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

There was nothing compassionate in Kraven's harsh expression. "It's not my fault you didn't do your homework. I guess it's just like old times, huh? Trust the wrong person, you end up screwed."

With no warning, Bishop attacked him, grabbing the demon and slamming him down hard on the ground. If Kraven had been a human, it probably would have broken his back. Bishop even got a couple punches in, directly to the demon's face, before Zach and Connor forcibly pulled him back and tried to restrain him. He looked completely out of it right now, and it scared me.

"Get control over yourself," Zach warned Bishop. "You're only making things worse."

It was the first time I'd heard an edge of anger in the angel's voice. Maybe he wasn't always the kindhearted healer.

Kraven wiped the blood at the corner of his mouth and pushed up off the ground. His eyes glowed red. “Yeah, I know. It sucks. But you can’t blame me for this. It’s not my fault.”

“You should have told me,” Bishop hissed.

“Why? What good would that have done? Your brain is toast. If it wasn’t for her—” he thrust a thumb at me “—the rest of us would be eating out of Dumpsters and sleeping on park benches. Just before the city was wiped off the face of the planet with us in it, like in your girlfriend’s vision.”

The pain on Bishop’s face tore me up inside.

“What can I do?” I asked.

Kraven shot a dark glare in my direction. “You can stay the hell away from him.”

A sob rose in my chest. “I didn’t know this would happen.”

“I believe you. But it doesn’t change anything. You got a taste. Would you have taken it all if we hadn’t stopped you?”

My breath caught. I’d felt it—tasted it. Bishop’s soul. I’d sensed it leaving him and entering me. And I’d wanted more.

Roth eyed Bishop as if he were damaged goods that should be taken directly to the dump. “He’d probably like that. Suck the whole soul out, and maybe he could flutter back to Heaven without that ball and chain around his ankle.”

“Or, more likely, it would destroy him completely and he’d be taking a nosedive right into the Hollow,” Connor said without even an ounce of humor. “Got a front row seat for that earlier. Not fun.”

“Why would you think something like that?” I asked, alarmed at the very thought of it.

He looked at me. “We’re not human. Well, not anymore. When we’re given the chance to be an angel or a demon, we’re changed on a base level.” He flinched. “It hurts, trust me on that. But once we’re finished with the conversion, we function without a soul. Having one...”

“Would screw us up,” Kraven finished. “But it’s a lose-lose. Without a soul, a fallen angel or an exiled demon would perish in the human world. With it, you risk getting your eggs scrambled.”

“Maybe,” Connor said with a shrug, “maybe not. When it comes to Bishop, anyway. What happened to him was a mistake, not a punishment. Maybe he’d be okay without it.”

Maybe. That word didn't sound like something I could put even an ounce of my trust in.

Bishop had sunk back down to the ground. But he watched me, his expression raw, his eyes filled with something else—something I couldn't name. Something aching and bottomless and filled with need. All directed at me. It scared me, because I felt like I was looking back at him exactly the same way.

He should hate me right now. But he didn't. Just the opposite.

I realized I was moving toward him again when Kraven yanked me back, his grip painfully tight on my wrist.

"Don't go near him," he growled at me.

Zach crouched next to Bishop, a hand on his shoulder as he'd begun to rise. It was to hold him back from meeting me halfway. He was the moth, I was the flame. Right now, I knew I could burn him very badly. Despite a nearly overwhelming urge to struggle against Kraven's grip on me, I stayed back.

"I feel it now," Bishop said, pressing his hand against his chest. "My soul. It's heavy inside me."

"Lighter than it was, though," Kraven added, giving me an unfriendly sneer. "After all, you were just dinner for your new girlfriend."

I hated everything about this. And there was absolutely nothing I could do to make it better.

Kraven yanked on my wrist.

I shot him an angry look. "What?"

"I'm taking you back to your dorm."

"I can get there by myself."

"Nah. Consider me your chaperone to make sure you don't sneak back here and try to stick your tongue down his throat again." He looked over his shoulder. "Roth, go with Connor on patrol. Zach, you take care of my darling soulful brother. Make sure he doesn't follow after us. Looks like he wants to."

"Wait a minute," Connor said. "Bishop's your brother?"

As Kraven dragged me away, I craned my head over my shoulder to look back at Bishop. His blue eyes burned into mine. Confusion, anger—and desire—all mingled together there in his gaze.

Mix in an extra helping of guilt, and that was exactly how I felt, too.

When I first found him, sitting on the sidewalk, lost and confused and unable to find the searchlights, I'd helped him then.

I'd helped destroy him tonight. Less than a week to go from one extreme to the other.

"So, you finally got a taste of angel cake," Kraven said after a few minutes of walking. Each step away from Bishop felt heavy and forced. "Was it worth it?"

"I didn't mean to do that," I managed.

He finally loosened his grip on me and put some space between us. We'd exited the rundown area of town and entered a neighborhood with tall trees, manicured lawns, and fashionable condos. Like night and day in the space of a couple of blocks.

"Right. You're just an innocent college student looking for love in all the wrong places."

Kraven had a truly amazing talent for pissing me off. "You knew about this, and you didn't say anything before. You could have warned him."

"It was just a hunch. He got the fuzzy end of the lollipop by being the chosen one to enter the city without being shielded. The confusion easily could have come from that. What am I, psychic? That's your job, sweetness."

"Will he be all right?" I asked shakily.

"From your first taste? Yeah. He'll recover. Pretty sure it would have taken a lot longer for you to suck the whole thing out. As for the future...I don't know. He's a survivor. Kind of like a cockroach. Just when you think he's finally dead, he'll pop right back up again and start flapping his wings."

All I could do was concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. My arms were crossed tightly over my chest, and I kept my eyes on the sidewalk stretching in front of me. My throat felt so thick it was nearly impossible to swallow. "So, what about me?"

"Good question. What about you?"

"Are you really walking me back to campus? Or are you walking me to my doom?"

He eyed me. "Your doom? Sweetness, you watch way too many movies."

I went silent for a moment. "So, what do I do now? What you said before? Stay in my room, close the blinds, and hide from the world?"

“Nah. I’m sure you’d end up getting in trouble even there.” He grinned darkly at me. “Go to your classes like a good girl and keep an eye on that little friend of yours. Also, I’d suggest you stay away from Bishop until this is all over.”

That actually made me laugh sharply.

He frowned. “What’s so funny?”

“You sound like you might just give a crap about what happens to your brother. And here I thought you two hated each other way more than just angel/demon animosity.”

His jaw tensed. “I feel nothing for him. Whatever you might think about us is wrong. We had some biology in common a long time ago. There’s nothing between us now except some bad memories.”

“So, you don’t hate him?”

“Hate can be a useful emotion.”

That wasn’t really an answer, not that I was expecting one. I concentrated on him for a moment, surprised that his walls were down. “You do hate him. But not nearly as much as you hate yourself, right?”

I was sorry I said it as soon as the words left my mouth. Due to the lack of a snappy comeback, I thought I’d struck a nerve.

“You shouldn’t feel that way,” I said. “I mean, I don’t know what happened between the two of you when you were both human, but—”

“Just shut up, Gray girl. Is that even remotely possible for you?”

I flinched. I took it back: he didn’t just hate himself down deep. He’d made plenty of room in there for me, too.

When we reached my dorm, I finally chanced a look at him, but he’d already turned and started walking away.

I quickly navigated my way to my room. Carly wasn’t back yet. As I stood in the dark dorm room, feeling utterly and completely alone in the universe, I noticed something important.

For the first time in nearly a week, I wasn’t hungry at all.

Keep reading [Cursing Midnight!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Rowen is the bestselling and award-winning author of over two dozen novels. A former president of [Toronto Romance Writers](#), Michelle lives in Mississauga, Ontario, where she refills her creative well by watching trashy reality TV and drinking a lot of delicious coffee.

Michelle's alter ego is New York Times bestselling author [Morgan Rhodes](#).



Author Photo

www.michellerowen.com

Join [Michelle's VIP List](#) for the latest info about contests, new releases and more!



OTHER BOOKS BY MICHELLE ROWEN

THE IMMORTALITY BITES SERIES

[Bitten & Smitten](#)
[Fanged & Fabulous](#)
[Lady & the Vamp](#)
[Stakes & Stilettos](#)
[Tall, Dark & Fangsome](#)
[Blood Bath & Beyond](#)
[Bled & Breakfast](#)
[From Fear to Eternity](#)
[From Rags to Witches \(Novella\)](#)

THE LIVING IN EDEN TRILOGY

[The Demon in Me](#)
[Something Wicked](#)
[That Old Black Magic](#)

THE NIGHTSHADE TRILOGY

[Nightshade](#)
[Nightfall](#)
[Bloodlust](#)

THE MIDNIGHT TRILOGY

[Craving Midnight](#)
[Cursing Midnight](#)
[Crossing Midnight](#)