The Light Within Me

by

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, I would like to thank my husband for his unwavering support and encouragement, as well as not rolling his eyes too much when I talk about works in progress that include vampires and beings from other worlds.

I also couldn’t have done this without the guidance and support of my editor, Allison Itterly.

And finally, I would like to dedicate this to two of my oldest and dearest friends, Candace and Jenny. Both of you know so much about me, my idiosyncrasies, not to mention my secrets, and yet you still continue to be my friends year after year. I love you both dearly.
Chapter 1

Noah had seen a lot of dead bodies in his time. He didn’t know how many, and he refused to keep count.

In some ways, all dead bodies were the same. Sure, each one had once been a unique individual, but when a person died, the light did go out, as if someone had flipped an internal switch in the body.

Noah crouched down. The clouded, blue, dead eyes of the man, probably in his late thirties or early forties, stared back at him. He looked around the alley where the body had been found. Two brick buildings devoid of windows stood on each side of the alley, a perfect setting for making sure there weren’t any witnesses. Any lights that had illuminated the area from streetlamps or overhead security features had ceased to exist a long time ago. At night, the place would be pitch black, and anyone passing the mouth of the alley would be oblivious to what was happening in that space. Any sounds could be explained as rats scurrying. Or cats fighting or fucking. Both sounded the same to him. In a nutshell, this was a perfect kill site. An experienced predator had done its dirty work here.

Noah stood up and rubbed his face. He had had a long day and looked forward to getting home. He turned to the detective in charge of the case, Matt Wilson.

“This isn’t one of mine,” Noah said, his voice a deep rumble. Noah was considered one of the best independent murder investigators and criminal profilers in the United States. He was often called to help assist and provide insight for cases all over the country.

But today’s body find was different.

Noah had put the word out on the West Coast that he was looking for a specific murderer with a special modus operandi on the kill, and if any detectives could let him know about any bodies that fit the kill description it would be greatly appreciated. It just so happened that this man with the dead, blue eyes died in downtown Reno, Nevada, which was about forty minutes outside of where Noah resided in Fernley, Nevada. Detective Wilson had contacted Noah about the body, and as luck had it, Noah had been in Reno.
“I was hoping it was your guy,” Detective Wilson said quietly, rubbing the bald spot on his head, then hiking up his slacks over his slightly rounded belly. “We’ve had a couple of these turn up, and I’m beginning to worry about a serial killer. It’s always the same M.O.—throat ripped open. I know you said you were looking for a killer who liked to slice throats, so I thought you should take a look.”

Noah nodded and ran his fingers through his short, brown, wavy hair. At six foot eight and two hundred seventy pounds of hard mass and unrefined power, he dwarfed everyone in the alley. He pushed his black sunglasses up on his straight nose, looked to the sky, and let the late afternoon sun warm his already tanned skin. He scratched at his face, rubbing his strong jaw. He hadn’t bothered to shave, so he had more than a five o’clock shadow going on, and it was beginning to get on his nerves.

He had to get moving before it turned to night.

“I appreciate the call,” Noah said, stuffing his hands into the front pocket of his jeans, his Ed Hardy T-shirt peeking out from his hip-length leather jacket. He didn’t bother to tell the detective that he would most likely never catch the person or persons responsible for the deaths that were happening in downtown Reno. If Noah had told the detective that vampires were responsible for the body lying at his feet, or that Noah himself wasn’t of this planet, he was certain his reputation would take a hit that it couldn’t recover from. As far as humans were concerned, vampires and beings from other universes were mythical creatures of horror stories and blockbuster films, not actual entities living among them.

Noah had been around long enough to know that vampires cleaned up their own messes, and they were pretty efficient at their job. They didn’t want humans to know of their existence. Noah didn’t want humans to know about his existence either. He was familiar with the “alien” the American government kept in Area 51. Man, that poor bastard had been put through the wringer, and Noah often wondered if he was still alive, or if they had finally killed him with all of their testing. No, humans weren’t going to find out about him and his fellow Warriors walking around on Earth, and he was very careful to make sure that never happened. He paid his taxes and obeyed most laws. Except for speed limits. He liked driving fast. He minded his p’s and q’s because he wasn’t signing up to be studied in the name of science and all that other crap.
The human lying on the concrete at his feet had been a victim of a vampire that was a little overzealous, as vampires didn’t kill humans. The vampire species would take care of their own problems, just as his own species was trying to do.

And failing miserably, he noted.

But Noah didn’t like to think about that.

Noah put his hand on the detective’s shoulder and smiled. “Thanks again, man. You let me know if anything else turns up around here. I’m looking for a slicer. My guy is neat and tidy. Not like this guy. Single slice, not pieces of the throat missing.” He cringed internally that he could refer to a killer as “neat” and “tidy.”

They said their good-byes, and Noah made his way over to his black Escalade. He slid into the black leather seat, shut the door, and looked through the heavily tinted front window. He closed his eyes for a moment, bothered at the fact that the dead no longer affected him. He used to get upset. He used to have nightmares. A few times he had even found a quiet corner so his lunch could evacuate his body with a little privacy.

But that was long, long ago.

Now, he didn’t even flinch, no matter the condition of the body. He had been at this too long, and he knew it. Two hundred and eleven years was too long for anyone to do one thing. He didn’t feel much of anything anymore. He felt no compassion for the dead, he sure as shit wasn’t happy, and he was bone-fucking-weary tired. Exhausted. He felt like his soul was being sucked dry. He was going through the motions of living here on Earth, keeping his mind focused on one thing: finding the killers from his race.

He opened his eyes again and gazed at the sky through the car’s windshield. Dusk was upon them. He needed to get out of reach of anyone who might want to talk to him. When the sun fully set, his eyes would turn a blazing orange. Not easy to explain that one. Sure, he could wear his sunglasses, but he had never seen a guy wearing sunglasses at night who didn’t look like an asshole. And he didn’t need to draw any attention to himself.

He jammed the key into the ignition and pulled away from the curb, not really looking forward to his long drive home.
Chapter 2

As Noah sped down the road—speed limit be damned—he remembered when he came to Earth and what had brought him here.

He had lived on a planet named SR44. It was a nice place. Lots of green forests, wildlife, and peace and calm. The temperature fluctuated between sixty-five and eighty. The beautiful time of twilight lasted six hours a day. There wasn’t a lot of land mass on SR44. In fact, ninety percent of the small planet was water, so the population packed itself into dense areas filled with skyscrapers that sparkled like freshly buffed gold. The rest of the planet was made up of thick forests and water similar to the Earth’s oceans, except it was fresh water, not saltwater. The people of SR44 enjoyed the oceans and forests much in the same way those on Earth did. There were those who even lived in the forests similar to some of the Earth’s native tribes. No matter where they lived, the cities or the forests, the inhabitants of SR44 lived together in a cohesive peace, so there weren’t any wars among the planetary populations. They were a proud, moral race that had definitive definitions of right and wrong.

SR44 and its inhabitants were a beautiful sight. Every habitant, male and female, had a different colored body mass, ranging from the lightest to the boldest colors, which reflected off the golden buildings. During the daytime, the cities looked like a canvas of every shade of the rainbow coming to life and dancing within the golden rays.

Their bodies were nothing but wisps of colored smoke that made up a long, lean form similar to a human form, with arms and legs as well as a head. However, unlike the human form, their body mass continuously moved and swirled, similar to watching flames dance in a fireplace.

The basic family structure on SR44 was similar to that of Earth. Noah’s family, which consisted of his parents and him, had been what would be considered royalty on Earth. His upbringing had been filled with wealth and the best of everything—the finest schools, the nicest housing, the biggest celebrations. The folks on SR44 went all out for their weddings, birthdays, and holidays. In Noah’s family, nothing had been spared for these parties.

Noah had graduated from the highest rank of military called the Battle Squad,
a.k.a. the self-proclaimed bad-asses. His father had been so proud and thrown a party that lasted three days. It started at their mansion, then hopped to their yacht, and finally ended on his parents’ island, one of the many that spotted the ocean. Three hundred people had attended the party at some point or another during the three days, but Noah and his fellow Battle Squad comrades were there for every second. He smiled as he remembered that night; they’d practically drowned themselves in the human equivalent of booze, and the female attendees were more than happy to help the Battle Squad celebrate in any way, shape, or form.

That had been a hell of a three days. Cheers. Salute. Sláinte. Bottoms up.

His father knew how to throw a party. Actually, everyone on SR44 was pretty adept at celebrating. Noah sometimes wondered if their DNA had some party helix that hadn’t been discovered yet.

The Battle Squad was always training for a battle that they would most likely never see. The planet kept their military strong in case there was ever an invasion from another species. They had never experienced such a thing, but better to be prepared than to get caught with your metaphorical pants down around your ankles. And, unlike humans, they knew for a fact that they weren’t the only ones to inhabit the universe.

They weren’t quite that self-centered.

Crime was low, but that was because they handled their criminals differently than humans. When someone committed a heinous crime, there was a trial, just as there was in the human world. Crime on SR44 was committed by the males of the species—there had yet to be a female who perpetuated a crime worthy of banishment.

When the culprit was found guilty, they were sent to live on one of SR44’s moons known as “The Colony.” There wasn’t any life in prison, no death penalty. SR44ians believed in making criminals as miserable as possible, just as their victims and the victim’s families lived in misery.

The Colony was not a nice place. SR44’s school system drilled it into the children what would await them on the Colony if they broke the law. The Colony saw very few hours of SR44’s sun, so it was bone-chilling cold. It was made up of gray and black rocks and dirt, and because of the lack of sunlight, there wasn’t any greenery. It was a cold and miserable place with dark, evil inhabitants. Noah remembered the first time he had seen
pictures of the Colony. He had been the equivalent of a human ten-year-old, and had literally been scared straight. He made a promise to himself that he would never, ever, break a law and would lead an upstanding and honest life. As he approached adulthood, he was his father gave him the choice of going into the SR44 military, or going to work in the science division of the SR44 government. Kicking ass seemed far more fun than test tubes, so he opted for the military when he was the human equivalent of twenty years old.

Noah swerved the car, barely missing a suicidal jackrabbit. If the little fucker wanted to off himself, fine, but Noah wasn’t about to help him do it.

To graduate from the Battle Squad, he had to live on the Colony for six months to train. The cold had made his metaphorical bones rattle, and he felt two steps shy of crazy from all the drab, gray colors. The dead silence of the place deprived his senses, despite the company of his fellow comrades. When he got back to SR44, the colors had almost blinded him, and it felt as though the noise would deafen him. Eventually, he was able to adjust.

The criminals who were sent to the Colony were aptly named the “Colonists.” The people of SR44 did not believe in rehabilitation for the hardcore lawbreakers, but they did believe in ejecting them from society. Just like on Earth, there were murderers, rapists, and pedophiles, and they were sent to the Colony to live out the rest of their days. Thankfully, there weren’t a lot of those in the population, and the count on the Colony never reached above one hundred.

Noah had been young and full of piss and vinegar. Because of his social standing, it was customary for a mate, or a lovren, to be chosen for him. His father decided he was ready for some grandkids and had chosen a female named Julia. Noah thought he had grown to love Julia, and they were together two years before he left SR44. But if he had been honest with himself, he loved his job as a warrior, not Julia. When he thought about her now, he realized that she was simply just a figure in his life that was supposed to be there—kind of like the chair or the bed. He winced. Man, that was cold comparing his mate to furniture, but his life had been devoted to being a warrior. She had just . . . been around.

Married to the job and all that.
He loved the training he received in the Battle Squad, and he became an excellent combatant with no one to fight. This irritated him, as it had his other brothers-in-arms. He was raw energy waiting to explode. What was the purpose of having incredible skills and no one to use them on?

Then the opportunity presented itself. Unbeknownst to the people of SR44, some of the criminals of the Colony had fled. When the ship landed to deliver the monthly supply of food, rumor spread that twelve murderers overpowered the crew of the medical ship and took off for somewhere unknown. No one was interested in how they had bested their captors, but rather, how to make sure those criminals never wreaked havoc on another planet in the universe. As a world, the escape of their criminals had been the greatest embarrassment, failure, and shame of their existence. They were a peaceful people and did not wish the evil that inhabited the Colony on anyone.

The ship the Colonists had hijacked was eventually tracked heading for Earth. Those in charge of the military handpicked six combatants to go and chase after the criminals. They were simply called the Six Saviors.

Noah had been one of those chosen.

All six were chosen for their special abilities. Noah and Hudson excelled at fighting and killing. Talin, the resident tech-head, was a master at anything computer-related. Cohen was the healer of the group. Rayner, the only Warrior who was a Forest Dweller on SR44, had the ability to see spirits that didn’t reside on this plane or the next, spirits that were just stuck between their bodies and whatever afterlife they had earned. And lastly, Jovan had the ability to feel a glimmer of a person’s emotions if he could physically touch them.

Noah and the rest of the Warriors had been so excited to finally put their skills to use, to erase the embarrassment and failure of their people, and bring back their pride as a peaceful planet that kept their living trash contained. As the highest-ranking member chosen, Noah was in charge.

To blend in with the humans, they had been given human forms before leaving for Earth. All were given large bodies, which were so different from their regular misty forms. Needless to say, the bodies took some getting used to, but the three-month trip blasting through space to get to Earth had provided them with the time to learn how to
manipulate their new bodies.

Before the Six Saviors were sent to Earth to capture and kill the Colonists, they were told that they would not be allowed back to SR44, nor would they be permitted contact with any of their kind until all twelve Colonists were dead. The Six Saviors all agreed with Noah, that with their excellent skills, it would be a short trip. In and out. Over and done with.

And then, party on.
And on.

They knew they would be hailed as heroes when they returned to SR44. They discussed the parades and parties in their honor that would take place, and none of them could wait to celebrate their accomplishments.

Noah remembered when he had said good-bye to his family the night before they shipped out.

“Come back to me safe, my lovren,” Julia had said after they had “joined,” or made love.

“Of course,” he had said, trying to hide his excitement of finally having a mission and a purpose. “I’ll only be gone a short time. We’re highly trained. We’re the best of the best. Piece of cake.”

He had said the same thing to his parents as well.

Jesus, he didn’t think he had been so wrong about anything in his life. And he’d been wrong about a lot of shit, but that had been an epic miscalculation.

Obviously, all the Warriors had been dead wrong, because here they were, still walking the Earth two hundred and eleven years later.

They had run into a few setbacks, to put it mildly.

First, the Colonists had taken on human bodies. No one knew how this had happened. The Six Saviors had thought their prey would be easy to track and spot as they would be nothing but wisps of black smoke filtering among the humans. When a person of SR44 was sent to the Colony, they turned black. No one knew why, but theories argued that the lack of sunlight caused them to change. Others believed that the evil in their rotting souls made them lose their color. Whatever color they might have been when they lived on SR44 dissipated once they moved to the Colony. The Six Saviors knew the
Colonists had landed in rural Montana, so they presumed the Colonists would be easy to catch. With not a lot of people around, they could fight their war and destroy the Colonists without a lot of human interaction.

But once again, wrong answer. The Colonists scattered like roaches from a chemical spray. Good thing they weren’t gambling in Vegas. They’d have to go home with LOSER stamped across their foreheads, not to mention empty pockets.

The second thing the Six Saviors didn’t count on was that the Colonists immediately began mating with humans, passing on their corrupted DNA. The Six Saviors agreed that the original twelve Colonists needed to be stopped immediately, and then they would look into their offspring. If they were violent, if they had inherited their father’s evil ways, they needed to be eradicated as well.

The third thing that put a dent in their plan was that the Colonists began to commit crimes on Earth. Oh yes, the human population had their dregs as well, but the really bad crimes could be attributed to the Colonists of SR44.

As for their efforts of catching the Colonists, the Six Saviors functioned well as a unit, and they had stayed together. Only years later did they start fanning out in groups of two, but they always lived together in a home base.

It was tough, nearly impossible, to tell the difference between a human crime and one committed by a Colonist. The only telltale sign was a dusting of stuff that looked like black ash at the crime scene. It was undetectable by human eyes, but sometimes, if the Six Saviors were lucky, it would show up in a photograph if the angle was right. The best way to know if a Colonist had committed a crime was for one of the Six Saviors to see the crime scene first-hand. At the crime scene Noah just left, there had been no trace of the ash.

The Six Saviors assumed the ash was a leftover trace of the black forms the Colonists morphed into while living on the Colony. But that was just a guess.

Noah slid his foot off the gas as a highway patrol came into view. The officer sat in his car, talking on the phone with the interior light on, seemingly oblivious to the drivers on the highway. Good thing, because Noah had been going ninety in a seventy-five zone.

It became apparent over time that the crimes the Colonists committed seemed to
be more serious and serial in nature. The Six Saviors needed to be able to work with the
humans, yet have the flexibility to work outside their laws if needed. They had decided
that since Noah was their assigned leader on SR44, he should be the link to the human
world. Not that he was particularly sociable or anything. There were others among the
Six Saviors who probably would have done a better job, but they stuck to the given
hierarchy. That, and Noah had exceptional instincts and criminal-profiling skills. He built
his reputation as an investigator by helping the human police solve their crimes. In turn,
when he was certain that they had located crimes their species had committed, he would
put out information on what to look for, and the human police kept him informed of what
they’d found through faxes, e-mails, photos and, like today, calling him to visit the crime
scene.

Noah smirked as he thought of the more famous killers who had been Colonists.
Jack the Ripper? A Colonist. Thankfully, the Six Saviors had gotten to him before the
humans figured out who he was. In the human world, he simply disappeared. In Noah’s
world, he suffered a hard death.

Charles Manson? Yes. Jeffrey Dahmer? Oh, yeah. The problem with the last two
was that the humans beat the Six Saviors to them. At least the Six Saviors had been able
to get to Jack the Ripper. They had tried to infiltrate the prison to do away with Manson,
but it had been a no-go. That fucker was locked up tighter than a virgin in a chastity belt.

Noah removed his sunglasses and looked in the rearview mirror. His eyes had
turned orange, which had been the color of his form on SR44. During the day, they were
a blackish-gray color. He scratched at his jaw again. He ran his fingers through his hair.
He had been in this body so long he could no longer remember what his original form felt
like.

“Shit,” he mumbled, his eyes going back to the road. He had come to accept about
fifty years ago that unless a miracle presented itself, he would never leave Earth. Sure, he
had been more than eager to roll on the mission when it had been given, but he certainly
didn’t expect he would never return home. He remembered the day that knowledge had
made itself known.

The Six Saviors had surrounded a rural farm in Texas where they had pegged a
Colonist. They had studied the murder scenes of this particular bastard and finally found
out where he lived. The Colonist had mated with a human woman and had sired a son. No one knew where the woman was, and they could only guess that her loving husband had put her six feet under . . . unwillingly.

As some of his fellow Warriors put an end to the Colonist, Noah had been inside with the ten-year-old boy. The boy stared at him, his black hair hanging to his chin, his gray eyes dead. His father had just been killed, and the kid was devoid of all emotion. It had chilled Noah’s bones that night, and for many, many nights afterward.

“You just killed my father,” the boy said icily.

Noah had gone on a song and dance about how the kid would be better off with other members of his family, when the kid cut Noah off.

“No,” the boy said, shaking his head, a thin smile crossing his lips. “No. I’m just like my father. I’m bad. Very bad.”

Noah knew the kid wasn’t channeling Michael Jackson. He had meant it, literally.

At the time, Noah had the passing thought to put a knife in the kid’s throat, but he couldn’t do it. He realized the kid knew he had evil flowing freely through his veins, and it sickened Noah, but he couldn’t do anything about it. He simply couldn’t kill a kid.

He watched the boy walk out of the house, never to be heard from again. Noah then knew that his job would never be finished and his existence now belonged to Earth.

He was pretty sure he would never see his *lovren*, or mate, again, even if he did complete his mission down here. He barely remembered Julia anyway. He did remember she had been kind and gentle, her wisps of honey-colored smoke had been pretty. But again, that was a long time ago.

He didn’t pine for her. In fact, if he was honest with himself, he didn’t miss Julia either, which brought him full circle back to the fact that he probably never loved her at all. She was simply a part of his past, and he had accepted that he most likely wouldn’t revisit.

His life was now on Earth. But his home was still SR44. There was a difference. He had a life here, albeit a very pathetic one. Hell, he wouldn’t even consider it a life, or even an existence. Sure, his heart beat, his lungs pumped air in and out, he had a place to sleep, he ate, and he even laughed every now and then.
But he didn’t have a life.

He missed his life on SR44, his training, his family, and the total beauty of the planet . . . his home.

His so-called life on Earth was empty, filled with thoughts of death, seeing and smelling death, the emptiness of what death left behind. And at times he felt lonely, but it was what it was. He thought back to the kid. Noah wondered how many lives that boy had taken, how many lives Noah could have saved if he had just done away with the spawn when he had the chance.

One thing was certain: He was going to hunt down and kill each one of those cock-sucking Colonists and make them pay for taking his SR44 life away from him.

His kind lived to be around two thousand years old. Noah still had oodles of time before he would bite the big one. In fact, he had one thousand four hundred and eighty-eight years left. But really, who was counting? His human body was a male in his early thirties—a male in his prime. He would stay in this form at this age as long as he remained focused on the job of finding the criminals.

Every now and then, a small ray hope emerged, and he thought that maybe, just maybe, he would be able to go home.

But not tonight. Tonight there wasn’t even a flicker of hope on his radar. It was a dead, voided, black screen.
Chapter 3

After the large electronic gate closed behind him, Noah pulled into the driveway of his missile silo. Yes, a missile silo. A small smile crept across his face. He loved the place. And the irony. An alien living in a missile silo.

Nice one.

After the Cold War, the US government had plans to abandon numerous missile silos around the country to show the old Soviet Union that they meant business in nuclear disarmament.

Noah had played the stock market for years. If he spent enough time watching the market, he could determine what would go up and what would go down. It was all cyclical, and he had amassed a huge fortune. He bought a few of the silos around the country for next to nothing, then spent a shitload of money fixing them up so they were habitable.

Of course, the government took the missiles.

Buried into the ground nine stories deep, he had taken each floor and made them into living quarters. An elevator—down the middle of the silo—took everyone from floor to floor. Or, if they preferred, they could take the stairs located on the outer edges of the living quarters. The top two floors were common living space. That was where the Six Saviors ate, watched TV, played pool, and tried to keep track of and hunt down the Colonists in what they simply called the “War Room.”

He had chosen the missile silos for a number of reasons, the first being privacy. They had moved around quite a bit in their two-hundred-plus years on Earth, and privacy had always been an issue. Plus, they were in the middle of nowhere, devoid of any neighbors sticking their noses in their business.

The second reason was that the place was a fortress. A few times, some of the Colonists had turned the tables and started hunting the Six Saviors. Things had gotten dicey on more than one occasion. Here, security was impenetrable.

Third, living in a missile silo, especially a pimped-out missile silo that had the best of everything, was fucking cool.

Noah’s boots crunched under the dirt as he walked to the door. He punched in the
key code on the keypad, and the three-foot thick steel door popped open. He pounded down two flights of metal stairs as the door swished to a close behind him. He went to the second door, where he punched in another code on another keypad. He went in and was greeted by AC/DC’s *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* blasting through the Bose speakers and the smell of garlic. Noah knew the scenario before he even laid eyes on any of the others.

Based on the amount of garlic he smelled, Hudson would be in the kitchen cooking something Italian on his stainless steel Viking appliances. Talin and Cohen would be kicked back on the big, leather sofa in front of the TV playing *God of War* on the PlayStation. Rayner and Jovan would be gone a few more weeks on an assignment in California.

Noah waved at Hudson as he walked in, not even bothering to try to say anything above the noise, then headed for the TV room with the PlayStation and the bar. He didn’t give a shit about the game; he just wanted the contents of the bar.

He nodded to Talin and Cohen, made fast work of a shot of scotch, then lined up another. Hudson came in and killed the stereo. The silence was deafening. Noah looked up at the big male.

“Anything?” Hudson asked. His eyes were shining a bright yellow, which was the color of his form on SR44, his black hair falling to his shoulder blades in a ponytail. He was built like Noah . . . well, like all of them. Noah had heard the saying “built like a brick shithouse,” and that pretty much summed them up. Hudson liked nice clothing, and his black silk shirt hung outside his brown silk pants. His black loafers were made of the finest leather, and a large gold bracelet clasped his wrist. It was a good thing he could be one of the meanest, nastiest motherfuckers Noah had ever seen, or all of them would have ridden Hudson on his metrosexual clothing choices.

Noah shook his head. “Nothing. Not one of ours. Vampires again.”

“No shit?” Talin chimed in from the couch, his eyes not leaving the TV. He wore blue sweatpants and a frayed AC/DC shirt from the ’80s. How the thing stayed together was anyone’s guess. He wore his dark hair high and tight, and his eyes were a fluorescent blue, the color of his form on SR44.

“Those bloodsuckers need to keep their bad boys on a leash,” Cohen mumbled,
also wholly focused on the game. His jet-black hair hung like a mop on his forehead, causing him to frequently push it out of the way. His eyes burned a bright purple. He too was dressed in sweats, and he wore a T-shirt that said *Never Underestimate the Power of Stupid People in Large Groups.*

There were grunts of agreement.

“Anything from Rayner and Jovan?” Noah asked as he shed his leather coat and threw it over the barstool.

Hudson crossed his arms over his chest, his huge biceps straining the shirt. “They called a couple of hours ago. They lost our Colonist number six in Sacramento. They’re trying to re-track.”

Noah nodded. The Six Saviors had killed five of the original twelve Colonists, and were closing in on number six in Sacramento. They thought they had a lead on number seven in Reno, but it had been a dead end.

Just a fucking vampire.

Noah looked around the room. Done in dark blues and warm browns, the place relaxed him. The oversized stuffed leather couch formed an L facing the ninety-six-inch plasma TV. A hand-carved table he had picked up in Canada was serving as the footstool for Talin and Cohen’s large feet. He sat in a barstool and slipped off his combat boots to rub his feet in the thick, brown carpet. He was pretty certain there wasn’t anything better than rubbing his feet in the carpet after a long day.

“What’s cooking?” he asked Hudson.

“Found a new recipe with a garlic twist on chicken parmesan.” That brought on a round of approval.

“Nice.”

“Fuck yeah.”

“Sweet.”

Hudson turned back toward the kitchen. “Dinner will be ready in ten.”

Noah filled his glass again, hoping the scotch wouldn’t kill the tastiness that a dinner cooked by Hudson offered.
Chapter 4

Abby shut the door to her apartment and leaned against it. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, exhausted.

Not that she had a particularly difficult day working at the Reno newspaper in the Crime Department. She had finished an article on some robberies and had a relatively quiet day.

No, she was exhausted from stress, not work.

She remembered her boss’s words from this morning. She needed to do an amazing article fit for the crime pages by Friday, or she would be on the cutting block in the next round of layoffs. No, she didn’t like her job much, but she needed it. She lived paycheck to paycheck while trying to pay off the student loans and a boatload of credit card debt. She would fight to keep this job.

Her large, black cat, Neptune, strolled out of the bedroom to greet her. He stood in the middle of the living room and howled loudly, letting her know he was hungry.

“It’s nice to see you too,” she said, kicking off her heels.

She fed him, then changed into pajamas even though it was only 6:00 p.m. She didn’t have anywhere to go, no one to see.

She popped a Lean Cuisine in the microwave and looked around her little space. She really did love her apartment, especially the huge picture window in the living room. She loved the way the afternoon light filtered through the white, gauzy curtains, lighting up the whole place. Sure, it was a little hot during the summer, but all the rest of the year made up for a few warm nights.

When the microwave let her know her dinner was ready, she poured herself a big glass of wine and sat down on the couch to eat. She watched a few minutes of the news, then found a marathon of *CSI*.

Perfect.

Her eyes drifted and caught the picture on her end table.

She felt the familiar ache in her chest. Abby was nine years old when the picture was taken, and it was one of the last photos with her mom.

In the photo, her mother, Iris, pressed her cheek against Abby’s, and both of them were smiling brightly in their silly Inspector Gadget birthday hats. Abby remembered the
cartoon fondly. She had never been one for Rainbow Bright or Strawberry Shortcake. She liked the idea of being a spy instead of riding some sparkly pony.

Abby marveled at how much she now looked like her mom. When she stared at the picture, she sometimes felt she was looking at her own reflection. Her mother had long, auburn hair, big brown eyes, and a smattering of freckles across her nose, just as Abby did. Her mother was twenty-nine in the picture, the same age as Abby was today.

And the ache of losing her mom was as strong today as it had been twenty years ago when her mother had been murdered. She had never known her father. Her mother had told her that he died before she was born.

Abby had a special relationship with her mom. Even from a young age, she knew she was different than most kids, and it went beyond her cartoon choices. First off, she was terribly shy and had a hard time making friends. That was still the case. As a kid, and even now, she felt that at a base level she was different than other people, and that made her uncomfortable and socially awkward. Her mother’s death and her stint in the orphanage caused her withdraw from society even more, but it was something besides that. It was as if she didn’t really fit in anywhere. She really had a hard time relating to just about everyone she met, and most of the times she just kept to herself. Sure, she ate lunch with a couple of people at work, and she talked to a woman in her spinning class. She even dated when she was asked out. None of it seemed to satisfy her, and she felt she could never let her guard down and really get to know a person. She just couldn’t get past the fact that she lacked a true connection with anyone.

She ran her finger over the photo. Her mom had been her everything. She had not only been a parent, but Abby’s best friend. Her mother took Abby’s little idiosyncrasies, such as her cartoon choices, and her fascination with the universe and what laid beyond that, in stride. Abby had been far happier talking about the gaseous consistency of Saturn than playing with Barbies. Needless to say, there weren’t many kids who wanted to hang out with her. She placed the picture in the table drawer so she didn’t have to look at it anymore.

Abby sighed and set what was left of her TV dinner on the table. Neptune jumped up and began picking out the chicken. She knew she should shoo him away, but she simply didn’t have the energy.
Looking out the big picture window, she watched as the sun slowly made its final
descent behind the mountain.

She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream.

She wanted something, anything, to happen in her life that brought her some
excitement. She didn’t know how many more nights she could take of \textit{CSI} reruns and her
demanding cat.
Chapter 5

After dinner, the Warriors met in the War Room to go over what they knew about the latest suspected Colonist number seven, who they believed was in Reno. Two of the walls in the room were floor-to-ceiling glass. They gathered around a large black marble table that seated eight in plush black leather chairs. There were maps on two of the walls from different parts of the United States. They were concentrating on the West Coast right now, as it seemed that there had been a spike in murders over the past few months. Pushpins decorated the maps of where the murders had taken place. They were also color-coded on whether the Six Saviors thought, or knew, the murders were committed by humans (blue), one of their kind (red), or unknown (yellow). There were far too many yellow dots on the map as far as Noah was concerned.

“Okay, so here’s what we know. We know that S.O.B. number seven likes to slice and dice, but not butcher. He’s very neat. According to the police reports I’ve gathered, some possible eyewitness accounts have put him at . . . let’s see . . .” Noah looked at the notes. “Oh, what a surprise,” he said sarcastically. “A white male in his thirties, average height, with dark brown hair.” He slammed the notebook on the table, frustration boiling in him. “Short of these fuckers really sticking out like our boy Saddam Hussein, or us actually seeing the crime scene with our own eyes, we’re always looking for the goddamned proverbial needle in the haystack,” he shouted.

Noah rubbed his face, wishing he had brought a bottle of scotch to the War Room with him. He was so tired of all of it. Luck played such a critical factor in their hunt for the Colonists, and Lady Luck had not graced them with her presence in a while.

It was silent for a moment, while the feeling of defeat hovered in the room.

“But Hussein was an awesome take-down, you have to admit,” Talin said.

The banter broke out between him, Hudson, and Cohen reliving how they had traveled to Iraq, posed as US Marines, and had been part of the capture of Saddam. They had gone unrecognized in the melee with their handkerchiefs over their faces—just a few extra soldiers. When Saddam got pulled out of his little hidey-hole, they couldn’t kill him because there were real marines there, but their guy had gotten his justice.

This type of talk was breaking out more and more frequently, and Noah knew
why.

All the Six Saviors were getting tired of their lives on Earth. Some, like Noah, had grown tired of it all long ago. Some were starting to feel the itch of irritation and the valley of loneliness and isolation at the realization that they weren’t leaving Earth. They would never again see their families. They would never again walk through a city where the golden colors shimmered around them. They would be forever stuck in the human bodies given to them, never to see their former selves except for the light of their previous beings shining through their eyes at night.

Some had come to the conclusion that they were never going home. Some held out hope. This type of talk of the criminals they captured bolstered confidence, kept a flicker of hope alive. Even those who didn’t believe they would ever head home participated in the banter just to help fan that little flame of hope for those who still had it.

Noah half heard the talk, feeling particularly low tonight. He stared at the table, imagining another one thousand four hundred and eighty-eight years that no one was counting. If—no, it had to be when—they got the remaining six original Colonists, they still had to find their offspring to see if the evil had filtered down through the generations. It seemed a never-ending mission, plowing through the sewers of humanity in order to find one of their own.

Noah stood abruptly, bringing the banter to a halt. He needed space. He needed to get away. He figured he could either go to Reno and hang out with the vampires, or he would go to his room, sit on his bed, watch TV, and get piss-ass drunk. Neither seemed like much of an option, but his bed was just an elevator ride away, while Reno required more time in the car. He decided to let the vamps do their own thing. Maybe he would touch base with their leader soon and see if they had heard or seen anything having to do with the Colonist in town. Humans might not know that vampires and other worldly beings were among them, but the two minority races were very aware of each other. Every now and then they got together just to keep each other informed.

Noah made a mental note to pick up the bottle of scotch from the bar before he headed down to his quarters, which resided at the bottom floor.

“I’m done,” he said quietly. He wondered if that meant he was done with the day,
done with the conversation, or done with his life. He didn’t care to look for the correct answer—he just knew he was done.

He padded barefoot out of the room and headed for the bar. He grabbed the scotch and proceeded to his floor. Sure, eight flights of stairs were a bitch, but it was better than running into any of the others on the elevator.
Chapter 6

Noah flicked through the channels. The resident tech-head, Talin, had wired the place so that it had something short of every channel on Earth. If he really wanted, Noah could watch TV from Russia. Not that he really wanted to, and there was the small problem that he didn’t speak Russian, but it was nice to know the option was there if the desire ever presented itself.

Maybe it was time to learn some Russian to add a little variety to his life. Frankly, it sounded like too much work. Maybe tomorrow night he’d get drunk on vodka instead of scotch.

*There’s your variety for you.*

This had to be his second or third time surfing through the channels. He was sitting in his gray overstuffed chair drinking for at least two hours, and he hadn’t watched more than a few seconds of anything. He knew he should just go to bed, but that was when the dream began. He hated that fucking dream.

It always started the same. He was in a tunnel with very little light, and he ran. And ran. It wasn’t a panicked run, but a slow, steady jaunt. He was always looking over his shoulder, looking all around him, trying to see something that wasn’t there in the shadows. And that was the dream. He just kept running and looking around. It seemed like some mornings he would wake and feel as though he had been running all night long and fighting demons straight from hell—sweating profusely and shaking.

He understood that it was a metaphor of what had become of his life.

He kept chasing after something that was hard to find, and he had to keep running to find it. He hated that fucking dream.

He shut off the TV and plunged the room into blackness. After a second, his eyes adjusted, throwing around a warm, orange glow. Noah always thought it was strange that his eyes burned orange, but he saw everything in their normal colors.

He had designed all the bedroom spaces in the silo so that each contained a sitting area and a large bathroom with a walk-in shower and Jacuzzi tub. He looked at his huge king-size bed. Why he had bothered with such a large bed, he didn’t know. He was the only one to have ever slept in it. His sheets were a stark white silk, the comforter a dark
brown. He had opted for the same plush dark-brown carpet in his quarters as upstairs in
the main living space. He had the walls painted an off-white that didn’t glare, but soothed
instead.

He hadn’t bothered with a glass for the past half-hour. Instead, he drank straight
from the bottle. He gazed over at his bed again and wondered what it would be like to
share it with a human female. To feel her soft skin against his hard body. To taste her
lips, and feel her hair run through his fingers . . .

The females of their race were the biggest downfall for an SR44 male. The males
fell in love easily and hard. To keep the Six Saviors focused, their human bodies were
specially programmed. If they were to feel too much pleasure, their life expectancy
would immediately decline. They would become the age of their human bodies, and they
would age as a human would. It would be the ultimate failure—a huge disgrace, not only
to them as individuals, but failing their race as a whole. True pleasure for an SR44 male
consisted of falling in love with a female and making love to her. That was the ultimate
pleasure they could have, and both components had to be present. If they allowed that
pleasure, it would signal their weakness and their inability to complete their mission.

None of them wanted to fail. They were all driven by duty and honor.

And some, like Noah, were driven by sheer revenge to make the Colonists pay for
the Warriors leaving SR44.

Noah had no intention of ever falling for a human woman and experiencing the
ultimate pleasure. He was too focused on exacting his revenge on the Colonists. He
would stop at nothing until every single one of the original twelve Colonists, and all of
their spawn, were eradicated from Earth.

He cut the thoughts off. He had watched enough porn on all the thousands of
channels in order understand the whole idea of human sex. He had to admit, he was
intrigued. But duty, honor, and sheer revenge drove him. He had to clean up the mess of
his people down here on Earth and restore the pride of the people of SR44 as a whole. He
had to slaughter those who had taken his life from him.

Human sex was far more involved than sex on SR44. He thought of his lovren and
how they had made love, or “joined,” as they called it. Being that their forms were wisps
of colored smoke, they simply entwined themselves in each other. It was a pleasurable
experience, but one he barely remembered. Human sex was something all together different.

He knew that all the other Warriors dappled in sex with humans at some time or another. The human women loved Hudson, with his long hair, big body, good looks, and expensive clothes. Hudson had told the Warriors about having sex with females. He said it was simply mind over matter to not experience too much pleasure, that you didn’t have to love someone to enjoy their body. He said that as he got closer to orgasm, his skin started to shimmer yellow, the color of his form on SR44. It was thought among the Warriors that once the tipping point was hit—that point of pure, unadulterated bliss of having sex while in love—the SR44 form would simply disappear from their bodies like a spirit floating to heaven, and they would become human.

Hudson had bedded more than a few women. Actually, that was being kind. Hudson was a man whore through and through. He could control his pleasure, keeping his true form within his big human body. He also said it seemed as though the shimmer was invisible to human eyes. Or, as he said, maybe the women he’d slept with were so caught up in the sexual satisfaction he gave them, they didn’t notice.

Hudson had a bit of an ego.

Noah never had any interest in human women, unless they were a member of a police department from where he needed information. Even then, he kept the relationship strictly professional, which wasn’t difficult. No woman had ever made him want to take things further.

He kept his focus on his work.

He stood and began to sway. He unbuckled his belt, undid his jeans, and let them fall to the floor. He stepped out of them, stumbling and lacking any grace. Cursing, he took off his shirt, stumbling again. He stood naked in his room, the only light coming from his eyes, which cast the room in an orange hue. He gazed over at his bed, seeing two of them. That was probably a good sign that he had overdone it on the scotch. He lurched forward, then fell face first, hoping he hit the correct one and didn’t end up on the floor. Not that it mattered at this point, but it would be nice to wake up in the bed.
Chapter 7

Abby looked over at her coworker James and decided that she really hated her job at the Reno newspaper. She was so sick and tired of listening to him sniff his nose, and then cough. Sniff, cough. Sniff, cough. Sniff, cough. Some days she wanted to drag him by his hair to an allergist.

“Do you need a tissue, James?” she asked through gritted teeth.

He turned to her, his dark eyes cold. “No, but thank you,” he said quietly.

She felt herself grimace, then rolled her chair to face her computer and tried to tune him out. She really hated even speaking to him.

She sighed and tucked a lock of her wavy auburn hair behind her ear. She was working on an article about the murder that happened yesterday in downtown Reno, and she wasn’t having much success putting the words together. From what she had heard, part of the poor guy’s throat was missing. It turned out that he was one of the local drug dealers. Not that anyone should be murdered, but one less drug dealer off the streets of downtown Reno was a good thing, in her opinion.

She’d tossed around the idea of doing a story on the murder of the drug dealer, or maybe moving on to something else. She knew that asking the police for any information on the murder would be a dead end. They were as tight as a miser’s wallet when it came to information. She was okay with her position in the crime section, but stories, well, good stories, were hard to come by. She could go out and interview the families of the victims, but she hated that. Maybe she should think about moving to the lifestyle section of the paper, but then thought better of it. Doing stories on recipes, cleaning products, and celebrities would be worse than doing stories on crime.

She shook her head, not wanting to take a jaunt down memory lane.

No, she didn’t want to write for the lifestyle section. She at least had an interest in crime, specifically unsolved murders. If people knew this about her, they would most likely think she was off her rocker. She was aware that her curiosity stemmed from her past, from the death of her mom, whose murderer had never been found.

Abby looked through the photographs of the crime scene and the area around it, marveling at the decrepit buildings of downtown Reno. She had read articles and seen
pictures of Reno when it was a thriving party town. The casinos had stood brightly, signs flashing the entertainment of Marilyn Monroe and the Rat Pack. Most casinos were now boarded up thanks to that little place called Las Vegas rising out of the desert and the legalization of Native American gaming in California. Combine those factors with some really bad decisions by the City Council, and you had a recipe for failure.

Pawnshops and low-income housing now dominated. You could hit the streets any night and find the drug of your choice, or get a fantastic deal on a blowjob. Downtown Reno was no longer thriving, but on life support.

However, it did look as though Reno was in for a turn-around. Business leaders of the downtown community had come together to brainstorm a plan on what to do with the empty, boarded-up casinos that used to be the town’s bread and butter. She had heard some interesting ideas and hoped that whatever they came up with would better the area and make it a place that tourists and locals would really want to visit.

As she flipped through the pictures, she was thankful she couldn’t see the body. The police had done a great job of keeping the deceased from prying eyes. The photographer had snapped some pictures of the looky-loos gathered. She studied each face, not recognizing anyone she knew. Except her highly annoying coworker James, of course. The guy went to almost every crime scene. He loved his job. Sometimes Abby thought he liked it a little too much.

She turned back to pictures of the goings-on of the crime scene. She recognized the detective in charge, Matt Wilson. She paused for a moment, staring at the big guy who was talking to Detective Wilson. Had she seen him before?

She looked at a few more pictures. The guy was huge. He had to stand at least six-five, and it looked like a small plane could land on his broad shoulders. Although the pictures were black and white, she could tell he had dark hair, probably a brownish color. She flipped through a few more, trying to get more detail on the guy, curiosity flaring in her, a scratch in her brain as she tried to place him. Who was he? She was certain she had seen him before.

Maybe he was new to the Reno PD and she had briefly seen him when she visited there. She knew just about all the cops. Hell, she had even dated a few. She hadn’t heard any rumblings of a new guy in town, though, and she was certain that a man like him
would have made her turn her head, even if she had seen him just in passing. Perhaps he was an outside investigator?

She had to find out who the guy was. Maybe she could get an interview with him on the murders—sort of an outside perspective instead of the “no comment” the cops always threw her way. If he were new to the Reno PD, she would be getting an earful of no comment. But if not, this might be the piece she needed to save her job. And if she met him face to face, she would probably be able to figure out where she had seen him.

She reached for the phone and hit the number-four speed dial—a direct line to the detective’s office at the Reno PD. Not many people had the number, but dating a cop or two had its perks.

“Summers.”

Shit. Just the person she didn’t want to talk to. Tim Summers, her ex-boyfriend as of a week ago. The breakup had been somewhat mutual, but more her than him.

“Hi, Tim,” she said.

“Abby? Is that you?”

“Yes.”

“Hey, baby. How you been?”

They chatted briefly about nothing. She really hated these small-talk conversations. She wasn’t good at them and considered them a waste of time. But she had found out with experience that sometimes they were necessary.

“So what can I do for you, Abby?”

She felt strange asking her very new ex-boyfriend about information on another man who had caught her interest in a photograph at a crime scene.

“Well, I was hoping I could talk to Detective Wilson,” she said.

There was a pause. “Is this professionally?” Like it was any of his business. She almost said as much, but remembered this was one of the reasons why they had broken up. The guy had a jealous streak a mile wide.

“Yes, Tim. I’m looking at some photographs from the murder scene yesterday. I see he caught the case, and I wanted to talk to him about it.”

Another pause. “Hang on.”

A click, and she was forced to listen to elevator music that sounded like it had
been composed by a tone-deaf five-year-old. She rubbed her temples and closed her eyes. She felt a headache coming on.

“Wilson,” the voice barked, making her jump.

“Hello, Detective,” she said, “my name’s Abby—“

“I know who you are, Abby. You broke my boy Tim’s heart last week. Guy has been useless ever since you dumped him.”

She wasn’t sure what to say to that. She figured she didn’t need to go into the details of the relationship, like how his boy Timmy bored her to tears, literally, and she wondered if she would ever meet someone she felt any type of connection to. And how she felt she was slowly, but surely, slipping into a depression that she wasn’t certain she would emerge from. She was terribly lonely and just wanted to feel like she fit in somewhere—anywhere. She was an unhappy nomad, without a clan or a real friend, who desperately needed to stop dating cops and find a therapist. Yes, better to ignore Detective Wilson’s statement about Timmy boy’s heart simply because she didn’t want to spill the toxic ooze that was clogging her own.

“So what do you want?” the detective asked after a pause. Okay, there wouldn’t be any small talk with this one, which was fine.

“Well, I was looking at the crime scene photos from the murder yesterday and—“

“No comment.”

“I wanted to know—“

“No comment.”

“Listen, I just—“

“Abby, do I need to spell it out for you? N. O. Comment.”

She took a deep breath, tired of the asshole cutting her off. Yes, she might be on the precipice of a depression, but she still had a little fire kindling in her gut.

“If you would quit being so rude and let me finish my sentence, you would understand that I’m not trying to get any details of the investigation, Detective,” she said coolly.

He paused. “Then what do you want?” She could tell by the tone of his voice that he was curious, as well as suspicious.

“I’m looking at these photos, and there was a big guy there with dark hair. I have
a picture of you talking to him. Who is he?”

The detective burst out laughing. “You’re calling me to get the name of the big boy at the crime scene? Jesus, Abby. Let my Timmy’s heart heal before you move on to the next one.”

Abby felt her face flush, which caused her tongue to tie itself in knots. “It’s not—I’m certainly not . . . that wasn’t why . . .”

The detective laughed again. “Relax, honey. Just riding you a bit. His name’s Noah. Last name is . . . where the hell did I put that card? Here it is. Johnson. Noah Johnson. He’s one of the best murder investigators and criminal profilers in the US. Let’s see . . . and his phone number is . . . hold on, I got it around here somewhere. Here it is . . .”

As he read off the digits, Abby scrawled them down on a Post-it note. “Thank you, Detective,” she said, ready to get off the phone.

“Sure, honey. Just don’t let Timmy see you out with the guy. He’s still got it for you. Noah may be big, but bullets still make holes in big guys.” She heard a click and hung up her own phone, deciding that she would pretend she didn’t hear that last line.

She studied the picture of the detective and Noah. She squinted, certain she had seen him before. “But where?” she asked herself out loud.

“Excuse me?” James said, then sniffed.

She turned around, trying not to cringe outwardly. She forced a smile as she met his dark eyes. “Nothing, James. Just talking to myself.”
Chapter 8

Noah heard his cell phone ringing. He peeked one eye open and saw that he had indeed fallen into the bed last night instead of the floor.

High five.

He was sprawled out on his bed sideways, his cell phone just a foot or so away. The fucking thing sounded like a blow horn to his alcohol-injured brain. He picked it up and looked at the number. It wasn’t one he recognized, so he put the phone back down and gingerly raised himself from the bed. He felt like he had been in a high-speed collision with a bus. Or a semi. Yeah, probably a semi.

And the semi had definitely won.

He groaned and made his way under the sheets. His phone started blaring again.

“Fucking shit,” he muttered, and picked it up. Same number. Still didn’t recognize it. He decided to answer it anyway. If it was a wrong number, he could tell them to piss off and he could go back to his hangover.

“What.”

“Um . . . hi. I’m . . . I’m looking for Noah Johnson.”

The female’s voice on the other end instantly calmed his raging headache. He opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling.

“Yes?” Just keep talking, sweetheart, he thought. Keep talking until you have talked this beastly pain away.

“Well, is he there?”

Oh, right. Might be a good idea to let her know she was talking to the right person.

“Sorry. Yes. I mean, I’m here. Shit. I’m Noah.” He had obviously destroyed some of the brain neurons that connected his thought process to his mouth.

“Hi. My name’s Abby. I work for the Reno newspaper, and I was wondering if I could talk to you about yesterday’s murder. Just for a few minutes. I won’t take up much of your time.”

The sound of her voice sent waves of relaxation and peace over his brain, bringing the pounding to a low hum. How did she do that? What was so special about her
voice that it actually calmed a headache? It wasn’t until she stopped talking that he realized he was supposed to answer something.

“I’m sorry,” he said. Jesus, he was certain his tongue had grown hair overnight. “What did you say?”

This time he listened to the words, and his brain worked well enough to put them together and actually hear something beyond the tone of her voice. And then it registered. Reporter. No. Negative. Abort the phone call. Hell, no.

“No.” He made it a priority to stay away from anyone or anything having to do with news organizations. He needed to remain anonymous so he could continue his work somewhat under the radar.

She sighed. It was a pretty sound, he decided, but it conveyed a lot of frustration.

“Look, I don’t want details about the murder. I get that you can’t comment on an open investigation, and I won’t ask you to. Detective Wilson told me you’re a murder investigator, sort of freelance. I was interested in hearing more about your job, the work you do.”

He shut his eyes. He bet Wilson also gave her his number. Prick. Sending a reporter on his trail did not bode well for the detective. Payback would be nothing short of a bitch. “No.”

Just as he was about to hang up, she said, “Please, Noah.”

It wasn’t a desperate plea, but a simple statement. It made his finger stop a second before it reached to the OFF button. Before he knew what he was doing, he was making plans for later in the afternoon to meet her at a small coffee shop he liked in Sparks, an area between Reno and Fernley.

He hung up the phone and rolled over. Before sleep overtook him, he realized he didn’t know what she looked like. He figured it would work itself out. He shouldn’t be meeting her anyway. At least she had gotten rid of most of his headache, though, so he supposed he owed her.
Chapter 9

Abby arrived at the coffee shop twenty minutes before their scheduled appointment. She was nervous, but excited. She hadn’t been excited about anything in a very long time. She had a few so-called friends who she met for coffee every once in a while or saw in her spinning class, but she kept her guard up around them. She just never felt comfortable enough to open up to them. She still talked to her old college roommate, Candace, every now and then, who she considered a true friend. Candace had embraced Abby—weirdness, shyness, idiosyncrasies and all.

Abby fell into the shy side, and she knew that the depression lingering around her was due to the fact that she was so terribly unhappy with everything in her life, both professionally and socially. Her heart was beating a little quicker, and she was looking forward to laying eyes on the man from the pictures. She was certain she knew him, but from where? That was the hundred-thousand-dollar question she didn’t know the answer to. She hoped she would be able to place him when she saw him face to face.

So, yes, she was excited for this meeting.

She had worked on her list of questions, making sure they did not point to any specific crime, but more about the man himself and his job. She wanted to know why he was in this line of work, and how he had gotten there. She thought it would make an excellent feature for the crime section of the newspaper, and maybe save her job. She also hoped that once she met him, she would know where she knew him from. The fact that she couldn’t place him was an uncomfortable itch that needed to be scratched. She thought about her weekly routines and where she went. Did she know him from the gym? The grocery store? The little bookstore over on Fourth she frequented? She just couldn’t figure it out.

A black Escalade screeched to a halt in front of the coffee shop. As a tall, lumbering male got out of the car, she recognized him from the picture. Although she hadn’t been able to see his full face in the photo, she knew him by his size. She was shocked at the pure raw power that radiated from him. She watched as he walked into the shop and stood at the door for a minute looking around. He took off his sunglasses and looked around again. His dark eyes landed on her, but she found herself frozen in place.
He ran his hand through the dark waves of hair, and she couldn’t help but notice the flawless face, the high cheekbones, the strong jaw covered with more than a day’s worth of scruff.

His gaze met hers again, and she found it within herself to give him a quick wave. A small smile crossed his face as he walked toward her.

No, he didn’t walk.

He rolled.

It was a wall of sheer energy moving toward her, and she had the thought that he resembled some force of nature, like a hurricane or tsunami.

He wore jeans, leather boots, and a black shirt with Tapout blazed in white lettering hugging his wide chest. As he approached, she found herself thinking how she was woefully unprepared for this meeting. She was certain she was going to say something stupid, like that time she had met an old acquaintance at Target. He had told her about his new job and mentioned that it was very lucrative. She had stumbled around her words, then came up with the brilliance of, “You must be making good money!” Like she didn’t know what lucrative meant. Or the time Candace took her to a party and she was so nervous about meeting new people she had called the hostess by the wrong name the entire night. She had also spilled her vodka and cranberry juice on the white rug when she tripped over her own feet.

Or maybe she would try to sit down in her chair, miss it, and end up sprawled on the floor, like she had done in one of her classes in college. And then there was the time she had met a man at a meeting and extended her hand to shake his. Only he was missing his hand. She became so flustered she offered to fist-bump instead of shake. The list of her social mishaps was long and painful for her to think about. And the more she thought about what she shouldn’t do, the more nervous she became.

She felt herself shrinking within her body. She had to take a deep breath so she didn’t drown within her own insecurities that were bubbling up at a terribly fast rate, reminding her what a high level of idiocy she could attain in a very short period of time.

Beyond her own uncertainties, there was that uncomfortable itch of recognition turned into an anthill of irritation scratching at her skin. Not only was she sure that she had seen him somewhere, but she felt a draw to him that bordered on insanity. Her heart
began to beat harder, and she actually felt a sheen of sweat on her brow. She had the brief vision of the magnets in her middle school science class, slamming together when spaced just a few inches away.

_You are one._

What?

She tried to clear her thoughts as he approached the table. She would deal with the craziness in her head at another time. Right now she needed to focus. Say hi. Shake hands. Get the interview. Hopefully save her job. Then, mission accomplished.

He arrived at the table, and somehow she got to her feet. “Noah?” she said, like she didn’t know.

He nodded.

She checked to make sure he had a hand to shake, then stuck hers out and gave him her best “I am a professional smile” she could muster. “I’m Abby. Thank you for meeting me.”

As Noah took her hand, he felt as though he had just hooked himself up to a battery charger. His heart actually skipped a beat when their hands touched.

He loved the feel of her soft, cool hand. It was so dainty and fragile inside his big paw. She stood about six feet tall, he noted, but she also had on high heels. Her bone structure was delicate, her skin a milky white with a splash of brown freckles over her nose and cheeks. Her mouth turned up slightly in a smile, and her full lips had just a hint of pink coloring. Her large brown eyes stared into his. When he let go of her hand, she shyly brushed a lock of auburn hair behind her ear and studied the table as she sat down.

He watched her fold herself into her chair. Her skirt rode up a bit, and her long, slim legs tucked themselves under the table. He pulled the chair out across from her and looked her over again as he sat down. She might have been the prettiest thing he had ever laid eyes on. He let his eyes travel from her face to her neck and down to the V of her white blouse, which promised a glimpse of cleavage if he got the right angle.

“So, um . . .” she began. He immediately adverted his eyes back to hers. By the look on her face, he had been busted.

When their eyes met, her cheeks got a little pink. Was he making her blush?

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Have we met before? I feel like I’ve seen you
Noah let his eyes scan her face again. He would have most certainly remembered meeting her before.

“I don’t think so,” he said quietly, holding her gaze. The color on her cheeks deepened, then she looked down at her pad of paper.

After a moment of silence, she said, “So, I prepared a list of questions. Like I said on the phone, I’m not looking to get into specific crimes. My interest is in you.” Noah watched as she seemed to flinch at her own words. “I mean, I’m interested in your job, how you became a special investigator, what your job entails, etcetera. I envision it being a feature piece in the crime section of the paper.”

He nodded and sat back. If he had to assign a word to this meeting, it would be weird. Not that he was any wordsmith or anything, but there wasn’t another word to describe it. Never, ever, on Earth had a woman gotten his attention the way this blushing, beautiful woman did. Sure, he had seen good-looking women—he did have eyes after all—but none of them had affected him like Abby. What was it about her, he couldn’t quite put his finger on, but he felt something within him come alive for the first time. He didn’t know what the feeling was, but it was like a Phoenix rising from the ashes of his almost-dead soul.

How dramatic.

Take that, Shakespeare.

He had taken six Excedrin and slept most of the day, so as far as his hangover went, it was hovering in mid-range. Definitely on the north side of “Oh my God, I may die,” but on the south side of feeling good. He hadn’t eaten since last night, and he heard his stomach give a growl of protest at the neglect, which was getting difficult to ignore. But really, it was the simple physics of a serious hangover. When you drank as much scotch as he had the night before, what went down was certain to come up, and he wasn’t big on the whole exodus of food from his gut that came with an epic hangover.

As she talked, he watched her lips move, but he wasn’t hearing the words. He loved the sound of her voice—warm and soothing. Those lips looked so soft and full. And he liked the fact that she didn’t slather them up with a bunch of goop.

“Noah?”
He returned his attention to her eyes. This simply wasn’t working. He was a hungover piece of shit, he was hungry, and his brain wasn’t functioning. He hadn’t heard one word she had said. He shouldn’t be thinking the way he was about this woman. He shouldn’t be here, period. She had caught him at a moment of weakness this morning. He should’ve called her back when he reached some level of sobriety this afternoon and canceled. No, this whole situation had Really Bad Idea stamped all over it.

Before he knew what he was saying, the words popped out of his mouth. “I’m hungry, Abby. Will you have an early dinner with me?”

Really? What the fuck was he doing?

“There’s a great steakhouse a few doors down. We could head over there.”

Oh, Jesus. Shut up!

“We could kill two birds with one rock. Or stone. Take your pick. You could do your interview, and I could eat. Of course, I would be more than happy to buy you dinner as well.”

Where was this coming from? Did he really need to cut out his own tongue to make it stop?

To make matters worse, she just stared at him. Okay, maybe the whole dinner thing was an even crappier idea than agreeing to meet her in the first place. Well, actually there was no maybe about it. The dinner invitation took the top prize for Bad Idea and would remain there for a long, long time. Possibly forever.

A slow smile crossed her face. “I would like that.”

Okay. Looked like they were going to dinner.
Chapter 10

It turned out that Noah enjoyed his Bad Idea. Immensely.

The steakhouse was a family owned and operated business, a small restaurant with only ten tables and a small back room. Legend had it that the mob used to meet back there, but the owner, Saul wouldn’t confirm it, nor would he deny it. So it remained legend.

Saul greeted Noah as an old friend. He stood at five foot five, about two hundred pounds, had a head full of thick black hair, and loved to laugh. Noah also believed that Saul loved his restaurant and its patrons more than he loved his wife. He didn’t bother trying to hide his surprise when Noah introduced Abby. Noah had been frequenting the place for years, and never once had he brought a woman with him. In fact, he had come here when Saul’s dad ran the place. When it was time for Noah to ship out of the area because hey, he wasn’t aging, he missed the place. He had to wait for Saul’s father to die before returning to the restaurant.

Saul sat them at the back table and lit the small candle in the middle of the red tablecloth. The lights were dimmed, and soft jazz played over the speakers. The walls were decorated with old pictures of Reno and Sparks, as well as Saul’s family going back many generations.

Saul knew how to do two things great. The first was steak, and he did it right. He owned a cattle ranch just outside of town where the cattle were range fed. It translated into a succulent meal every time. The second was pairing wine with dinner to accommodate the taste of the guest.

Noah didn’t think his system could take any more alcohol, but as he sipped the Merlot Saul had brought for them, he found that his system was enjoying it. When his dinner arrived and he sampled the filet mignon and garlic mashed potatoes, his system was totally onboard and very happy. Or maybe it was the breathtaking woman sitting across from him that had him flying high.

After her first two questions, the interview pretty much went out the window. He turned the tables and began asking questions about her. He couldn’t help himself. He wanted to know everything about her. That little voice in his head was screaming at him
to get up and run as far and as fast as he could, but the more she talked, the more that voice in his head sounded as though it had been locked in a closet and gagged. By the time dessert arrived, the voice was nothing but a low hum in his head and terribly easy to ignore.

With prodding and a lot of questioning, he found out that Abby’s childhood hadn’t been pretty. She grew up in Sacramento, California, where her father had died before she was born, and her mother was murdered just after Abby’s ninth birthday. He watched as her face saddened, but then the sadness disappeared as she continued talking.

“I suppose that’s why I have such a fascination in unsolved murders,” she said quietly, her finger slowly tracing the lip of the wineglass. Noah knew it wasn’t meant to be seductive; it was just something she did while she thought about what she was saying. But damn, it was sexy as hell. Her nails were cut short, and her fingers were long and graceful. There wasn’t a ring on any of them. She explained how she collected old murder files from the Reno and Sacramento area, and often looked through them, wondering if something had been missed at the crime scene, or if the murderer was just that good. She also said she had wondered if some of the murders had been committed by the same person, simply for the lack of evidence in some of the files.

“They never caught my mother’s murderer. I have this fantasy that one day I’ll be digging through old files and something will jump out at me, and I’ll somehow solve the case.” She sat back and scoffed. Her eyes met his, and he wanted to hunt down that killer and gut him, just for her. He prayed it wasn’t one of his Colonists.

Drawing her out wasn’t easy. She seemed closed off and shy. Not like she had anything to hide, but like she wasn’t comfortable letting anyone get close to her. However, once he got her talking, once she seemed to trust him, she unveiled a lot of herself, which pleased him immensely.

She told him of growing up in an orphanage, as none of her remaining family would take her in after her mother’s death. She worked hard in school and went to the University of Nevada, Reno, on a partial scholarship, student loans, and credit cards. In college, she’d learned how much fun partying was, and the boozing helped her break out of her shell a bit and make some friends. She kept her grades just good enough to keep the scholarship. When she graduated with a journalism degree, she wasn’t anything
special, so any hope of getting into a big-city paper pretty much flew out the window. The Reno paper was happy to have her, and the rest was history.

As he split the last bit of wine between their glasses, he asked how she liked her job.

She sighed. He really liked that sound. Depending on her mood, it seemed to convey so much feeling. Right now, it was uncertainty. When he had talked to her on the phone, it had been frustration. He had never known anyone who could communicate so much with so little.

“It’s okay. It’s fine. I can pay my bills.”

He thought it was a shame for such a pretty and intelligent female to be stuck doing something that she obviously didn’t like all that much.

Noah glanced at his watch and saw that the sun would be going down in about an hour. He was surprised that they had spent three hours together. It seemed like minutes. He hated to leave, but the last thing he needed was to explain why his eyes were glowing orange. His tech-head Talin had actually invented contact lenses that kept the nighttime glow of their eyes to a minimum, but they were highly uncomfortable, and Noah had not bothered with them except for a couple of times. He wished he had some now, because he felt like he could sit at the table with her all night.

He looked at Abby. Her cheeks were slightly flushed from the wine, her eyelids just a little droopy. As she sat back in her chair—her slim fingers twisting the stem of the wineglass—he really, really, didn’t want to leave, and he couldn’t remember the last time he had enjoyed himself so much. Probably some party on SR44 was the last time he had been this happy—certainly never on Earth. But often what one wanted to do wasn’t what one needed to do.

“I have an appointment at six,” he said.

She paused a beat, then sat up in her chair, seeming to go back into business mode. “I understand,” she said. “I should get going as well.” She reached behind to get her purse that she had hung off the back of the chair.

Noah threw a couple of bills on the table and began walking out behind Abby.

“Noah!” Saul called. “Noah, you know your money isn’t good here!” It was the same thing every time Noah dined in the place. And just like every time before, Noah
didn’t look back, just gave Saul the one-finger salute over his shoulder. And just like every other time before, he heard some of the other patrons laugh, Saul’s chuckle the loudest of all.

Noah walked Abby to her car, a red Honda that should have been made into scrap metal about ten years ago. But at least the damn thing got her from point A to point B most of the time.

“Thank you for everything,” she said as she fished around in her bag for her keys. “Dinner was really wonderful. I don’t think I’ve ever tasted steak like that. I’m going to have to remember this place.” As if she could afford it on her salary, but maybe if she saved up it could be a special treat for herself.

She watched Noah out of the corner of her eye as he leaned his back against her car and looked her over, smiling. It made her feel slightly uncomfortable, the way his eyes roamed her face, watching her dig through her purse as she tried to find her damn keys. Her cheeks flushed and chastised herself for not putting her keys in the designated key pocket of her purse. That was what they made all the pockets in purses for—a place for everything, and everything in its place. It was too bad she ran her life a little bit differently, despite her best intentions. Mainly, wherever it dropped was where it stayed. If she put things where they belonged, she wouldn’t spend a good portion of her time looking for things and wondering where they were. She certainly wouldn’t be digging through her purse looking for her keys.

Finally, she found them.

She met Noah’s eyes and smiled. What she saw there surprised her. She watched as his eyes grew even darker, but yet the half grin on his face made him look endearing, almost like a little boy who had been caught stealing cookies and was sheepishly trying to get out of it. She held her breath as his hand suddenly grazed over her cheek, slid down her shoulder, and briefly squeezed her hand.

“Good night, Abby,” he said, and turned back toward his car. As he walked into the sunset, Abby watched his large body move, feeling stunned. Her cheek burned where he had touched her, and her heart beat a little faster. She reminded herself to breathe. She loved the way his shoulders seemed to roll with every step, the way his long, strong legs
carried him with a lethal grace.

She shook her head and tried to bring herself around to reality. If he could make her feel like that with just a touch to the cheek, she couldn’t imagine what would happen if he kissed her.
Chapter 11

Noah drove home slowly. Usually he floored it to get home, but not tonight. Tonight he wanted some time to himself. He appreciated the heavy-duty tint job on the windows of the car because he knew his eyes were glowing a piercing orange.

His mind was awash with everything Abby. He could see her large brown eyes looking at him from across the table, the little dimple in her cheek when she laughed. He thought of her long legs and the way the muscles in her calves flexed when she walked in her heels, the way her butt swayed in her skirt. He thought of her long, pale hands playing with her wineglass, and he imagined them wrapped around his . . . he adjusted the way he was seated.

He replayed the night over and over on his way home. He had really enjoyed himself, and not the type of enjoyment that came with getting drunk with one of the Six Saviors and kicking their asses at God of War. No, this had been something different. He didn’t know the name to place on it, but it had been something he hadn’t experienced in his life on Earth.

Abby was unique.

She was unlike any woman he had ever met before. He couldn’t place his finger on why she was so special, but he knew he felt a connection with her that he had never felt before with anyone else, even with his lovren on SR44.

He watched as the gate to the silo opened, and he drove in. He parked next to the other five cars—a black Range Rover, a gray Mercedes convertible, another Escalade, and two Explorers. He felt light on his feet as he went to the door and punched in the code. As the door opened, he felt like doing a little Ginger Rogers down the stairs, but stuck to his normal pounding.

He punched in the code on the second keypad and walked into the kitchen area. No music tonight, no one cooking. He heard the TV going and listened. Sounded like an MMA fight.

“Get off the mat, you fucking loser!” someone screamed, and that pretty much confirmed his suspicions. He grabbed a Heineken out of the fridge and made his way to the TV room.
Hudson sat at the end of the couch in blue track pants and a T-shirt. Judging by the sweat stains, he had just finished a workout. Talin and Cohen slumped in the middle of the couch, a six-pack of beer between them because God forbid if they actually had to get up and move during the match.

“Hey, man,” Cohen said, dragging his eyes from the TV. “Where you been?”

Noah took a long sip of his beer to hide the smile that was creeping across his lips. He wasn’t going to share where he had been, or what he had been doing with anyone.

“Just had an appointment,” he said, heading for the elevator. He didn’t feel like being social. He wanted to think about Abby some more.

As he rode down to the bottom floor of the silo, he closed his eyes and thought of Abby. Her soft, soothing voice, the way she cocked her head to the side when she was thinking. The way her shoe had dangled from her foot when she bounced her leg up and down. And that smile. She could light up a city with the wattage of that smile.

He opened his eyes as the elevator dinged, signaling the arrival of his floor, and he began to rain on his own parade.

What the hell was he doing? He shook his head at his own stupidity. He should be running away from that woman. He was a warrior here for a dire purpose. He had to clean up the mess of his people. His kind had already been responsible for thousands of human deaths, and it was up to him and his fellow Warriors to stop the carnage. He had no business thinking about or wasting his time with a human woman regardless of how attracted he was to her.

He swore violently as the elevator door opened. He had to stay away from her. He couldn’t have anything more to do with her. End of story. Game over. Dead end. He began to gather his resolve on the matter.

As he unlocked the door to his quarters, his cell phone rang. He looked at the caller ID. Abby. He stopped in his tracks. As much as he didn’t want to answer, he wanted to hear her voice. It was more than a want; it was a need. He felt the inner tug-of-war within him growing stronger. There was the warrior, dedicated to his cause, threatening to shoot the other part of him that simply just liked Abby and being in her company. Maybe it was time for him to let go of his high code of warrior ethics and just
enjoy something for a change. But the warrior part of him did have the gun . . .

He quickly came to terms with the situation by telling himself it was just a phone call. It was talking to another being over a device that carried your voice to them and their voice to you. Nothing more.

He hit the ON button. “Hello?”

“Noah?”

He stepped into his quarters and didn’t bother with the lights. His eyes were casting the room in an orange glow.

“Hi, Abby,” he said, sitting on the bed and kicking off his boots.

“I’m sorry to disturb you.”

“You didn’t.”

“Okay. Well, I realized on my way home that we didn’t finish the interview. In fact, you only answered two questions.”

Noah fell back on his bed. “Really.” Like he didn’t know that.

Abby laughed, which made him smile. He closed his eyes, letting the sound reverberate through his bones. God, he loved to hear her laugh.

“I think you’re far more interesting,” he said quietly.

Silence.

“Well, I would like to continue the interview at a time that works for you,” she said, matching his quiet tone. “I’m sort of on a deadline, so if you’re available at some point tomorrow . . .”

He mentally went through his schedule for the next day and didn’t come up with anything earth-shattering or even mildly important.

“I’m yours,” he said without thinking. Shit. Why couldn’t his brain catch up with his mouth and put a stop to words like this?

“Excuse me?”

For both your sakes, you better rephrase that one, asshole. “Whatever time you need me, I’m yours. I’ll make room in my schedule.”

“Okay,” she said, then paused. He could hear pages turning, as though she were looking through a calendar. He liked the fact that she still used an old-fashioned organizer instead of a phone calendar.
“Well, I have meetings tomorrow afternoon, but I can meet you in the morning. Maybe around ten or so?”

The warrior in him, the one bound by duty and honor, was talking really loudly. He really should just stay away from her. He should just be an asshole and hang up, or say something crude, or rude, and make her not want to have anything to do with him ever again. Yeah, that sounded great, but that wasn’t what came out of his mouth.

“Ten sounds good,” he said. His voice was a low rumble.

“Thank you, Noah. Where would you like to meet?”

“I’m flexible. You go ahead and pick.”

“Well, I would like to conduct the interview somewhere private where we won’t be disturbed, if that’s okay.”

“That’s fine.”

She explained to him that her office was anything but private, but there was a small sandwich place around the corner from her office building that was usually pretty quiet at ten in the morning.

“Give me the address,” he heard himself say.
Chapter 12

Abby hung up the phone and tossed it on the bed in front of her, a small smile creeping to her lips. Tomorrow at ten in the morning she would get the rest of her questions answered, write her piece for the paper, and hopefully keep her job. That would be that.

Then why did she feel like a teenage girl who had just been asked to her prom? And why did she feel like meeting Noah was something very significant in her life? Something that would have a deep impact?

She checked her bedside clock, and even though it was only 8:00 p.m., she decided to turn in. She had a feeling it would take her a while to go to sleep with her mind spinning with thoughts of Noah.

The dinner invitation had been a shock to her, crossing boundaries of work versus social interaction and all that. Not that she was very good at respecting those unseen boundaries. She had dated a few cops, so those type of work versus social boundaries were a bit blurry due to her simple basic need and desire to connect with someone.

And she definitely felt a connection with Noah.

But if she were honest with herself, she had only dated those cops because they had asked her out, and she was desperate to have something to break up the loneliness and monotony in her life. She had never held any interest in them. But when Noah offered to take her to dinner, it led her to believe that the interview would continue at the steakhouse. A professional meeting that would continue over dinner.

Well, it hadn’t remained professional, and frankly, that had been perfectly fine with her. Boundaries, like some rules, were made to be broken.

She remembered the way the candlelight had hit his face, showing off those damn cheekbones she wished she had. His eyes were an onyx color in the restaurant, so deeply black they would have been scary on anyone else. They looked like pools of never ending . . . she didn’t know what. Like a never-ending black universe. She remembered gazing up at the sky when she was young after her mother died. She imagined that somewhere up in the darkness was heaven, and if she thought hard enough, if she stared long enough, her mom would be able to hear her thoughts.
In later years, when she felt so disconnected from everyone, she had looked into that never-ending blackness and wished she could be swooped away to another planet by another species that she was certain lived out there. She sometimes wanted to escape, to flee her life and start over somewhere far away.

That was what Noah’s eyes reminded her of—the deep, never-ending blackness of the universe. She found them beautiful, mysterious, and wondrous, just like she did the night sky.

As far as Noah was concerned, the term “easy on the eyes” was the understatement of the year.

She hadn’t noticed when he took control of the conversation, but loved the way he seemed to hang on her every word as he peppered her with questions. As if what she had to say was life-or-death important. No man had ever listened to her like that, and she found herself wanting more. It was only until she had gotten home that she realized she really didn’t know anything about him. He always steered the conversation back to her.

What she said when she called him was true—she didn’t realize until she was on her way home that he had only answered two of her questions. She needed something for the paper by Friday, and she was counting on this feature piece. Shaking her head, she scolded herself. She needed to quit with the whole female-swooning thing and get down to business. But she hadn’t felt this good, or this excited, by anything since she had been awarded a partial college scholarship.

While in her sophomore class in high school, she had decided that she wanted to be a writer. Her teacher had been kind and supportive of Abby’s efforts, and Abby responded well. She loved writing because she could take the thoughts and worlds she created in her mind and put them to paper, thereby transporting herself out of her reality and into a place where she was in charge of the characters, the surroundings, and what happened in the stories she created. It was an escape from the feelings and insecurities of her life. Later when she discovered journalism, she focused on that. Her need for discovering the truth, whether in her own life or in someone else’s, became very important to her.

But back to Noah.

She decided to swoon some more.
The way he had touched her face had been so gentle, yet its impact had floored her. She rolled over in bed and brought her fingers to her cheek. Noah obviously wasn’t too concerned about the work versus social boundaries either.

She flipped over again, landing on her stomach. As she stared at the clock, she decided that tomorrow would be all about the interview. She needed this piece for her Friday deadline. Tomorrow she would not be the giddy schoolgirl she felt like now. She would be the professional writer for the city newspaper doing a feature on an interesting figure in their city. The piece that would hopefully save her job because there certainly wasn’t a Plan B. She was living paycheck to paycheck and trying to pay down her debt from college. In a nutshell, if she lost her job, she would most likely have to declare bankruptcy. Either that or become a greeter at Walmart until she found something else. That thought made her cringe.

Her resolve set, she closed her eyes. After a few minutes, she felt her cat jump up on the bed.

“Hi, Neptune,” she whispered as the big black cat curled up on her back and began to purr. She decided he needed to go on a diet because him sleeping on her was becoming uncomfortable.

But tomorrow she would get her story, and that was all there was to it. Fancy dinners didn’t mean squat. The big good-looking man was simply a means to getting food on her table and keeping a roof over her head. It was nothing more.

The thing that bothered her, or interested her—take your pick—was that she was still certain she had seen him somewhere, but she couldn’t figure it out to save her life. And there was the underlying feeling of a connection to him. It wasn’t only that she thought she had seen him somewhere, but the fact that she felt as if she knew him.

But she didn’t know him.

She knew she couldn’t possibly know someone after spending three hours with them, especially when she was the one who had done most of the talking. The whole connection thing was ridiculous, but she couldn’t deny it.

An hour later, she was staring at the ceiling when her phone rang. She answered without bothering to see who it was.

“Abby, it’s Noah.”
She smiled so wide she thought her face would crack. “Hi.”

There was a beat of silence, then he said, “Listen, something’s come up for me in the morning. Can I push our meeting back until eleven?”

“Um, sure. That’ll work. You’ll just need to talk fast so I can make it to my afternoon meetings.”

He chuckled. “Okay. I’ll talk fast.”

Abby didn’t want to hang up, but she kept reminding herself about professional boundaries. “What’re you up to tonight?” she blurted, closing her eyes.

“Just doing a little business, a little research. You?”

She smiled into the darkness. “Not much. Just . . . sitting here with my cat.” She half-expected him to hang up with that brilliance. She sounded like some lonely woman with self-trappings of staying at home because she had nowhere else to be.

Oops.

She was.

Just her and the cat. But she reminded herself it didn’t matter what he thought of her because it would be a purely professional relationship, despite all that B.S. about feeling a connection to him and feeling like she already knew him. She needed to get his story, save her job, and keep a roof over her head.

There was another small span of silence, but oddly, it wasn’t uncomfortable.

“So, what do you prefer, Abby? Coke or Pepsi?”

Abby laughed. “Pepsi, definitely Pepsi.”
Chapter 13

The Colonist whistled softly as he looked at the house he was about to break into. The adrenaline flowed freely through him, making his very being vibrate with anticipation. His senses were heightened, his mind buzzed.

He felt alive.

The woman living in the house—first name Stacy, last name Boss, middle initial A., age thirty-five, five foot four, one hundred ninety pounds—was going to die tonight. She, of course, had no idea.

As far as Stacy was concerned, she would wake up tomorrow at 6:00 a.m., get ready for her job as a bank teller at the Bank of Carson, and spend her day as she did every other day. She would chitchat with customers, count money, take a longer lunch than she was allowed, repeat everything except the lunch in the afternoon, and go home.

Once home, Stacy would have three glasses of bourbon and Coke. She didn’t eat dinner, but would have a bag of potato chips instead. She would watch TV, and since today was Tuesday, she would watch the O’Reilly Factor, Real Housewives of somewhere, and then the eleven o’clock news.

The Colonist figured she deserved to die just for watching the obnoxiousness of Housewives. He did, however, enjoy O’Reilly every now and then.

At eleven thirty, she would go into her bathroom and spend approximately fifteen minutes getting ready for bed. She would emerge, check the locks on the back door to the house, as well as the front door. She would turn off the TV and all the lights except the one over the kitchen sink and head to bed. Unfortunately, he didn’t know what days of the week she used the pink vibrator she kept in the nightstand.

Humans were so fucking predictable.

If asked, he could recite her patterns for any day of the week. He knew her TV schedule, the names of the people she ate lunch with at work, and how much she was paid. She loved having bacon and eggs in the morning, and drank three cups of coffee with hazelnut-flavored creamer before she left for work.

He knew she had been divorced for eight months and four days, and she hadn’t had a date in two months. Her black hair color was fake; she used Clairol number 47, or
was it 48? He wanted to remind her about the dry cleaning she needed to pick up, but really, what would be the point? She wouldn’t need the clothes in . . . approximately forty-five minutes. No, she would be dead in bed while wearing her blue nightgown, her throat nicely slit, and he would be flying higher than the moon.
Chapter 14

Noah was struggling to pull his boot on when the phone rang. He smiled when he saw it was Abby.

At first, he thought she was going to cancel by the hesitancy in her voice, and there was a small part of him that wished she would. They had talked until three in the morning about a lot of everything, some of nothing, and communication between them flowed freely. He not only thought Abby was the prettiest thing he had seen in forever, but he liked her personality as well. She was the whole package as far as he was concerned.

They had started out with the Pepsi versus Coke debate the previous night on the phone, and moved into a bit of light politics, and then cake-flavoring preferences.

“Strawberry is, by far, the best,” she had said, and he had disagreed wholeheartedly.

“Strawberry-flavored cake may be the most god-awful cake ever. Ever, Abby! Who wants fruit on and in their cake? Cake is all about the sugar, not nutrition. Give me chocolate any day.”

A few hours later, the conversation had turned to random questions again.

“Favorite movie of the ‘90s,” he asked quietly.

“Hmmm . . . I would have to go with either The Matrix or Pulp Fiction. Terminator 2 was pretty good too,” she said sleepily. “My turn now. Favorite planet.”

Noah had been lying in bed half-asleep, but not wanting to hang up the phone. But his eyes had flown open at the question, and a jolt raced through him as he wondered if she knew what he was.

After a moment of silence, she said, “Noah? Are you still there?”

“I’m here,” he said, fully awake. There was a small part of him that wanted to tell her about SR44 and its beauty and wonderment, and how much he missed it. But he knew she meant this solar system.

“I have to go with Pluto,” he said.

“But Pluto’s not considered a planet anymore.”

“I know. That poor little bastard totally got the short end of the stick on that one. I
always root for the underdogs.”

He found himself liking Abby more and more, and frankly, it scared him a little bit. He had never developed feelings for a human female before—hell, any female—and his own personal code of work and no pleasure was slowly eroding.

He imagined her on the other end of the phone, her teeth trapping her lower lip, maybe a little crease on her brow.

He really wanted to kiss those lips. They looked like little pink pillows. He wondered if she was dressed yet, and he felt an erection about to make an appearance.

Right.

Okay.

Get out of your own head and get back to what she was saying.

When she explained that her car wouldn’t start, relief washed through him. Yeah, there was the small part that wanted her to cancel, but the rest of him would have been highly disappointed. She asked him to pick her up.

Noah didn’t hesitate to say yes, but did say he was running a little late. She gave him the address to her apartment.

Noah pulled up to the curb of Abby’s apartment in his black Mercedes Benz SLK convertible and double-checked the address. It was an older house painted white with green trim that had been converted into what looked like four apartments—two on the top and two on the bottom. Each apartment had a huge picture window. As he walked up the path sandwiched by patches of grass on each side, he cringed when he saw that her apartment was on the bottom. So bad for safety reasons. There were too many awful people looking to do awful things, both in his species and hers. She needed better protection than this.

He shook his head and rang the bell. A buzz sounded, and he heard a click as the lock was set free. He turned the knob and went into a foyer done in white tile and white paint. The door to the right opened, and there she was.

Her hair was piled on top of her head in a loose ponytail, and her long legs were hugged by a pair of faded jeans. She wore a simple white button-down shirt again and a pair of sandals. She looked fabulous.

“Hi,” she said, smiling.
He smiled back. “Hi.”

Just then, a huge black cat bolted out the door and began running between his ankles, back and forth. Then it started purring. Loudly.

“Neptune!” she scolded. “Get back in here!”

The cat, of course, ignored her. She stepped out and reached down for him, but he meowed and jumped out of her grasp. Noah bent down, picked up the cat, and held it to his chest while scratching behind its ears. Neptune shut his eyes and purred louder.

“Seems like someone likes you quite a bit,” Abby said as she stepped aside to let Noah into her apartment. Most animals did like him. He didn’t know if they sensed he wasn’t fully human or what the deal was, but he had never met a dog or cat that he didn’t get along with.

Noah didn’t say anything as he took in her living space. Everything was white, or a version of white, as was the foyer. It was light and airy. To his right was a small, tidy kitchen and dining area. He imagined Hudson going mental, trying to cook in such a small space. Her couch was a light brown color, and an old second-hand coffee table held a few magazines. White mesh curtains covered the huge window, offering close-to-zero privacy. In front of him was a small hallway with a couple of doors, which he assumed was the bedroom and maybe a closet or two.

He put Neptune down and turned around to look at Abby. He hadn’t been imagining her subtle beauty. He watched as she tucked some hair that had come loose from her ponytail behind her ear, and he admired the freckles over her cheeks and nose. He absolutely loved that her beauty was natural and not painted on.

“Ready?” she said, grabbing her bag.

“Sure.” He let his eyes leave her face and looked around the small space. He liked being here, seeing her things and the way she lived. Yet, he didn’t want to answer the questions she had lined up for him. At all. So, he was in a dilemma. He didn’t want to leave her, but he sure as shit didn’t want to speak about himself. His eyes moved to the big window. It was a pretty day.

Springtime in northern Nevada could be wonderful. The tulips were starting to creep out of the ground, and the air had lost that bitter feeling. You could actually feel the sun warming your bones and heating your skin. It was a perfect day for a ride up to Lake
Tahoe in a convertible Mercedes. He had only been up there once before, when he had worked on a murder case for four days straight. That was about ten years ago, but the absolute beauty of Lake Tahoe had been forever burned in his mind. Maybe they could head up for a little lunch, a little sun, a walk on the beach . . .

“Let’s go,” he said, smiling.

“Okay.” She started talking about the wonderful omelets the sandwich shop served in the mornings. “If we get there soon, we can get one of those instead of lunch.”

“Let’s go somewhere else. The day’s too pretty to waste.” Then he remembered the meetings she had in the afternoon. “Can you cancel your meetings? Call in sick or something?”

“Um . . . well, where would we go?” Her brow furrowed in deep thought. “And what about the interview?”

“For a drive. I was thinking Lake Tahoe. Maybe some lunch, a walk on one of the beaches. And I’ll answer your questions.”

Noah watched her face light up.

“I think I just developed a stomachache,” she said.

Noah smiled widely. “Better call in sick then, Abby. That shit can be contagious.”
Chapter 15

They flew down Highway 395 at a somewhat reasonable speed, the top down on the Mercedes. As they turned right up Mount Rose Highway, the road became embedded in a wall of forest with houses interspersed and hiding throughout. The air became crisper and cleaner and smelled like pine. Abby closed her eyes, tilted her face upward, and let the sun play across her face as it bounced in and out of the trees.

Noah looked over at her and almost lost control of the car. She was beautiful to begin with, but sitting there like that, with her face turned up to the sun, she was astounding. It was as if she belonged to the forest, the sun, the springtime mountain air. She smiled slightly as if she were enjoying her own private joke, and her skin glowed as her hair flew all around her face. Watch the road, buddy.

As the car easily made the turns up the highway, he asked, “Where do you want to eat?”

“Gar Woods,” she answered without hesitation or opening her eyes.

“Gar Woods it is,” he said, punching the buttons on his TomTom.

They arrived in North Lake Tahoe, a beautiful cluster of shops, houses, and large forest trees. He pulled into Gar Woods, and they secured a table out on the deck overlooking the majestic beauty of Lake Tahoe.

“Anything to drink?” he asked as they perused the menu.

“Definitely a Wet Woody,” she said.

He looked at her confused. Wet? Woody? What?

She looked up from the menu and blushed. “You’ve never had the drink? A Wet Woody?”

He shook his head, trying to get his mind out of the gutter. No, he had never experienced human sex, but the words “wet” and “woody” put together conjured up all sorts of images that didn’t belong at lunch in a public place.

“They’re wonderful,” she said as the waitress came over.

“I’m game, Abby,” he said, smiling. He looked up at the waitress. “Two Wet Woodies.”

“Not now,” Noah said, going back to his menu. They enjoyed their drinks, as well
as the view. Lake Tahoe expanded out in front of them in its magnificent, blue wonder. On the other side of the lake, mountains with white snowcaps stared back at them. Boats tooled around the lake, a few pulling up to the dock. People got out of the boats and made their way up to the restaurant.

Noah and Abby both decided that they wanted the French Dip. Noah watched as she inhaled her sandwich and realized he loved the fact that she ate with gusto. Abby liked to eat. He had seen women in restaurants that simply moved food around on the plate, and he found it annoying.

“It’s so important to save places like this,” she said, gesturing out to the big lake when they discussed the environment.

He agreed whole-heartedly. But, he wasn’t against throwing down a drill or two in Alaska either. There had to be a balance.

“So why did you go into journalism, Abby?”

He watched her as she stared out at the lake as if she were pulling her thoughts together.

“Truth,” she said quietly, not looking at him. “I feel like . . . like somehow my life is based on a lie.” She paused a beat, then looked over at him. “Don’t ask me to explain it. But I like that my job requires me to find out the truth about . . . everything that I write.”

He nodded, but didn’t question her further. He knew all about existing under a lie—he did it on a daily basis. Whatever her missing truth was, he hoped she found it soon so that her life would be content.

She told him funny stories of her college days, like the time she had lost a game of strip poker and had to make her way home in her bra and underwear, ducking behind bushes and hiding behind streetlamps as cars passed. It had been a horrifying experience at the time, but she was able to find the humor in it now. She had him laughing until tears rolled down his face, with a little voice in the back of his head begging to see her in a bra and panties.

Then she told him about her coworker James and his annoying sniff-cough habit. Noah wanted to strangle the guy simply because he bothered Abby.

She had tried to get information out of him, like where he was born and how
many siblings he had, and if he was close with his parents. The questions were unanswerable and made him cringe inwardly. So he did what he did best—he turned the conversation back around so that it was all about her.

And then she hit him with a doozy.

“Have you ever been married, Noah?”

He felt like someone just goosed him, and he began shifting in his chair. Uncomfortable didn’t begin to describe the way he felt with that question. He hadn’t been married in the technical sense of Earthly ways. But of SR44 ways, yes. Did he love Julia? Had he loved her? At one point he thought he did, but now he was pretty certain he never really had. In fact, he was dead fucking certain he had never been in love in his whole long, pathetic life. So what was the truthful answer? Yes? No?

He went with the middle road.

“Once. It was . . . a while back.” Two hundred years or so, but she didn’t need to know the math. “We were married for a very short time.” That part was dead-on truthful. Bull’s-eye on the truth target.

They talked the afternoon away, and Noah was surprised when the sun began its descent toward the evening. He figured he had about three hours before sunset. He looked out at the pier and wanted to go out there with Abby.

He paid the bill and took her hand. They strolled out to the end of the wooden pier in silence, the sun almost blinding them, the waves lapping at the sides of the old wood. They sat down at the end and slipped off their shoes, dipping their feet into the frigid water.

“After a while your feet pretty much go numb,” she laughed.

“Pretty much.”

He loved the way the sun played on her hair, bringing out the reds highlights. He noticed her nose and cheeks held a little red tint of sunburn. She turned to him, catching him staring at her.

“What?” she asked, smiling, their eyes locking.

“Abby,” he heard himself say quietly, “I think I’d like to kiss you.”

He watched her eyes flare slightly, and then they locked on his lips.

“Well, I don’t see anything stopping you,” she whispered.
No, there wasn’t anything physical stopping him. Just his inner war. The warrior in him screaming that this went far past the whole interview thing he had been quieted with and into the unacceptable zone.

The other part of him, the one who just wanted the warrior to shut up for a moment, won once again. He grinned and bent his head down to hers. It was a soft, yet brief meeting of lips. That damn warrior voice in his head screamed at him to pull away, and he did. He opened his eyes to see her large, warm, brown eyes looking up at him. As the sensations of the kiss registered, he knew that he definitely wanted more. He bent his head to her again, and this time he laced his fingers through the hair at the nape of her neck and held her mouth in place. He had no idea what he was doing, so he allowed her to take the lead.

As he felt her lips move over his, he marveled at the sensations coursing through his veins. His body felt like it was lighting up from the inside, desire licking through him, traveling up to his skin.

Her tongue snaked out from her mouth, gently prodding his to open. So he did. As her tongue met his, his eyes flew open in shock, but then after a few seconds, he closed them again, following her lead. He felt her hand move into his hair behind his ear.

It was like a dance, he decided. Their tongues circled, twisted, and pushed, all in a glorious dance. He felt his cock go rock hard, and he had the urge to rip open her shirt button by button and take her down on the dock.

Instead, he pulled away, put his big arm around her, gathering her to his side. They sat in silence for a moment.

“So, what other questions did you want to ask me for the interview today?” he asked quietly into her ear, also managing to land a kiss on her neck, knowing full well she had asked exactly none.

“Oh, shut up,” she said, then burst out laughing.
Chapter 16

When they pulled up in front of Abby’s house, she asked him to come in, and she was really pleased when he said yes.

As she struggled to open the bottle of wine, she thought about the situation. She was fiercely attracted to Noah and she wanted him. That kiss at the lake . . . wow. At first, Abby had felt her heart skip and anxiety swam through her. Despite her short stint of partying in college, she was not what one would call “experienced in the romance field.” She was glad she hadn’t been standing when he kissed her, or she would have gone all swoony and her knees would have buckled under her.

She wasn’t very experienced sexually. She usually ended a relationship before it could get to that place. On the very few occasions she had gone there, she had never felt like she did with Noah. She was terribly attracted to him, more attracted to him than any of the very few men she had been with in her life.

The man made her blood boil. Hot. There was no two ways about it. She awed at his huge, hard body that moved with such grace. He looked like he should be a bull causing mayhem in a china shop, but instead she would bet he could charge through said china shop with the precision and agility of a ballet dancer. The way he moved his hands through his wavy, brown hair made her want to do the same. His black-and-gray eyes stared at her with such intensity, her stomach fluttered. She loved the way he looked at her. It excited her and almost frightened her. She had never had such a physical reaction to a man before.

There was also the fact that she felt more comfortable with him than any other man she had ever dated. She loved talking to him. She remembered sitting on the dock with his huge arm around her, tucked close to him. The words that had flung themselves through her brain were “home,” “safety,” and “companion.”

And with these feelings, she found herself opening up to him like she never had to another person. She couldn’t believe she had actually told him that she felt her life was based on a lie. She could never explain it, but it was just a feeling she had. Insecurity washed through her. She took a deep breath and found comfort that she hadn’t done or said anything too embarrassing because Noah was still around, and he seemed to like
being with her.

She thought about a date she had been on a few months ago with a man she had met at the gym. He had taken her to dinner and asked her that same question—why she had gone into journalism. The true answer was on the tip of her tongue, but it refused to come out. Instead, she had given him some lame answer about how she went into journalism because she was good at spelling. She closed her eyes and cringed at that one. There hadn’t been any more dates with that guy, which had been okay with her.

She felt Noah come up behind her and watched his hands clutch the counter, trapping her within a cage of man. His scent overtook her. It was fresh air, pine trees, and raw male. She shivered as he kissed her neck once, then again. She stopped messing with the wine, her very inner being vibrating with a desire she had never felt before, and turned to Noah. She laced her hands around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss.

His hands rubbed up and down her back, then moved down to the curve of her hips. The next thing she knew, she was being lifted off the floor, and her legs wrapped around his waist on their own accord. He carried her to the couch.

He sat down with her straddling him.

Abby felt her blood race; the ache of desire was almost overwhelming. She felt like she was going to go crazy if she didn’t get a piece of Noah.

Now.

She moved her hands under his shirt, feeling the rock-hard muscles of his chest and shoulders. There was just so much of him!

“I want this off,” she whispered, and was really happy when he didn’t argue. She pulled it over his head as he lifted his arms, and then he greedily kissed her again. She felt him messing with the buttons of her shirt, and cursed herself for not wearing something a little easier to remove. She broke the kiss and helped him get them undone, and moaned as he ran his thumbs over the lacy cups of her bra. He began fiddling with the clasp, and she didn’t have the patience to wait for him to get it undone. She undid it herself, tossed it to the floor, and pressed her breasts into his chest, relishing the feeling of her skin against his.

She moved so that she could pull him down on top of her. As he settled on her, she marveled at the way their bodies seemed to fit together, how his weight wasn’t
uncomfortable, but soothing. It made her feel safe and protected.

As fire licked through her, the need for Noah’s touch and his body rising within her, she realized, as silly as it seemed, that she might very well be falling in love.

Noah was pretty certain he had found heaven on Earth when Abby pulled him down on top of her. He loved the feeling of the skin-on-skin contact, the way her soft curves met his hard body as they kissed. She tried to undo his belt, but he pulled away. He slid her jeans off, gaping at her naked body, silently thanking whoever was responsible for the design of the human female form for the absolute perfection.

He heard himself breathing heavily, and he wondered what he looked like. He had to be glowing so hard he probably looked like he was spitting fire. But Abby stared up at him as if nothing was wrong, and he reminded himself that humans could not see his skin glow.

He moved his hands over her breasts, down her ribcage, and circled her belly button. He was surprised to see a small amount of brown curls at the top of her sex. In every movie involving sex he had ever watched, the woman had been bare.

He let his finger travel into her secret flesh and felt like his balls had been jacked with a bolt of lightning, but in a really good way. She was hot and slick. He gently traced up the folds, and she began moving against his fingers. He lay down next to her, letting her rub against his hand. He knew his eyes should probably be closed, but he loved watching as he kissed her. Her cheeks were turning pink, and she had a look pure enjoyment on her face. She repositioned herself a little, and suddenly his fingers were sliding deeper into her sex, and she continued moving.

He didn’t really know what to do, so he just kept kissing her, watching her move, trying to give her what she wanted as she gyrated against his hand.

He looked down at her breast, the hard pink tip beckoning him. And who would he be to deny such an invitation? He moved slightly so that he could suckle it again. Seconds later, she grabbed his hair and pulled his face to her chest as her hips bowed off the couch. He felt her sex go tight around his fingers, contracting and loosening and doing it all over again. And again and again. At first, he was terrified that he had hurt her, but then he looked at her face. She didn’t look hurt in the least bit. She looked like she
was thoroughly enjoying herself.

*This must be a human female orgasm,* he thought.

He looked at her in wonder as she called out his name and her hips undulated. After almost a minute, she came to rest. Her breathing was labored, and he laid his head down gently on her chest to listen to her heart thumping rapidly and loudly.

He slid his fingers from her and looked at them. They were shiny and slick and he had a desire to taste them.

So he did.

He closed his eyes and let out a groan. She was lovely. In fact, he wanted to taste more. He moved down between her legs to the floor, threw them over his shoulders, and began tasting her core. He let his tongue swirl—he gently sucked, and he felt like he could go on for hours.

He found a rhythm, using his fingers and tongue, one that seemed to drive her wild. He learned when she was close to orgasm by the feel of her body and the look on her face. He would drive her to just before the point of no return, and back off, making her crazy. He watched as the sweat rolled down between her breasts and her head thrashed in frustration.

After her third orgasm, Noah disengaged his mouth and looked at his skin. He was glowing. He closed his eyes for a moment, making certain his SR44 form wasn’t leaving his body. When he was certain it wasn’t, he looked up at Abby, reminding himself that human women couldn’t see his SR44 form, the shimmer that radiated from his skin.

Abby looked at him, squinting just a little, and he noted the bright light of the afternoon sun was just about blinding. He relished in the happy, satisfied smile on her face. She reached for him, and he put his hand in hers, letting her pull him up so they were face to face. She moved so that he wasn’t lying on top of her, but body to body on the couch. She kissed him and tucked her head into his shoulder.

“You’re pretty good at that,” she said softly, then giggled. He smiled, his ego inflated to epic proportions as he ran his hand over her hair.

Her palm lazy circled on his chest. Slowly, it made its way down the flat plane of his stomach, landing on his belt. As she began to undo it, he looked outside. The sun was
getting ready to nestle itself down behind a mountain. If he let her get in his pants, he was certain he would have a lot of explaining to do once his eyes starting going all pumpkin on him.

He gently pulled her hand away and held it.

He kissed her forehead. “I want nothing more than to stay here with you and have you get into my pants,” he said softly. “But I need to go, honey. I have an appointment with one of my . . . coworkers tonight. I’m afraid I would never leave if this went any further.”

He heard her sigh. It signaled resignation and frustration in which he agreed with wholeheartedly. But he imagined in another half hour or so his eyes would be glowing orange. He didn’t know how she would react that she had just let a member of another species into her most private flesh. Probably not very well, he imagined.

She nodded and sat up. She went to the bathroom and came back out in an orange terrycloth robe. He had put his shirt back on, and thought about how absurdly amusing it was that her robe was almost the exact shade of orange as his eyes would be soon.

“Wow, that sun is bright,” she said as she came over to him.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and he held her close. Man, he didn’t want to leave.

He leaned down and kissed her slowly, then pulled away. “Maybe I can see you tomorrow?” he said as he looked down at her, hoping like hell she would give him an affirmative.

“I would like that,” she said. He kissed her again and heard himself let out a moan, a desire to take her to the floor and strip off that robe almost overwhelming him.

He needed to get the fuck out of Dodge. Evacuate immediately. Terminate all physical contact and start putting one foot in front of the other out the door and to the car. She closed her eyes for a moment, then looked up at him.

“Call me later, okay?” he said, disengaging himself. Man, this was hard.

She nodded, and he finally got his feet moving.
Chapter 17

He hauled it back out to Fernley.

As he drove on Interstate 80, he couldn’t wipe the smile from his face. Damn. Abby rocked his world. It was a cliché, but the God’s honest truth. He had never felt anything like what she did to him. He replayed the past hour or so minute by minute. He loved making her orgasm. Loved it. He would love nothing more than to spend night after night pleasuring her. He could still taste her on his lips, still smell her shampoo and skin.

And the day at Tahoe . . . he would never, ever be able to go back there without thinking of Abby. Who would have thought there would be an actual drink called a Wet Woody? And strip poker? It had taken him a few minutes to figure out how you played poker and ended up running home in your underwear, but he finally got it. Instead of money, you played with clothes. Although the thought of anyone seeing Abby in her underwear didn’t sit well with him, but the story was still really funny.

And that kiss at the dock. He couldn’t believe how their tongues moving against each other affected him. He marveled at it.

And don’t even get him started on what happened on the couch.

He felt like he had received a lifetime of education in the field of human females in a day.

There was no doubting it: Abby was intelligent and funny, and he liked being around her. He liked the way she made him feel whether she was kissing him, whether he was making her orgasm, or if they were just talking. His two beings were warring again, and he found it easier and easier to ignore the uptight warrior within.

He arrived at the silo about a half hour after dark. He went through the routine of pushing the remote to open the gate, parking the car, pushing the buttons on the keypad, banging down the metal stairs, and then hitting the next keypad.

He stopped for a moment and listened. It sounded like his boys were banging around the pool table, some Led Zeppelin making its way through the speakers.

He went into the room and stood at the doorway, crossing his arms over his chest. Hudson’s yellow eyes were the first to meet his. Noah watched as Hudson’s face turned
to shock. Talin and Cohen turned in greeting and froze. All three stared at him as if he had just given birth to alligators right there on the carpet.

“Holy shit,” Talin whispered.

Someone muted the stereo. What the fuck? Was his fly undone or something? He knew he was still a bit hard, but it shouldn’t be noticeable under his T-shirt, should it?

Hudson smiled. “Well, well, well. Look at you.”

He didn’t know what the male was referring to, but he decided to play it off.

“What’re you talking about, Hudson? Don’t I match or something today? Is my clothing choice affecting your delicate fashion sensibilities?” He full expected to get smacked upside the head for that one, but it never came. Hudson met his stare, and he arms crossed over his chest as his eyes narrowed.

“Go find a mirror, Noah. Then let’s talk about your sensibilities. Or, most likely, lack thereof.”

Noah went to the formal dining room that was never used. In there, on the far side of the room, hung a large rectangular mirror. He walked around the oak hand-carved table and chairs that sat sixteen. Before he looked in the mirror, he began to ready the insults he would throw at those cocksuckers. They were right behind him.

As he caught his reflection in the mirror, he stopped. It was light, but it was there. A glowing orange radiated around his form. His whole form. He took a couple of steps forward and touched his reflection in the glass. His eyes met those behind him—the bright yellow of Hudson, the shocking blue of Talin, and the violet purple of Cohen.

“So,” Talin drawled, his voice bathing in sarcasm and meeting Noah’s gaze, “let’s see. What could get Noah in a lather and make him turn orange?” The male crossed one arm over his chest and rubbed his chin as if he were actually thinking about it. “Gosh, I don’t know. Oh, wait. That would be a female.”

Noah looked at his image again. His whole body was outlined in a soft orange glow. He had never seen this in himself before. But then again, he had never felt pleasure before in his human form. It was something that he was not supposed to feel. He knew the consequences—if he went to that place of absolute pleasure, where he fell in love and made love to the woman he loved, his SR44 form would flee his human body, and he would simply become a human and begin to age. He was somewhat close to that now
because the glow had taken form around him, his SR44 body getting ready to evacuate. And the fact that he had been with Abby almost forty-five minutes ago? He had come close to losing his SR44 from, closer than he had realized. He shouldn’t be glowing like this now.

As dread and panic washed through his body, he watched the glow around him slowly diminish and then totally burn out. He looked at his orange eyes in the mirror, then met the bright orbs behind him.

He needed to escape, to think through this. He turned to leave.

“Not so fast,” Talin said, stopping Noah in his tracks with a hand to the chest. “We need to know what’s going on, man.” When Noah didn’t say anything, Talin continued. “Noah, where did you . . . where did you see the female?”

“Reno,” he mumbled.

“Reno!” Hudson said loudly. “Reno? Like almost an hour ago? Jesus, Noah! You shouldn’t still be glowing! Did you fuck her?”

Noah felt the anger rise within him. No one fucked Abby. Abby was to be worshipped and revered, not fucked like one of Hudson’s whores.

“No,” he bit out.

Hudson narrowed his eyes. “You didn’t sleep with her, and you’re still glowing?”

He shook his head as Noah chose not to answer.

“If you didn’t sleep with her and you’re glowing, you have a problem,” Talin said quietly. “The problem is that you’re getting attached, and that has to stop. Like yesterday.”

_Do you want it to stop?_ his non-warrior voice chimed in.

He closed his eyes and thought about the answer to that. No. Yes. Shit. Yes. No. Dammit.

He rubbed his face and pushed Talin ‘s hand away. “Going to my quarters,” he growled, hoping to send the signal that he didn’t want any company. He didn’t want to discuss anything.

He made it to the elevator without anyone trailing behind him. At least they had gotten the hint on that one. He was surprised that no one came after him, but perhaps they realized that he needed to be alone, to think this through. As he went into his quarters and
tugged off his boots, he took a deep breath and tried to focus.

Hudson had been with human women, and he had kept it together. He still had his SR44 form. Cohen had as well. Noah could get some pointers from him. He sure as shit wasn’t talking to Hudson. That comment about fucking Abby really grated on his nerves.

He fell back on his bed. He could not lose his SR44 form. There wasn’t any compromise on that.

He had to finish the job he was sent to do. The duty and honor of the warrior in him swelled.

Maybe he could also walk the fine line of enjoying the pleasures of Earth, as Cohen and Hudson did, yet keep his SR44 form so that he would have longer on Earth to eradicate his species’ mistakes. To stop the killings of the Colonists.

He dialed his phone. On the third ring, Cohen picked up.

“You busy, man?”

“Nah, just kicked Cohen’s ass in pool. Now it’s his turn to stomp Hudson.”

“Fuck off, Cohen,” Noah heard Hudson say.

“What’s up?” Cohen asked, ignoring Hudson.

“Can you come down? I have to know how to control this.”

“You mean the little glitter problem you’ve got going on?”

“Yeah,” Noah said, rubbing his face. He didn’t think he was glittering, but he wasn’t going to argue semantics. “Yeah.”

“You want a drink?”

“Do we have any more scotch?”

Noah heard Cohen moving bottles around. “Just found a nice bottle of Glenfiddich.”

“Good. See you in a few.”

Cohen arrived a few minutes later with the bottle and a couple of glasses. They sat down in the overstuffed chairs in the sitting area.

Noah studied his friend. Today’s T-shirt simply said The Faces. Cohen loved old rock n’ roll. He wore baggy jeans and his hair was its usual unkempt mess.

After pouring, Cohen sat back and smiled, his eyes glowing fluorescent purple.

“So, Noah’s got himself a female. ’Bout time, my friend. You have no idea what you’ve
been missing.”

Noah smiled. “Look. I like her. I like spending time with her, but I’m not willing to go to that place where I lose my SR44 form. I’m not going to fall in love with her. I need to be able to finish my job here. You’ve been with human women. Tell me what to do so I’m not glowing and shit. So I don’t lose it.”

Cohen nodded and became serious. He looked around the room as if he were putting his words together, finally focusing on the far wall. “Do you remember what it was like joining with your _lovren_?” he asked softly, not meeting Noah’s eyes.


Cohen nodded again, keeping his eyes on Noah. Cohen didn’t get serious often, but his face told Noah he was going to now. “I don’t know about you, but when I joined with my _lovren_, it wasn’t just a joining of bodies, but of minds. That’s where the difference lies. You can be with human women, and it is really amazing, let me tell you. But you need to hold something of yourself back. Does that make sense? You can’t give your whole self over to the experience. You can’t let your feelings get in the way, Noah.”

Noah thought about it a moment while his sipped his scotch. His memory reached for his experiences with his _lovren_, and he remembered something of what Cohen described. It had been an experience where they gave themselves over to each other, both with their body and mind. Basically, in a nutshell, he couldn’t fall in love with Abby. He could do that, couldn’t he? He felt his cock jolt with a resounding yes, ready to head back on the road to Reno and Abby.

“Okay, I think I get it.”

“So who is she?” Cohen asked. “Where did you meet her?”

Noah sighed. “She’s a reporter. She called me, I met her.”

Noah almost laughed at the surprised look on Cohen’s face. “Are you fucking around with me?”

Noah shook his head.

Cohen burst out laughing. “Well, I didn’t see that one coming. A reporter. Good thing human women can’t see the glow when we get cranked up. We’d be reading about your sparkly ass on the front page of the paper.” He shook his head and took another slug of scotch.
“I know. She wants to ask me all these questions about my line of work for some feature story. I keep putting her off.” He shook his head. “I do like her though.” He thought about arguing the semantics between glowing and sparkling, as Cohen had put it, but decided against it. His body did something that wasn’t normal to humans. So glowing, sparkling, shooting rockets out of his ass, it just didn’t matter what you called it.

Cohen nodded and narrowed his eyes. “Just remember, you have to keep some of yourself back when you finally have sex with her, and you’ll be fine. Don’t fall in love, man, or you’re through. You’ll be an old man in no time. It’s just sex. Body to body. Nothing else is involved.”

Noah nodded again, thinking how if he did turn human, he would be old in about forty or fifty years. To his kind, it was such a small sliver of time it was almost infinitesimal. To humans, it was a lifetime.

Cohen got up to leave. “I’m heading out tonight. Maybe get myself a little action, do a little walking around, see if anything strange pops up.”

Noah nodded and stood as well. “Thanks, man.”

Cohen offered his fist, and Noah bumped. “Anytime, man. Let me know how it goes.” He walked to the door, turned, and smiled. “I feel like I’m a dad getting ready to send his son off into the big, bad world to lose his virginity.”

Noah rolled his eyes, but there was truth in Cohen’s words. He looked over at Cohen, who had gone serious again.

“Don’t lose it, Noah. You’re too important in this fucking mess we were sent here to clean up. We can’t do it without you, man. We need you so we can get home as soon as possible.”

Noah watched the door close. He plopped back in the overstuffed chair and sighed. He sat for a few minutes, looking at the floor, thinking about Abby. He wished he could have stayed with her, but he knew it was impossible. He would only be able to see Abby in the daylight hours since his eyes glowed orange after dark. Unless he got himself some of Talin’s totally uncomfortable contacts that hid the glowing eyes. Maybe he would look into that.

He allowed himself a small fantasy of Abby accepting that he wasn’t wholly human and they could be together. He could spend the night with her, and maybe he
would talk to the guys about bringing her back here. He shook his head, putting a stop to that one. The idea was a lame horse that couldn’t get out of the starting gate.

He got up and went to the computer to check his e-mail. A couple of crime scene photos from his contacts back East. He didn’t see anything that warranted sending anyone out there. A couple of spam. The last e-mail was from a sheriff in Carson City, Nevada. It was a crime scene photo of a woman they’d found this morning in her apartment with her throat slashed. The cut was thin, but deadly accurate. She had been found in her bed, no obvious signs of forced entry, no fingerprints. It was as if everything in the bedroom had been wiped down.

He looked at the rest of the photos, hoping to see something that would indicate if it was worth checking out or not. The last photo was taken from the bedroom out to the living room and kitchen area. He studied it carefully, and then he saw what he was looking for: a soft glow of black ash on the cabinet in the kitchen. It was so faint, it looked like a small shadow or a slight cabinet discoloration. Any human wouldn’t see it. Only Noah and the other Warriors could see the ash the killers of his kind left behind.

He smiled, reached for his phone, his gut humming with excitement. “Hey, Hudson, what do you have planned for tomorrow?”

“Gonna try a new recipe, but that’s about it.”

“I got us a lead on one of ours. Fucker killed a woman in Carson City,” Noah said. “We’ll leave at eight. I’ll call now and get us access to the crime scene. Maybe we’ll get lucky on this one.”

He studied the photo some more, then looked again at the death photos. He shook his head, guilt washing through him. The female had been in her mid-thirties. He clicked back over to his e-mail again and scrolled through the unread messages. There were many. Perhaps if he hadn’t been so taken with Abby, he would have found something to prevent this woman’s death.

And there it was. His excitement drained, replaced by dread. An e-mail from two days ago from a sheriff in a small town called Elko, Nevada. The man had sent Noah pictures of a murder scene there. Another woman, dead, but she hadn’t been found right away. Noah studied them, and from what he could tell, the cuts were the same, and there were also traces of ash.
“Motherfucker,” he whispered under his breath.

He had missed an opportunity to gather more information on the Colonist who liked to slash throats in a neat way all because he had been so caught up in Abby, and another woman had lost her life because of it.

He closed his eyes and put his head in his hands. He thought about everything for a long time, and then the warrior in him won out. He needed to focus; he simply couldn’t afford the distractions of Abby. He had lost many lives, but never because he had been focusing on something else. This time, his lack of concentration had caused a death, and maybe even more.

His phone rang, and he picked it up and looked at the small screen. It was Abby. He shut his eyes and thought about her soft skin, her beautiful taste, her smile that lit him up from the inside. It was too much. He needed to step away from her. Hell, he needed to run like hell so she didn’t distract him from the work he needed to do.

“Hey, Abby,” he said.

“Hi,” she said, her voice a warm wave that rolled over him.

He took a deep breath. He hated himself and his life more than ever. “Abby, I can’t see you tomorrow.”

There was a beat of silence. “Oh. Okay. Maybe—“

He cut her off. “Abby, it’s a really bad time for me. Work wise. I-I just don’t think we can see each other again. Not for a while, anyway. I-I really need to focus.”

There was a long silence on the other end, and he shut his eyes.

“Okay, Noah. I’ll just talk to you when I talk to you.”

The line went dead.

His heart hurt at her icy tone, and he totally understood why she was upset. After what they had shared that afternoon, he could see her thinking that things would be going somewhere.

But they simply couldn’t.

He needed to focus all of his concentration on finishing his job. He sighed heavily and went back to looking over the photos and all the missed e-mails on the computer screen.
Part Two
Chapter 18

Six Weeks Later

Abby stared at herself in the mirror and wondered how she had gotten talked into attending the Mayor’s Ball.

Oh, that was right. It was called trying to save her job.

Go her.

Ever since she had been told that her job was safe, she had been saddled with extra duties at work, and she had taken them on without a word. This included going to the Mayor’s Ball.

From what she’d understood, the ball consisted of the upper echelon of Reno’s businessmen and women and politicians who basically spent a few hours kissing each other’s butts, putting together business deals on the side, and trying to skid the palms of those who could help with business. Maybe a building inspection hadn’t gone as well as it should have? Slap the head of the building inspectors with a little cash and watch the report go through.

An invitation had been sent to her boss, but he couldn’t attend due to his wife having a biopsy. He called her in and told her that she was to represent the paper. She started to give reasons why she couldn’t go, but he gave her a look that said she better find a way to go. She simply couldn’t afford to lose her job right now, but she had put out her résumé in the hopes of getting hired somewhere else. Maybe it was time to move on, anyway. She had never been to the East Coast, so maybe spending some time there would be a good thing.

But first, she had to get a job.

Second, she needed to keep the one that she had.

She thought back to when she had found out her job was safe. It was exactly two days after Noah had ceremoniously dumped her.

Bastard.

That one had hurt. And it had briefly pushed her over the edge into that depression she had been fighting.

Thank God it had only been a brief tailspin, lasting about four weeks. She either
slept for hours and hours or couldn’t sleep at all. She didn’t eat and lost a few pounds. She felt overwhelmed by her job, and when she began crying at work for no reason at all, she knew it was time to get some help.

She began seeing a therapist a couple of times a week, which helped immensely. She also added some yoga to her workout schedule, and she had been able to pull herself out of it without having to go on any antidepressants. She was thankful for that because she had experienced bouts of depression before that required medication, and she hated being on the stuff. It made her feel like she was walking around in a fog and that she didn’t have a care in the world. It felt like reality was a place far, far away, and she detested the feeling.

Her first diagnosis of depression came when she was fourteen and living in the orphanage. She remembered how low she had felt, how she couldn’t sleep, and how it seemed she was either really angry or in a mess of unstoppable tears. They had put her on meds for the first time then, which helped, but after a couple of months she knew she had to beat the Big D, as she called it, by herself. She wouldn’t rely on medication if she could help it. Since then, she had experienced four other bouts of the Big D, and the most recent episode taking the tally up to five.

She only had two dates with Noah, but she had allowed herself a little fantasy of them getting together and heading down the road to the happily ever after. She had really liked him. A lot. Maybe, perhaps, even falling in love with him. He was charming in a gruff way, and he made her laugh. She had been open and honest with him in a way she never had with another person, and it made the situation that much harder.

He also made her feel special with the way he slung his arm protectively over her shoulder, the way he hung on her every word. She had never been with a man who was so attentive to what she had to say. And then there was that strange feeling of attraction, of them somehow belonging together. Her mind went back to the magnets in science class. It was a really strong pull on her side, and she had hoped on his as well.

Boy, had she been wrong on that one.

She replayed the last time she saw Noah over and over again, and talked it over with her therapist. There wasn’t anything she had done to bring on the breakup. At first she had been certain it was something she had done or said, but she finally came to the
conclusion it was something on his side. She didn’t know what it could be, but that had to be it. Their day at Tahoe had been as close to a perfect date, and she knew he was attracted to her. She could see it when he looked at her, and felt it in . . . well, felt it in him . . . when they had gotten really close on the couch. The way he kissed her, held her, and the hard length in his pants was difficult to ignore.

No, something else had happened. What that was, she didn’t know, but she was getting better at not obsessing about it. Maybe an old girlfriend re-entered the picture. Or maybe he was married, even though he had told her he wasn’t. Or maybe he had been telling the truth with the whole work excuse he laid on her. Whatever it was, she had gotten to that place where she just hoped he was happy and wished him well.

That was what she kept telling herself, anyway.

But back to her job situation. Obviously, she never got the interview with Noah, so she had scrambled to get something together to save her job. She had worked for two days on her newspaper piece and came up with something that she felt was pretty good. Well, somewhat passable at any rate. Okay, barely worth reading.

She had gone into the office to see if she would lose her job or not.

When she had arrived, she nodded at James. Besides his sniff-cough thing that made her want to shove some Benadryl down his throat, he really gave her the creeps. He wasn’t tall, maybe around five foot nine, but he was stocky and looked like he could do some damage if he put his mind to it.

His hair was a greasy black, and his features were plain. He wore off-the-rack suits from Sears and cheap shoes. All of that was fine—it wasn’t like she could afford to buy her clothes at Nordstrom’s or anything—but it was his eyes that really made her uncomfortable. They were very dark . . . okay, they were black, but they were cold. Ice cold. Sometimes when he looked at her she felt like sprinting out of the room.

He had always been nice enough to her, but never overly friendly, which was fine. She wasn’t looking to be his friend, just to coexist in the cubicle across from him for eight to ten hours a day. That was it.

That day she had been nervous. She had turned in her story and was basically hanging around the office. She couldn’t do any writing. She busied herself, trying to tidy up her desk.
“James,” her boss had yelled. She turned around to see James take a deep, nervous breath. She had guessed that their boss, Bob, had told him that his ass was on the line as well.

She hadn’t known that.

James strode into Bob’s office, and Bob closed the blinds and the door.

Uh-oh.

That couldn’t be good.

Ten minutes later, James strode out. He didn’t head back to his desk, but toward the front door. Security showed up immediately afterward as he began emptying his desk.

Abby took a deep breath to try to calm her nerves. She felt bad for the guy, she really did. But at the same time she thought that maybe she wouldn’t have to work with him any longer. That was if she had a job. For all she knew, she would be hot on his heels out the door.

“Abby!”

This was it.

She stood and smoothed her skirt. She took a deep breath and willed her feet to move, one in front of the other.

As she reached the office door, she smiled at Bob. He was in his sixties, almost bald, and short with a very large paunch belly. As she sat down, she caught a glimpse of the blue- and white-striped shirt that strained over his stomach, and she wondered how those buttons remained closed.

He looked at her for a moment, then opened a folder. As he began reading, she looked around the room. He had his degrees on the wall behind him, a couple of photos of his kids and his wife. Looked like a nice family. His large oak desk was too big for the office. His chair creaked as he sat back.

Abby crossed her legs, tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, and watched her foot bounce around in its black high-heel shoe while he looked over the file.

“So I read the piece you turned in on this unsolved murder case here in Reno,” Bob said. “Took place in 1955. You did an okay job tying it together with questions about some of the murders that have gone unsolved since.”

She smiled slightly. “Okay” didn’t sound good, but she had been desperate. She
had hauled out her collection of unsolved murders and pretty much made something up. She knew it was strange to have an obsession with murders that had not been solved, but she couldn’t help herself. It was her sick little hobby.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“Although I think it’s ridiculous to assume that these murders were committed by the same person, it is interesting to think about a copycat.”

She smiled again. She knew the whole thing was weak, but she had weaved in a lot of speculation, hoping that all the dots would connect.

He threw down the file on his desk. “Look. Here’s the deal, Abby. I need to cut some jobs in every department. It was either you or James. I just sent James on his way, so you’re keeping your job.”

She sat up a little taller and felt a big shit-eating grin trying to break through.

“Thank you, Bob,” she had said quietly, trying to calm the excitement brewing in her gut.

“You’re welcome, Abby.” He tapped the folder in front of him. “This piece is pretty weak. A lot of guessing, and the facts are tied together pretty thinly. But . . . I think you fit in better with our team.”

She couldn’t hide the shit-eating grin any longer. She had a job, even if it was a job she wasn’t very excited about. She could continue to feed Neptune, not to mention herself, and keep a roof over both their heads.

“I appreciate it, Bob,” she said.

He smiled and nodded. “Now get out of here.” She stood, and she noticed him take a gander at her legs as she stood up.

Feminism be damned, she was glad she had worn a skirt.

Her thoughts returned to the present, to the stupid Mayor’s Ball she needed to attend. The gown she had gotten at a consignment shop was a silk red strapless number. It wasn’t formfitting, but it grazed over her curves. She paired it with black onyx jewelry and black heels. She piled her hair on top of her head and let a few wisps hang around her face. She had never been good at the whole makeup thing, so she just brushed a little blush on her cheekbones and dabbed on some mascara. She figured if she went any further and tried to do anymore, she would end up looking like a member of the band Kiss.
She heard the honk outside summoning her. She stepped out, locked her door, and went down the walkway toward the cab that would take her to the ball. She figured she would need a few drinks to get herself through the evening and loosen herself up, so she decided not to drive. She also hoped she didn’t do or say anything stupid, but at this point, she really didn’t care.

The driver let out a low whistle as she got in. “Don’t you look like a princess,” he said, eyeing her in the rearview mirror. “Where would you like this chariot to take you?”

The ball was being held at the Atlanta Casino on Virginia Street. He nodded, made a note in his book, and they were off.

As she looked out into the late afternoon light, she wondered why the ball was starting so early. But she figured if it was good enough for the Hollywood A-listers to start the Grammys in the afternoon, then it was good enough for the mayor of Reno and all the guests.

The doors opened at four, and she planned to be out of there by five thirty. She figured putting in an hour and a half was enough time.

The cab pulled up to the casino, and a doorman opened the door for her. She followed the signs indicating the way to the ball.

She checked in at a table just outside the huge ballroom and noticed a lot of people staring at her. Some of the women were whispering behind their drink glasses. She ignored it all and went into the ball. She stopped and looked around to see if she knew anyone, and she felt more eyes on her. A couple of women looked at her and turned to laugh. She looked down at her dress. No wardrobe malfunctions. Everything was where it was supposed to be. She felt her insecurity take grip of her heart and a near panic set in. She looked up again and realized that everything and everyone, from the tablecloths to the balloons, were black and white. She had to be standing in front of two hundred people, most of their eyes on her.

She felt her cheeks turn the color of her dress, and she wished the floor would swallow her up, or a group of terrorists would crash the party. If they had, she would have volunteered to be their hostage, as long as they got her out of that ballroom. Another epic social fail for Abby.

No one had told her it was a black-and-white ball.
And there she stood in a blood-red dress.
Chapter 19

Noah pulled at his collar feeling like someone had tied a noose around his neck and had no qualms about tightening it. He hated ties, but he hated tuxedos even more.

Hudson drove the Escalade to the curb in front of the Atlanta Casino, and a valet attendant appeared out of nowhere. Hudson handed him the keys and made his way into the hotel, Noah right next to him.

“I hate these fucking things,” Noah said under his breath, pulling on his collar again, not sure what he hated more—the function or the clothing it required.

“I know,” Hudson said in a quiet voice. “But it’s important for you to be here. We have to stay in the good graces of the chief of police and the detectives. There will also be cops and the higher-up pencil pushers from all over northern Nevada. So quit pulling on your fucking shirt, make sure your fly is closed, and we’ll go in and be social for a couple of hours.”

Noah quit grousing and watched as Hudson signed them in. He knew the male was right. Noah could count the amount of hours he spent in his penguin suit per year on two hands. And it was important for them to be here. Their work was too important to miss a chance to socialize with the very people who provided them with the information they desperately needed.

It wasn’t just the tuxedo that had him on the south side of a bad mood. He had been cranky and irritable since the last time he hung up the phone with Abby, and he knew it. Never one for a high patience level, his tolerance for everything and everyone around him had hovered at zero. And that was on a good day. None of the Warriors wanted to spend any time with him anymore, and he was pretty much an outcast in his own home. He worked alone, ate alone, and felt sorry for himself...alone.

Not a day had gone by where he hadn’t thought of Abby, and he found himself hating his life and the reflection in the mirror a little more each day. He was having a hard time leaving his own pity party.

These were his thoughts as he went through the doors and got hit so hard he actually backed up a step. Someone had to be leaving in a hurry to be able to move a mountain like him.
He looked down at who had run into him. He felt his breath catch in his throat as he came face to face with Abby. His first thought was that she was the most beautiful thing he had seen in all his days.

Ever.

Period.

Then he noticed tears shimmered in her eyes, ready to drop to her cheeks. They looked like stars gleaming as they waited to fall.

He reached for her shoulders to steady her. “Abby?”

Her eyes met his, and a look of absolute defeat came over her face. “This really can’t get any worse, can it,” she said under her breath. It wasn’t a question, but a statement of fact.

“Abby, what’s wrong?” He looked behind her to see what had her running out the door like the place was on fire, his protective instincts flaring. He felt his muscles tighten, and his adrenaline began to flow, as he got ready to kill whatever had Abby so upset. However, he didn’t see anything but a bunch of people dressed in black and white milling around.

Then he noticed her red gown.

He guessed she was embarrassed that she arrived at a black-and-white ball in a red gown.

“Excuse me,” she said through gritted teeth and tried to get around him, which he was having no part of. He heard the tittering of women laughing and looked over Abby’s shoulder. Two women in their fifties, who had obviously been to the surgeon to try to look like they were in their thirties, were staring at Abby and laughing.

Noah felt his blood boil. “Hudson,” he said quietly, not taking his eyes off the women, “would you please escort Abby to a quiet corner so she can pull herself together? I have some business to attend to. It won’t take long, and I’ll be right behind you.”

“Of course,” Hudson said, taking Abby’s elbow. Noah heard the male quietly introducing himself as he led Abby out.

Noah put a small smile on his puss and approached the two women. They were talking quietly among themselves when they noticed his approach. He watched as they stood up a little straighter, stuck their chests out a little further, and sucked in their guts.
“Ladies,” he said, looking into their Botoxed faces. He let his eyes graze down until they fell on two sets of breasts so big and so taunt, he bet he could bounce a nickel off the silicone and it would fly at least five feet.

“Hello,” said the blonde. Her voice indicated that she was ready and willing to do whatever he wanted, husband be damned. “And who are you?”

He smiled again and met her eyes. In a quiet voice, he said, “I’m the guy who wants to tell you that you can laugh all you want at that woman in red you just chased out of here, but mark my words, ladies, you will never be, nor were you ever even close to as beautiful as she is. Inside and out. And that is before your surgery,” he allowed his eyes to travel down to the breasts again, “and after.”

Both women looked at him, dumbfounded. He doubted anyone had ever talked to them that way, and he suddenly hoped he hadn’t just insulted the wife of the chief of police.

“Have a nice evening,” he said. He then turned to go find Abby and Hudson. He found them a few minutes later. Abby was standing against the wall in an empty corridor dabbing her eyes with Hudson’s handkerchief.

She gave him a sad smile as he approached.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She nodded and then blushed. “No one told me it was a black-and-white ball,” she said, looking at the floor. “I feel so stupid.”

Noah looked her over from head to toe. He thought of the two women he had just shared his thoughts with, and they had nothing on Abby in the looks department. He knew that if she had actually stayed in there, men would be begging for her time and attention.

That red dress grazed over her curves, leaving some to the imagination but letting any poor bastard who set eyes on her wanting to see more. Christ, did he want more. He loved the long grace of her neck, and the black onyx jewelry blazed against her pale skin. The thing he loved the most was that she was totally oblivious to her own beauty and the power she held over any man who set eyes on her. If she could get past her own insecurities, she would be wreaking havoc from one end of the city to the other.

But that was one thing—out of a list of many—he liked about her. She didn’t
realize her beauty, and he also loved watching her blush when she thought she had said something wrong. He loved the way she seemed to choose her words carefully, but at the same time open up herself to him, revealing more of her inner being that he was certain not too many people were privy to. As he stared at her, he thought she was sort of like vanilla ice cream with hardened chocolate sauce over it. She tried so hard to be tough on the outside, but it didn’t take much for him to crack her and experience the wonderment underneath.

Hudson nodded. “Understandable, but you didn’t know. Besides, you look better than any of those other women in there, and believe me, I was looking.”

Noah watched his friend carefully. Hudson was always on the lookout for his next conquest, so when he said he was checking out the other women, he wasn’t lying.

“In fact, until I realized you knew Noah, I was just about to hit on you,” Hudson said with a smile.

Abby looked at him and blushed. Noah felt like he wanted to pound the guy. He was going to hit on Abby?

“I think I’m going home,” Abby said, meeting both their eyes. “I can’t go back in there.”

Hudson shook his head. “Wrong answer, Abby. Neither Noah nor I have dates. Please, join us for just a little while.”

She hesitated, then looked at Noah as if she was waiting for him to agree.

“Noah said quietly, his eyes never leaving Abby’s. “C’mon, Abby,” he said with a wink and a grin, and offered his arm.

“Oh, just for a little bit, though.” They nodded and told her that they didn’t expect to stay long either.

“I just need to say hello to a few people and meet some others who can help me in my work,” Noah said as they walked. She was between them, her hands resting on each of their arms.

“And I need a dance partner,” Hudson said. “Noah can’t dance.”

Abby laughed, and Noah could tell by the sparkle in her eye that she meant it. He patted her hand. “Okay, I’ve got to do my butt-kissing and shmoozing.” He turned and looked at Hudson, then again at Abby. “I’ll be watching you,” he said with a wink at
Abby and a glare at Hudson. He hoped Hudson got the hint that Abby was off limits.

But the fact of the matter was that he didn’t really have any domain over her, did he? He had dumped her, told her they couldn’t see each other again. She was free to see whomever she chose to, and he just hoped like hell it wasn’t Hudson.

That he simply couldn’t take.

He knew that she would be nothing more than another notch in Hudson’s headboard, a place to visit every now and then for a quickie. No, he wouldn’t, or he couldn’t, stand for that.

He still had feelings for Abby. Big feelings. In fact, they were so strong it scared him more than a little bit. It was as if his SR44 ways were coming front and center. Males of his race fell in love hard and quickly. The pain in his chest hadn’t left since he blew off Abby six weeks ago. He thought about her multiple times a day, every day. There hadn’t been a no-thought Abby day. And now here he was face to face with her, and she literally took his breath away.

He watched as Hudson led Abby to the dance floor, and he checked his watch. He went to the bar and got a scotch, figuring he better get started as they only had a couple hours of light left. He imagined there would be a lot of guns drawn if his eyes started glowing orange and Hudson’s starting glowing yellow. They definitely weren’t interested in signing up for government medical experiments. Roswell, anyone?

He scanned the crowd, looking for the ass he needed to kiss first. Might as well start with the chief of police.

He put on a smile and made his way over.
Chapter 20

Abby allowed herself to be twirled around the dance floor. Hudson was an excellent dancer, and she had to admit she was having fun. She couldn’t even remember the last time she went dancing.

After two songs, Hudson asked if she would like a drink. She nodded, and they made their way to the bar. Hudson ordered a 7 and 7, and she had a glass of white wine.

“So you work with Noah?” she said as they found a table to sit.

“I do.”

“Noah said business was pretty busy,” she said, thinking about when he had dumped her six weeks prior.

“Unfortunately, yes,” he said. He went silent for a moment, gazing out at the sea of people as if he were looking for the right words. “You know, Abby, Noah really does like you,” he said quietly. “He didn’t want to quit seeing you, and frankly, he hasn’t been the same since . . . since he did one of the stupidest things I have ever seen him do.”

He looked back at her and brushed a strand of hair off her face, tucking it behind her ear.

“Well. Um . . . I’m not certain what to say to that, Hudson. Except that I have been right where I always am, and my phone has been working just fine.”

Hudson nodded. “Noah’s not the brightest guy sometimes. I hope when he does come around and realize what a dumb cocksucker he’s being, you’ll give him another chance.” Then he took his hand in hers and gave it a small kiss. He brought it back down to the table, but didn’t let go.

“Anyway, let’s dance,” he said with a grin, bringing her to her feet.

An hour later, Noah was certain he was about to have an aneurysm. He had been keeping an eye on Hudson and Abby, and he didn’t like what he saw. None of it. In fact, when Hudson kissed her hand, Noah wanted to stab his own eyes out so that he didn’t have to watch it.

What the fuck was that asshole doing? He watched over the shoulder of one of the City Council members as Hudson twirled Abby around on the floor. Hudson’s hand kept
moving up and down Abby’s back, and the only thing Noah could think was that he wanted to break every single bone in that hand. There were some countries in the world where Hudson could have the damn thing chopped off, and Noah found himself liking that brand of justice right about now.

When Hudson gave her a little peck on the cheek, Noah’s vision went red. Red with fantasies of Hudson’s blood flowing.

“Excuse me,” he growled, and made his way toward Hudson and Abby, who were now leaving the ball.

People moved out of the way for him, which was a good thing because he wouldn’t have been able to stop even if he knocked someone over.

As he made it to the hall, he caught the sight of Abby’s red dress rounding a corner. He followed. What were they doing? If he rounded that corner ahead and saw Hudson trying to kiss her or something, he would kill him. There wouldn’t be another option because he simply wouldn’t be able to contain himself. His hands balled up into fists, ready to beat Hudson into the ground if he had one finger on Abby.

He rounded the corner that led to a little alcove to see Abby and Hudson seated on some wicker chairs.

Both looked up at him. Shock crossed Abby’s face. “Noah, what’s wrong?” she said at the same time Hudson whispered, “About time.”

Noah realized he must look like a bull with a bad attitude. He heard his heavy breathing and actually felt his nostrils flare. All he needed was a hoop through his nose and he was good to go. He ran his hand through his hair and tried to calm down.

No one said anything for a moment, and then Hudson stood. “I think I’ll be going now,” he said, keeping his eye on Noah.

“That would be very, very wise of you,” Noah said, his voice a dead calm. “Very smart, Hudson.”

“We’ve got about forty minutes before . . . it happens,” Hudson said in a low voice. “I’ll get the car and wait for you outside.”

When they were alone, Abby stood and said, “What the hell was that all about, Noah? Why do you look like you want to kill Hudson?”

“You’re mine,” he gritted out. “He shouldn’t be touching you and kissing you and
feeling your back. You belong to me.”

“No, I’m not, Noah,” she said quietly with a sad smile. “I don’t belong to anyone, especially you. You dumped me faster than you would a snapping alligator.” She took a deep breath. “You, especially, do not have a claim on me.”

She tried to get around him, but he stepped in her way. She looked up at him, her big, brown eyes boring into his with questions. His gaze went to her full lips, and the sensations he had experienced when they had first kissed were so fresh in his mind it was as if it had happened yesterday. Before he knew what he was doing, he took a step toward her.

And she took a step away from him.

He felt like an animal that had cornered its prey and was ready to pounce.

Two steps later, he had her backed up against the wall, his body pressing against hers, his mouth fully engaged on her soft lips.

He felt her struggle for a moment, but he didn’t care. She was his. And the fact of the matter—short of her kicking him in the nuts—he didn’t think he could stop. He couldn’t believe how much he had missed her taste, her smell, the way her body curved into his.

He wanted some more of that tongue action.

She finally gave in to the kiss. Her hands slowly made their way around his neck, and there . . . there was that tongue. He heard something that sounded like a low moan mixed with a growl escape his throat. He wanted to go to his knees, lift up her dress, and taste her. He felt his erection trying like hell to make its way out of his pants.

Yes, she was his.

He just needed to convince her of that.

He had been an ignorant fuck to think that he could just walk away from her. It just wasn’t going to happen. However, he didn’t know how to make it work between them without her knowing the truth about him, about what he was.

He broke the kiss, mindful that his body would start glowing shortly from the sheer pleasure of their mouths meeting. It felt like his heart would beat right out of his chest, and his breath sawed in and out of his lungs. There just wasn’t enough oxygen in the room when Abby was around.
“I was so dumb, Abby,” he whispered as his thumb caressed her cheek. “So
dumb. Please. Let me make it up to you.”

He knew he was crowding her, and he didn’t care. He didn’t want more than aew inches separating them.

“Noah, I . . . I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything,” he whispered, hovering above her as he put his finger to her
mouth. “Don’t say anything except you will give me another chance.”

“Noah . . .”

“No, Abby,” he said, pushing his body against hers. He kissed her lips again and
felt the heat whip through him as their mouths met. Christ, he couldn’t get enough of her.
He wanted all of her.

All. Of. Her.

Abby broke the kiss this time. “Noah, listen to me,” she said as she gave his chest
a gentle push.

He backed up, but kept a hand planted on the wall on each side of her. He looked
down at her as she spoke, hanging on every word, waiting for the yes he so desperately
needed to hear.

“Noah, you . . . you hurt me,” Abby said as she looked down at her hands. She
couldn’t have done more damage to him if she had taken out a knife and stabbed him
forty-two times. The pain of her statement lanced through his body, ripping at his soul.
When she looked back up at him, her eyes were shimmering with tears. One dropped and
slowly made its way down her cheek, falling toward the ground. He caught another tear
in his hand as it left her jaw.

“Let me make it up to you, Abby. I was a dumb cocksucker. Please, Abby.”

A sad smile crossed her face as another tear fell. “That’s what Hudson said.”

Noah was confused. What business did Hudson have in this conversation?

“What?”

“Hudson said you could be a dumb cocksucker,” she said and giggled.

Her smile and her laughter was the best thing Noah had seen or heard in six
weeks. He smiled.

He knew he was running out of time. His eyes were about to start glowing. He
needed to get out of there, and fast. He would have to figure out the details on how all this was going to work at a later time.

He nodded. “I have to go now, Abby, but I’m going to be at your front door at 7:00 a.m. We’re going to start over.” He paused. “If you’ll let me.”

She searched his face, her own radiating indecision. After a moment, she nodded. “We’ll need to talk tomorrow, Noah. About . . .” she waved her hand in the small space between the two of them, “about us.”

Noah nodded. “Let us drive you home, Abby.” He knew they would be cutting it really close. Like if they hit too many red lights, she would see their eyes glowing. He didn’t want to leave her though.

She nodded again. He stood back from the wall and buttoned his coat to hopefully hide what was going on in his pants. He put his big arm around Abby’s shoulder, holding her close to his body, and they made their way to the valet.
Chapter 21

The drive to Abby’s had been quiet. Noah had sat in the backseat with her, his arm around her, his fingers tracing around the soft skin of her shoulder. He kept his eyes on the clock from behind his sunglasses, and hoped like hell they would make it to her house before he and Hudson lit up.

They dropped her off, and Noah had whispered a reminder in her ear that he would be at her door at seven in the morning. She nodded and slid out of the car. They waited until she was inside and saw the lights in her apartment come on. Noah moved to the front seat.

“That’s not a very safe place for her to be living,” Hudson murmured as if he were talking to himself. Noah grunted in agreement, noting the large picture window and the fact that she lived on the first floor.

They took off into the night, traveling down Interstate 80. When they were out in the middle of nowhere, Noah said, “Pull over.”

“What?”

“Pull the fuck over. Now. Or do I need to say it in easier words for you to understand?”

Hudson found an area off the highway and stopped the car. Noah got out and began walking.

Hudson followed. “What the hell’s going on, Noah?”

Noah turned around and charged toward Hudson. He hauled back and hit Hudson square in the face, sending the male back a few steps, which probably wasn’t too smart. Both he and Hudson were highly trained killers, and things were about to get really ugly. Noah imagined they would both need to visit the healer of the group, Cohen, when they returned to the silo.

Hudson was stunned, but just for a moment. He put the palm of his hand to his jaw while eyeing Noah, and gave it a push.

“You want to explain that?” Hudson asked, his voice a deadly calm.

Noah stared at Hudson, whose eyes were shining a bright yellow. He figured they were far enough off the highway that no one in a passing car would see them.
“Fine,” Hudson said when Noah remained quiet. He turned and gave a roundhouse kick to Noah’s sternum, sending him backward, almost planting him on his ass.

Noah recovered quickly and lunged for Hudson, taking him to the ground between two huge sagebrush plants. They rolled around, fists flying, grunts and cursing the symphony to their fight. Twenty minutes later, they lay spent, side-by-side in the dirt and sagebrush.

“So,” Hudson breathed, “what the fuck was that?”

Noah looked up at the stars, wondering if anyone was looking down at him. There were so many species in the universe, it was a definitely possibility. If not another species, then Google had probably caught the fight. He had visions of them being an Internet sensation. Two assholes—with their eyes glowing—rolling around in the desert, beating the shit out of each other.

Perfect.

“She’s mine,” Noah said, breathing hard. “You pissed me off the way you were touching her, kissing her hand and her cheek.” He went silent for a moment. “Don’t even think about making a move on her, Hudson, because if you do, I will kill you. And I’m not threatening.”

Hudson looked at him, then broke out in gut-wrenching laughter, holding his side. He must have done some damage to one of Hudson’s ribs. Maybe he got lucky and broke one. But it was obvious that Hudson had apparently lost his mind.

“Jesus, Noah,” he said when he finally caught his breath. “I thought I was going to have to take her down to the floor and dry hump her before you broke in. Really. It took you long enough.” He continued laughing in spite of the pain.

“What took me long enough?”

Hudson went quiet and looked up at the stars. “Noah, you have been miserable for the past six weeks, not to mention a pain in the ass to live with. When you saw Abby tonight, you weren’t miserable. You smiled for the first time in weeks, you dumbass. I don’t have to be a genius to see what she does for you. I figured if I was a big enough asshole—did some hand-holding, a couple of innocent kisses and shit—you would realize what a mistake you had made.” He sat up. “I think you broke my rib, you fucker.”
Noah sat up next to him, silent for a time. Hudson would pull something like that because he knew that Noah would respond to actions, not words. “Well, it worked.” He looked back up at the night sky. “I don’t know how it’s going to work though, Hudson. I don’t know. I can’t let her know what I am. And I sure as shit can’t lose my SR44 form.”

Hudson stood and held out his hand to Noah, who took it and actually appreciated the help, as his knee was out of whack and he didn’t know if it could support his full weight.

“Does it matter?” Hudson said quietly. “Does any of it matter?”

Noah stared at his friend, unsure of what he meant.

“We’re stuck here, Noah. We aren’t going home, man. You know it. I know it. Some of the others still have hope, but we’re never going to finish this mission. You’ve been so focused on it, and you’ve missed out on so much. Maybe it’s time to enjoy yourself a little. The Colonists aren’t going anywhere, and neither are their offspring.” He crossed his arms over his chest and looked at the ground.

“Our time is long, but it will come to an end. We could get run over by a semi, or killed by a Colonist. One of the other Warriors could fucking lose it and kill us all tomorrow. These crazy governments here on Earth could launch bombs and turn us to dust within seconds. Do you really want to go out knowing that you didn’t love, that you didn’t have the pleasure of love?”

Noah looked at the yellow eyes staring at him, dumbfounded by Hudson’s words. He had never heard the male talk with such honesty and frankness. He had never known that Hudson had those ideas and feelings.

Hudson shrugged his shoulders. “Noah, if you felt love and pleasure, and you turned fully human and began to age, guess what? The Colonists are still going to be here. Their offspring are still going to be here, and they will and are having offspring. It’s a never-ending cycle that we can’t stop, man. We let the evil loose on this planet, and no matter how hard we hunt them down, they will produce more evil. If not this generation then the next. So turning human, aging, and enjoying yourself after two hundred and eleven years of nothing but business with someone you love? I say go for it.”

Noah still didn’t know what to say. They were silent for a moment and just looked at each other.
“Let’s go home, my friend,” Hudson said quietly, putting his hand on Noah’s shoulder.

“I think my knee’s busted,” Noah said as he limped back to the car.

“Well,” Hudson said, “the way my fucking rib feels, I hope you got a rattlesnake up your pants gnawing on your balls as well.”
Chapter 22

Abby was back to feeling like a teenage girl, and frankly, she hated it. She felt her heart grow wings, flutter in her chest, and begin to breathe on hope. She didn’t want to hope. Her relationship, if you could call it that, with Noah had lasted exactly two days the last time. Two days. Who was to say that on day three he wouldn’t bail on her again?

As she paced her apartment, she thought of everything that had happened tonight and cursed her boss for not mentioning the ball was a black-and-white affair. What a dumbass. How could he forget that? And she showed up in a red gown. She had looked like cranberry juice spilled on a white couch.

Hudson had been an interesting distraction. Between trips to the bar and the dance floor, he had questioned her relentlessly about her life. He was even worse than Noah with the need for information. She had noticed how he kept one eye on Noah, and when he was certain Noah was watching, he would kiss her hand, or plant a small kiss on her cheek. None of it had been sexual; it had been as if she were with a family member or something. He was caring, kind, and interested in her, but not in a way that would indicate a sexual interest.

Now Noah, on the other hand, made his intentions very clear. She had almost dropped to her knees with that kiss and the way his body pressed up against hers, trapping her against the wall. She could still smell him. He was raw, overbearing power.

She found the differences in Hudson and Noah interesting. Hudson was sleek sex. She imagined some people might think of a Porsche or Ferrari if she were to say “sleek sex.” He was shiny, put together, and expensive. Noah was not. Noah was raw power. If she stuck to the car analogy, she thought of a big four-by-four pickup. Or maybe a tank. He was driven, hard, and didn’t have many bells and whistles. What you saw was what you got. And she found that terribly sexy.

As she paced her apartment, she noticed Neptune staring out the big picture window. She couldn’t see out of it because of the lights on in her apartment and the darkness outside, but apparently he had found something that caught his interest. She watched him for a moment, thinking how easily cats were amused. All of a sudden, he let out a growl, arched his back, and hissed. He then jumped off the windowsill and took off
for his hiding place, the hall closet.

It scared the hell out of her, and she ran to close the curtains, locking out whatever was out there. Since the curtains were just filmy white pieces of nothing, it didn’t do any good. She tried to get a grip, because she was certain that her heart would beat itself right out the front of her chest. She noticed that her front door wasn’t locked, then ran over and threw the deadbolt in place.

As she stood in the middle of her apartment, listening for anything out of the ordinary, she berated herself for letting Neptune scare her. It had probably been a loose dog that had gotten too close to the building. Having said that, the hairs on the back of her neck were still tingling, her whole body primed with fear. She took some deep breaths and tried to calm herself. She knew she was totally overreacting and chided herself about it. She went straight to her bedroom that only had a small window. She would read a little bit before bed and hopefully be able to quell her uneasiness with a good book.
Chapter 23

The Colonist watched as she paced back and forth in her apartment. He had been watching her for weeks now, ever since she had stolen from him. She had taken something he needed, something that he wanted, and she would pay for it. He was simply waiting for the right time to collect what she owed.

Which was her life.

You didn’t fuck around with a Colonist. Not that she had any idea what a Colonist was, but that was beside the point.

He had never liked her to begin with. She always thought she was better than him, looking down at him as if he were a piece of trash. He couldn’t wait to watch the fear in her eyes when he came to collect.

He probably would have killed her tonight if it wasn’t for that damn cat. She usually wasn’t too careful with the doors, and he could have slipped right in. But he wanted to kill her during the day.

He had been in her apartment while she was at work, just looking around. He had gone through some of her papers, looked in her closet, gone through her drawers. He even drank one of her sodas. He liked to know the people he killed. He liked to watch the horror on their faces as he revealed the most intimate details of their lives. The last victim, the woman in Carson City, Nevada, had told him that he had to be Satan himself when he spewed the balance of her savings account.

No, he wasn’t Satan. Some would say he was much worse.

Of course, there were similarities. He had nothing but evil running through his veins. He wasn’t above torturing or causing extreme pain. He had hate in his heart, and he only felt totally alive when he killed. He didn’t know Satan personally, but he guessed if he were to ever meet the guy they would be great friends.

The difference between him and Satan was that humans could keep Satan away by leading good, decent, lives or through religion and prayer.

They couldn’t, however, keep him away. No matter how good, how decent, how pure a person was he could get to them. He could get to anyone he chose, and that was his power. He relished tracking his prey, the weeks leading up to the kill when he got to
know his victims, and then the kill itself was the most amazing feeling he had ever experienced.

He had killed on his own planet once, and he had been killing on this planet for two hundred and eleven years, killing a total of one hundred and forty-seven people. The sheer pleasure from it never failed to surprise him.

This kill would be different, though. Usually he picked his victims at random. He would just be walking down the street, see a face, and the urge to kill exploded in him. He would then begin watching that person and learning their lives, as well as the lives of their neighbors. For instance, he knew that this kill should take place in the middle of the day around lunchtime. None of her fellow apartment dwellers in the building were home during that time, but she usually came home for lunch. It would be a wonderful afternoon with her.

She had stolen something that he wanted, something that he needed, and she would pay.

As he watched the lights go out in the apartment, he sighed. Yes, she would learn her lesson soon enough. *You don’t take from him, and you don’t mess with a Colonist.*
Chapter 24

Abby woke to a buzzing noise. She thought maybe she had forgotten to turn off her alarm clock for her Saturday sleep-in, but the buzzing continued even when she slammed on the sleep button.

She realized it was coming from her front door. She decided to ignore it, and then remembered that Noah had called late last night and said he would be at her front door at 9:00 a.m. She looked at the clock: 9:05 a.m. Shit!

She flew out of bed and grabbed her orange robe. Neptune was right behind her as she ran for the door. She pushed the buzzer to let the front door to the vestibule open, then opened her door.

Noah came in carrying coffee and a bag of something, a worried look plastered on his face.

“I was getting ready to bust down some doors when you didn’t answer for . . .” he checked his watch, “three minutes.” He looked her over from head to toe.

“I’m sorry,” she said groggily. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

He nodded, and she stepped back to let him in. “Why didn’t you sleep well?”

She smiled. “Just a visit from the boogeyman from my imagination.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Are you certain? There wasn’t anything wrong? I’m probably being a little overprotective here, but I see a lot of bad stuff in my line of work.”

She thought back to last night and how silly it all seemed now. She had been frightened because of her cat, and then her imagination had taken over. It felt like she was being watched, and she had heard every creak and groan of the old house.

“Certain. Just an overactive imagination.”

He handed her a cup of coffee and told her he brought bagels and cream cheese from a mom-and-pop place that made everything, including the cream cheese, from scratch. Neptune greeted him with meows and purrs, winding himself in-between Noah’s legs as if he were greeting a long-lost friend who he had missed terribly.

They sat down at the table to eat. Abby realized that she had skipped dinner the previous night and inhaled two bagels. They were beyond delicious.

A huge clapping of thunder made Abby jump and sent Neptune for the hall closet.
“I didn’t know we’re expecting rain,” she said.
Noah nodded. “Weatherman said it was going to be crappy weather all day. Perfect day for staying inside and doing nothing.”

Abby thought about that. A whole day. Alone. With Noah. Whatever would they do? She felt a blush creep across her face as she thought of the options.

“Do you like Rambo?” Noah asked. “There’s a marathon on today. Thought maybe we could catch some of it.”
Abby smiled. She did indeed like Rambo. She loved all the action movies from the eighties. Rambo, Die Hard, Rocky, Indiana Jones.

Another clap of thunder came from above, and the rain began to fall quietly, but quickly whipped against the window.

“Sounds perfect,” she said.

Noah was thrilled when Abby said she was good with watching movies all day because he was exhausted.

After getting back to the silo, both he and Hudson had needed to visit Cohen. Cohen had the ability to heal others of his race quickly and painlessly by using his energy to travel into a body and mend wounds.

Cohen had asked how they both ended up being hurt, and neither Noah nor Hudson had offered up any information.

After his healing session, Noah took a shower. He thought a lot about what Hudson had said. He got it, and what Hudson said made a lot of sense; however, he just couldn’t see himself saying fuck it and letting his SR44 form go. Duty, honor, and revenge had driven him for a long time, and it wasn’t something that he could, or would, just give up overnight. Maybe the name for it was pride. He felt like if he gave up his SR44 form, the Colonists won. Game over. His time on Earth would be short, and theirs would continue to be long. He was too proud to be defeated.

When he had gotten out of the shower, exhaustion overcame him, and he wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed. But as often was the case, what he wanted didn’t amount to a pile of shit.

His phone rang. Cursing, he answered. It was the sheriff from a small town called
Lovelock, which was about an hour northeast of Fernley. Noah had never talked to the man, but the sheriff told him he was friends with a detective in Carson City, and the detective had given the sheriff Noah’s number because he thought Noah would be interested in what they found.

Of course, it wasn’t anything nice, like a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. They had found a body. A woman, her throat slit.

“My buddy in Carson said that you might be interested because it’s quite . . . well, it’s very tidy. Not any other stabbing, just a slice across the throat.”

Noah cursed again and wondered if his vocabulary would soon be limited to only the choice words. It sounded as if their Colonist number seven had claimed another victim.

“The crime scene is already cleaned up, but if you want to come and take a look at it in the morning, I can meet you there.”

Noah had looked at the clock next to the bed that called his name, begging him to slip between the silk sheets and let it comfort him. 11:00 p.m. Between the fight with Hudson and the healing, the night had pretty much been eaten up. He had closed his eyes and cringed when he told Abby he would be late. But the crime scene could be a lead to the Colonist, and he couldn’t let a lead slip by.

He had told the sheriff that he would very much appreciate access to the crime scene in the morning, and said he would be there just after dawn. And would the man mind sending over the pictures of the crime scene? After the sheriff assured him it wouldn’t be a problem, Noah hung up and dialed Hudson.

“You’re coming with me to Lovelock in the morning,” he had growled into the phone.

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Are you taking me out to the desert to bury my body?”

“No, it’s tempting, but I already have one dead body to deal with. Sounds like our Colonist did the dirty deed.”

Hudson sighed. “How very exciting for us,” he’d said, not sounding excited at all.

“Agreed. See you right after dawn.”
They had driven to Lovelock in silence.

He looked over at Hudson, who was dressed in a gray silk suit with a black shirt opened at the collar. He had a thick silver chain around his neck, and his thick, black hair was pulled back into its standard ponytail down to the middle of his shoulder blades. On anyone else, the whole get-up would have screamed *pimp*, but on Hudson it was nothing but class.

Noah looked down at the jeans he had pulled out of the dirty clothes hamper, his black-and-red *Affliction* shirt, and his black leather boots and jacket. He ran a hand through his hair. Sometimes he wished he had some class like Hudson, but other times he couldn’t imagine the work that went into dressing like that. It had taken him all of ten seconds to decide what to wear this morning. He only had one condition—it had to be somewhat clean. When your wardrobe consisted of nothing but jeans, T-shirts, and boots, getting dressed was painless and efficient. Beyond that, it was too much time to invest.

They had met the sheriff at the crime scene and did a quick look-around. Handshakes were exchanged, war stories told, promises to keep in touch were given, and the sheriff left. Noah and Hudson split up and looked around the neighborhood, trying to get a clue on where their guy had come from or gone to.

Noah walked the sidewalk slowly. In the past, they had found the black ash on plants where the killer had accidentally brushed across them, and sometimes they had found footprints. The footprints were actually how they had found their good buddy Jack the Ripper. That asshole had been careless, certain he would be able to outsmart humans and the Six Saviors. Saddam Hussein was the same. That guy left the black stuff with every step he took. The Six Saviors had been surprised that humans couldn’t see it because it was so thick. However, it was also the stuff that led them to his hiding place. The Colonist seemed to produce it just before and after killing, which put them in their heightened state. And everyone knew Saddam had killed a lot.

His cell phone went off. “Tell me something good,” Noah had said, still walking and scanning sidewalk.

“I found partial footprints that end at a curb. I’d bet your left nut he got into a car here and took off. I’m looking at a security camera right now outside the building. If Talin can get into the feed . . .” Hudson had trailed off.
“Why aren’t you betting your left nut?”
“I don’t bet my nuts. Always someone else’s.”
Messed up, but smart. Good to know your bases were covered if you were wrong.
“Is Talin still at the silo?”
“Don’t know, Noah.”
“All right. Call him. Give him the address, and if he’s out somewhere, tell him to get his ass back to the silo and get on that feed.”
“Got it.”
Noah had gotten back to the silo at exactly 8:00 a.m., which was just enough time to drop Hudson off and make his way to Reno for the revised 9:00 a.m. meeting time he had promised when he called Abby. He remembered her hesitancy when he had called last night, and he remembered his desperation as he tried to convince her that yes, he would be there, just a couple of hours later.

So yeah, back to this morning. Coffee was a must. Bagels were a luxury he wasn’t going to do without.

When Abby said she was tired and happy to lounge on the couch all day, he doubted there was a happier male in the universe. He felt like he had just a little more energy than a dead man.

They had ordered pizza for lunch and done nothing but talk, laugh, and watch Rambo movies. Noah had snuck in a kiss or two. He thought of the way she tasted and wanted to get back between her legs. He could honestly drive her to orgasm for hours, and he couldn’t imagine anything that would make him happier than doing just that. He figured that making that move wasn’t conclusive with the whole give-me-another-chance-to-be-a-good-boy-and-not-an-asshole-thing he was trying to work on.

Halfway through the second Rambo movie, his eyelids grew heavy, ready to descend. He pulled off the blanket from the back of the couch and lay down, taking Abby with him. Spooning her from behind, and loved the way her body fit with his. He wrapped his big arm around her waist and nestled his nose in her hair. He listened to her soft sigh and decided it conveyed contentment. The pitter-patter of the rain outside along with the low hum of the TV lulled him even further. He didn’t have time to fight it. Sleep rolled up on him like a tornado and sucked him down like a Hoover.
He woke in the late afternoon, Abby sleeping next to him, still curled into his body. He and Abby were definitely not of the party crowd today.

He sat up on his elbow and watched her sleep. Her lips were slightly parted, her skin glowing in the late afternoon light filtering through the large picture window. He marveled at her beauty once again and silently laughed at her shirt that had revealed itself when her robe opened. It said, “I was abducted by aliens, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.”

If only she had a clue.

He kissed her exposed neck and she stirred.

“Wake up, beautiful,” he said quietly.

She groaned, flipped to her back, and turned her head into him, resting it on his chest, but she didn’t wake.

“Abby, if you keep sleeping, you’ll be up all night again.”

Her eyes fluttered open, and a desire hit his spine that nearly buckled his brain to incoherency.

He bent down and kissed her, and she responded by kissing him back. Then her hand crept slowly, tentatively, around his neck.

He loved kissing Abby. He loved her taste, the way her mouth moved, and . . . ah, yes . . . there was that tongue. He brought his hand to her cheek and ran it through her hair.

He wanted to devour her. Literally start at the top of her head and taste every inch of her. He longed to feel the taste of her breasts, her stomach, even her toes. But he felt the vibration in his body as he kissed her. He didn’t know if he was glowing or not, but he couldn’t let his SR44 form go. As pictures of the crime scene in Lovelock swam through his brain, his resolve hardened. He knew deep within him that Abby wasn’t just a body he wanted to know. After his beat-down on Hudson, he had realized that he did indeed have strong feelings for Abby. Feeling he shouldn’t have for her, feelings he couldn’t have for her.

He closed his eyes and held her close. He wanted to scream at the sheer torture of the two halves that warred within him. He liked being with Abby. He liked the way he felt when he was with her.
Yet, his warrior side couldn’t allow him to give in to the feeling. He had too much to do on this planet. Whether he went home or not was irrelevant.

But he felt such a peace, such a pleasure being with her.

There had to be a way to make it work with her. Had to be. A way that he could hold a small part of himself back so they could be together, and he could continue to hold on to his SR44 form.

He idly wondered again what Abby would think if she knew she had a being from another planet wrapped around her.

He looked out through the filmy curtains: he would have about an hour before his eyes began to glow. Frustration boiled within him, and the old self-hatred started to rage.

He clamped down on it and held Abby tighter.

“I like your shirt,” he whispered in her ear.

She looked down as if she were uncertain what shirt he was talking about. Then she laughed softly, but didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Do you think there are . . . others out there?”

Noah felt his heart stop for a second and reminded himself that she didn’t know what he was. He cleared his throat. Did he say yes and risk her thinking him a whack-job? Did he say no and negate his own race and all the other species he knew for a fact lived in this vast universe?

No, negative on both. He did what he did best. He answered her question with one of his own. “What do you think, Abby?”

She was silent for a few minutes, as if she was having her own internal debate on how to answer the question without sounding like she was two steps away from crazy. He remained quiet.

“Well,” she began hesitantly, “I think it would be very vain, very . . . ignorant, to think that us humans were the only ones in this universe.”

A smile crept to his lips that threatened to turn into a full shit-eating grin. He was glad she was facing away from him.

“I agree,” he said into her hair. “I agree.”

They lay in silence, watching the images of Rambo flicker on the TV. Apparently, Abby had put it on mute before falling asleep.
Noah watched the sun make its way down the sky at far too fast a pace for his liking.

When he knew he had about fifteen minutes before the glow in his eyes began, he started to get up.

“No,” Abby said, grabbing his hand and holding it to her waist. “Don’t leave yet.”

And the war raged on within him. Stay? You betcha. Just lie down, snuggle in close, and the hell with everything and everyone. Abby was all that mattered. When his eyes started glowing, he would tell her what he was, where he was from, what he was doing here. She would smile, say she was happy she had met someone from another species, and life would be puppy kisses and chocolate.


“Gotta go, baby,” he said while disengaging himself from her grasp.

When he was hovering above her on the couch, he met her big, brown eyes. She took his breath away, and he couldn’t move. At that point, he was lost. He would do just about anything Abby asked of him.

Her hair was a tangled mess, her under eyes slightly bruised from being tired and doing a lot of nothing all day long. Her robe was now fully open, revealing her nightshirt. He noticed the way it rode up to the top of her thighs.

She put her hands on each side of his face and gently pulled him down on top of her.

As he let his weight settle and his lips meet hers, he was pretty certain there wasn’t a better way to spend his time than being with Abby. He loved the feeling of her under him, and when her hands went to his back, then traced up his spine, his cock took on a whole new meaning of hard. When her hands went under his shirt and her skin met his, he knew he was in trouble. Big trouble. Time to disentangle and get moving, no matter how difficult. Honestly, he wondered if he had ever done anything more difficult in his life. He briefly thought of the boy in the ranch house in Texas. The decision not to kill the evil spawn had been difficult, but as far as “stuff-that’s-hard-to-do,” that had nothing on getting up and leaving Abby.

“Abby, I need to go,” he said, as he lifted himself off her. “As much as it fucking
kills me, I need to go.”

He stood up and planted his feet on the floor. He glanced outside and guessed he had just under ten minutes before his eyes turned. Wasn’t he just as accurate as the world time clock.

“Is there someone else?” she asked quietly.

Noah turned to her, surprised by her question simply because there had literally been no other for two hundred and twelve years. She was sitting up on the couch, her brown eyes imploring him for the truth.

“Of course not,” he said, confused.

“Then why do you leave at night?”

_Because my fucking eyes light up like someone stuck a blowtorch up my ass. Because I’m not from Earth. Because I know that if I stayed here with you, I would love nothing more than to make love to you, to explore every inch of your body, over and over again. To kiss your nipples, your lips, your neck. To run my hand down your naked hip to your thigh. To hear you call my name as you orgasm again and again. If I did that, I would become fully human and not be able to complete the mission I was sent here to do. I would lose the only thing I have left—my pride. I don’t have a home, I’m not among my own people, and I’m failing at my mission. I can’t allow myself to fail because I have my pride._

He went to the couch, got down on his knees, and took her hands. “Abby, I don’t want to leave, but I need to. I swear to you on my life that it’s just work stuff. There hasn’t been anyone but you in . . . a long time. It’s all you, honey.”

She searched his face, and he hoped he was conveying the honesty he meant. God knew he was telling the truth, but not why he needed to leave. He was terribly aware of the minutes ticking away, like Big Ben was knocking around in his brain.

After a moment, she nodded. “Okay,” she said, and she ran her hand over his cheek. “All I ask is for your honesty.”

He felt guilt wash through him, but did his best to hide it. “Always, Abby,” he whispered. He kissed her briefly, stood up, and reminded her to lock her door after he left.
Chapter 25

The Colonist watched as one of the Six Saviors left his next victim’s house. Well, one of his next victims. He had nothing to do but wander the streets and pick victims now that Abby had wronged him. He had three victims in the hopper right now that he was studying and observing. He was, as the police would say, escalating.

He wondered if dear Abby knew she was messing around with another being. Not just another body, but a being. He doubted it. He had always thought of her as stupid.

He watched the Warrior leave her house from the shadow of a tree across the street.

When he first noticed the Warrior a few hours ago through the big picture window with the sheer curtains, he had second thoughts on whether or not he should pursue her. But after mulling it over for a bit, he came to the conclusion that this kill could most likely be the most satisfying of his whole time here on Earth. He had watched them on the couch kissing and feeling each other’s bodies. He felt sick to his stomach watching them, but then decided that maybe he was missing something about Abby. He had never thought of her as attractive, but he decided he would do a little kissing and feeling before he killed her. He wanted to see what this Warrior got out of it, and what he was supposedly missing.

As he stood by the tree across the street watching her through the big picture window, he wanted nothing more than to kill her now. He would have to be patient, though. All of her neighbors were home. He would have to hunker down and wait until she came home from work for lunch like his original plan called for. She would be the only one home, and he could spend some time with her.

No, he couldn’t wait to see what was so special about all the kissing and feeling of Abby.
Chapter 26

After Noah left, Abby paced her apartment. Again. Why did he cause her to pace so much? Maybe because there were a few unanswered questions. When she was away from him, there were more than a few of those.

Like why she didn’t see him at night.

Why he didn’t talk about himself, but always steered the questions back to her. She went to the small kitchen and pulled out a bottle of Chardonnay, popped the cork, and poured herself a big glass.

She flopped back down on the couch, curled up under the blanket they’d shared earlier, and closed her eyes despite the rest she had gotten in the afternoon.

Noah was a puzzle.

She just couldn’t get past the way he dazzled her, blinding her when they were together, but left her eyesight clearer when she was alone, wondering who he was. She had remembered that feeling from their brief time six weeks ago. What did she really know about him? She knew he lived in Fernley, and that he was some type of murder investigator-profiler. She knew nothing about his family, where he was born, his past.

But when they were together, it seemed that none of it mattered because of the feeling she got when she was with him. As strange as it sounded, she felt like she was home. Like they were one in the same.

She barely remembered having a home when her mother was alive, but she did remember the feeling. It was a feeling a safety and belonging. Of being comfortable of who you were when you were there. A feeling of contentment. A certainty that she was okay, and Noah felt she was okay as well.

She took a long pull from her glass and stared at the floor, thinking about the first time she had met Noah, and how she had been so certain that she knew him from somewhere, but simply couldn’t place him.

She felt something coming up from her subconscious. Her heart began to pound, and she felt like her breathing had stopped. She did know him, and she finally knew from where.

She flew from the couch and ran to her room. She pulled out her box of unsolved
murder files.

Shifting through them quickly, she finally found it. At the bottom of the box, she saw her mother’s murder file. She had slapped a couple hundred bucks down for a copy, but somehow the cop ended up giving her the original. She lifted it out with shaky hands. She hadn’t looked at the file in a long time.

She opened the yellowing folder and scanned the reports. She had been through this file a thousand times, maybe more.

Her mother had been found in the kitchen, her throat slit. It was as if everything in the room had been wiped down. There weren’t any fingerprints anywhere—not on the knobs of the kitchen cabinets, the old Formica counters, or any of the doors or windows. There hadn’t been any signs of forced entry, so the police had looked at everyone her mother knew, which was a lot of people. Her mother had loved everyone she met, loved to laugh and was very popular, but she had only dated every now and then.

She looked at the crime scene photos and felt her heart trying to make an escape out of her chest. She was certain she was about to discover something big. She skipped over the close-up pictures of her mother, but studied the other pictures of the murder scene. Her eyes wandered to the outside focal point of the pictures, looking at the people and things that made up the background. She scanned the faces of the people inside the house. She didn’t know what she was looking for, but she continued to scrutinize everything.

The second-to-last photo was taken from the doorway to the house looking outside to the street. Again, she looked at the peripheral of the picture. Her heart skipped a beat, and she gasped. There stood Noah talking to one of the police officers. She was certain of it. He dressed a little differently, but it was a different time, a different era. The eighties weren’t kind to anyone. But there wasn’t mistaking his huge frame and dark hair. He didn’t look a day older than he did now. But that was impossible—that would put him at . . . what? If he was thirty, or thereabouts, and her mother had died when she was just shy of ten, which was about twenty years ago, that would put him at fifty today. There was no way that man was fifty. Simply no way.

She set the picture down and stared at the wall, trying to come up with an explanation. Could it be his father? Maybe an uncle? Older brother? She picked up the
photo again, making sure her eyes weren’t playing tricks on her.

    No, she was certain of what she was seeing.

    She threw down the picture, got up off the bed, and took another long swig of wine, her hand shaking. Thinking about Noah, her mother, and the feeling of being home had finally dislodged the answer of where she knew him.

    Yes, she had questions about Noah, but now she was determined to get some answers. There had to be a reasonable explanation of why he was at her mother’s murder scene twenty years ago, not looking a day older than he did today. Maybe it was something simple, like he had a really good plastic surgeon or something.

    She found her cell phone in the kitchen and dialed his number. When he answered, she asked if he could stop by sometime tomorrow afternoon. They agreed on 4:00 p.m.

    Abby stood in the middle of her kitchen staring at the phone. She took another gulp of wine. A large clap of thunder boomed, and lightning lit up the night sky. She jumped and looked out the window. Lightning flashed again, and she swore she saw a man standing by a tree across the street looking at her. Fear iced her heart, and she froze in the kitchen, staring out the big picture window, but not seeing anything.

    Another boom of thunder, and the power went out. Neptune began hissing out the window, then growling. Another clap of lightning, but this time she didn’t see anyone outside staring back at her.

    She let out a long, slow breath as she tried to calm her nerves and downed the rest of her wine. Her feet were finally able to move, so she took a couple of steps and found the kitchen counter. She set her glass down and felt around until she found the drawer that contained the flashlight. Praying the batteries hadn’t gone bad, she flicked it on and swung the beam around her living room. She hurried to the front door to make sure it was locked.

    The hairs on the back of her neck were standing up, and goose bumps ran up her arms. For the first time since she had moved in, she wished she had thicker curtains on the huge window. Actually, she wished she could just slap a big piece of plywood over the thing. She had never felt uneasy with the big window before, but the past couple of nights she really wished she lived in a place where she didn’t feel so exposed.
She made her way to the bedroom and crawled under the sheets. After a while Neptune joined her.

She thought of the man she saw standing outside. Or maybe she hadn’t seen a man at all. Maybe it was a trick with the lightning and shadows.

The storm finally died down, and she listened to the rain hit the street outside. She had a feeling she was in for another long night.
Chapter 27

Noah whistled as he drove to Abby’s place. He and Hudson had just come from a meeting in Carson City with the sheriff about the murder over there. After comparing the photographs from that murder with the ones from the murder in Lovelock, Noah was pretty certain it was the same killer. And he was certain it was a Colonist because of the ash footprint they had found. It bothered him that the murders were so close together time-wise, and he feared that the Colonist was escalating. This was good and bad. It was good because they had a better chance to get him simply because he would make mistakes. It was bad because more people would lose their lives.

He pushed that all into the back of his mind. He didn’t want to think about death. He wanted to think about wrapping his arms around Abby, feeling her soft curves, and kissing and touching her soft skin. He couldn’t wait to get his hands on her.

He had given a lot of thought the previous night to just how far he could physically go with Abby. He felt he could hold his SR44 form within him. Well, he was going to do everything in his power to make sure that happened. He would just take it slow.

Baby steps.

He pulled up to the house and jumped out of the Escalade. “I’ll call you when I’m ready for a pick-up,” he said to Hudson.

“No worries. I’m sure I’ll find something to do.” Noah had a feeling that something meant one of the many women Hudson kept in touch with.

He walked up the sidewalk thinking about baby steps. Yeah, he didn’t have to jump her bones and totally lose his SR44 form. If she let him, he would go a little further each time and see how much his body could take.

He pushed the button and the door to the vestibule opened. Abby was there to greet him. Her hair was down around her shoulders, and she wore a long, flowing skirt with a silky blue tank top. She smiled at him tentatively.

“Come here, you,” he growled. He had her in his arms within seconds.

He felt her hesitancy, but then she snaked her arms around his neck and pressed her body against his. He backed her up against the counter, then gently lifted her up so
she was sitting on it. She spread her legs and wrapped them around his waist, and he
ground his erection into her core. God, he loved how she felt, how she smelled, how she
tasted.

He couldn’t believe how Abby cranked him up. There was nothing but fire, lust,
and desire sweeping through his veins. All that mattered was getting as close to Abby as
he possibly could.

He pulled out the silk shirt from her skirt and let his hands travel up her bare skin
until he reached the softness of her bra. Gently, his thumb glided over her nipple, and he
felt it peak and harden. He loved the little moan that came from her throat.

Her hands moved under his T-shirt, and goose bumps formed on his skin as she
touched him. He wanted to be skin to skin with her, to feel her soft breasts against his
hard chest.

He lifted the hem of her tank top and slid it over her head, finding the clasp to her
bra and flicking it open with ease. He would have ripped the damn thing in half if the
clasp had given him trouble. He then quickly took off his shirt, breaking the kiss for just a
second while he slipped it over his head.


The urgency within him to have all of her almost overwhelmed him. He knew it
was his SR44 tendencies coming out. Once a male of their race had the urge to mate, or
join with another, it was difficult for them to stop. Thankfully, females were the same
way.

He found the hem of her dress and let his hands slowly travel up her calf, over her
knee, grazing over her thigh, to her hip. Jesus, her legs were a contradiction—long and
strong, yet soft and feminine.

He wanted her naked.

Now.

He wanted to be inside of her.

Now.

So much for baby steps.

Abby was the one who pulled back, both of them breathing heavily. When she
opened her eyes, he saw shock cross her face.
“Oh my God,” she whispered, backing away from him.
“What’s wrong? Did I do something?”
“Noah, you’re . . . you’re glowing!”
Chapter 28

At that point, Abby wasn’t sure who moved faster. Noah stepped away from her with a string of expletives, turning his back to her.

She held her shirt up to her bare chest and jumped off the counter, still staring at the subtle orange glow that radiated from his skin. She recalled the time all those weeks ago where she thought she had seen him glowing, but had chalked it up to the sun reflecting off her orange robe.

Wow.

When he had arrived, she had planned to confront him immediately with the photo from her mother’s murder file. But then he had practically tackled her, overwhelmed her, and well, she simply got caught up in the moment and became more concerned with getting as close to him as possible and letting the rest of the world fade away.

Now his skin was shimmering a light orange glow. As she stared at him, she felt stunned. Oddly enough, she wasn’t afraid of him, but supposed that would be a good reaction to have. No, instead she was insanely curious. The man before her not only shimmered a light orange, but he had been at her mother’s murder scene twenty years ago.

She had the feeling she was about to find out something terribly important. She felt like she was on the precipice of a rabbit hole, and when she jumped and found the end, which would be the answers she desperately needed to hear from Noah, her life would never be the same again.

She slid on her shirt while Noah kept his back to her and planted his hands on the kitchen table. She stayed silent as she watched the shimmer on his skin fade, then disappear.

“Noah?” she said quietly.

No answer.

“Noah, you have to talk to me.”

Still no answer.

She approached him slowly and laid her hand on his bicep. He looked at her hand,
then into her eyes.

“Noah, it’s only fair that I know the truth.”

“You’re not afraid of me,” he said quietly.


“No. I have a lot of questions, and not just about . . . the glow.”

“What else?”

Abby drew in a deep breath and opened the file on the small kitchen table in front of them. He pulled out a chair and sat down.

“What’s this?” he said, looking at the pictures.

“I was wondering if you knew anything about this case,” she said, watching him flip through the yellowing papers and pictures.

“Well, obviously a female, throat slashed,” he said noncommittally, his eyes meeting hers. “I don’t know any specifics about it though.”

“So you don’t know anything about this case?”

She felt him hesitate, and she couldn’t help but feel she was about to pull the guillotine on an unsuspecting rabbit. She was trapping him.

“No, Abby,” he said quietly, meeting her eyes.

She stared at him for a moment, then nodded. She didn’t know whether to be upset at his blatant lie or afraid of the truth.

“Abby, what’s going on?”

Abby calmly took the file and rifled through the papers. She threw a picture on the table in front of him. “Then why don’t you explain why you were at my mother’s crime scene?”
Chapter 29

Noah looked at the photo in front of him. So, so, very, very busted. There wasn’t any denying the man in the photograph was him, even with the horrible mullet haircut. He put his head in his hands and closed his eyes. Short of killing her, which he wasn’t about to do, he didn’t see a way out of this. His mind swarmed, trying to come up with a lie that was plausible. All he could think of was how quickly the day had spiraled down the pisser.

Mother. Fucker.

“That’s my mother,” Abby said quietly. “I need to know what’s going on. Why were you there? Why haven’t you aged a day?”

Her mother.

Well, well. He never saw this one coming. Kind of like being blindsided by a Chevy. Or maybe a tank. Here he was standing in front of the ten-year-old girl he had felt so bad for all those years ago. How was that for a good smack of fate?

He remembered the case. Distinctly. The woman had left behind a ten-year-old girl. He knew the murderer had been one of his kind, a Colonist, and now that he was looking at it, the throat slash actually matched the women in Carson City and Lovelock. He made a mental note of the year of this case so that he could cross-reference it to the others. It looked like Colonist number seven had been a very busy boy for quite a long time.

He remembered seeing the traces of ash that didn’t appear in the photograph in front of him, but had been at the murder scene. He had been in the Sacramento area when the murder occurred, and he raced over when the detective in charge called him.

He stood up and began pacing the small kitchen. “Do you really want to know the truth, Abby?”

“Yes,” she said after a moment of silence. He could tell she was having her own internal war of whether she really did want to know, or if things were best left unsaid.

He stopped in front of her, nodded, and met her eyes. “What I’m going to tell you will sound crazy. When I’m finished, you can kick me out and we can never see each other again, but you can’t ever say a word to anyone. Do you understand?”
She looked up at him, and he could see her trying to make a decision on whether she could keep that promise.

“Abby,” he said, grabbing her hands, “please. It’s so much bigger than me. I need your word. It’s crucial that you never breathe even a hint of it to anyone. It could mean your life.”

He had visions of her talking about the whole situation to the wrong person and her ending up in the funny farm, or worse, in the hands of some government that would not relent until they squeezed every last drop of blood, or information, out of her. Whichever came first.

She nodded. “I promise,” she murmured. “Please tell me what’s happening. Please help me understand.”

Noah sighed and turned to grab his shirt off the kitchen counter. He couldn’t believe he was going to tell her what he was, but he didn’t see a way around it. He did, however, make a mental note to beat the ever-loving shit out of Hudson and Cohen when he got home. He distinctly remembered both of them saying humans couldn’t see the glow. Lying motherfu—

He had to tell her the truth, because nothing else could explain his sparkly ass, or the picture, and frankly, he was at a loss of words to make up a lie.

He turned to Abby and leaned against the sink. He crossed his arms over his chest and met her eyes.

And then he started talking.
Chapter 30

Twenty minutes later, Abby found herself plopped down on a chair at the kitchen table, the truth more wild than she could have imagined. She found herself slightly afraid, excited, unsure.

She looked at Noah, who was still leaning against the sink, her eyes traveling from the waves of his brown hair, down to his wide chest, his narrow waist, down his long legs to the tips of his leather boots. So this was what an alien looked like.

Huh.

So much for the whole E.T. image of Hollywood.

He met her gaze. She knew from the hard lines and stress on his face that he was telling the truth. There wasn’t any reason for him to lie to her. There was also pain on his face, as if he were hoping she would accept him the way he was, but expecting that she wouldn’t.

She looked around the kitchen, wondering if she could get up. Would her knees work? She gave it a shot, almost surprised that her legs functioned well enough to carry her to the cupboard to get some red wine. For some reason, she was certain this occasion called for red. Noah reached up to the cupboard beside him and pulled a glass down. She took both the bottle and the glass to the table and sat back down. She poured and stared at the blood-red liquid before she took a long drink.

The fact of the matter was that there was a little voice in her head telling her she should probably be more frightened, but she wasn’t. Instead, she was completely and totally overwhelmed. In twenty minutes, her life had been tossed upside down, and she needed time to absorb what he had told her. She felt like she was in a snow globe and someone had just shaken it. Hard. She needed time to see where everything would land.

She had questions, but her mind was swimming and she couldn’t put the words together. She needed to be alone. She needed him gone so she could sort through all of it and try to bring it into her own reality.

“Noah, I think you need to leave,” she said quietly. “My brain feels like it’s going to explode.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him physically flinch as though she had just
whipped him.

She stared at the linoleum as he made a call on his cell phone.

“Hey, Hudson. Ready.” He didn’t wait for a reply, just ended the call. “I’ll wait outside,” he said quietly.

She nodded and felt the tears roll down her cheeks as she heard her door click shut.

She sat at the kitchen table, reflecting on everything that had happened.

One thing that had driven her toward journalism was an unrelenting need for the truth. She had always compared her mother’s murder to other unsolved cases, and she was always surprised at the lack of evidence in her mother’s case. Something hadn’t seemed right. There simply wasn’t a clue or lead to be found anywhere. With the other unsolved cases she had looked into, there had been something—a hair, some fiber, a print, a footprint. With her mother, it was as if a ghost had made its way into the house and killed her.

Now she understood why.

It hadn’t been a ghost, but another species all together. An evil that Noah said was here to hunt and kill.

As crazy as it sounded, it made sense.

The other thing that brought her relief was knowing that the people who inhabited Earth were not alone in this great space of the universe. She had never believed that they were, and she did believe in all of the sightings that were documented and recorded. Now she had proof, and he just walked out her front door.

She trusted Noah explicitly. If he had wanted to hurt her, he already had ample opportunity. She wasn’t afraid of him, but she also wondered where that left her.

She had allowed herself the little fantasy of the happily ever after with that man.

Alien.

Whatever.

And it didn’t seem that far-fetched, but now, from what he had told her, it seemed close to impossible. He would never truly be hers. He could never love her. He had told her that, not in so many words, but he had made it clear that his mind needed to stay focused on his work.
If things were to go any further with them, it would not be a relationship, but sex. Period.

She thought about what they had done sexually. There had been the kisses, the caresses, the mind-blowing orgasms he had given her weeks ago on her couch. An alien, a being from another planet, had given her those time-bending orgasms that no human man had ever been able to achieve with her.

Score one for the aliens.

However, he couldn’t give any part of himself to her. But she knew she needed more than that. As ridiculous as it sounded, she had fallen in love with Noah in the short time they had been together. She wanted all of him, not just great sex every now and then. She couldn’t go on with the relationship knowing that she was the only one who had any emotional involvement in it, and that his end was simply physical.

Take away a point on the alien, and she was left again with a big fat zero.

She took another slug of wine, recalling the conversation.

“So you glow when you kiss me because it gives you pleasure. That glow is your . . . your SR44 form radiating out of your body, and if you experience too much pleasure, it will leave you and you will be fully human and begin aging. But you don’t want to do that because then you will have failed your mission here on Earth of eradicating the criminals from your planet.”

He had nodded. “Yes. They’re called the Colonists. I can’t allow it to happen, Abby. I was sent here for a purpose along with the others, and I can’t let them down.”

“Others?” she asked incredulously. “Others? How many others?”

He sighed, closed his eyes, and rubbed the bridge of his nose, as if he were upset with himself for telling her too much. When he’d finally met her eyes again, he said, “There are six of us. We were sent to eradicate the Colonists. We didn’t know they would take on human forms, and we didn’t know they would begin mating with humans. We need to finish killing the original twelve, then check on their offspring. If their offspring are also criminals, we need to get rid of them too. We have six more Colonists to go before we start on their offspring.”

Wow.

If what he said was true, and why wouldn’t it be, there were aliens walking
around the Earth in human form, killing people?

Abby went to the couch and turned on the TV. She flipped through the channels until she found a *Rocky* movie. Which one, she wasn’t sure. She didn’t even know how many had been made. She did know that they were good for shutting down, tuning out, and forgetting about life for a while. Neptune jumped on the couch and curled up on her lap.

Through the filmy curtains of the big window, she saw a car pull up in front of her apartment, then drive away quickly.

She felt a tear roll down her cheek because she had a feeling she had said goodbye to Noah forever.
Chapter 31

Noah had Hudson drive home. Hudson had arrived a few minutes after Noah called, and Noah made it very clear that he wasn’t up for any type of conversation. He didn’t care about any topics, whether it be the weather, the latest celebrity gossip, or a new discovery at the bottom of the ocean. He didn’t want to hear a word. Especially from Hudson, the lying son of a . . .

He was really trying to avoid another fight with Hudson out in the desert.

He thought about his conversation with Abby.

Yeah, that had hurt. He didn’t blame her though. He had looked into her large brown eyes and a feeling crept through him that he would never see her again. He felt a fissure in his soul. He had been alone for so long, and he finally met someone who he wanted to be with, but they couldn’t be together.

There wasn’t a question; it was just a fact.

There were too many outside factors. First, they were from different planets. Screw all that men are from Mars, women are from Venus crap.

This was literal.

Second, he could never care for her the way he wanted to. His job, the eradication of the mistakes of his people, was too important. He needed to be around for a long time to erase the Colonists. He could never give himself over to what he felt for her now, let alone what he could feel for her in the future with more time.

He remembered the pain in her eyes, and he wondered if his were mirroring what he felt. He closed his eyes, memorizing every freckle, every curve of her face, every wave of her hair.

As they sped down the highway, Noah made plans for when he got home that involved a bottle of Lagavulin he had been saving for six years. He didn’t want to talk to anyone. He wanted to be alone. He was afraid he would kill someone. Literally.

As they pulled into the parking area of the silo, Noah bolted from the car before it came to a halt. He punched the code to get in, then pounded down the stairs. He heard Hudson behind him. The male had been smart and kept his trap shut, as well as physical distance between them. Noah had so much pain ripping through his body he felt like
fighting. He wanted to kill something. He hoped none of the other males in the house would get in his way. He knew if he killed one of them, he would be physically hurt, probably mortally, and then he would feel bad about killing one of his fellow Warriors. That was a whole lot of no winning on everyone’s side.

He didn’t bother with the elevator, but headed for the stairs. As he flew down the nine flights, he wondered again why he had chosen to live on the bottom fucking floor.

He threw open the door to his room and slammed it shut. He plopped down on the edge of his bed and put his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands, his breath sawing in and out of his lungs. Self-hatred bathed his very soul. Hatred for what he was, what he never could be. He could never be a proper mate to Abby. His duty always came first. Even if there was a chance in hell that she would accept him for what he was, he could never fully give himself over to her. He had to complete what he was sent to do. His duty forced it; his honor demanded it.

“Fuck.”

He felt his eyes stinging as if they had dirt in them. He wiped his eyes with his fingers and they came back wet. Okay, there wasn’t sand in his eyes, so what was this? Was he . . . crying?

He let out a long litany of curses and went to his closet. Where was that damn bottle? He didn’t see it, and began unloading his closet. He knew the shittin’ thing was in there somewhere.

His phone rang, and he took it out of his pocket, hope rising in his chest. He saw that it was Cohen.

“Fuck off,” he said as he threw the phone across the room, shattering it. He realized the error of his ways as he watched the thing smash into what seemed like a million pieces as it hit the wall. Now Abby would never be able to get ahold of him. Not that he expected her to, but hope sprang eternal and all that.

He could get a new phone from Talin. He turned back to the closet and found the bottle wrapped up in a sleeping bag. He had obviously been worried about thievery among the other males he lived with.

He cracked it and took a swig. The shit burned.

Burned good.
He went to the phone at his bedside and dialed Cohen’s number.

“Why are you calling on the house phone?”

Noah cursed. “I need a new phone.”

“Sure, my man. I’ll get one from Talin and bring it down in a minute. Just so you know, I’m bringing Jovan for backup. Hudson informed me you were ready to kill something. Jovan’s still got his gun strapped to his chest from his trip to Cali, and he’ll shoot you if you get out of hand.”

Noah didn’t think Cohen was particularly funny, but he did admire the male’s smarts. “All right. I promise not to lay a hand on you. Bring me a phone, asshole.”

They arrived a few minutes later. Jovan looked tired. Exhausted. If Noah didn’t know better, he would guess the male had been partying for six weeks instead of hunting a Colonist. He was big, just like all of them, standing right around six foot five, give or take a couple of inches, and hovering in the two-fifty, two-seventy-five range. His blonde hair hung limply to his jawline. Noah realized it must have gone dark outside, as Jovan’s eyes burned a bright emerald green. He was dressed in camo pants, a black tank top, and boots, and Cohen hadn’t been kidding—the male still had his gun strapped to his chest.

Noah assumed he looked as bad as he felt. Wrecked. He was fucking wrecked. He stood in the middle of the room with the bottle. He knew his shirt was wrinkled, his hair was a mess, and his feet were bare. He really didn’t care.

He took another swig.

“Anything in Sacramento?” he asked Jovan.

The male looked at Noah, a little surprise flaring in his eyes, and shook his head.

Noah nodded, thinking he must look really bad. Worse than he thought. He focused on Cohen, really wanting to kill him.

He needed to clear the air with the male. “Why did you lie to me?”

Cohen looked up. “Excuse me?”

“Why the fuck did you lie to me? Why did you tell me that human females can’t see our SR44 forms?”

Cohen looked confused. Honestly confused. “I didn’t lie. They can’t.”

“Bullshit. I had a female call me on it today!” Noah bellowed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jovan putting his hand on the gun.
Shock crossed Cohen’s face. “Impossible,” he whispered. “That can’t happen, Noah. Think about it. Humans can’t see the ash the Colonists leave. I’ve been with plenty of human women, and none have ever told me I’m glowing. Same with Hudson. No one had ever called him on going jaundice. All of us have been with human women. Not one has ever said anything."

Noah lost some of his bluster. Not just from the fact that Jovan had a hand on his gun, but because he could tell that Cohen was telling the truth.

“It happened to me today,” Noah said, and fell into the big gray chair. Silence filled the room. Noah wasn’t sure what surprised them more—the fact that he had actually been with a human female, or that she had seen his SR44 form.

“Tell us what happened, Noah,” Jovan finally said, as he came over and sat down in the chair across from Noah.

Noah took a deep breath and told the whole story. About being busted on the photo. The glow. Being kicked out of the female’s house.

“She shouldn’t be allowed to live, Noah,” Jovan said. “She now knows of our existence. It’s unacceptable. It’s dangerous to us.”

“That’s not up for discussion, Jovan,” Noah said in a deadly, quiet voice. “If that woman even gets a scratch on her, I will rain the fires of Hell down on everyone who lives here.”

Jovan’s eyes flared in surprise, but he nodded. “Apparently, some things have changed around here in the past few weeks since I’ve been gone,” he murmured.

“We at least need to find out how she can see your SR44 form, Noah,” Cohen said quietly. “There’s a possibility that she may not even be human. Maybe she’s one of the Colonists who has taken on a human female form and is out to kill you. Did you think of that?”

Noah opened his mouth to argue, then shut it. He didn’t have an argument. He had never been with a human woman before, so he didn’t know if the feel of her skin, the smell of her hair, or her wonderful taste was normal or not. He did think of their time together, and she had had ample opportunity to cap his ass. She had never shown any type of aggression toward him whatsoever. She had been kind in her ways, loving in her touch.
“I don’t know about that. I don’t think she wants me dead. She’s had plenty of time and situations to make that happen,” Noah said quietly. He took another sip of his bottle. “But, I will explore the possibility that she’s not human. I’ll go there. Hell, we’re here, the vampires have been around for forever and a day, and who knows what else may come out of the woodwork. Maybe she’s some new species or something. So, yeah, I’ll go there.”

Cohen and Jovan nodded. “We should talk to her as soon as possible,” Cohen said.

“All you going to share that shit or what?” Jovan asked. Noah handed him the bottle, and Jovan took a hit.

Noah took a deep breath, resigned. He needed to visit the lovely Abby tomorrow. “Okay. We’ll go and see her tomorrow. Jovan, you look like shit and like you haven’t slept in a week. Or maybe a few weeks. Cohen, you and Hudson are going with me to talk to her.”

Cohen’s eyebrows made a run for his forehead. “Me? Hudson?”

Noah nodded, a small smile played over his face. “Yep. She met Hudson and liked him. He’s my wingman. You . . . you’re not her type. She likes the good-looking ones.”
Chapter 32

They never made it to Abby’s the next day. Noah called her over and over, and she never picked up. Worry raged through him, and Cohen wasn’t any help.

“We should just go see her,” Cohen said.

“No. When I left, she was freaked out, and I don’t want to make it worse showing up with you and Hudson. I don’t want to scare her more.”

Cohen sighed. “She could be putting together a wonderful exposé on the aliens who have come to visit as we speak, Noah. This shit needs to get cleared up!”

Noah ignored him.

The coroner had given them the approximate time of death, and they gathered and watched the video feed Talin had hooked on his computer for four hours in the War Room on a huge screen that hung from the ceiling. They saw cars and people come and go. It was mind-numbing work. They stopped every hour, all of them stretching, Noah checking his cell phone for the forty millionth time, hoping for a call from Abby.

Cohen and Rayner headed outside to toss around a football while Hudson went upstairs to get something to eat. Talin fooled around on the computer, and Jovan stayed seated, his big arms across his chest.

A half hour later, they were back at it.

They watched every grainy frame, looking for any indication that they were seeing their guy. Hudson had taken a picture of where he found the ashy footprint, and all they needed to do was wait for a male to put his foot there. A couple came close, and they froze the frame and did some measurements, disqualifying them.

This went on all day. They watched, they stopped, they extrapolated, they measured, they argued, and then moved on.

All of them were restless and irritated. None of them, except Talin, did well sitting for long periods of time, and even Talin beginning to get edgy.

When they had hit the end of the fourth hour of feed, they all cursed violently. None of them wanted to go back and do a repeat.

“Just to pummel my brain a little more with boredom, let’s watch the next hour,” Noah growled. Maybe the coroner had been off on his timing. It wouldn’t be the first
time, and it most certainly wouldn’t be the last.

Fifteen minutes in, a small black car pulled to the curb. The hairs on Noah’s neck began to jitterbug, and he knew this was it.

“Get a make on the car,” he said to no one in particular. There wasn’t a front plate.

All of them went dead still. They all felt it too. They watched as a male emerged from the car and stepped onto the sidewalk, took a look around, and then he began walking as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

He was back twenty minutes later with the same slow, nowhere-to-go gait that he had left with.

“C’mon, you cocksucker,” Talin said under his breath, sitting forward in his chair. They were all waiting for the male to put his foot where they needed it to go to identify him as one of theirs.

And then he did.

“Yes!” Rayner hissed, standing and spiking the football to the ground.

Talin froze the frame and they all stared. “Gentleman, meet Colonist Number Seven,” he said.

“It would be too easy if we could get a license plate,” Hudson said.

“Let’s see if Lady Luck is on our side this evening,” Talin said. He hit play again, and they watched the car drive away, no license plate showing.

“Well, at least we have a face,” Hudson said, as they all took in the very ordinary, non-descript face. The eyes looked dark, as well as the hair. It was a white male, but judging his height was difficult due to the camera angle. All turned to look at Noah. It must have gone dark outside because he was met with bright blue eyes of Talin, the yellow of Hudson, the violet of Cohen, the green of Jovan, and the red eyes of Rayner.

“Yes, we do,” he said. “Yes, we do. Talin, do a B&E on the online mug shots from the Carson City Sheriff’s office. Run your face-recognition program on it.”

Talin nodded.

“Cohen, Hudson, I need you to stay here and help Talin when I go to Reno. Rayner and Jovan are with me tomorrow. We have some business to take care of there.”

Jovan and Rayner nodded agreement.
“Anyone up for some pool?” Hudson asked. There were yeses all around, and they made their way upstairs.

Someone put on some AC/DC and cranked it. Someone else put a beer in everyone’s hand. They drew straws to see what the teams would be. As they laughed and talked smack, Noah worried about Abby. He figured she probably didn’t want anything to do with him. He just hoped like hell she was safe. He thought about that big window in her living room, the weak lock on her door, and her being on the first floor of the building. A knot formed in his gut. He vowed he would see her tomorrow with his own eyes to make sure she was okay. And if she didn’t want anything to do with him, he promised himself he would check up on her every now and then until . . . well, until forever.
Chapter 33

Abby felt bad for not answering her phone all day yesterday. She really did. She had lost count of how many times Noah had called. She just didn’t have anything to say to him, the being not from this planet. She was having trouble processing everything he had told her and she wasn’t ready to speak to him.

She came out of the mind-numbing work meeting and went to her desk. She checked her cell phone. Noah had tried to call again. Three times. She checked her watch and decided she would head home for lunch. She hadn’t been able to go home yesterday due to a doctor’s appointment, but today, to save a few bucks, she would go home and slather some peanut butter on some bread and call it nutritious. Once there, she would call Noah.

Just as Abby arrived at her apartment, she parked her car and called Noah. He answered immediately. “Abby?”

She had to smile in spite of herself. “Hi, Noah.”

“I’ve been trying to get ahold of you,” he said quietly.

She got out of the car and headed up the walk to her apartment, her heels clicking on the cement. “I’m very aware of that, Noah. But I’m . . . I’m just having trouble with everything you told me. I guess my brain isn’t processing it all that well, and I just need some time.”

There was silence as she put her key into the vestibule door.

“Look, Abby, I’m sorry about all of it, I really am. But you have to understand—“ Abby gasped as she looked at the door to her apartment. It was slightly ajar, but there wasn’t any sign of forced entry. In her haste to get to work this morning had she forgotten to shut it all the way?

“What’s wrong, Abby?” Noah said in a low tone.

“Nothing. It just looks like I didn’t get the door to my apartment shut all the way this morning.”

Noah was silent for a moment. “Don’t go in there, Abby,” he said with deadly calm.

“Noah, don’t be silly. I was in a hurry this morning and just didn’t shut the door
all the way. Hopefully Neptune’s still around.”

She pushed the door open and took a step in.

“This is weird,” she said, coming to a stop just inside the door.

“What?” Noah growled.

“There’s this . . . it’s like a black ash on the floor.”

“Get out of there now!” Noah bellowed in the phone. “Now Abby, get out now!”

He scared her so bad she dropped her purse and turned for the vestibule door. She heard footsteps coming from down the hall, and then she saw a figure in the doorway of her bedroom out of the corner of her eye.

“Abby!” Noah yelled. “Run. Get the fuck out of there and run!” She heard him take a deep breath as she hit the walkway leading to the sidewalk.

“Go somewhere public,” he said more calmly, but hysteria still filtering through his voice. “And whatever you do, do not let go of your phone.” She made it to the sidewalk and looked at the big picture window of her apartment. And there stood a dark figure.

She watched as he made his way for the door leading outside.

Abby kicked off her heels and ran down the street, cursing herself for dropping her purse, which contained her car keys. It would have been a much easier getaway in her car. If the damn thing would have started, which was always a crapshoot.

“He’s coming after me!” she huffed into the phone, panic flowing through her freely now. Noah told her to go somewhere public. Where should she go? Her brain was frozen. She looked behind her and saw the man running down the sidewalk after her.

She brought the phone down from her ear to get her arms pumping more. The good news was that she had run track in high school and college, so she knew the drill. She hiked her skirt to get more leg movement, cursing that she had worn the damn thing.

The bad news was that she had excelled at sprints, not long distance. She was already winded, the muscles in her legs beginning to burn.

She heard yelling from the phone and brought it up to her ear. “Get this motherfucking car in high gear, Jovan! I don’t give a shit if you need to run over puppies and old people! One of ours is after Abby!”

She brought the phone down and turned the corner, taking an uphill side street
that she knew led up to the back of shopping complex that housed a J.C. Penney, a Chuck E. Cheese, a Home Depot, and other miscellaneous shops. She looked behind her—the man was closing in. She couldn’t see his face. A dark cap was pulled down to shade most of it. She noted he also had on black track pants and a black T-shirt.

“Abby, where are you?” Noah yelled.

She was certain her lungs were going to explode as her legs pumped up the hill. Her feet hurt and her legs burned. She couldn’t talk right now; she had to concentrate on where she was going to hide because she simply couldn’t keep running for much longer.

When she saw the shopping complex in front of her, she forced her legs to go faster with renewed purpose.

“Abby! Jesus, Abby! Where are you?” It wasn’t a question being yelled at her anymore, but more of a demand for an answer.

She looked behind her one more time. He continued to gain on her. She brought the phone up. “J.C. Penney. By my house.” She saw the back employee door was open. “Employees’ entrance at the back.”

She brought the phone down from her face, her cheeks wet from tears. She wasn’t sure if they were from the exertion or the fear.

In the distance, she heard the roar of an engine like whoever was driving wanted to be Mario Andretti. Either that, or a Grade-A asshole.

She prayed it was Noah.

Just as she was about to duck into the employee entrance, she heard a hiss behind her, and then she was skidding across the blacktop. It felt like she was in a slow-motion movie. Her hands hit the ground first, and she watched her phone fly from her fist as if it had suddenly developed wings. Then her knees hit, then her face. The impact burned, like someone had just set fire to her skin, and it seemed to go on for much longer than needed. She felt the weight of someone on her back, and she could only assume that it was the man. Defeat raged through her body as she finally came to a stop on the blacktop. She blinked once and saw the phone skid to the underside of a dumpster. Her hair was being ripped and her head being lifted off the ground.

Then she heard the squeal of wheels. A hiss sounded in her ear, and her head dropped down to the asphalt and bounced. She registered voices and heard footsteps
pounding by her.

“Abby? Oh, no. Fuck, no. No! Abby!” Noah’s voice rang in her head. She couldn’t move though, just kept staring at the underside of the dumpster. For some reason, she noted the thing was green. And then she wondered if her phone still worked.

She felt herself being turned over, and she focused on the face in front of her. Noah. His black eyes were glistening, his brow creased with worry. “Abby!” he yelled at her again. He wiped her face and neck, then she felt his hands go down her torso as if he were patting her down.

“You aren’t hurt,” he said excitedly. “You aren’t hurt.” She begged to differ on that, but didn’t have the strength to argue. He gathered her in his arms and held her close.

“You’re safe, honey. I’ve got you now. You’re safe.” Her body violently shook. The tears came quicker now, her lungs barely working as she gasped for breath. Then she saw blackness at the corners of her eyes and her mind got heavy. As she shook, she felt Noah’s arms around her and heard his voice. She felt the safety, the feeling of being home, like she belonged somewhere—the feeling she always felt when she was with him. The blackness moved in further, clouding her vision. She let herself succumb to it and pass out.
Chapter 34

Noah paced the plush rug in his quarters. It wasn’t going to be plush much longer if he kept up the pacing. He was wearing the thing down to the concrete underneath.

He looked over at his bed again.

Abby lay under the thick, light-brown comforter and white sheets were pulled up to her chin. She was a mess. And she had been out for over twenty-four hours. He was worried about a brain injury, but they had given her an X-ray in their own makeshift medical facility at the silo, and all had come back normal.

The side of her face was scratched up, as were her hands, arms, and knees. Okay, scratched up was being kind. They were mangled, exposing raw flesh.

The bottom of her feet looked like they had been chewed on by a rabid dog. But he supposed that was what happened when a person ran barefoot on concrete and asphalt for a good mile or so.

He had cleaned them the best he could, then slathered on the Neosporin and topped them off with some bandages.

He ran his hand through his hair and plopped down on the overstuffed chair he had moved over next to the bed. He went through the events from almost two days ago.

When Abby had said there was black ash on the floor of her apartment, it felt like his blood had frozen in his body, like his world was tilting on its axis. Fear had coiled through him, and he screamed at her to get out of there. He had never, ever in his long life experienced that feeling before, except once. It was when he returned to SR44 from his six-month training on the Colony. The bright colors, the sounds, even wonderful sounds such as laughter, were too much. All of it had overwhelmed him, and he was afraid on many different levels. First, he was terrified he would never be able to get back to leading a normal life. Second, he was afraid of waking up each morning because his life had just overloaded him and steamrolled him into a barely functioning being. For two months he couldn’t leave his home, he couldn’t be around his loved ones or his family, except for short periods of time, and he found himself more content to be in the darkness, alone, than in anyone’s company. He wanted to return to the Colony just so he could go back to the sensory deprivation he had become accustomed to. The only others who understood
were his fellow Warriors, as they had experienced the same thing. It was only after time
and a lot of baby steps that he was able to integrate himself back into society. Then, he
had literally felt his blood still in his veins when he was bombarded with too much of life,
his mind temporarily unable to work.

   Except this time, he had gone into what one might call a panic.
   Okay, he had panicked. Big time.
   He had yelled at Jovan to drive harder . . . something about running over old
people and puppies. Not that he would ever condone such a thing, but he needed to get to
Abby before that male.

   He marveled at her bravery, not to mention her track skills. She had hauled ass a
good distance in a very short period of time, but he guessed fear combined with
adrenaline in someone’s gas tank would make that possible.

   When they had pulled around the corner and seen that cocksucker on top of her,
he had gone ballistic. Rayner and Jovan took off after Abby’s attacker, and Noah had
been left to deal with Abby. The fear almost paralyzed him as he saw her laying there
bleeding. When he turned her over, her blouse had been shredded by the asphalt, and
there was blood on her neck, running down her chest. Her hands, arms, and knees were
bloody as well. There was so much blood he couldn’t tell if she had been stabbed, or
maybe something worse.

   He had tried to clear the blood from her neck, and hope flared when he didn’t feel
any cuts.

   Rayner and Jovan had lost the guy and met Noah back at the car. They had
suggested they take Abby to a hospital, which Noah shut down immediately. He
informed them she would be coming to stay at the silo. It was the safest place for her,
considering the fact that she was being hunted by a Colonist. They started to argue, but
shut up when he glared at them. They shrugged, and Jovan began driving.

   Noah had insisted that they stop at Abby’s apartment. He didn’t care about clothes
or any of that bullshit. He wanted to collect Neptune for Abby. Jovan rolled his eyes, but
went into the apartment with Noah as Rayner stayed in the car with Abby. They had
found Neptune locked in a closet, and Jovan shook his head when the feline jumped into
Noah’s arms. Jovan packed the cat food and litter box. He also took pictures of the ash
and the rest of the apartment with his phone so they could study them and have it for their files. Noah set the cat on his wide shoulder and told him to hold on. He figured that while they were there, he might as well grab some of her stuff. He took a bag from Abby’s closet and threw in some clothing. Jeans, sweats, underwear, bras, T-shirts, and a couple of sweatshirts. He went to her bathroom and gathered the bottles in the shower, then looked under the sink to see if there was anything she could possibly want or need. Not that he had any idea, but he thought he would see if anything popped out at him. Nothing did, but then he remembered her toothbrush. He rushed back out to the car with Jovan, Neptune still perched on his shoulder, a low purr rumbling from the cat’s throat.

They were in the apartment for a total of fifteen minutes. When they got in the car, Neptune became agitated, and only calmed down when he was allowed to burrow himself in-between Abby and Noah.

Noah looked over at the cat now. He sat on Abby’s chest, staring at her face as if he was willing her to wake up. Noah had tried to shoo him off her, but the cat had hissed at him and scratched his hand. The little feline was lucky he belonged to Abby because if he didn’t, Noah certainly wouldn’t tolerate such an attitude from anyone, cat or otherwise.

When they had arrived at the silo, they were met by the other Warriors, who immediately told Noah that bringing Abby there was a bad idea. Noah didn’t give a shit what they thought; she was staying. There wouldn’t be a discussion about it. He carried her down to his quarters in the elevator, and once she was situated in his bed, he went back up. Things had gotten a little heated then, with Talin getting in his face. They had gone chest-to-chest, nose-to-nose.

“You can’t fucking compromise us like this, Noah,” Talin had yelled. “We don’t know what she is! Colonist? Something else sent her to hurt us? We don’t know what she is!”

“Nothing is compromised. I take full responsibility for her while she’s here. There’s one of ours out there who wants to kill her, and I’m not letting that happen. So go fuck yourself, Talin.”

The other four had gathered around, ready to tear them apart if a fight broke out. Talin had taken a deep breath, stared into Noah’s eyes for another moment, and
backed down. “I will not fight my fellow brother-in-arms,” Talin said, taking the high road. “Even if he is being an unreasonable asshole.”

Noah rubbed his face and looked at Abby again. Shit. He owed Talin a big apology. He never should have talked to his fellow Warrior like that. Never. They joked around, called each other names, but when it came down to it, all of them held nothing but deep respect for each other. They were bonded by the ways that only warriors could be, but also bonded by their mission on Earth and the fact that at some point, most of them realized that they wouldn’t be returning to SR44. They were a family.

But that apology would have to come later.

Neptune’s bright yellow eyes met his, and then cat let out a wail that made him sound as if he were in pain.

“I feel you, my man. I want her to wake up, too.”

The cat went back to staring at Abby.

He knew there were those in the house who questioned whether Abby was even human because she had seen his SR44 glow, but also because she had been able to see the ash left behind by one of the Colonists.

That question banged around in his mind as well, but that was for another time. First, she had to heal and regain consciousness. Then she could answer questions.

At this point, Noah was certain he didn’t care what she was. She could be a cross between a vampire and an iguana for all he cared. He realized what a fool he had been, and had been for a long time. There was no denying the stark fear that raged in him when he realized there was a chance that she had almost died. And the feeling that had replaced that fear when he found out she would be okay.

He was in love with Abby. Of that, he was certain.

How everything else was going to work out, he had no idea. He had a Colonist gunning for Abby, his fellow Warriors weren’t happy with him for bringing Abby around, and he really did owe Cohen an apology.

Despite all that, if Abby would have him, he knew in his heart he would give up his SR44 form for her and lead a human life.

Yeah, right now that was really the only thing he was certain about.
Chapter 35

Abby came to consciousness slowly. She felt the familiar weight of Neptune on her chest and began to stretch. She immediately put the brakes on that idea. Pain lanced through her from the top of her head down to the soles of her feet. Literally.

What the hell had happened? She had to be at home since Neptune was sitting on her, but then it registered that she was not in her own bed. Fear licked at her gut as she tried to figure out where she was.

It all came back to her in a rush. Going to her apartment. Running from that man. Being tackled, feeling like she was being put through a meat grinder, so sure that she was going to die . . . her eyes flew open and she came face-to-face with Neptune. He let out a howl and then began purring.

Then Noah came into her vision.

“Abby,” he said quietly, a small smile on his face. He sat on the edge of the bed. “I’m glad to see you.”

She looked around the big space done in light browns and creamy whites. “Where am I?” Her voice was hoarse.

“You’re at my house, honey. Do you want some water?”

She nodded and tried to sit up, the cuts on her arms and hands making it difficult. “Let me help you,” Noah said. Neptune got off Abby’s chest and stood on the bed while Noah helped her sit up and put pillows behind her back. She gingerly relaxed into them, and Neptune curled up in her lap. She noticed that she was in one of her nightshirts. Someone had taken off her clothes and dressed her.

Noah went to a small refrigerator in the room and pulled out a bottle of water. He poured it into a stout crystal glass and brought it over.

She brought it to her lips, pain searing through the side of her face. She imagined if it hurt that badly, it probably looked worse. She tried to pet Neptune, but then looked at her bandaged hands. God, she was a mess.

The water was good, and she had more. They sat in silence.

“So, what happened?” she finally asked, her throat burning.

Noah’s brow creased in worry. “What don’t you remember?”
She told him that she remembered everything up to the point where she hit the ground and watched her cell phone skid underneath the dumpster.

Noah nodded. He told her about the chase Rayner and Jovan had given, and how the Colonist had lost them in Home Depot. He gave her the rundown on going back to her apartment, getting her things, then coming back here.

“So, this is where . . . you all live?”

He nodded.

Abby wasn’t sure what to think about all of it. She had found herself shacked up with another species. She was intrigued and a little frightened. She wasn’t afraid of Noah, but she had no idea of what to expect from the rest of them.

“Where exactly is that?”

“You’re in Fernley,” he said quietly. “In a missile silo.”

“A missile silo,” she repeated.

He nodded and told her the history of the government disarming the missile silos at the end of the Cold War, and how he had picked them up for cheap and had them totally renovated.

“So, you own more than one?” she asked incredulously.

He nodded. “I own six. They’re all over the country. As you can imagine, we can’t really stay in one place for more than ten years or so. We need to move on because we don’t age. Also, if I need to send someone to another part of the country to check something out, it’s a good, safe place for them to crash.”

Huh. For some reason, all of this seemed perfectly logical, perfectly sane to her. She wondered how hard she had hit her head.

“Abby, look. I probably shouldn’t have brought you here, but I did.” He looked around the room, then at the clock. “Here’s the thing, okay? When it gets dark, my eyes are going to change to orange. We don’t know why it happens, it’s just the way it has been since we got here.”

Okay. Missile silos. Orange eyes.

“Like when you glow?”

He looked at her and nodded. “It is our SR44 form that makes that happen.”

This she had to see.
“When will it be dark? Will anything else happen?” she asked. She hoped they all didn’t turn into flesh-eating zombies or something like that.

“About an hour. And no, nothing else happens. We just walk around here like we all have a flashlight stuck up our ass.”

She tried to smile, but her face hurt too much. “Do . . . do the others glow orange as well?”

He shook his head and explained that the color of their forms on SR44 were different, so their eyes shone a different color.

“Can I meet them?”

He took a deep breath. “You’ve already met Hudson,” he said. “I guess you can meet the rest later.”

“Hudson?” she asked incredulously. Wow. So she knew not one, but two members of another species.

And one was a hell of a dancer.

Abby carefully moved so that she was almost lying flat, her head resting on the pillows. They sat in silence for a while, neither sure what to say.

“Do you want to watch some TV?” he asked quietly.

“Sure.”

“What do you want to watch?”

“Do you have any movies?”

He pushed the buttons on the remote to movies-on-demand. They scrolled through. Die Hard was on.

“How about Die Hard?” she said. “I haven’t seen that movie in years. I remember liking it though.”

Abby watched as he gave her a very satisfied grin.
Chapter 36

As Abby watched Bruce Willis run, shoot, and talk on the phone, she tried to wrap her mind around everything and thought about a few things that needed to be addressed.

First, somehow, her being with Noah, a member of another species, inside a missile silo, which also housed other members of his species, was okay with her.

Second, she couldn’t wait to see his dark eyes change to orange. Now that was going to be weird.

Third, why did that guy want to kill her?

That was the hundred-thousand-dollar question.

She couldn’t imagine who would want to kill her. She had never done anything illegal; she had never had dealings with the mob or any shady characters like that. Was the mob even still in Reno? She didn’t know.

It had to be random, didn’t it?

As she thought about seeing the man in her window, she remembered that she couldn’t see his face, but there was something that seemed familiar about him. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but yes, she recognized something about him. Or maybe she just thought she did. She had been nothing short of terrified, and maybe she didn’t know what she saw. It was a possibility.

She felt her lids getting heavy and knew she was going to be asleep soon. She curled over onto her side.

Suddenly, she heard Noah move and she looked over. She gasped as she was bathed in a brilliant orange light. Noah quickly looked away.

“No,” she said. “Noah, don’t.”

He slowly turned his head back to her, his eyes meeting hers.

Abby stared at the glow emanating from his eyes. The light illuminating from him was warmth, softness, comfort, and caring all wrapped into one color.


He continued to look at her for a moment, then he said quietly, “No, what I see is beautiful. I see goodness, kindness, and a woman who takes my breath away. She is
beautiful beyond anything I have ever imagined.”

Abby blushed. No one had ever talked to her that way, and she had a feeling she could very well get used to it. Despite her injuries that felt like open, raw wounds, the things he said still made her heart sing.

She reached out her bandaged hand, and he took it gently in his.

“Thank you, Noah,” she said. Bruce was shooting something on the TV, and Noah hit mute with his free hand.

“For what?”

“For being there when . . . when that man . . .” She couldn’t finish the sentence, and she felt tears in her eyes.

“Oh, honey.” Noah moved to the bed and gathered her in his arms. As she cried out her fears on his T-shirt, she was comforted by the huge arms around her, the safety they gave her, and the feeling of being right where she was supposed to be.

Except he had made it clear that he could never be hers.

And that only made her cry harder.
Chapter 37

Abby had cried herself to sleep. She woke the next morning feeling better, but still sore. She rolled over and looked around.

Noah was asleep in the chair next to the bed. His head was tilted back, his mouth open. Neptune had perched himself on Noah’s shoulder and had his head tucked in by Noah’s ear. She couldn’t help but laugh. Which, of course, brought both of them awake.

Noah came to consciousness first and lifted his head, which in turn upset Neptune. The cat let Noah know he was angry with a growl, and then jumped to the bed to curl up in the pillows.

“Are you okay?” Noah asked, rolling his head, trying to get the kink out of his neck.

“I’m fine,” Abby said. “Sore, but good. I would really like to try to take a shower, and then I want to look around the silo.”

Okay. Yeah. The trying to take a shower, no problem. Although she couldn’t get the bandages wet, she could do a half shower.

Abby watched Noah heave himself out of the chair and go to the bathroom to run the shower. He then came to the side of the bed and helped her to her feet. She cringed as her mangled feet hit the floor, but waved him off when he tried to pick her up. Her footsteps were hesitant and slow, but she made it to the bathroom.

She turned to Noah and smiled. “I think I’m good.”

“Just holler if you need me.”

Twenty minutes later, Abby emerged from the bathroom feeling much better. She hadn’t quite showered, but she had managed to splash water and soap on most of her body. The water had stung the cuts, but getting clean overrode any discomfort.

As she came out of the bathroom and looked around the room, she realized she was becoming stir crazy. Claustrophobic. Whatever. Before the shower, she had wanted to get out of the room, despite its huge space, but now, she would claw her way out if she needed to.
“Can we please go somewhere?” She heard the pleading in her voice.

Noah stood in front of her and put his hand through his hair. He sighed and looked at the ground as if thinking about her request.

After a moment, he said, “Okay. Just let me get in the shower.”

Twenty minutes later they were on their way up the elevator. Abby noted Neptune had decided to join them, and he wasn’t afraid of the elevator despite never being in one. Or she thought he had never been in one. She had a feeling he had made this trip before and was happy to be doing it again.

The doors opened to a small hallway and door. Noah opened it, and they stepped into a huge living space. Abby moved at a snail’s pace as she gingerly put weight on her cut-up feet.

Because they were in a missile silo, it was circular in shape, but there was a big screen TV, a couple of cozy-looking brown leather couches, a bar, and a pool table. The room was done in dark browns and navy blues, and she fell in love with it.

As she looked around, she felt Noah’s eyes on her, as if he were expecting her to say something.

“It’s a nice place, Noah,” she said, meeting his gaze.

He smiled broadly, and she swore his chest puffed out a little bit.

“Thank you. You hungry?”

She nodded, and they stepped back in the elevator and headed up to the next floor. The elevator opened into the kitchen area, and there stood Hudson. He was dressed in black silk pants and a white silk T-shirt. Abby noticed that a gun was settled in the waistband of his pants at his lower back.

He turned his head at the sound of the elevator and stared at her. Then he smiled.

“Hello, Abby.”

“Hi.”

Hudson came over and asked how she was feeling and if there was anything he could get her. He was just making breakfast, which consisted of chocolate chip pancakes and fruit, and he had a fresh pot of coffee on.

“It all sounds wonderful,” she said, thinking that not only did he dance, but he cooked. He would be a catch for any woman.
He nodded once and turned back to his tasks.
Just then two more men came around the corner.
“Hey, Hudson. Smells fucking good. What is it?”
Abby watched as the big blond with a surfer’s haircut and wearing camouflage pants entered the room.
The other man, built the same as all of them, had a mop of dark hair and wore sweats and a plain white T-shirt. “Wait! Don’t say anything. I’m guessing pancakes. Am I right? Hell yeah, I’m right.”

Hudson turned to face them. He met each of them in the eye, then looked directly at Abby. Both men turned around slowly, and Abby noticed that Noah placed himself in front of her.
There was silence for a moment.
“Hey, Abby,” said the one with dark hair. “I’m Cohen.” He hitched his thumb at the blond. “This is Jovan.” It wasn’t a friendly greeting, just a statement of names, and Abby had the distinct impression that they were not happy to see her.
Abby nodded to both of them.
“I was just showing her around. She also needs to eat,” Noah growled at them.
There was obviously some conflict between Noah and the others, Abby thought. *Like they don’t want you here.*
“Right,” Jovan said with a slight smile.
“We’ll eat in my quarters,” Noah said.
Cohen nodded, and the two left the kitchen.
Noah took Abby’s hand and led her around the corner to complete the tour of the main living quarters. They walked past the War Room, then Abby hesitated a moment. Noah stopped as well. The War Room was glassed-in on two walls, so she could see clearly inside. There was a man with a military haircut sitting at a big, black marble table and hunched over a computer. On one wall, there was a huge screen displaying a close-up picture of another man.
“That’s Talin,” Noah said.
Noah looked at her and followed her gaze to the large screen. Abby looked puzzled as she stared at the picture.
“Noah,” she said quietly, “why do you have a picture of James up on that screen?”

“I’m sorry?” Noah said.

“Why do you have that picture of my coworker James up there? Remember I told you about him? The guy I worked with who had a serious allergy problem?”

Noah cursed violently and stood in the doorway of the War Room. Talin looked up, surprise shown in his face at the intrusion, especially by the female who shouldn’t be in the compound to begin with.

“Noah,” Talin said incredulously, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest, “what the fuck?”

Noah knew that bringing Abby to the silo was a big no-no. It went against an unspoken code of the Warriors. He knew there were some who wanted to beat the shit out of him for it and maybe kill her. But bringing her into the War Room was nothing short of sacrilege, and he probably deserved to be shot for it. But she obviously knew the guy on the screen. The same guy they had spent a full day looking for while going through grainy security feed. The same guy Talin was running a facial recognition program on while syncing to numerous galleries of police mug shots in the area.

Noah ignored Talin. “Abby, take a close look. Are you certain?”

She glanced up at the screen again. “Noah, I spent five years with nothing but a few feet between me and him for eight-to-ten hours a day. Of course I’m sure.”

Noah felt dread and elation. He knew Abby was safe here, but he couldn’t stand the thought that she had been that close for that many years to a Colonist.

“You know him?” Talin asked incredulously, standing up, pointing at the screen. “You know who this guy is?”

Abby nodded.

After a beat of silence, Noah said, “Better call a meeting, Talin. And tell Hudson to bring in some of those pancakes. I think we’re going to be here a while.”
A few steps shy of pandemonium broke out. It wasn’t pretty.

Rayner and Cohen came in with their guns in their holsters, glaring at Abby as if she had three heads, each containing a bad case of scabies. Talin didn’t meet Abby’s eyes, while Rayner glowered at her as if he were certain they had someone they couldn’t trust among them. Noah doubted that Abby was a Colonist, but for her to be able to put a name to the face of one was bad news. For her.

Hudson came in with a stack of pancakes and a bowl of fruit. Jovan was behind him with some plates, silverware, and a canter of coffee. Noah noted that Hudson now had a knife tucked into the back of his pants instead of the gun. He knew that if Hudson let that thing fly, it would end up buried between Abby’s eyes. There wasn’t anyone better than Hudson with a knife, whether it was in the kitchen chopping stuff for dinner or dealing death. He rubbed his face in frustration.

Once everyone was seated, Noah said, “First, there will be no violence.”

There was a rumble of questioning disapproval among the males as they stabbed pancakes while keeping one eye on Abby. “She’s not here to hurt anyone.”

The coffee cup that was making its way to Abby’s mouth stopped midway. Hurt anyone? Was he serious? She put the cup down on the table and looked around at the big burly men sitting around her. Hurt anyone? If anybody at the table should be frightened, it should be her. She noticed the weapons they carried, but hadn’t thought they were carrying them because of her. Just their sheer size . . . yes, she should be the one feeling threatened. She cringed thinking that they were ready to use their weapons on her. Why that was, she didn’t understand.

She was sitting here with bandages on her hands, her feet, and her face looked like chopped liver. She had on a bathrobe and a nightshirt. She couldn’t imagine anything less threatening. What was she going to do, hobble up to one of them and swear at him? She sure as hell couldn’t hit anyone with the big bandages on her hands. Right now her mouth was the only thing that worked properly, and that was just barely because of the cuts on her face.
Just then Neptune announced his arrival with a loud howl and jumped up on Talin. All the men mumbled their hellos to the cat, as Neptune purred. He quickly settled down in Talin’s lap. Talin stroked the cat’s back, and Abby had the feeling Neptune had been busy making friends while she was unconscious.

Traitor.

Abby let out a little laugh, the smile hurting her face. “Hurt you?” she asked incredulously, looking around the table. She rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. Are you guys serious?”

They were all silent, looking at her. She began to feel a little uncomfortable.

“How much do you know about us, Abby?” Talin asked calmly. He didn’t wait for an answer. “See, we have been here over two hundred years, and no human has ever found out about us. And then Noah meets you. And you and Noah start messing around, and Noah starts glowing, which you can see, but no other human woman has been able to see. Believe me, there are those at this table who have been with hundreds, if not thousands of women, and none of us has ever been busted glowing. And then you can see the ash that is left behind by the Colonists. Our dilemma, and why we feel a little threatened by you, is because humans aren’t supposed to be able see our SR44 forms, nor can they see the ash left by a Colonist. Yet, you can. And then you announce that you actually know a Colonist. So we have to wonder exactly what you are. And then there’s the nice fact that you work for a goddamned newspaper . . .” He brought his fork up to his mouth and popped in a piece of melon.

There were grunts of agreement.

She looked at all of them, stunned. “And what exactly do you think I am?” she asked.

Hudson didn’t meet her eyes. She noticed he didn’t eat either, just watched his fellow Warriors as if he were on high alert, waiting to respond to something.

“Perhaps you’re a Colonist. Perhaps you are some other being that isn’t even on our radar. We don’t know,” Talin said. He stabbed at the stack of pancakes and took two. Another being? Really? Yeah, that would be cool, but unfortunately, it wasn’t in the cards.

“Look,” she said. And they all looked at her, except for Hudson. He continued to
eye everyone at the table. “I was born in Sacramento, California. I never knew my dad. He died before I was born. My mother was murdered when I was ten. The only reason that I know about you is because I saw Noah in one of the crime scene photos from my mother’s murder file, and I called him on it. As for the glow . . .” She felt herself blush while she thought about what caused it. “I don’t know what to tell you. I saw Noah glowing. I don’t know how, and I don’t know why I can see it.” She took a deep breath and continued.

“As for me being a reporter, your secret is safe. I could have already put a piece in the paper about you, but I didn’t. And believe me, a piece about you would’ve been far more interesting than the garbage I did write.”

“Let me make something very clear,” Noah said loudly, his deep voice reverberating around the room. “I trust Abby. I trust that what she says is the truth. There’s an explanation for her ability to see things she isn’t supposed to see, and we’ll find out why that is.”

“And so do I,” Hudson said just as loud. “Abby poses no danger to us.”

She sat back in her chair and watched as they all eyed Noah and Hudson for a moment, then continued eating.

“Very well, Abby,” Talin said as he stabbed another pancake off the platter. “Whatever Noah says usually goes, and if Hudson is backing him up . . . so, welcome, I guess.”

The others grudgingly nodded.

“Now that that’s out of the way, let’s go over what we know about that cocksucker up on the screen,” Noah said. He shoveled fruit into his mouth.

Talin told him there wasn’t a hit on any of the mug shot books, but at this point it didn’t matter because they had an ID thanks to Abby. He was also going to compare the footprint they got from the security feed to the footprint that was left at Abby’s house and hopefully, if the planets were aligned right and luck was on their side, there would be a match.

“Abby, tell us what you know about James.”

Abby took a deep breath. She really didn’t know much. She hadn’t talked to James about anything outside of work, and even their work talk was short and to the
point. She didn’t know where he lived, or what he did on his own time. She did know he
loved Philly cheesesteak sandwiches and often brought them back to the office. She also
knew that James had been fired a few weeks earlier when the paper had issued a round of
pink slips.

“I’m also pretty certain that James killed your mom,” Noah said quietly. Shock
rippled through Abby’s body. She had sat next to her mother’s killer for five years? “The
cut marks are the same on your mom, as well as the other cases we’re working on.”

Abby was silent. On the heels of the shock came rage. That, however, didn’t last
too long because she didn’t have the energy to keep it fueled. Her mother was dead and
had been for a long time. Anger wasn’t going to bring her back.

There was brief talk and speculation that James was her attacker. He had the
motivation to do it.

“Why would he kill me? Because he got fired and I didn’t? Why wouldn’t he kill
our boss instead? He was the one who did the firing.”

Talin explained the psyche of a Colonist. They were highly self-absorbed and
love watching the aftermath when they killed. They wanted to see people talking about
them on TV and read about themselves in the newspaper.

“It’s really a perfect job for a Colonist,” Talin said. “He had a front-row seat to
watch the police work, and he probably even wrote articles about his own kills. He would
love that. It also gave him a chance to keep an ear to the ground and make sure no one
was closing in on him.”

The others nodded or grunted in agreement. The pancakes were flying off the
serving tray at an alarming rate. Abby couldn’t imagine their grocery bill.

“Most likely, in his mind, you took that from him. The good news is that he didn’t
get you. The bad news is that he won’t stop until he does.”

“Or he’s dead,” Hudson said mildly.

Talin nodded in agreement.

“Have you ever noticed any ash around him before?” Talin asked.

She shook her head, still trying to get over the “he’s going to be after you until
you’re dead” part. She realized that her life as she knew it, at least until James was
stopped, was over. She couldn’t go back to her old life, her job, her apartment. She felt a
knot in her throat, but swallowed it. She could think about all that, and the implications it brought, later.

“Why do the . . . Colonists? Is that what you called them?” She turned to Noah with the question, and he nodded. “Why do they leave that ash?”

Hudson wiped his mouth with a linen napkin and set it down beside his plate. “We believe the ash is left when a Colonist is in a heightened state, as they would be before, during, or immediately after they kill. We think it is similar to our glow, which only happens when we’re in a . . . heightened state.” A small grin crossed his lips, and the others around the table smirked as well.

They watched as Abby’s cheeks flushed, most likely thinking about the heightened sexual states she had enjoyed with Noah.

Everyone had finished breakfast at the point, and Abby yawned. She was sore. “You want to go lay down?” Noah asked quietly below the din of rumbling male voices that filled the room. She nodded.

As they got up from the table, Abby felt eyes on her. She turned to see the one who had introduced himself as Cohen watching her. He came over. “It looks as though you’re in some pain,” he said quietly.

She nodded. He had the same black-gray eyes as Noah. He still looked at her with wariness, and his next words surprised her. “Abby, I’m a healer of our people. I would like to try to help you.”

“No,” Noah said forcefully.

Cohen turned to Noah. “She’s obviously not fully human. Let me try to help her. If things go hinky, I’ll back off.”

Noah was shaking his head before Cohen even finished the sentence. “Noah, she can barely walk. Her face looks terrible, and she hurts everywhere. Let me try.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, you’re a healer of your people? And I thought we just cleared up that ‘I’m not fully human’ thing,”” Abby said, staring up at the two big men arguing over her as if she wasn’t even there.

Cohen broke eye contact with Noah and looked down at her. “I am a healer. On
SR44, I would help heal those who were injured or sick. I would like to try on you, with your permission, of course.”

“No. I said no.”

Abby put her hand on Noah’s arm. “I really don’t think this decision is up to you, Noah,” she said. “Cohen, please explain what you’ll do.”

He smiled. “It involves taking my SR44 energy and merging it with your own energy to speed up the healing. I’ve never done it on anyone but my own kind, but if you’re willing to try, so am I.”

“No.”

Abby looked up at Noah and glared. “Like I said, Noah. My decision.”

She would do just about anything to feel better at this point. She was already getting tired of all the literal pussy-footing around she was forced to do.

“Abby, we don’t know what will happen. It could kill you,” Noah said quietly to her, as if she were a child.

“Of course, I would monitor your body’s reaction, and stop if necessary,” Cohen said, ignoring Noah.

Abby nodded as Noah threw out another negative.

“Can I think about it, Cohen? This . . .” she waved her mummied hand around, “is a lot to take in. And now you’re telling me that you may be able to heal me?”

“Of course. Noah has my number if you decide you want to give it a try.” She nodded and watched as he walked away.

“I’m really ready to lay down,” she said.

Noah and Abby made their way back toward the elevator. It took her several minutes just to reach the kitchen.

“For God’s sake, Noah,” Hudson said with disgust and anger once they reached the kitchen, Hudson’s main domain. “Pick the female up and help her. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Noah looked down at Abby. “I’m sorry, Abby. I’m such an asshole a good portion of the time. Let me carry you.”

Abby nodded slowly, and put her arms around his neck and met his eyes. “Thank you,” she said. Their eyes locked for a brief moment, and she felt her breath catch. She
was lost in those dark, never-ending depths.

“I believe it’s me you should be thanking,” Hudson said with a smirk.

Abby tore her eyes away. “You’re right. Thank you, Hudson.”

Just then, the door to the elevator opened, and Noah stepped in holding Abby in his arms.
Chapter 39

As they entered Noah’s quarters, Abby was very quiet. He gently settled her down on the bed and watched as her eyes closed. He sat down on the gray chair beside the bed.

“Do you have any ibuprofen or something?” Abby asked quietly. Noah went to the bathroom and got some out of the cabinet. He brought it to her with a large glass of water.

She took it, drank the water down, and closed her eyes again.

A half hour later, Noah thought she was sleeping, and she startled him when she said, “I want to try to have Cohen heal me.”

“I don’t like the idea, Abby,” he said quietly.

She sighed, and he read the frustration and anger in it. He got ready for the verbal onslaught he knew was coming. She opened her eyes, and yep, she was pissed.

“Noah, this is not your decision to make. I’m in pain. If Cohen can help me, then I want him to try. He said he would monitor it all and make sure I’m fine. I hurt, Noah, so please call him.”

She closed her eyes again, making it clear that the decision had been made and there wouldn’t be any further discussion.

Noah swore under his breath as he picked up the house phone.

“Hey, Cohen . . . yeah she wants to try. But let me make this clear: if she gets hurt, I won’t hesitate to put a bullet in you.”

Fifteen minutes later, Cohen showed up. He pulled around the big overstuffed gray chair that Noah had been sleeping in and sat down.

Cohen explained that he would close his eyes and go quiet for a moment, and she would probably feel some tingling or maybe a slight burn on her injuries. She nodded, and Cohen shut his eyes.

Abby looked over at Noah, and he smiled.

Abby suddenly realized how much she had grown to love Noah. And how important it was to get this nightmare over with and let him go.

She wouldn’t care if he began aging as a human, but she understood the call of
duty and honor that resided in him, and that was part of the reason she liked him so much. He was strong, kind, noble, and dedicated. Looking at Noah, she felt like she had lost something, but the reality was, she never had him. She had never had him, and she never would. She resigned herself that their relationship was over, simply because she needed to protect herself . . . from herself.

She sighed and broke the eye contact. All of a sudden, the bottom of her feet started tingling. She gasped and stared at the bandages. She swore she could feel the skin mending where she had literally run her feet raw.

“Relax, Abby,” Cohen said. “Relax and concentrate with me. I can’t do this without you.”

She closed her eyes and concentrated on her feet. She had been right—she could feel the skin knitting together, the flesh healing. She felt another energy within her, and knew it was Cohen. She thought it strange that there was another being within her, but then she marveled at the miracle that was taking place within her own body. If only humans could be healed like this. There wouldn’t be any cancer, the damage from heart attacks and strokes could be negated. The tingling traveled up her legs and gathered in her knees. It stayed for a while, and then she felt nothing.

Next, her hands began to burn slightly, then quite a bit. She bit back the pain and concentrated on healing them. The burning turned to a tingle, and once again she could feel the skin mending, closing the raw, open wounds.

“We have to do your face now, Abby,” Cohen said. “This is going to take longer and it’s a more delicate procedure. We’re shooting for no scars on that pretty face of yours.”

She channeled her energy into her face, feeling the tingle as well as a slight burn. She felt Cohen there, felt him going slower there than he had on her hands, feet, or knees.

“I need more from you, Abby. You have more to give, I can feel it.”

She concentrated harder, imagining her face as it had been before the attack. She pictured it in her mind like she saw it every day in the mirror. She saw pictures of herself smiling, her skin smooth and unmarred.

It seemed like hours had passed, and then she knew that Cohen’s energy had ebbed from her body. She opened her eyes to see a light purple mist hovering above her
face, and then disappeared.

“Are you okay, Abby?” Noah said, grabbing her hand.

She nodded. Cohen opened his eyes. “I think we did good,” he said tiredly. He went on to tell them that some of the cuts probably should have had stitches after they were first inflicted, but they should heal okay now.

“Can I take off my bandages?”

Cohen nodded and stood up. “Noah, can I talk to you a minute?”
“She’s not fully human.”
Noah stayed quiet for a moment, letting that little piece of information sink in.
“You’re certain?”
Cohen nodded. “It’s slight, so slight that a human doctor wouldn’t be able to
detect it through any normal human chemistry tests, such as blood or urine, but I can feel
it in her energy. Her energy has some of the same markers as our kind.”
Noah ran his hand through his head and swore.
Cohen nodded again. “Which means . . .”
“I fucking know what it means,” Noah bit out.
Cohen put his hand on Noah’s shoulder and kept it there for a moment. “We can
bring in Talin and do a full blood and genetic makeup to see who’s responsible. But we
need samples, and it would be nice if she could give them to us voluntarily. Until that
happens, I’m not going to say anything. But eventually, after we get shit figured out, we
need to have a meeting with the others and see where to go from there.”
Noah nodded and watched Cohen head for the elevator, thinking about the
implications.
That meant that Abby’s mom had conceived Abby with one of their kind. The
Warriors’ rule number one was that there would be no offspring when dealing with
females. Ever. Unless one of the Warriors had let that rule slip and impregnated Abby’s
mother, which was highly doubtful.
There was only one other explanation.
Abby’s mother had slept with a Colonist.
Which meant that Abby was on the shortlist of people to observe and possibly kill
after the original twelve Colonists were dead.
“Motherfucker,” Noah hissed, and went back into the room. Abby was taking off
her bandages, marveling at the healing that had taken place. As he watched her and
listened to her say things like, “Oh my God, Noah! Look at this!” he wondered what
exactly he was looking at.
Although it kind of grossed him out, he hoped like hell and prayed like the Pope
that he was looking at one of his Warrior’s daughters instead of the spawn of a Colonist.

Noah watched as she explored her bruises, cuts, and abrasions that were no longer there. He couldn’t help but smile at her childlike wonder, but his brain churned through some pretty horrific thoughts.

If she was a spawn of a Colonist, she didn’t need to be put down. She was a good person, a kind person, a generous and caring person. The world needed more like her.

His Warriors, however, might think differently, and that worried him.

For now, she was safe, as he trusted Cohen not to say anything to the others. He had known the man for over three hundred years, both in his human form and in his SR44 form. Cohen kept his word.

So, if they did do the testing, and she was a spawn of the Colonists, what would he do? He could see that even if she had a piece of Colonist in her, she wasn’t evil. Could he accept her as she was? He had been hunting Colonists for so long, fueled by hatred and revenge. Could he look at her and accept the fact that she was part of something that he hated? A hatred that drove him to get out of bed each day?

He felt an ache in his gut, and the heaviness of defeat flowed through him. He didn’t think he could. There would always be something in the back of his mind reminding him that she was part of the very thing he despised most. The thing he had sworn to hunt down and eradicate, the thing that had stolen his previous life. The thing that had driven his revenge. The thing that had kept his honor and duty front and center.

He shook his head. He had to think positively. Maybe she was one of the Warrior’s daughters, but which one? Which Warrior had broken the cardinal rule of not reproducing? Honestly, he didn’t know what option upset him the most—the daughter of a Colonist or the daughter of one of his Warriors.

He tried to smile as she chattered about how good she felt and how she couldn’t believe the way her wounds were healing. In fact, she felt so fantastic, she wanted to go back upstairs again even though it had only been a couple of hours since they had breakfast.

He looked at the clock. Actually, it had been far longer than a couple of hours. In fact, it was almost dark. His eyes, as well as his fellow Warriors’ eyes, would be changing within the hour. They would be gathering for their evening meeting soon, and
then dinner would be served. He supposed he could bring some food down to his quarters for them, but Abby was chatting away, digging through her bag for clothes. He thought he better tune in to what she was saying.

“. . . so intrigued by this place, Noah. I mean, a silo? There are people who never get to see such a thing, and I’m actually spending time in one! Maybe we can play pool. I used to play pool when I was in college. I wasn’t bad. That sounds like so much fun . . .”

Jesus, he almost wished Cohen hadn’t healed her and he could just put her back to bed. He didn’t want her around the other Warriors, especially with them feeling apprehensive about her being there. They had agreed that there wouldn’t be any violence toward Abby, but he didn’t want to take any chances. She had seen enough violence to last her a lifetime, as far as he was concerned. He wanted to protect her from everyone and everything.

He looked at her, the ache in his chest expanding. God, he loved her. He was ready to become fully human for her, to give up everything he was. He needed the madness and questions in his head to stop, even just for a while. He needed to be with Abby.

He stood up and went to her. She kept chatting as she rummaged through her suitcase. He put a hand on her shoulder, and she quieted and turned around. He took her in his arms and held her close, feeling the way her body fit into his. Her arms tentatively curled around his waist.

He wanted to tell her that he loved her, that he wanted to be with her, that he was ready to give up his SR44 form, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it because he had the distinct feeling that if she was the child of a Colonist, he wouldn’t be able to stay with her, to keep that vow he so wanted to give. To explain his feelings now wouldn’t be fair to her, especially if he had to leave her later.

And he hated himself for it. He hated that he couldn’t find it within himself to accept and forgive her for what she might be. He knew he shouldn’t be worrying about something that hadn’t even occurred, but he couldn’t help it. She was a much bigger person than he was. She had accepted him for what he was. If she hadn’t, she wouldn’t be so comfortable among him and his Warriors. She never would have allowed Cohen to practice his healing gift on her. Yes, she was a much bigger person than him.
He looked at the clock again. He needed to get upstairs for the meeting in the War Room.

“I have to go up for a meeting, Abby,” he said into her hair. He kissed the top of her head and pulled away. The unspoken was that she needed to stay down in his quarters. There was too much distrust for her to be roaming the silo alone.

“Okay,” she said quietly, crossing her arms over her chest.

She took a hesitant step toward him and stopped. It was obvious that she wanted to say or do something. He wanted to hear that she loved him, and then throw her arm around his neck and kiss him with those beautiful lips.

The irony of the situation was that he wanted it, but he didn’t want it. For now, things needed to stay just where they were. Nowhere.

“I’ll call you in a bit,” he said, and turned to leave.
Chapter 41

Noah walked into the War Room and sat down in his usual chair. He had to focus and forget about his internal battle going on as far as Abby was concerned. They now had an ID on a cock-sucking Colonist, and he needed to be on top of his game so they could catch the S.O.B.

“So, where are we?” Noah asked to no one in particular.

Talin began talking. “While you and Cohen were busy with the healing, Rayner and I went and checked out the Colonist’s address. Obviously, he wasn’t there or we would be sinking back shots of tequila and bringing in hookers and blow.”

Noah rolled his eyes as the rest of them smirked.

“He’s picked up and moved. The place was clean. We also stopped by Abby’s place to take a look around. See if there was anything that we missed in the pictures we took.”

“And?” Noah asked

“Nothing. We’re pretty much at a dead end again. Looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack. I have a trace running on his credit cards to see where and when he’s using them, but besides that . . .”

“Okay,” Noah said quietly.

Silence filled the room for a moment, and he noticed Rayner glaring at Talin, and Talin shaking his head. Rayner rolled his eyes. Something was obviously up.

“What’s up, Rayner?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

Rayner didn’t say anything more, just looked at the tabletop.


Talin sighed. “Fine. We came up with a plan to catch the fucker, but we know you’ll shoot it down. Like with a cannon.”

Noah narrowed his eyes. “Spill it.”

Talin explained that the Colonist wasn’t going to stop until Abby was dead, and they all agreed on that. Colonists didn’t like to fail, and James had failed miserably with
Abby. If she hadn’t seen that ash, and she wouldn’t have if she were fully human, she would be very dead.

“So, we thought we could use Abby as bait. Of course, we would make sure nothing happened to her.”

“No,” Noah said forcefully, standing up and slamming his fists on the table.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not!” Hudson roared, also standing. “That woman is not going within ten miles of James. Do you understand me?” He began pacing, continuing to yell. “Jesus, Talin, how could you come up with such a stupid, fucked-up plan? You’re supposed to be the smart one!”

Noah eyed Hudson. Something was very off. Hudson was calm and cool. Like glacier cool. Nothing rattled him. Noah had seen the male fight a Colonist, bloody from bullet holes, stab wounds, and once a wire wrapped around his neck, but he hadn’t even grimaced or flinched. The guy was solid. Stoic. Noah bet he could count the number of times in three hundred years that he had heard Hudson raise his voice on one hand. He rarely showed emotion. Yet, here he was coming totally unhinged at a stupid idea that Noah would never allow to happen. And yes, Hudson’s reaction was puzzling.

Talin stood up, his eyes narrowing, and put himself in front of Hudson. Noah could see where this was going. Talin wanted to find out why Hudson’s boxers were in such a snit. And, as far as Talin was concerned, he had been called a lot of things, but calling him stupid was unacceptable.

“Why do you care, Hudson? What is that female to you?” he asked with deadly quiet. “We can all see that Noah over there is in love with her. Hell, a couple of us even have a bet on how long it takes before he loses his SR44 form. Maybe we have a little lover’s triangle going on here? You liking Abby, too? Feeling a little territorial over her?”

Hudson glared at Talin as they stood chest to chest. His jaw twitched while his fist clenched and relaxed again and again, getting ready to throw down. “Back off my grill, my friend,” Hudson said. Noah would confidently bet his own left nut that things were about to get physical.

“No,” Talin whispered.

Within seconds, Hudson had Talin up against the wall, his heavy arm across
Talin’s upper chest. “Don’t fuck with me on this one, Talin,” he hissed, obviously fighting to keep himself in line and not beat Talin to a bloody pulp.

There was a brief moment of silence, and then Talin flashed a sarcastic grin and said, “I think you got some wood in your pants over that female.”

Oh yeah. Things were about to get physical and ugly. Noah had no doubt that someone was going to end up with a bloodstain on their shirt. And God help everyone if it was Hudson. He hated blood on his silk shirts, and he would be bitching about it for weeks.

“All right! Enough!” Noah said loudly. But no one was listening.

Hudson hauled back and hit Talin square in the mouth. “Don’t you ever fucking talk about my daughter that way!” he screamed as Talin began to bleed.
Chapter 42

A couple of things happened at once. First, the room went silent, and Noah felt an incredible relief wash through him in finding out that Abby did not have one drop of Colonist DNA in her. And then there was a little gasp that could be heard outside the door.

Noah closed his eyes. Shit. Abby. She must have heard Hudson’s confession. He stepped out the door and held out his hand to her. She was pale, her eyes wide. She took his hand hesitantly and let him lead her in.

Everyone had their eyes on her. “I . . . I’m sorry. I wasn’t eavesdropping. I swear. I was in the kitchen, and I heard yelling. I wanted to make sure everything was okay . . .” She looked over to Hudson. Noah watched as the male’s eyes slowly turned bright yellow as he stared at Abby. Noah looked down at Abby, whose eyes were as wide as the stretch of silence in the room, watching all their eyes change to the colors of their SR44 forms.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

Noah didn’t know what to do. He guessed the best thing would be to get her out of there. He put his arm around her shoulder. “C’mon. Let’s get you back downstairs.”

She looked up at him and shook her head. He watched her face harden, and she straighten her spine as if she were preparing for verbal warfare.

“No. I’m staying right here until I get some answers.” Then she looked directly back at Hudson. She motioned toward the table. “Shall we?”
Chapter 43

Abby saw that this wasn’t going to be a private conversation. The men all took their seats around the table, their eyes glowing brightly. Once again, she didn’t find herself afraid, but now she knew why.

Her whole life finally seemed to make sense. Why she felt as if she never fit in, that she was different from everyone she met. Not to mention, the unexplainable connection she felt with Noah from the first time she’d laid eyes on him.

It was because she wasn’t fully human. She was some type of hybrid human-alien creature. And somehow, that rang okay with her.

She couldn’t believe all the puzzle pieces of her life were finally falling into place. It was a relief, it was exciting, and it was nerve-wracking.

When Noah had left her downstairs, she had planned to hang out until he called her. But then she had gotten really, really hungry. She hadn’t eaten since that morning and decided that she could sneak upstairs without anyone knowing and get something to calm her raging hunger.

When she was in the kitchen, she had heard the muffled voices from the War Room. As they got louder, she became more concerned. She didn’t know what she could do to make things calmer, but she found herself inching down the hall to listen. She had gotten within earshot when Talin told Hudson that everyone knew Noah was in love with her, and well . . . as they say, the rest is history.

She turned to Hudson, who looked over at her. Sadness seemed to be ripping him open from the inside.

“I loved your mother. She owned my soul,” Hudson said.

Abby was surprised at that. She had thought that maybe it had been a one-night stand gone bad. “She’d told me you died before I was born,” she said quietly.

Hudson nodded, staring off into space for a moment as if he were gathering his thoughts. The room was deadly silent, all eyes upon him.

And then he began.

He had met Abby’s mother, Iris, in the grocery store of all places. He had been working the Sacramento area, as there had been a string of murders that the Six Saviors
thought could be attributed to a Colonist. He had almost run her over as he darted down the aisle looking for basil and cumin. He remembered he was making spaghetti that night.

When Iris had looked up at him, he felt his heart skip a beat. Her large, brown eyes chastised him for his reckless cart maneuvering. When he apologized profusely, she smiled, and he was done. He couldn’t let her walk away.

So he didn’t.

He asked her to dinner right there on the spot, and after a few moments of small talk, she hesitantly agreed.

Two months later, he realized his SR44 tendencies were coming out and he had fallen in love quickly, and hard. He was ready to give up his SR44 form and live as a human. He had never been happier in his life and realized that he would never be leaving Earth. That was okay though, because he had found a woman with big, brown eyes and long, wavy, auburn hair who captured his soul. He had nothing or no one waiting for him back on SR44, and he was content with the knowledge that he would never return there.

“You look a lot like her,” he said with a sad smile.

He decided he would tell Iris what he was, and pray to any and every god that she accepted him and allowed him to remain in her life.

Before he could do that, she told him she was pregnant.

He had been thrilled. He was in love, and he would be a father.

But that love didn’t flow both ways.

Iris told him that she didn’t see the relationship going anywhere, and she had thought long and hard about the pregnancy. She decided to raise the child. Alone.

He had argued and begged, and then eventually demanded that he be a part of the child’s life. Iris refused and told him that if he insisted, she would disappear without a trace and he would never see his child again. She said if he loved her, he would respect her wishes.

So he had watched from afar, the pain crippling him each time he laid eyes on Abby and Iris.

When Iris had been murdered, Hudson was devastated. He wanted to approach Abby and tell her that he was her father, but then she got swooped up in the system. He had no legal ground to stand on, as his name wasn’t on her birth certificate, and Iris had
told Abby he had died before the birth. He felt it was better not to rock Abby’s fragile boat and remain in the shadows of the unknown, keeping a watchful eye.

And he had.

“I watched you graduate from high school. That day you wore a blue dress with your hair in braid down your back. I was so proud of you. That night you got piss-ass drunk at your friend Lynn’s house and tried to drive home. I was the one who let the air out of two of your tires so you had to stay there.”

Abby couldn’t remember what she’d worn for her graduation, but she did remember the party, the epic hangover the next day, and that her tires had been flat.

“I was there at your college graduation. You wore a green dress that looked absolutely beautiful on you. That night you went out with a couple of people, but you went home early.”

He was right on that one as well. She had tried so hard to fit in, but never really did.

“I didn’t particularly like that Tim guy you dated a couple months ago, and frankly I was happy when you broke up with him.” She heard a low rumble coming from Noah that sounded very much like a growl, which she chose to ignore.

She had to smile. Hudson sounded so much like she thought a father would.

“Imagine my surprise when we literally ran into you at the Mayor’s Ball,” he said, bathing her in the warm, yellow light of his eyes. “I couldn’t believe it. Of course, I recognized you right away. Then when I saw Noah getting protective of you, I knew that Noah liked you. A lot. You were the female who made him miserable for so long. The one who made it so difficult to live with him.”

Abby’s cheeks warmed. Hudson looked at the black marble table. “But I also know that Noah is sometimes too hardheaded and stubborn for his own good. Sometimes his priorities get a little fucked up. That’s why I acted the way I did. It wasn’t sexual. I wanted to tell you so badly who I was, but I bit my tongue. You had gone so long without knowing me, I didn’t want to upset you more than you already were.” There was a beat of silence, and he met her eyes.

“I can honestly say that night was the best of my existence. I got to talk to you, to hold you.”
He motioned over to Noah, shaking his head. “Like I said, it wasn’t anything sexual. I was just trying to get this dumbass pissed off so he would realize his feelings for you.”

Hudson sighed and looked down at the table again, his face hardening. “And then when I heard that you had almost been taken from this Earth by a Colonist . . .” He closed his eyes, as if he was trying to block out the feelings of the incident. After a moment, he took a deep breath and looked at her again.

“I wanted things to be so different, Abby. But I did love your mother, so I did what she wanted. I figured watching you from afar was better than never seeing you again.”

Abby stared at Hudson. She could see the sadness and regret written all over his face. He was telling the truth.

Abby couldn’t believe her mother had hidden the fact that she pushed Abby’s father away. She tried to imagine what her life would have been like if she had known her father, but she couldn’t picture it. The fact was that yes, growing up, she pined to know her father. However, she couldn’t miss something she never had. She missed the idea of having a father. Perhaps she felt a little cheated, but there wasn’t any anger. Her mother had done what she thought was right.

Even though it went on the south side of wrong.

She wasn’t going to get upset over a mistake that occurred so long ago. She had almost lost her life, and in that time she realized that life was too short to get caught up in the past, in the wrongs that may or may not have been done. Parents did what they thought best in order to do what was right for their children. They tried to imagine the consequences of their decisions for the child, but in reality, they had no idea what the future held.

In the case of Abby’s mother, she couldn’t have foreseen that Abby would have such a hard time in life, battling bouts of depression, never feeling like she belonged anywhere or with any group of people.

Abby was going to concentrate on what was happening and what she had now. She could choose to embrace it, or she could choose to hold on to old mistakes made by others.
She looked at the huge man in front of her with the black hair and the white silk shirt. She looked at his fingers, which were long and graceful, like hers. She watched his mannerism while he talked, like the way he tilted his head and bounced his foot. She looked nothing like him, but she could see their mannerisms were the same. Besides, she was sitting at the table with him now, and they could move forward from here.

Hudson cleared his throat. “I know you don’t need a father now, Abby, but maybe we could be friends? Or something? Anything?”

Abby felt her eyes well. She nodded and looked down at the table to try to hide the tears.

Everyone was silent for a moment, the tension making the large room feel claustrophobic.

Finally, Cohen cleared his throat. “Well, looks like we have some celebrating to do.”

There were grunts of agreement from the others, but a quick look around the table let Abby know there was a big question hanging in the air. Did anyone really feel like celebrating? Did she feel like celebrating?

She stood up and went to Hudson, who got up from his chair and faced her.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said quietly, knowing all eyes were on them.

He nodded.

She stepped into him and wrapped her arms around his waist. She felt him hesitate for a moment, then his huge arms engulfed her.

It felt good. It felt right.

She squeezed harder, and he did the same. She then felt him kiss the top of her head.

“I never thought I would have you in my life, my doha, my daughter,” he whispered. “Yet, here you are. Right now, there isn’t a happier male in this universe.”

She pulled away, and Hudson held her hands. “Do you want to celebrate? Do you want to be alone?” He paused, uncertainty writing itself on his face. Hesitantly, he asked, “Has anything happened in this day worth celebrating?”

She smiled up at him.

Yes, there was much worth celebrating. She had been badly hurt, but thanks to
Cohen, she was well. She’d found out she had a father, and she liked him. She was able to forgive the past sins of her mother, and she felt really good about that. She heard through the grapevine that Noah loved her, but she wasn’t going to take that one as truth unless she heard it from his lips.

“Yes. A lot has happened to be thankful for,” she murmured, squeezing his hand.

Hudson nodded and smiled back. Without taking his eyes off her, he said in a loud voice, “Make it happen, gentlemen. We are celebrating my beautiful doha, my daughter.”

The room erupted into cheers, and the Warriors patted Hudson on the back and gave quick hugs to Abby. They all moved to the room with the pool table, and someone turned on the stereo. The Rolling Stones began to scream throughout the room.

Noah came to her with a glass of white wine and smiled. “I’m happy for you,” he said in her ear.

Abby felt a chill vibrate down her spine. Just a whisper in her ear from Noah made her body ache. But she wasn’t going there. He had made it very clear that he could not, and would not, give himself fully to her. He wouldn’t give up his SR44 form and become human. As far as Talin and Hudson saying he cared about her? That he loved her? She had no doubt that he did care for her. Deeply.

However, she wasn’t willing to have a relationship with someone she loved, who couldn’t and wouldn’t love her back. She couldn’t be with someone knowing that they were withholding a part of themselves.

She had fallen in love with Noah, but she wasn’t going to go there unless she could have all of him, and she wouldn’t ask for that. She couldn’t ask him to give up a part of himself that was so important to who he was and what he did.

But wanting a relationship with her father posed another problem: He would always be tied to Noah. Perhaps she and Hudson could work out an arrangement that when all of this was over, they could meet away from Noah so that her heart didn’t have to break over and over again at seeing him. That would definitely be something to discuss at a later time.

She smiled and stepped away from him.

She saw Rayner getting a pool cue, and she grabbed one as well.
“You up for a game, lady?” Rayner said, smiling smugly.

“You bet,” she said, ready to wipe the grin off his face with a couple of nicely placed shots.
Chapter 44

Noah watched as Abby ceremoniously kicked every one of the Warriors’ asses at pool. All did their best to be gracious, and most tried to keep the cursing to a bare minimum, which was hard for the group. Noah appreciated their efforts, but he was certain that none of them would want to play with her again without a hell of a lot more practice.

At some point in the evening, Hudson sided up to him, but didn’t say anything. After a while of silence, as they watched Abby put the final nail in Cohen’s ego, Noah said, “I’m glad it’s you.”

Hudson didn’t meet his eyes, just nodded. “Don’t fuck this up for you, or for her, Noah. If my little girl’s heart gets broken, I promise you I will do the same to every bone in your body.”

Noah looked over at Hudson, who was smiling, but Noah could feel the undercurrent of the very real threat.

“If she will have me, I would make her my lovren,” Noah said under his breath so the others couldn’t hear. But first, he had to clear the air with Abby. He had to tell her how he felt, and what he was ready to give up to be with her. He was ready to commit his full heart and soul to her. He was ready to give up his SR44 form and live as a full human. With Abby, of course.

Hudson was silent for a moment, then nodded. “If she will have you, I’ll give my blessing. Of course, there will be a traditional ceremony.”

Noah watched Abby give Cohen a high five as she then wiped the table with Jovan’s ass. If it had been a sword fight, the warrior would be a bloody and battered mess. Noah watched her toss her auburn hair over her shoulder as she bent down to line up the pool cue for her shot. He loved the way her brow furrowed as she concentrated, and the way that lovely pink tongue poked through her lips as she focused on her shot. He watched the pool cue slide through her delicate hands with grace, and the room lit up when she smiled after she made a perfect shot.

And a fierce recognition raced through his body.

He wanted her.
He reminded himself that he had to make things right between them. He had to tell her that he was willing to give himself up so that he could fully love her with his mind, as well as his body.

If she would have him.

It took her almost being killed by a Colonist for him to realize just how short life was, especially for her. And Hudson’s little speech in the desert that night had rung true. His duty here on Earth was never ending. There were more Colonists. Their offspring had to be investigated, all down the family tree. The thought made his brain ache.

And where did that leave him? A guy up to his elbows in dead bodies, with no end in sight. Since he had been hanging out with Abby, he also realized how lonely he had been. He had been longing for the connection that he shared with Abby. It wasn’t just physical, but an emotional and psychic connection that was so strong, and it brought him to his knees when he thought about it.

So, yes. He was ready to give up everything for her. Including his inner being, his longevity, not to mention the anger and revenge that had driven him for so long. He could do without the anger and revenge. He was ready to replace those with good things. But what would that do to his effectiveness in the job? He couldn’t imagine functioning without those feelings coursing through him. He guessed he would have to see how his job performance was affected.

If she would have him.

He thought about the fact that she might not want him. That would hurt, and he imagined it would hurt in a way that would make him wish someone had stabbed him multiple times because that would be less painful.

Cohen was talking about breaking out into teams to do battle on the velvet table, with Abby on his team, of course. Noah knew that he needed to interfere if he was going to get time with Abby anytime soon.

He walked over and placed his hand on her lower back. She looked up at him questioningly, and he leaned down, his voice low. “I need to talk to you,” he said.

She nodded, and moved to put her cue away, the wall of Warriors parting for her.

“Noah? What the hell, man? Really? She agreed to be on my team!” Noah looked at Cohen and couldn’t believe the male sounded like he was two steps away from
whining.

“I need to talk to her. Privately. You guys are going to have to play by yourselves. As pathetic as it may be . . .”

He moved through them and took Abby’s hand.

He was tired of being cooped up in the silo and wanted fresh air. They made their way up the metal stairs in silence. He punched in the code to open the first door, and then the second. A blast of springtime desert air hit his face. He inhaled deeply, taking in the dry air tinged with the warm promises of desert sagebrush bloom. The sky above them was clear, the stars twinkling like diamonds settled on black velvet.

They walked for a bit, staying within the silo’s compound. Noah scanned the area, always on alert, but with Abby by his side, he supposed he was hyper-vigilant. He wanted to be certain nothing, or no one, would hurt her.

When they had lived among regular people, a couple of the Colonists had banded together and attacked. It had been a blood battle, and the Warriors, having been caught completely off guard, had been lucky to survive. Shortly after that, Noah had bought the missile silos. They were safe, secure, and built like a fortress, as it should be. They hadn’t had any problems with the Colonists since they’d moved in.

But vigilance coursed through his blood, and his eyes scanned the fence line and the area beyond.

After walking in silence for a few minutes, Abby stopped and turned to him. “What’s going on, Noah.” It wasn’t a question.

Well, here you go, buddy.

“I want to be with you,” he said quietly, the glow of his orange eyes bathing her in their warmth.

Before he had finished the sentence, she shook her head back and forth slowly. “Noah, this isn’t going to happen. You’ve made yourself very clear, and I understand. Your mission is important. There are too many people dying because of the Colonists. Humans have enough of their own sociopaths, and we don’t need yours as well. You and the rest of the guys are doing a noble thing.”

He didn’t really give a shit about being noble. He was done with noble. Noble had gotten him nowhere except in a pile of misery that he hadn’t realized the depth of until he
met Abby.

He cared about being happy. Abby made him happy, and he wanted to be with her for as long as possible.

He took a deep breath, and let the words fly. “Abby, I love you. I want to give all of myself to you. If you would have me, I would make you my *lovren*, my mate. I want to grow old with you.”

He watched as her eyes widened, and her jaw hung loose. She remained silent.

Noah put his hand on her shoulders and said, “I never knew how miserable I was until I found you.” He pulled her to him. She resisted for a just a second, but then let herself be engulfed in his arms, her cheek resting against the expanse of his chest.

“Noah, you can’t do that,” she said quietly.

He had to laugh. “Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do, woman. I tell you I love you, and you think you’re in charge?”

He felt her arms snake around his waist. They stood in silence, listening to the desert sounds. Rabbits and lizards scurried about; a coyote gave a lonely howl in the distance.

“Will you let me love you, Abby?” His heart was doing double time, and a sheen of sweat broke out on his brow. What if she said no? What if she told him to go to hell? He would be devastated, and he felt an ache in his heart at just the prospect of her telling him no. If she said no, he was afraid of what he would become. A male of his species without the female he loved was about as alive as a rock.

She tilted her head and searched his face. He could see the indecision in her eyes, her brow creased with uncertainty. After a moment, which seemed like a lifetime, he could tell that she had reached a decision. The furrow in her brow relaxed and she smiled slightly. Then she nodded slowly, and Noah felt his heart calm, and his world shifted into a new phase of light and hope, replacing the dark and bleak he had been living in for so long. He put his mouth gently to hers.

He pulled away, his breath catching at the feelings he allowed to course through him. He felt . . . freedom. It was a freedom of his job, a freedom of the boundaries he had encased himself in.

They slowly walked arm-in-arm back toward the missile silo. As he punched in
the code for the first door on the keypad, Abby said, “I think I need to know that code.” He smiled and told her the numbers needed for access.

They went down the metal stairs, their footsteps echoing lightly. When they reached the second keypad, Noah couldn’t hold back. He pressed her against the wall with his body, his hand on the side of her neck holding her in place as he kissed her hungrily.

When he was certain he was glowing, when he felt the incredible pleasure Abby gave him, he stopped and looked down at her.

“What do you want to go play pool with the boys?”

“No,” she said breathily, “I want to go play with you.”
Chapter 45

Noah made sure the elevator didn’t stop on the way down to his floor. He didn’t want to be interrupted, and he found himself wondering once again why in the hell he had chosen the bottom floor of the silo as his quarters. The elevator seemed to be in slow motion.

By the time they made it to his floor, he had one arm out of his shirt, and the other arm still trapped in the shirt. He had resisted from tearing hers to shreds, reminding himself that they weren’t the only ones who lived in the silo. Although, the chances of them running into any of the other Warriors, not to mention her newfound father, were slim, but he wasn’t ready to roll that dice.

When they were finally locked in his quarters, it was a whole different story. He slammed the door and drove them to the bed. As her back hit the comforter, he took her shirt in his hands and ripped it down the middle.

The heat in his body consumed him. He couldn’t think about anything except putting his skin next to hers, to give himself over to her wholly.

He had her naked within seconds, most of her clothes destroyed around him. As he loomed above her, his heart pumped in anticipation. He shucked his pants and boots, and he couldn’t take his eyes off her. Her auburn hair spread out around her, her large brown eyes watching his movements, a small smile playing on her face. The pale skin of her curves glowed in the light of the room.

When he finally got rid of all the annoying clothes that encased his body, he gently laid down on top of Abby, careful not to put his full weight on her. He was hit with the realization that he had never made love to a woman in human form. The joinings on SR44 were a whole different ballgame than what he was about to do.

Shit.

Uncertainly raked through him.

“Noah, what is it?” Abby asked. He guessed she had felt his brief hesitancy.

“Well . . . I’ve never . . . this is . . . well . . .” Embarrassing? Awkward? A real moment killer? Wasn’t he just the fucking wordsmith.

Abby looked confused for a brief moment, and then she was able to read between
the lines. “Oh,” she said. Silence filled the room, and then she smiled warmly at him. “Well, let me show you, Noah.” She kissed him deeply. “I think you’re going to be really, really good at this,” she whispered in his ear.

His inner thug with the ego demanded that he take the lead on this one, but the more sensible side of him took over. Better to learn and get it right then to forge onward and screw it all up.

He rolled to his back as she straddled his hips, and he felt her soft, wet core against his hard length, sending energy rippling through his body. She bent down to kiss him, their chests and abdomens meeting skin-to-skin, and his SR44 form began to vibrate within his human body.

He relished the feeling of her kiss and the heat of desire it set coursing through his body. As if he could take anymore. His skin had a sheen of sweat, and his heart felt like it was going to pound out the front his chest.

He watched as she broke the kiss and put her hand on his erection. She gently stroked him for a few moments, which made him feel like his eyes would cross. She then stood him up and slid down until he was fully encompassed.

His eyes grew wide at the sensation. Being inside Abby was the most beautiful feeling he had ever experienced. Wet velvet. A silk fist. Warmth. Home. His eyes went down to where their bodies joined, and he marveled as she rocked on him gently.

He watched her hips move, and his gaze traveled up to her flat stomach, her ribcage, to her breasts. On impulse, he reached out and brushed his thumbs over the nipples, and she groaned.

She planted her hands on his chest and closed her eyes. She began to rock harder, sending shockwaves through his body, all of them ending up at the tip of his cock. By the way he felt, he was pretty sure he was close to having an orgasm.

As he watched her, his heart beat in double time, his love for Abby almost painful. He let the feeling wash through him, giving himself over totally to the experience.

He looked at his skin and noticed the glow. He knew his SR44 form wouldn’t be around much longer, and he was so okay with it. If making love to Abby felt like this, he would gladly let his SR44 form go and tell it not to let the door hit it in the ass. The
pleasure rippling through him, combined with the vibration of his SR44 form getting ready to leave his body, made him wonder if he would come out of the experience with his brain intact. The physical sensations were almost too much to handle.

The orgasm came quickly, hitting him in the base of his spine, and sending his hips off the mattress deeper into Abby. He closed his eyes, gasped, and let out a moan as the waves of pleasure rolled through him. His SR44 form vibrated with intensity. As the last blast of the orgasm bucked him, he felt the final vibrations as his SR44 form left his body, and he watched it shimmer just above his skin. He looked up at Abby to see the most incredible thing he had ever laid eyes on.

Abby was a woman undone. Her head was thrown back, her auburn hair cascading down around her shoulders. She had moved her hands from his chest and grabbed his lower legs, causing her body to arch. Her movements were raw and sensual, a woman who knew what she wanted and was determined to get it. Her breasts swayed as her breath rasped in and out of her mouth. He felt her walls go tight around him, and as she came saying his name, the room lit up with a burst of light. Noah thought for a moment that one of the Warriors had come into the room, but then he realized that the light was coming from Abby.

The white light shone around her skin, just as his SR44 form did. He watched as she experienced the last tremors of her orgasm, the light radiating out from her, almost blinding him. He saw the glow from her shimmer outward, trapping his SR44 form that hovered above his body. After a few seconds, he felt his SR44 form return to his body. The damn thing had moved back in.

Huh.

Noah had no idea what the hell just happened. Well, he knew that they had mind-blowing sex and he definitely wanted more, but Abby was glowing white, and his SR44 form was trapped by her glow.

He didn’t know what to think.

The whole thing was just fucking surreal.

He still had his SR44 form. And holy shit, he had finally gotten something he wanted. He wanted Abby, and he wanted his SR44 to stay intact. The outcome he wanted had come to be, and there hadn’t been any compromise on his part.
He pretty much liked that. A lot. He didn’t know if his SR44 form would continue to stick around, but going on what he knew now, as long as he kept Abby happy in bed . . . explodingly happy . . . then his SR44 form would stick around because it would be trapped by her flash. Or glow. Whatever.

A slow smile crept across his face as he thought of the work he would have to do to keep Abby “explodingly” happy in bed. He didn’t even care if that wasn’t a word. And he couldn’t imagine a job with better pay or benefits.

He listened to Abby’s heavy breathing, and she laid herself down on his chest. He gently caressed her back as he watched the light radiating off her begin to fade slightly. After a moment, she looked up at him and smiled.

The center of her eyes glowed like stars in the sky, like diamonds. A piercing white light radiated from them.

She kissed him deeply, obviously unaware of what was happening with her body.

“Abby,” he said, “I think you need—”

“Shhhh,” she said quietly. “We don’t need to think. We need to do that again.”

He thought about saying the hell with the whole glowing thing, but decided that hey, her skin was shimmering like bright moonlight on a dark lake, and she needed to know. He realized that might be the end of the sex, which would be a terrible disappointment, but he cared about her too much to remain silent.

He slowly and reluctantly lifted her off. With her protests, he picked her up and brought her to the full-length mirror in the bathroom. As he set her down in front of him, he watched her eyes widen in shock.

“What’s happened to me?” she whispered as she touched her reflection in the mirror, meeting the white eyes staring back at her, tracing the slight shimmer on her skin.

“I don’t know, Abby.” He explained his theories: She was part SR44, and maybe that part was coming to the surface. Perhaps Cohen’s healing had triggered it. He told her how he had lost his SR44 form, but her light had stopped it from evaporating. “How do you feel?”

She closed her eyes, as if she were concentrating very hard. “I feel really good,” she said, opening her eyes, smiling at him in the mirror’s reflection.
He put his big arms around her, and she leaned back into his chest. He kissed her neck, tickling her earlobe with his tongue.

“Are you sure?” he asked, running his hands over her breasts, down her ribs, and resting them on her hips.

“I’m positive,” she said.

Noah turned her around and kissed her deeply, feeling his body come alive with flames licking him from the inside out.

He picked her up easily, bringing her legs around his waist, and leaning her up against the wall of the bathroom. He bent to kiss her breasts, his tongue playing with the hard bud.

Noah heard Abby gasp, felt her hand tightening in his hair. “Noah, please . . .”

“Please what, Abby?”

She met his eyes. “Please make love to me.”

He smiled, positioning himself to enter her. Oh, hell yeah. He could totally do that.
Chapter 46

Abby woke in the early morning hours expecting to feel a wall of man spooned around her, but instead she felt empty space. She reached to the other side of the bed and felt nothing but cold sheets.

How unromantic.

She stretched, feeling sore in all the right places. She loved the slight pain that radiated throughout parts of her body and the memories it brought.

After the session up against the wall in the bathroom, they had ended up on the floor. She felt the rug burns on her backside.

After that, they had ended up in the huge Jacuzzi tub, her sitting between his legs, the warm water and white bubbles lapping at her breasts. They talked quietly about her newfound glow, which seemed to happen each time she had an orgasm. The light that burst from her was almost blinding. Based on the way she felt, she convinced Noah that it wasn’t anything to worry about. She felt alive. Whole. Like she now had the piece of her genetic makeup she had been missing. She felt energy coursing through her body. She felt strong, healthy, and invigorated. In fact, she couldn’t remember a time when she had felt better, both physically and mentally.

However, she had been caught up in the moment and decided she would pay Cohen a visit today. It was today, right?

She opened her eyes and looked at the clock. Yes, daytime.

She rolled over again, put her feet to the floor, and made her way to the bathroom. As she splashed water on her face, she wondered where Noah had gone at such an early hour, and decided she would go find him. As her stomach howled, she amended her mission to get some food and then find Noah. She pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt and made her way to accomplish her mission.

She rode the elevator up the full length of the silo, landing on the kitchen floor. She walked in, the aroma of coffee making its way into her senses.

As she poured, she heard voices down the hall. Déjà vu, anyone? She remembered the last time she had been in the kitchen and heard voices down the hall, getting louder as they were now.
She vowed she would stay in place. Her feet would not move, because regardless of her curiosity or concern as to what was happening down the hall, none of it was her damn business.

Or was it?

The last time she made her way down the hall toward the loud voices, it had definitely been about her. All about her. She had found out that she did indeed have a father, a man whom she liked and looked forward to building a relationship with.

She knew she was being silly, and chided herself for being so narcissistic that she thought they could possibly talking about her. Like they didn’t have anything else important to discuss. Like Colonists killing people and stuff like that.

“Abby will not be involved in this!” she heard Noah roar. She almost spilled her coffee.

Okay, so it did involve her. She took a deep breath, steadied her coffee cup, and headed down the hall. This time she didn’t try to hide her footsteps; she didn’t try to sneak up on them. She walked directly down the hall to the War Room and stood just outside the doorway, leaning against the wall.

She could see the goings-on in the room reflecting off the glass panes. Talin and Noah were almost chest-to-chest in a heated debate.

“We could end this now,” Talin said. “We could have another one gone, and even if you don’t want to go home, some of us do. It isn’t fair, Noah. We can make sure she’s safe, that the fucker doesn’t lay a hand on her. We can do this. It’s like baiting a rat trap with cheese. He will come; we will snap his neck.”

She watched as Noah shook his head. “I love that female,” he said through gritted teeth. “I will not put her in any type of danger. I don’t know what I need to do to get that through your pigheaded skull. It’s not happening, Talin.”

She wondered what type of danger he didn’t want her to get into.

“You know as well as I do that if that Colonist isn’t stopped he will hunt her down until the day he dies and kill her. We have another body on our hands this morning, same M.O. Neat slit to the throat. He’s escalating. We have the ability to trap him, stop him, and put a fucking bullet in his heart and end it. And no one further gets hurt.”

“Except the possibility of my future lovren,” Noah growled. “I won’t put her at
any risk. Listen to my fucking words, Talin. I’m not speaking Russian or anything. Simple English. You should be able to understand me just fine.”

Talin stood his ground. “What’s she going to do? Stay here in the silo for the rest of her life? Are you going to move her across the country, keep her stowed away in another fucking silo? You’re basically imprisoning her, Noah.”

Silence.

“You don’t understand,” Noah said, as he backed away from Talin. “Last night when we were together, she glowed like one of us. She was beautiful and magnificent. Somehow, she kept my SR44 form from leaving my body. She is one of us. If anything happened to her, it would destroy me.”

“Are you shitting me? You were with her and you didn’t lose your SR44 form?”

Noah shook his head. “I don’t know what happened, Talin. I know that I love her more than my life. I know that I . . . that I experienced incredible pleasure. Somehow, she kept my SR44 form from leaving.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Talin muttered, staring at the floor, obviously trying to come up with a reasonable explanation. After a moment, he said, “So you . . . orgasmed?”

Noah smiled and nodded.

Talin was silent for a moment, studying Noah. “Which is all the more reason for her to do it, Noah. She’s special. You can’t keep her here forever. She’s going to want to go out in the world. James will hunt her down. If something happened then, how would you feel? Don’t hold a sword over her neck for the rest of her life when we could end her hunter’s life in a mere matter of minutes. We’ll be there, Noah. Nothing will happen to her.”

There was a long stream of quiet, violent curses from Noah while Abby soaked in what she had heard.

She didn’t like the thought of being stuck anywhere, even if she was in love with Noah. She valued her freedom and didn’t like the idea of being trapped. But putting herself up as bait?

She thought of her mother who had been killed by James. James had begun his march of death on her life when she was so young, so needy of her mother.
She leaned against the wall, listening to the final curses of Noah, and then a silence as he paced across the room. She heard the crunch of leather as Talin sat down and sighed. She imagined him leaning back in the chair, his hands on top of his head, gazing up at the ceiling.

Oddly, she was terribly calm as she considered the possibilities.

She didn’t want to be hunted for the rest of her life. She imagined never being able to go to Reno to lose herself in the mall, or going to see a movie without looking over her shoulder. She couldn’t, or wouldn’t, live her life trapped in the silo, or any silo, regardless of where it was and how nice it was furnished.

She couldn’t see it.

She also had the opportunity to avenge her mother’s death. Regardless if her mother lied to her about her father, she loved her mother, and her death had put her life on a path she never would have chosen for herself. Even though the path had led her to Noah and Hudson, she had had a lot of difficult years.

So, score two for being the bait to kill the Colonist.

And then there was her own life.

What would happen between her and Noah would remain to be seen. She hoped they would stay together, that the words of love they said last night held true. She hoped the bond they formed through their time together was strong enough, and grew stronger.

She took another sip of coffee and made her decision.

*Here fishy, fishy . . . here’s your worm.*

She pushed herself off the wall and turned the corner. She met Noah’s eyes, and then Talin’s.

“I’m in,” she said, taking a gulp of coffee.

Noah let out another string of curses, and Talin smiled briefly, then nodded.

She braced herself for the lecture and tirade she was sure to get from Noah, but her mind had been made up.

He would just have to deal.
Chapter 47

Abby sat quietly in the War Room as she listened to Noah explain why putting her up for bait was such a bad idea. He had been talking for about ten minutes straight.

“You could be killed, Abby,” he said softly, his face a mask of worry. He stood on the other side of the table, his hand planted firmly on the marble. “I couldn’t deal with that. Please.”

She nodded at Noah, and calmly told him that she appreciated his concern, but she was moving forward with the plan.

“I love you, Noah, but I’m not going to live my life having to look over my shoulder at every turn.”

Noah pushed off the table and began pacing again as Talin watched the exchange between them. After a moment, he came over to her and got on his knees, taking her hands in his. “Please, Abby. Please. Don’t do this.”

She met his black eyes and was surprised to see stark fear in them. She sighed. “Talin, can you please give us a moment.”

Without a word, Talin got up and left the room.

“Noah, please listen. I know you don’t want me to do this, and I understand why. But this is something that I need to do. That asshole killed my mother, Noah. He sent my life into a spiral that I was lucky to come out of. Now he’s gunning for me. And what about him escalating? We can prevent more killings by me doing this.”

He didn’t say anything, but defeat washed over his face.

“Besides, I’m counting on you to make sure that nothing happens to me. I would hope we could come up with some type of plan where you would be by my side.”

Noah nodded, and stared at their hands intertwined for a few moments. He took a deep breath. “Okay. Okay. You win. We’ll come up with something. I’ll make sure you aren’t hurt.”

“Noah, look at me.” When he did, she said, “It’s not about winning. It’s about doing what’s right. It’s about putting an end to a lot of death.”

He got to his feet and pulled her close. She wrapped her arms around his waist and held him. “You’re so brave,” he whispered. “I just can’t lose you. It . . . it would
She nodded. “I don’t want to die either, Noah. I feel like I have finally found my place in life, a true recognition of who I am. I need more time with you, and I’m counting on you and the other Warriors to make sure that happens.”

“Okay.” He kissed the top of her head. “Do you know what I want to do?”

“What?”

“I want to get some food, go back to the room, and eat. And then I want to kiss you from the tip of your nose down to your pretty pink toes, and a lot of everything in-between.”

She smiled and blushed. “Sounds perfect.”

“But later I want you to go see Cohen. Just to make sure everything’s okay.”

She nodded.

“And after that we’ll sit down with the other Warriors and come up with a plan.”

He put his big arm around her shoulder, hugging her tightly to his side as they walked to the kitchen. No one else was around.

“I’m not much of a cook, Abby,” he said with a smile. “We leave that up to Hudson. So what’s it going to be? Fruit Loops or Rice Krispies?”
Chapter 48

Noah watched as Abby paced the floor of what he hoped would become “their” quarters. He had quit answering her theoretical questions a while back, finally understanding that she was simply venting and only got more annoyed when he spoke. She had endured a rough day, so he found himself content to sit, listen, and remain silent as she let off steam.

And it seemed she had a lot to let off.

After their stellar breakfast of Fruit Loops and another mind-blowing session of entangled bodies, he had insisted she visit Cohen. After some embarrassing and halting conversation of what had happened the past night, as well as this morning, Cohen did his thing, scanned her body, and declared her healthy. The “I told you so” look he received from Abby was one for the photo album.

He had then mentioned that she needed to break the news that she was going to participate in the capture of a Colonist to Hudson. She winced, but agreed.

That had gone over like dog shit served at a picnic.

Noah watched Hudson pace and curse in the War Room as he had done a few hours prior, and really felt for the guy. He wouldn’t want his daughter putting herself in that situation either.

Kind of like offering up a virgin to a volcano.

He admired Abby as she calmly listened to Hudson’s ranting, ravings, and pleas, but she stuck firmly with her decision. She comforted him when needed, met him head-on, and made it very clear she wasn’t to be swayed.

Noah could tell Hudson was pissed, but he knew when the male relented.

“You may look like your mother, but you definitely take after me as far as being pigheaded.”

Abby had smiled at that, then stood to wrap her arms around Hudson’s neck. She kissed his cheek, and Noah watched the anger drain out of the male.

“Just be there to help protect me, okay Hudson?”

Hudson closed his eyes and dropped his head to his daughter’s shoulder, a sign of defeat in the battle, but the inhale that brought his head upright signaled a strong ally in
the war.

“Of course, my doha. I will not let anything happen to you. Even if this is the most—”

“Shhhhhh, Hudson. That’s all I need to know. That you’ll be with me along with my future lovren. With you two, I know I’ll be safe.”

Hudson’s eyes met Noah’s over Abby’s shoulder, and a silent agreement was reached.

They would protect the woman they both loved, and die for her if necessary.

And this seemed highly irritating to her.

“Honestly, Noah, I don’t know if I can live like this. You—all of you—are such testosterone-driven, domineering, overbearing . . .”

She lost her bluster, sat on the edge of the bed, and put her head in her hands. She let out a long sigh.

“I’m tired of needing to stand up for myself,” she said. She met his eyes. “Noah, if this is going to work between us, I can’t have you being so overbearing and protective, okay? Because right now I’m having visions of trying to go shopping in Reno and you sending Rayner to tail me. Fully armed.”

He smiled, wishing he could say that he would never do such a thing, but she had him pegged.

He tried to put himself in her position, and he didn’t like it there. He understood her wanting and needing to live her own life, to make her own decisions, to go out and about without an armed escort, but he also had a fierce need to protect her. To make sure she came home at the end of the day, to him.

“I’m sorry, Abby,” he said. He stood up from his chair and went to sit next to her on the bed. “This is dangerous stuff. I don’t want to see you get hurt. Neither does Hudson. None of us do. But you’ve made up your mind, and we’re going to do everything to protect you. Most of us don’t like your decision, but we’ll make sure you’re safe.”

Abby’s brown eyes searched his face, and she finally nodded. “Okay.” He bent his head to kiss her. After a moment, she pulled him down on the bed with her.

“I wonder if I’m ever going to get enough of you,” she said as she pulled his T-
shirt over his head.

“Sweet Jesus, I fucking hope not,” he said, rolling on top of her, pressing his mouth to hers.
Chapter 49

The next morning, they all met in the War Room to come up with a plan on how they would use Abby to catch the Colonist, and what would be the safest method.

Noah found it difficult to swallow the French toast Hudson had prepared as he listened to the ideas being thrown around. He couldn’t believe he was letting Abby put herself in danger. One look at Hudson, and he knew the male was a little green around the gills at the idea as well.

Cohen and Rayner had done a little recon the previous day. They were hoping the planets would align and they would find the Colonist sitting in a lawn chair on Abby’s front yard waiting for her to come back.

The planets weren’t aligned.

They did, however, note the comings and goings of Abby’s neighbors, and recognized that all the apartments were empty during the day for about four to five hours.

“The day you saw the ash, why did you come home?” Rayner asked.

Abby explained that she went home for lunch almost daily.

“That’s why he attacked you then,” Talin said, studying the ceiling. He leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. “He had watched you, noticed your patterns. He attacked in the daytime, because there wouldn’t be anyone around to hear you scream.”

Abby cringed and felt her coffee making its way up from her stomach.

“A little fucking tact would be nice, Talin,” Hudson muttered. Talin looked around the table and met Abby’s eyes as if he were surprised he had said the words out loud. “Of course. I’m so sorry, Abby. You can beat me with a pool cue later, okay?”

She understood Talin was trying to make light of the situation, but it wasn’t working. This planning reminded her just how close to death she was a few days ago. If she hadn’t been on the phone with Noah when she went into her apartment that day, she had no doubt she would be very dead.

But she couldn’t let Noah or Hudson, or any of them for that matter, see how scared she really was.

She smiled at Talin. “Don’t make promises you don’t intend to keep, Talin. You can’t imagine the damage I can do with a pool cue.”
The Warriors laughed, and all was right again in their world.

After two hours, the plan was in place, and everyone agreed it was probably the best plan they could come up with, although no one was really comfortable with the idea of putting Abby up as bait. Even Talin and Rayner, who’d come up with the initial concept of using Abby, seemed a little nervous and unsure.

“Look,” Abby said, meeting each Warriors’ eyes, “I need you to be confident in this plan. We need to work together and stop James. I’m willing to put my neck out there. You guys need to be sure it doesn’t hit the chopping block.”

There were grunts of agreement, and everyone began talking at once, giving their assurances and making promises that nothing would happen to her.

“Okay,” she said, smiling. Two days ago, she had been a pariah in the house. Today they were pledging to keep her alive, regardless of what it took. She thought of the few short years she had had with her mom, and then, like that, she had no one as she made her way through the state system. Now, here she was with someone she loved, her father, and what seemed like four overprotective brothers. Big brothers. She finally had the family she had always wanted, even if they were a bunch of overbearing, domineering thugs.
Chapter 50

Everything was in place. Everyone was ready. Everyone was nervous, although no one was going to admit it.

Abby drove with Noah to Reno in the early morning hours. Exhaustion drained her, but adrenaline made it impossible to close her eyes.

As she watched the desert landscape fly by, she thought of the previous night. She hadn’t slept much, and neither had Noah. She had tossed and turned, thinking about what she had signed up for.

Really. What the hell was she thinking? Why was she putting her life on the line? It really all came down to what she saw as protecting her own future, she reminded herself. She certainly didn’t want to look over her shoulder forever, always wondering if the next time she ventured out would be her last.

She was also set on revenge for her mother’s death. That bastard had taken her mother away from her.

She had faith that everyone would come out the other end of this with only some bumps and bruises.

A long sigh escaped her lips.

“What?” Noah had whispered into the blackness. The dark was penetrated with an orange glow. She turned toward him and marveled again at the warmth that illuminated from his eyes.

“What?” she had said softly.

“Come here.” He had reached through the sheets and pulled her to him so they were chest-to-chest, belly-to-belly, leg-to-leg.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded, not sure if she was lying, or if she just had some jangled nerves.

He pushed a lock of hair behind her ear and smiled. “I love you,” he said quietly.

“Me, too.”

His smile vanished, and he looked very confused. “Does that mean that you love you, or does that mean that you love me?”

Abby laughed. The tension within her broke with the laughter, and it felt good. “I
love you, Noah. I think I’ve loved you since the day I laid eyes on you and your hangover in that coffee shop so many weeks ago.”

Noah looked confused again. “How did you know I was hungover?”

Abby rolled her eyes and her grin grew wider. “Noah, I could smell it. You reeked of scotch!”

Noah shut his eyes and smiled. He looked like a sweet boy who had just been chastised for not cleaning his room. However, when his eyes opened, they were raw heat and desire. Abby’s temperature spiked.

“Let me make you explode,” he had whispered. She wasn’t sure if he meant in orgasm, or in the blinding light that illuminated from her when she did.

It didn’t really matter. Noah was an excellent detonator.

“Abby,” Noah said, bringing her back to the car ride to Reno. She turned to him. “Ready? We’ve got about fifteen minutes until we hit your place. Got a text from Talin, and James is hanging out in the neighborhood pretending to walk a dog watching your apartment. We have to make this look good. We have to make sure he thinks you and I are done.”

She nodded. “Just promise me that you won’t take anything I say as real.”

He winced and looked out the window.

Fifteen minutes later, they pulled up in front of Abby’s apartment building. As she looked around, everything seemed the same, yet it was all different. Maybe because she knew of the evil that literally lurked around the corner. She looked at the big picture window that she had fallen in love with, that had sold her on renting the apartment. It now looked like a big, open invitation for danger. She cringed.

“Showtime, Abby,” Noah said quietly.

She took a deep breath, nodded, and threw open the door.

“I don’t want to see you again. Do you understand me, you fucking freak? I don’t want to see you, or your weird glowing eyes again! I don’t want anything to do with you, or any of your stupid friends. Just stay away from me! Do you understand? Don’t ever come near me again!”

With that, she slammed the door, tears shimmering in her eyes. She stomped up the sidewalk, a sick feeling welling in her stomach at the words she had said.
She put her key in the vestibule door, her hand shaking. When she got to her apartment door, she dropped her keys. Twice.

Finally, she got the door open and went in, leaning against the door. She didn’t flip the lock, as they had agreed on. Her apartment smelled slightly stale from being unoccupied for a few days, and she felt vulnerable and alone.

“Abby,” a low voice said, coming from her bedroom.

She jumped and went still. “It’s me, doha. I can’t come out there because of the window. As planned, I’m in your bedroom. You okay, love?”

She remembered she had to act natural. Running to her bedroom and throwing herself into Hudson’s arms, as much as she wanted to, would not look natural. She sighed and went to the refrigerator. It was three in the afternoon, but she grabbed a bottle of wine, then a glass. Happy hour somewhere in the world, and all that. She plopped herself down on the couch and turned on the TV, pumping up the volume.

“I’m okay, Hudson, thanks. That was really, really hard,” she said as he came into the doorway. Anyone looking into the picture window would see her sitting on her couch with the bottle of wine, tears streaming down her face while she watched TV. They wouldn’t be able to see Hudson.

He nodded. “He knows you didn’t mean it.”

She took a gulp of wine and reminded herself that she was supposed to be in her apartment alone. She threw her feet up on the battered table in front of her and began surfing through the channels.

She finally landed on the mindless Judge Judy. And goody, it was a marathon. Mindless TV led to a numb brain.

The bottle of wine was empty, the four hours of Judge Judy over. She had gone into her bedroom after the first episode and given Hudson a quick hug. She was glad he was there. She probably shouldn’t have drunk the wine. It would probably be best to have her wits about her, but at that point, maybe having her nerves bathed in Chardonnay wasn’t so bad.

She was a mess.

Besides, Hudson was there, and he made her feel safe.
But now night had fallen, and it was time to change bodyguards.

At Hudson’s directive, she went and turned off the kitchen lights, as well as the TV and the lights in her small living room. Even though it was eight at night, she went into her bedroom as if she were going to bed and sank into the mattress. She tried to hear Hudson moving through her living room and listened for any sign of him—a creak in the floorboards, a rustle against the couch. She heard nothing, but she felt it when his presence left the space. She never heard a sound.

She didn’t hear the door to her apartment open, nor did she hear anyone else enter. All of a sudden, Neptune jumped up on the bed letting out a very loud greeting, making her heart skip a few beats.

“Neptune!” she said, feeling comfort at the cat’s weight and loud purring noise. A minute later she detected another presence in the apartment, but just like with Hudson, she never heard a sound.

Before she knew what happened, the weight of Neptune was lifted from her and replaced with the much heavier, not to mention the much better smelling, Noah.

She wrapped her arms around him and cried silently into his chest. “I’m so sorry,” she managed to get out.

“Don’t be,” he whispered. “You were fantastic. It was a perfect performance.” She nodded, her tears finally stopping a few minutes later.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she whispered.

“Me, too.”

Desire bloomed within her, and she wanted to feel his flesh against hers. She wanted him to take her to that place of pure, simple pleasure, where nothing mattered but their bodies and their love for each other.

But she also knew that they couldn’t do that here. If they did, she would be throwing off light brighter than a shooting star, and that would ruin the whole plan.

“I want to be with you. Naked,” she whispered.

Noah chuckled and kissed her deeply. She felt both of their bodies respond. “We can’t, Abby.”

Abby thought of where they could, and lo and behold, her little bathroom didn’t have window. She pointed that out to Noah.
“I would love nothing more than to take you into that tiny bathroom, make you hold on to that sink, drop to my knees, and help myself to my favorite delicacy,” he said as he nibbled her neck. He rolled off her quickly. “But I have to keep my head in the game, love. I have to be using all my senses to protect you, not make love to you.”

Wow. Talk about putting a damper on things. An open slap by the hand of reality. But she knew he was right. She got up and went back to the kitchen for a glass of water.

When she returned to the bedroom, she said, “Okay, Noah. I promise to keep my hands off you.” She took a deep drink. “But after this is over, that promise is null and void.”

She heard him chuckle from the far wall. “Honey, if you kept that promise, I think I may lose my will to live.”
Chapter 51

They had arranged with Abby’s boss that she would go to work as she normally would in return for a story on her almost-murder. Of course, they would leave out all the paranormal stuff. It would come down to an article about Abby being chased by some guy who broke into her apartment.

Abby sat at her desk the next morning, nursing a wine-induced headache. Noah had woken her with a kiss and a pinch to her butt before he left, and Hudson came in as the sun was coming up. She had struggled into the shower, had some coffee, and made her way out the door to a job she didn’t want anymore.

Surprisingly, her car started.

She did nothing but sit at her desk, staring at a blank computer screen while she marveled at how time could move so slowly.

Lunchtime finally rolled around, and she knew she had to get her game on. She had to be alert. She had to be aware.

She shouldn’t have had so much wine.

She went to her car and drove to her apartment, dreading what might take place.

As she pulled up to the apartment building, it looked terrifying instead of inviting. She knew that the big picture windows of the other three apartments in the building housed the Six Saviors. Noah had Talin call each tenant and tell them that the building needed to go through some heavy duty extermination, and management would pay for a hotel room for the tenants, and they would also receive some cash for the inconvenience. They had all been happy to check into the Atlanta Hotel and Casino for the week with their wad of money.

The Six Saviors figured James was already familiar with the tenants comings and goings, and if they made it look like there wasn’t anyone home during the day and kept a “lived-in” look in the apartments at night, he wouldn’t be the wiser.

She took a deep breath and got out of the car. She made her way up the walkway, her heels clicking on the cement. She had an out-of-nowhere thought that her steps sounded like a clock counting down the minutes to her demise.

She reached the vestibule, put her key in the door, and went in. The door to her
apartment was as she had left it—closed up tight. She tried the knob before putting in the key, and it was locked solid. She exhaled as she entered her apartment, scanning the floor, the walls, and the furniture for black ash.

She saw none.

She made her way through the apartment, carefully looking over everything. When she reached her bedroom, Neptune was sprawled out on the bed where he had arranged himself among four pillows. She thought Neptune was a perfect name for him, as he looked like the god of his own little world.

He looked at her through squinted eyes and gave a howl of disapproval at his nap being interrupted.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Neptune.”

She went back to the kitchen and slapped some peanut butter on a slice of bread, downed three glasses of water, and called it good.

She jumped when her cell phone rang, and she didn’t recognize the number.

“Hello?” she said tentatively.

“Abby, it’s Jovan. He’s outside. You need to pace in front of that window. Keep the phone to your ear. Act like you’re talking to a girlfriend. Talk about what a fucker Noah was.”

She paralyzed with fear. She literally couldn’t get her feet to move, and she had the brief thought that her sandwich was going to make a second appearance on her kitchen floor.

“Abby!” he said harshly. “Move! Now! He needs to see you in that apartment!”

She took a deep breath and said quietly, “I really don’t have any girlfriends, Jovan. If he’s been watching me, he knows that. I’m going to hang up now and sit on the couch and read a book.”

“No!” he almost yelled. “I need to be in touch with you! I don’t give a fuck who you pretend you’re talking to, just act like you’re talking on the cock-sucking phone!”

“You listen to me, Jovan,” she said, “I’m getting really tired of this charade, and I’ve only been at it about twenty-four hours. I want this over with. I will keep this line open, but I’m staying with my normal patterns. And talking on this cock-sucking phone, as you so eloquently put it, isn’t one of the patterns.”
She took the phone from her ear as he cursed more and yelled, and put it in the pocket of her slacks. She went into the living room, her nerves buzzing with fear and anticipation. She found a book she had started about three months ago, but never got around to finishing. She sat down on the couch, opened it up, and didn’t see one word.

She idly thought that this was how a deer must feel. Always in the gun’s sight, but never sure when the bullet was going to come.
Chapter 52

Two days passed. Abby lay in bed in the dark, watching Noah pace the small space. He was going stir crazy. He had always been a man of movement, a man who needed room to roam.

He barely had room to get out of first gear before he had to put on the brakes. He had to stay in the bedroom because of the big picture window in the living room, with its gauzy curtains. If he started pacing in there, someone outside would see him. They were taking risks when he and Hudson rotated out.

He had been focused and determined, his adrenaline on overdrive, and ready to pounce on the Colonist.

Except James wasn’t around. Or if he was, he was really good at being invisible.

They thought for sure they had him that afternoon that Jovan saw him walking the neighborhood. James had walked right in front the apartment building, looked at it for a moment, then got into an old black Toyota. They had held off trying to grab him. If they failed, he would know that Abby was being protected, and they would be back at square one.

They had run the license plates on the car, and they came back as belonging to a white Mercedes.

Another dead end.

Noah was exhausted. He had been in high gear for so long, his energy was depleting.

He hadn’t been sleeping well. During the day, he was staying in the apartment above Abby’s. He found himself not sleeping when he should be, but instead sitting for hours on end, listening to every creak and moan of the building, not wanting to miss a sound in case James decided to make an appearance.

And then there was the fact that he hadn’t been with Abby for days. He wanted nothing more than to jump into that bed and do all sorts of lovely things to her body, sleep for a while, and then do them all over again, but he couldn’t be caught off guard by James, or it could mean death for both him and Abby. All of them doubted James would strike at night, but better to be safe than sorry.
To top it off, they had three days until the other three tenants in the building were coming home, and they would all have to move out.

So, yeah, he was stressed.

“Noah, come sit down,” Abby said into the darkness. “Let me at least rub your shoulders. You’re so tense, I’m afraid you’re going to snap.”

He stopped pacing, sighed, and sat down on the bed. Abby kneaded the tense muscles in his shoulders, and the feeling was a gift from the heavens themselves.

After a few minutes, she stopped.

“Thanks,” he said, and stood back up again. She had almost kneaded him to sleep. “Get some sleep, Abby.” He went and sat in the chair in the corner. He rubbed his two-day’s worth of stubble, massaged his temples, and concentrated on keeping his marbles lined up neatly in a row.

Jesus, he really wanted it all to be over.

Like yesterday.
Chapter 53

Abby sat at her desk staring at the computer screen again. She stared at the blinking cursor on the empty white space, transfixed. It was Friday, and her nerves weren’t just frayed, but totally shot. The stress of the week and waiting for something to happen had been too much.

She watched as the newsroom cleared out, some people heading to lunch, others on their way to meetings. She supposed she should get her feet moving, stay to the schedule, but at that moment, she just didn’t have it in her.

So she sat, staring at the cursor, trying to come up with the energy to move.

A few minutes later, she felt cold steel against the side of her throat at the same time she heard, “Hello, Abby.”

She stiffened, fear coiling in her stomach.

“It’s probably a good idea not to move too quickly. Or this could happen.” Tears welled in her eyes as the knife flicked against her skin. Then a trickle of blood made its way down the side of her neck.

“Why don’t you stand up nice and slowly, Abby.”

She did as she was told.

“I would love to kill you right now, but watching you with the Warrior has gotten me curious. He seems to love touching you, kissing you. I’m going to see why he likes it so much, because I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole. You’re an ugly whore. Definitely not my type.”

Abby closed her eyes, thankful she hadn’t eaten. She was certain that if she had, it would have ended up on her shoes.

They had been wrong. James had broken his pattern, something the Warriors had never seen in a Colonist. They had been certain he would try to kill her in the afternoon, at her apartment, while none of her neighbors were home.

“Let’s go out the back,” James said, sniffing her hair before he grabbed a handful and yanked her head back. “You know, you do smell good. Maybe I’m beginning to understanding what the Warrior sees in you.” He was silent for a moment. “But probably not.”
As she walked in front of him, the knife still pressed to her neck, her hair still being fisted, the tears finally spilled from her eyes. When she pushed open the stairwell door and looked at the gray concrete and the old yellowing walls illuminated by a bare bulb above, she knew one thing: she really didn’t want be raped and die there. Well, she didn’t want to be raped and die anywhere, but this old, forgotten stairwell was beyond depressing.

She moved down the stairs, her heels clicking with each step. When they reached the first landing, he pushed her face up against the wall, and her breath left her lungs. He stepped in close, pressing his body to hers, his face an inch away from her cheek. She could smell his rancid breath, which reminded her of forgotten chicken in a garbage can. His hand traveled over her hip and around to her butt. She cringed as she tried to block it all out, tears streaming down her face. Looking at the floor, she saw black ash. What had the Warriors said? The Colonists shed the black ash when they were in a “heightened state.” She dry heaved.

James still held the knife to her throat, and he dug it in on another slice. Just like the last one, it wasn’t deep, but it hurt.

“Why are you doing this?” she whispered.

He went still and then backed away. “Because you took what was mine. You took my job at the paper. I loved my job, and you took it,” he said. “You stole from me, Abby. I did my job, and I did it well. Yet, you took it from me.”

“I didn’t take anything from you, James,” she said.

“Yes, you did!” he screamed in her face, making her jump. “How come you have a job and I don’t? That job should have stayed mine. I was better at it than you, but you flashed your long legs, probably crawled under old Bob’s desk and blew him, and you kept the job.”

He yanked her hair viciously, making her cry out. “But let me tell you something, Abby. I hate those Warriors more than I hate you and your snotty attitude, always acting like you’re better than everyone else. I hate them. I was originally going to kill you because you took my job and you’re a bitch. Oh, and that I could.” He breathed even heavier, bringing her hair up to his nose and sniffed. “Now I’m going to kill you because there’s a Warrior who seems very attached to you. And one thing I know about males of
our race—once they fall in love, it’s their greatest weakness. So if I kill you, it will
destroy him. He’ll probably take a gun and blow his brains out the back of his head, and
that’s good for me. Then I have one less of those fuckers up my ass.”

He pulled her hair again. “Let’s go, bitch.”

Abby walked toward the next set of steps. Once they were down these steps, it
would be out the door and who knew where after that. And then, she would be killed, if
he didn’t kill her before they made it to the door.

But the door downstairs opened, and Noah flew through.

Abby heard a hiss come from James, and then he grabbed a fistful of hair again,
pulling her head back and fully exposing her neck.

She felt the knife slice at her throat.

It was different than before. All of sudden she could barely breathe, and blood
oozed from the wound. James still had her by the hair and yanked her back behind him.
She found herself unable to stand, and slowly sank to the concrete floor, her face next to
the yellowing walls. She brought her hands up to her neck to try to stop the bleeding, but
darkness seemed to be moving in on her at warp speed.

“Come and watch your whore female die, Warrior,” James sneered.

Noah let out a mix of something between a roar and a battle cry, and launched
himself up the stairs.

She watched as James buried his knife in Noah’s shoulder, and then everything
faded to black.
Chapter 54

Noah found himself exactly where he had been the first time James had gotten to Abby. He was in his quarters, wearing out his nice carpet from pacing, watching Abby try to heal in his big bed.

Their bed.

Shit had gone critical. Nuclear critical. When Abby hadn’t shown up at her apartment for lunch at the appointed time, Hudson had called him, and Noah had taken off for the office, fear racing through him.

He hadn’t bothered to find a parking space, but instead pulled up to the back of the building. The recon they had done before the mission had discovered the back stairwell was rarely used.

The scene that played out in front of him had made him sick, made his bones vibrate with anger. And yeah, there was a little fear mixed in there as well.

He doubted he would ever erase the image of James slicing open Abby’s throat. That had sent Noah into a blind rage. He definitely wasn’t thinking properly when he launched himself up the stairs and caught James’s knife in his shoulder.

He hadn’t felt a thing.

He had wrestled with James, eventually both of them falling down the stairs. Noah had taken the brunt of the fall, his spine hitting a number of stairs on the way down, and landed with James on top of him, the knife a precarious few inches from Noah’s heart.

The door at the top of the stairs opened, and Cohen came flying down, stopping at the landing where Abby had passed out sitting up, her head slumped against the wall. Noah looked up at the stairs at the noise of Cohen’s pounding boots and saw his indecision—did he help Abby immediately, who frankly looked like she might be beyond help, or did he help Noah destroy the Colonist and then help Abby?

Noah answered for him, simply shaking his head, as Cohen stepped down a stair to help him. Cohen nodded and turned to Abby.

The fight had been fierce. James had been strong, much stronger than he looked. Noah had finally been able to get the upper hand and get the knife away from James. He
tossed it halfway up the stairs between him and where Abby and Cohen were, out of reach for all of them.

James had made this personal. He had come after the woman he loved not once, but twice. He had hurt her both times, so for Noah, it would be a personal kill.

After a few minutes, some curses and grunts, James straddled Noah, his hands wrapped around Noah’s throat. Noah felt the life begin to leave him as he struggled for breath. He turned his head and looked up the stairs. He couldn’t see Abby’s face, just her shoe that had fallen off her foot. He zoned in on her pink-painted toenails. What if she was dead? If she was, he didn’t want to take another breath. He didn’t want to live a moment without her.

As he focused on her foot, he took a step out of his doubts and knew with clarity that he wanted to see those toenails again, whether she decided they should be pink, green, or black. It simply didn’t matter. He didn’t know if she was going to live, but he did know that if he didn’t get his shit together, he was going to be one big slab of rotting meat and he would never know if Abby lived or died.

With renewed purpose, he found the strength within himself to push James off him. He finally wrestled James to his stomach, his knee jammed between James’s shoulder blades. Noah’s breath heaved in and out as he gathered the last of his strength.

“This is for Abby, you fucker,” he whispered, as he took James’s head in both hands and twisted it with violent force. He snapped James’s neck, the loud crack reverberating through the stairwell.

A few seconds later, all that was left of James was a black pile of ash.

Noah had turned to Cohen, who was bent over Abby, concentrating. He slowly went up the stairs, his system coming back online. His shoulder began to throb, the bumps, bruises, nicks, and cuts from the fall down the stairs introduced themselves, letting him know they would be around for a while.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he looked at Abby. He swore under his breath, not wanting to break Cohen’s concentration. If he was honest with himself, she looked dead. Her face was ashen, and the amount of blood pooling around her was insurmountable.

He studied her. He wanted so badly to see those big brown eyes open and bathe
him in the love they always held. He wanted to see her smile—the one that lit up the room and made him feel like he was nothing short of a god when he was responsible for putting it there.

“Please tell me she’s alive,” he whispered to Cohen.

Cohen nodded, and took a deep breath as he extracted his SR44 form from her.

“Barely. There’s a lot of damage, Noah. I need to go back in soon. I think we can get her home though.”

“Shouldn’t we take her to a human hospital?”

They discussed how that would play out. There wasn’t an assailant—he was nothing but a pile of ash on the floor. What would they say? They found her on the street? That would most likely put them suspect, making her life, as well as theirs, very difficult.

And what about the fact that her SR44 half had come out? “I don’t know what that would do to a human blood sample, if anything,” Cohen said tiredly.

They knew that if her DNA didn’t come back normal, she would most likely be shipped to Area 51 to find out what she was exactly, to study her, which would be torture for her. Literally.

“We need to get her back to the silo, Noah. I need to rest a bit, which I’ll do on the car ride home, and then go back to work on her.”

Noah nodded, pulled his phone out of his pocket, and call Hudson.


Hudson wasted no time in the pick-up, or on the way home.

“Tell me she’s going to be okay, Noah,” Hudson had said quietly as he sped down the road.

Noah looked down at Abby. Her head lay on his lap, her body stretched out as much as possible across the backseat.

The bleeding had stopped, but based on the amount that had coagulated on her neck, not to mention the mess on her shirt, she had lost a lot of the stuff.

“I don’t know,” Noah said, feeling his throat constrict. He took a deep breath.

“Fuck. Ask Cohen.”

Cohen shook his head. “I don’t know, Hudson. She’s . . . she’s in bad shape. But I
can’t do anything for her now. I need to rest.” He leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes.

They were silent the rest of the way.

Despite the knowledge that James was dead, Noah insisted they go back to the silo where he knew for certain they would all be safe. Or maybe it was familiarity he needed. Whatever the reason, they came back to an empty house. Noah had carefully carried Abby to the elevator and down to their floor.

He stopped pacing and looked over at her on the bed. Her skin was almost as white as the sheets. He would give anything to see a little color in them.

He hadn’t felt much of anything since leaving his planet. Well, much of anything but anger and rage and a desire to get his revenge for having his life on SR44 stolen from him.

Now he had something coursing through him he didn’t like. At all. Noah realized the tremors in his body and the wild beat of his heart was from fear. Stark, cold, raging fear. He felt the usual panic that fear brought to him, and he breathed hard to try to keep from losing it.

He simply couldn’t lose Abby. Not now. Not when he had finally let go of everything negative in his life and allowed happiness to come in and pitch a tent in his heart. He liked being happy. He liked that he didn’t have any negativity flowing through him any longer.

His knees felt like they were going to buckle, and he plopped down on the bed next to Abby. He felt a sting in his eyes.

He was crying.

Oh, shit.

He didn’t bother to wipe the tears tracking down his face as he studied Abby. He laid his hand on her chest, and . . . good news. She was breathing. It was light, but her chest did move up and down. Her heart was still beating.

He had never felt so helpless, so out of control of a situation in his whole life.

“You can’t leave me,” he said to her. “You need to come back. Now. Don’t fuck around on this one, Abby.”

He closed his eyes as he imagined her mischievous grin when she teased him, and
he wished like hell she would pop off the bed and yell, “Surprise!”

He waited for it.

He prayed for it.

It didn’t happen.

He got off the bed and began to pace.

There was a soft knock on the door, and he walked over and opened it. Cohen stood there, looking like a distant relative to road kill. He pushed his dark hair off his forehead, nodded at Noah, and went to the bed. Neptune trailed behind him.

“Any change?” he asked.

Noah didn’t bother to answer. Anyone who looked at her could tell there was no change. Neptune howled and made a flying leap for Noah’s arms.

Cohen lugged the big gray chair over to the bed and placed his hands on Abby’s abdomen. He took a deep breath, and then went still.

Minutes that felt like hours passed, as Noah absently petted Neptune.

Cohen straightened and looked at Noah over his shoulder. “I don’t sense an energy, Noah,” he said softly.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Noah yelled, panic gripping his heart, making his muscles immobile. He knew it was sheer fear that was driving him at this point, but still he continued. “What the fuck, Cohen? Her heart is beating. She’s breathing. There’s hope. Don’t go off on your energy bullshit. She’s in there!”

Noah had the passing thought that if she didn’t wake up with his bellowing she might never open her eyes again. Neptune apparently didn’t like it, and he howled again, jumping to the bed. He curled up on Abby’s chest, staring at her just as he had the last time she had been hurt.

Cohen stood and met Noah head-on, but he spoke in a calm and reserved voice, “I don’t know what to do, Noah. I can’t heal her without her energy. Nothing would happen. She has to participate in the healing with me. So cut me some slack here, my man. I’m doing the best I can at this point.”

Noah exhaled and dropped his eyes. “Just do what you can,” he said weakly.

Cohen nodded and headed for the door. “I’ll be back to check on her in about an hour.” He paused and looked at Noah from head to toe. “Noah, you’re pretty beat up.
You want a little voodoo done on you? I should take a look at that stab wound on your shoulder . . .”

Noah shook his head. He looked down at his bloody shirt and at the piss-poor patch job he had done on his stab wound with a washcloth and some tape. He hurt from head to toe, but the physical pain was nothing compared to the vice of fear gripping his chest. “No. Save your energy. Abby needs it more than me.”

Cohen left, and Noah went back to Abby. “Come back to me, Abby. I can’t lose you. Not now. We just got shit figured out, Abby. Me and you. Us. Please, get back here . . .”

Neptune howled in agreement.
Chapter 55
Two Days Later

Abby stood in the far corner of the room watching Noah loom over her body. Her heart ached for the pain she was causing him, but she had no idea how to get back into her body. She had been trying to figure it out since Noah laid her out on the bed and left her human form.

She looked down at herself again. She was wearing the same clothes when James attacked her, but she was translucent, and she supposed she could very well qualify as a ghost.

Except she didn’t want to be a ghost. She wanted to be back in her body, alive, healing, and looking forward to her future with Noah.

But how to get there? She hadn’t a clue.

She had tried everything from willing herself back into her body to throwing herself at it. She had stood in front of Noah and screamed at him, but he had literally walked right through her. Neptune seemed to register that she was there, tracking her with his big yellow eyes as she moved about the room. He just kept looking from her to her body, obviously confused. She didn’t blame him. Confusion had taken on a whole new meaning. How could she be out of her body, yet her heart and lungs were working?

It seemed the only thing she could do was stand in the corner and watch what was going on and try not to freak out. Again.

A while later, a light knock sounded on the door, and Cohen came back in with Rayner and Hudson in tow.

She watched as they talked, Rayner quiet as usual. This was the first time he had been down to see her. Or, she guessed, her body. Hudson sat on the bed, taking her hand in his. She sighed and began walking around the room.

“I see you, Abby,” a deep voice rumbled.

Startled, she looked up to see Rayner staring at her. “You can see me?” she asked excitedly. “Rayner, you can see me? Oh my God. Rayner, please help me! I don’t know how to get back into my body!”

She rushed up to him, placing herself right in front of him. “How can you see me
when no one else can?”

A small smile came over Rayner’s face. “Almost everyone has a talent, or a curse, in my case.” She heard his words, but his mouth didn’t move. How did he do that?

“Curse?”

He nodded. “I see spirits who are caught in limbo. They aren’t dead; they aren’t alive. They’re stuck, just like you are right now.”

Abby nodded as if that was perfectly normal. “What do I do, Rayner? I don’t want to be dead.”

“Let me tell the others you’re here, first. Then I think I know of a way to get you back into that body.”

She nodded.

“She’s here,” Rayner said to Noah, Hudson, and Cohen. He ran his fingers to push his blond hair out of his face.

“What do you mean she’s here?” Noah asked.

“Her energy isn’t in her body because it’s right here in front of me,” Rayner said, never taking his eyes off Abby. “She can’t get back into her body.”

Hudson stood slowly and came to stand by Rayner, who was squinting into the empty space. “Abby?” he asked quietly.

“Tell him I hear him, that I love him,” Abby said. “Tell Noah I love him too, and I want to come back.”

Rayner passed on the messages, then turned to the other Warriors. “Here’s what I think has happened,” he said. “I think Abby’s body is close to death, but her spirit, or her energy, isn’t ready to accept that, so she’s stuck.”

“What do we do to get her back in her body so I can continue to heal her?” Cohen said.

Rayner exhaled and looked at the floor. As a member of the tribes of the forests of SR44, Rayner was a little different from the rest of the Warriors. The Forest Dwellers relied heavily on their knowledge of the spiritual life on SR44, as well as healing chants that went back centuries.

“Well, my gomada, my grandmother, on SR44 could also see those trapped in-between life and death. I remember her telling me about a chant that helps the spirit to re-
enter the body, or make its way up to its final resting spot. We can give it a try, but I’m not making any promises.”

“We need to get her back,” Noah said quietly.

Abby went to him and put her hand to his face. She poured the love she felt for Noah into her hand, hoping that she could somehow let him know that she was in front of him and that she was touching him.

“She’s right in front of you, Noah,” Rayner said quietly. “She’s touching your cheek.”

Noah shut his eyes and nodded. “I feel something. It’s just a slight warmth. I wouldn’t pay any attention to it if I didn’t know she was here,” he whispered. All of a sudden he felt a slight difference, as if she had pulled her hand away.

“She’s still here, right?” Noah asked, panic seeping into his voice. “She’s not touching my face anymore.”

“She’s here,” Rayner said. “But getting her back in there,” he pointed to her body on the bed, “is going to be up to you, Noah.”

“What do you mean it’s up to me? You’re the one from the forest with all the hocus-pocus shit. It’s up to you!”

Rayner shook his head slowly, his stoic face dead serious. “No, my friend, it’s up to you. She can only get back to her body if there’s a good enough reason pulling her there. And the only reason I have ever heard of that was good enough is love. Do you love her enough, Noah? Because if we start this, and you can’t hold up your end of the bargain, she will go on to the next life, regardless of what she wants.”

Noah sank to the side of the bed, his head in his hands. He took a good look at what was in his heart. The revenge still lived; the hate still lived. However, it wasn’t as strong as it once was. And what didn’t make him feel like he was eating himself alive was love. The ache in his heart for Abby was stronger than ever, more important than ever.

He hoped what he felt for Abby was enough. Because if he lost her, his soul would be lost too.
Chapter 56
Three Weeks Later

Abby rode down the elevator with Noah. They had just completed their mating ceremony and the feast afterward. Hudson had whipped up nothing short of a masterpiece, serving beef Wellington, perfectly seasoned baby red potatoes, a salad, and a three-tiered cake, of course.

It had taken Abby two weeks to heal, despite her frequent visits with Cohen. During that time, Noah had waited on her hand and foot, making sure all of her needs were met. Gradually, she had regained her strength. She and Cohen agreed that she would have a slight scar on her neck. She figured she could look at the mark every day and think about the terrible experience it signified, or she could look at it and appreciate her life. She chose the latter.

While in bed, she had given a lot of thought to what she was going to do once she was back to her old self. She had some things she wanted to get from her apartment, and Noah had taken her there. She knew James was dead, but being in her apartment still made her uneasy. When she saw Cohen, Jovan, Hudson, Talin, and Rayner pull up in front of her building, each with a gun strapped across their chests, her anxiety eased a bit. As they fanned out, scanning the neighborhood, she had to laugh. She looked over at Noah, who stood by the door with a gun in his hand. He smiled slightly and shrugged, as if to say, “Hey, we almost lost you twice before, it ain’t happening again, sugar.”

Apparently, she still had a lot of work to do on them being overbearing and overprotective.

With her permission, Noah had called Bob and said that Abby wouldn’t be returning to work. When she was better, she would write up her piece about being a victim of a crime, but she wouldn’t be stepping foot in that building again.

She had thought about what her next endeavor would be. She couldn’t hang out all day playing pool, and Noah wanted to keep her at arm’s length from his work and the Colonists. Abby had always wanted to try her hand at fiction, so she decided to write a book. She was excited by her life. First and foremost, she was alive, she was with the male she loved, she had a good relationship with her father, and she was growing to love
all the men she lived with. And she felt their affection as well.

Abby and Hudson had talked about the ceremony.

“We really don’t need one, Hudson. I know I’m totally devoted to Noah, and he
feels the same way.”

Hudson had blanched white, then crossed his big arms across his chest. “Oh, there
will be a ceremony, Abby.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but Hudson was having none of it. “My little girl
will be properly mated. No arguments.”

A few minutes later, she knew she was on the losing end of the discussion, so she
gave in. Well, it wasn’t even a discussion. She talked and Hudson simply shook his head
or said, “no.”

“Just remember who you got your stubbornness from, doha,” Hudson had said
with a smile. “Besides, we need a party around here. Might as well celebrate something
spectacular.”

The mating ceremony had been a hybrid of a human wedding and a ceremony on
SR44. On SR44, it was customary for the father of the bride to give the mating
incantation. This was done while the mating couple was surrounded by their families, and
only done when all three moons of SR44 were full.

Hudson had spent days preparing the menu, recruiting a very willing Jovan and
Cohen into the kitchen both as helpers and taste testers. As Abby watched the flurry of
activity around the house increase as the chosen day came closer, she also got caught up
in the excitement and wanted to help. None of them would hear of it.

The ceremony was held outside the silo. It was tradition of the ceremony to
feature the color of the female’s SR44 form. Abby had chosen to wear a white flowing
sheath, not a wedding dress. She let her hair fall down around her shoulders. When she
emerged from the silo, she gasped. All the Warriors were dressed in black pants with
white silk shirts, a full moon casting a light illumination on them. They stood in a circle
of hundreds of white candles lodged in three-foot-high candelabras. Within that circle,
the Warriors stood in a semi-circle around Noah, all of their eyes gleaming the colors of
their SR44 forms, looking at her. She stepped onto the white silk runner that had been
laid out for her and walked over to Noah. As she stepped up to him, the other Warriors
closed the circle. He smiled down at her and took her hands.

Hudson began the incantation in a loud voice, and the other Warriors joined in. Hudson had translated it for Abby so she would know exactly what was being said. It spoke of love in the present, a union, honoring each other, and love transcending time. After the third time around, they stopped the incantation, and Hudson performed a traditional human ceremony. “I do’s” were exchanged, they kissed, there was a lot of shouting and back slapping, and then the party began.

It had been a wonderful night, and both Noah and Abby were thrilled with the ceremony.

When the elevator came to a halt on the bottom floor, they made their way to their quarters. Noah pulled Abby in his arms and kissed her gently. They had not made love since before the attack.

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” he asked. “We can wait, honey. Until you’re a hundred percent.”

“I’m very sure, Noah. I’ve missed being with you.” She kissed him again. “Just let me splash some water on my face.”

He watched her as she made her way into the bathroom. God, he couldn’t wait to get her naked, to feel her skin. Then he remembered their conversation weeks ago in Abby’s apartment.

A slow smile crept across his face and he went into the bathroom. Abby met his eyes in the mirror as she dried her face.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

Noah put his hands on her hips and kissed her neck. He let his hands leisurely travel to the hem of her dress, grinding his erection into her behind, his eyes never leaving hers. He lifted the skirt up, hooked his thumbs through some small silk thing that was considered underwear, and slowly went to his knees, bringing that little slit of silk with him.

“I’ve gone so long without my special delicacy,” he said in a low voice as he kissed the back of her thigh.

Minutes later, a piercing white light exploded in the bathroom. Noah came to his
feet and met Abby’s brilliant white eyes in the mirror, slowly running his hands over her bare shoulders, her skin shimmering. He ran his hands down her arms to her hands that were gripping the sink with such force it was as if she were holding on for dear life.

“I love that I’m the only one who gets to see you like this,” he whispered in her ear as he kissed her neck.

She turned to him, hitched her butt up on the sink, and kissed him deeply.

She slowly removed his shirt, her hands making their way down to his belt buckle, and he moaned as she freed him and gently stroked him. He felt his body begin to vibrate with such a force of desire it almost buckled his knees.

“You’re killing me here, Abby,” he growled after a minute.

A devious grin crossed her face, and she said, “I am?” She actually batted her eyelashes at him as if she had no idea.

“Don’t you dare play coy with me, woman. You know exactly what you’re doing.”

She laughed throatily. “Well, I certainly don’t want to kill you, so what can we do to make sure that doesn’t happen?” She gripped him tighter, stroked him harder.

“Jesus, Abby,” he hissed.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No,” he croaked. But he also knew that anymore of this, and . . .

She kissed his chest, her tongue rolling a small circle, and he was done with the teasing.

He shucked his shoes and stepped out of his pants in record time. He thrust himself into her, and stopped, his breathing labored. God, he had missed this. She was hot, wet, and wonderfully snug around him. He wondered how he had gone so long without having Abby in his life, how he had lived so long in such misery. She was his light—literally.

“Take me to bed, my lovren,” she whispered in his ear, “and let’s see just how bright—”

His lips were crushing hers before she had the chance to finish. Her legs gripped his waist, and he carried her to their bed.
Chapter 57

The next night, Noah and Abby went outside and climbed the small hillside behind the silo, finding a large rock they could sit on. Abby was sitting between his legs, her elbows hooked over his bent knees. Noah wrapped the blanket around them to keep them warm.

They talked in whispered tones, stealing kisses every now and then, so they wouldn’t disturb the peace of the moment. Both stared up into the desert sky that was full of stars and a huge full moon staring back at them. Not a cloud was visible.

“Noah,” Abby said, gesturing to the night sky, “where’s your home out there?”

Noah was about to point to the Big Dipper, and tell her to hang a left and go a zillion-and-one light years, but then stopped himself.

He hugged her closer and thought about the question. If she had asked him the question weeks ago, he would have given her directions to SR44. But as he sat there with her, he realized he wasn’t just existing on Earth any longer—he was living.

He turned her face so her eyes were just inches from his. The orange glow from his eyes illuminated her. He looked at her big brown eyes, her pale skin, and every blessed freckle.

“My home’s right here, Abby.” He kissed her gently. “Right here.”
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About the Author:

Carly Fall is a wife, a mother and a slave to Nicky the dog. She loves to laugh, thinks chocolate and wine should be considered their own food group, and wishes Christmas happened twice a year.

She is the author of the award winning and Amazon best selling series, the Six Saviors, as well as paranormal and contemporary romance.

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