

Prologue

I was completely surrounded by darkness; I couldn't feel or hear anything except my voice calling out for help. After what seemed like an eternity of trying to find my way around the dark space, I stopped and sat down. More time passed and I began to forget how I got there. I think I was supposed to feel panicky, but I felt nothing. Eventually I started to see some color fading in from the distance.

As things started coming into focus, I saw a mother yelling at her very young child. The child had red blotches all over her face and snot dripping from her nose into her mouth. The mother grabbed the child by her shoulders with both her hands. *Find peace*, I heard my voice say to her. *She is only a child; one that you love very much. Hug her and help her feel better.*

No sooner had I said those words then everything went blurry and then I was standing in a crowded marketplace. People were speaking a language I didn't understand and it was very noisy. I was watching a boy move unnoticed through the crowd when he suddenly reached in an unsuspecting man's back pocket and took his wallet. *Return the wallet to him and apologize*, I said. I don't know how he understood me because I didn't know his language any more than he knew English. The boy ran up and tugged on the gentleman's sleeve and handed his wallet back. Kindness spread across the man's face and he led the boy to a nearby café and bought him some food.

Once again, things went blurry and I ended up in new surroundings. Each time I spoke to a person, they did as I instructed and I moved on. I traveled the world several times over, helping people in all types of situations. Happiness and peace spread through me each time I made things right.

I lost track of the number of people I'd helped. One time after I helped a woman say goodbye to her dying mother, I didn't jump to a new place. The darkness started to return and I all I could hear was the beeping of the woman's machine as she lay dying in her hospital bed. As the scene faded, the beeping remained. Soon, I heard other voices speaking, possibly to the occupant of the other bed in the room.

"She should be coming around any day now, unless her body decides to stay in a coma," I heard a male voice state.

I felt sorry for that person. I wondered what it would be like to be in a coma. Then I started considering if I would be able to use my gift to talk to a person who was in a coma. Could I convince them to wake up? I decided I would try to contact the person they were talking about and see if my theory would work.

I started moving around again, trying to find the light so I could see the person when I heard a familiar voice speak. *"Did any of the new scans indicate brain damage or bleeding?"* the concerned man asked. He sounded very tired and my pity moved from the person in the coma to the man worried about her.

"No, all the scans have been absent of any damage. But because her activity has been off the charts, we had to keep her in the coma until we knew she wasn't in any danger," the first voice explained.

I was very frustrated. Why wasn't I able to see them so I could help make things right? After the hundreds of people I had already helped, why was I sent here and not be able to do anything.

"Thank you, doctor," the familiar voice said.

That voice. How did I know that voice? I wished someone would turn off the beeping so I could focus on how I could help and then move on. *Speak again*, I willed, not knowing if a blanket command like that would actually work.

The voice spoke again. *"Ash, I need you to wake up,"* he said sadly.

I struggled to try to place the voice. Ash must be the person I couldn't see. If only I could...

And then it hit me. I knew who Ash was and I knew who the voice belonged to. I yelled out as loud as I could, "Brian!" but there was no one to hear me. More memories started returning to me: the

trips on the boat, Valentine's Day, my birthday, our engagement. That was it. I was the person they were talking about, but why couldn't they hear me and why could I see them. Remembering that life made me recall the many times I'd connected with Brian when he was far away. If I had done it in my blurry memory, it was worth trying now.

Brian? I whispered, trying hard to connect with him.

I heard him sigh, but he didn't say anything or indicate he heard me. I tried again and made a connection. I could see myself lying in a bed, covered with blankets and tubes and wires strung all over the place. Brian looked like he hadn't shaved or showered in days, but he was holding my motionless hand.

Brian? I asked again and saw him jump slightly.

"Ashlyn?" he said, looking around first and then at my still body. When I didn't respond, he shook his head and rested it back on his hand on the bed.

I was more excited than I'd been since I first discovered my gift all those years ago. *I've missed you*, I told him, hoping he'd believe it was me.

His head lifted up again and he moved closer to my head. Stroking my face he whispered, "Ash, you need to wake up." He bent down and kissed my dry lips.

I longed to be able to feel his lips kissing mine, but I couldn't. I was too scared to break my connection with him to do what he asked. *No. I can't leave you. I'll fall back into the darkness and get lost again*, I told him.

"You have to try," he pleaded in a quiet voice, trying not to be heard by anyone who might be passing by. "I need you to come back to me."

I'm scared, I told him and noticed a tear roll down the cheek of myself laying in the bed.

Brian wiped the tear from my face and kissed my lifeless lips again.

I let go of my connection with Brian, and tried to focus on the memory of his lips touching mine. But the darkness started closing around me again. I couldn't hear anything anymore and I was quickly losing the little bit of light that remained. I called out for Brian, but my voice went nowhere. I squeezed my eyes shut so I wouldn't see the moment that the darkness completely engulfed me.

Chapter One – Something Old, Something New

I awoke from what seemed like the worse dream I'd ever had... again. Covered in sweat, I reached my hand out in the dark room, searching for my comfort, my Brian.

"Another dream about Rick, Ash?" he asked with concern, but you could hear the slight irritation seeping through his sleepy words.

I simply sighed, "Yes," and moved against his body, cradling myself under his strong arm. The dreams began towards the end of the summer when we were getting ready to return home from our three month vacation on the beach in California. Kara and Michael had been with us most of the summer, but they returned before us so they could pack for their big move to San Francisco to go to college. Brian and I decided to take some classes together at the local university so we could be close to both our families while our wedding was being planned.

"You've gotta let him go. He's not coming back. He's dead. End of story. You did a great thing by helping the police catch him. So please... for me... could you let it go so these nightmares stop? You really have me worried and there's nothing I can do to help."

"I'm trying. I don't know what else I can do to stop them. I don't try to think about him... it just happens." I rolled away from him, grabbing my water and some Tylenol I kept in the nightstand. Three weeks after the encounter with Rick Thompson on graduation night, I came out of my coma. While I recovered, I was visited by Detective Olson who assured me Rick was dead. The part that troubled me, and may account for my continued nightmares, was the fact that his long time missing mother appeared out of nowhere to put a stop to the autopsy and removed the corpse. No one knew what she did with it and no one questioned it... except me.

I rubbed my temples as Brian came over and massaged my shoulders, speaking in a much softer voice, "I thought you would've dreamed about taking your mid-term exams naked."

I laughed reflexively. Brian and I had been up all night studying for our tests and I had felt pretty confident that I knew the material well enough to maintain an A. But the dream rattled me to my core. "You wish," I managed, turning my head to face his, brushing my lips lightly against his. "Could you start the coffee while I shower?" I batted my eyelashes playfully.

"Awww. I don't get to join you this morning?" he pouted.

I checked the clock then shook my head. "Maybe after school." I grinned and walked slowly towards the bathroom, teasing him with playful glances over my shoulder.

He fell back on the bed, feigning death which made me giggle again. My head still hurt, but being near Brian always lessened the pain.

I walked downstairs breathing in the welcoming aroma of my favorite coffee. I was about to sit down at the table when there was a knock at the door.

"It's Emily," I whispered to Brian as I peeked out the window.

"Your brother's wife?" he asked, as confused as I was.

I hadn't spoken to Emily since my birthday when she unsuccessfully tried to get me to accept the job at CES, the company that seemed to have a hidden agenda when it came to me and my gift. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door. "Hello Emily," I said diplomatically.

Emily handed me an envelope without a word.

Confused, I took it and asked her, "What's this?"

"The previous offer to be Ms. Brown's assistant has been rescinded. The position has been filled," she explained coldly.

"Fine," I shrugged. "What's this then? Severance package?" I could hear Brian chuckle a few feet behind me.

"I was asked to deliver this to you along with the message," she stated with the same frigid tone then turned and walked away.

"Okay, bye Emily. Nice seeing you again. Tell Mark I said hi," I yelled mockingly as she stormed off. "Bitch," I muttered under my breath and turned back to Brian, pulling out a chair at the table.

"That was weird," Brian said as he brought me a cup of coffee and kissed my head. "You okay?" I just made an annoyed face as I sat down, throwing the unopened envelope in the middle of the table.

Brian picked it up and tossed it in front of me. "Aren't you the slightest bit curious what's in here?"

I shrugged and pushed it back in front of him. "Not really."

He snatched it up and opened it, dropping a white envelope on the table while keeping a packet of papers in his hands, reading it silently, looking interested in the contents while occasionally saying, "Mmhmm," without looking at me.

"Sounds like a good read. Maybe they should've recruited you instead," I commented, clearly not amused.

"They are. They want me to work for them," Brian said from behind the letter, still reading.

"What?!" I snapped and grabbed the paper from him. It was full of legalese, warning about disclosing any information about their company. "Liar," I murmured and flung the papers toward the trash.

Brian laughed and went into the kitchen, picking up the papers and setting them on the counter, bringing back a bagel to go along with the coffee I was absentmindedly spinning in front of me. How dare they contact me like this. Wasn't it enough that their lack of action nearly got me killed? I know they had the resources to prevent everything from happening, but for some sick reason, they let it play out. I almost lost Brian, my friends, and my life in the process. The company and all its employees could burn to the ground for all I cared.

Brian brushed my hair to the side and kissed my neck as he encouraged me to eat. "You need energy for your tests today. I'm going to shower and when I return, I want this bagel gone and you in a much better mood."

I reached my hand around and caressed the back of his head, trying to let the exhilaration of his closeness take me to a happier place. "Okay," I whispered.

He disappeared upstairs and I continued internalizing the packet and Emily's visit when my eyes focused on the white envelope that had fallen onto the table. I picked it up and held it to the light, trying to see what was inside as I heard Brian get into the shower. I took one more bite of food and set it down, licking the cream cheese from my fingers, my curiosity getting the better of me. As I carefully opened it and pulled out the white note inside, I immediately recognized the handwriting as being Sonya's, the only person at CES who tried to help me.

I know you're curious about what happened while you were in the hospital. I can't tell you what was done with him, but can assure you he is dead. For everyone's safety, please don't pursue this. I'm sorry I can't give you what you want. If you had come to work here, you would already know all of this. I hope someday you will be persuaded. Until then, I wish you only the best because you are truly one of the most gifted out there.

I heard the shower turn off and I quickly put the note back in the envelope and hid it under the other papers in the junk drawer. I didn't need Brian knowing this only piqued my interest in uncovering what happened to Rick. He really wanted me to let it go and so I would let him believe I did.

A gentle October breeze caressed my neck as Brian and I sat in the lawn at school, enjoying a late lunch after our midterms.

"You look much better than this morning. I'm glad you let go of everything," Brian commented after he took the last bite of his pizza.

I opened an eye to him, smirking before tilting my head back, enjoying the warmth of the sun on my skin. "Mmhmm," was my only response. Even though I was keeping Sonya's note to myself, I wasn't going to lie to him and agree with having put everything behind me. I was trying to decipher what she meant about knowing what had happened to Rick after his death when my face was suddenly cooled by someone's shadow hovering over me. I was about to complain to Brian to move out of the sun when unfamiliar words startled me.

"Ashlyn and Brian... it's about time we caught up with you."

Brian and I stood up in unison, my eyes looking between the four people. Brian grabbed my hand and pulled me slightly behind him. "And you are?" Brian questioned, squeezing my hand as I tried to make a connection to the boy who addressed us.

The boy who matched Brian in height, but significantly skinnier with dirty blonde hair extended his hand to Brian. "I'm Ken. This is Audrey," he started, motioning to the stunning brunette next to him. "And this is Alex and Morgan," he continued, introducing the couple whose hands were interweaved, standing slightly behind them.

Brian took his hand and shook it while he maintained his protective stance slightly in front of me. "How do you know our names and why have you been looking for us?" Brian stared Ken down, not releasing the grip on his hand.

A cool smirk flash across his face and Brian's eyes widened, and then suddenly released Ken's hand. "What the..." Brian exclaimed, rubbing his hand along his leg.

"You'll probably want to put ice on that or something," Ken explained nonchalantly while the other three laughed at the unspoken joke.

In the moment that Brian took to bend down for his cup, Audrey was instantly behind me, touching my hair. "She doesn't seem like anything special," she said sarcastically.

Out of instinct, I connected with her mind and commanded her to move away from me. No sooner than I broke my connection, she was laughing in front of me.

"What the hell is going on here?" Brian snapped angrily, resuming his position in front of me.

Ken calmly held up his hand. "Not here. Meet us tonight at the coffee shop down the street. We'll explain everything. If you don't like what we have to say, you can walk away then and we won't bother you again." He turned to look at me and continued, "We aren't the bad guys. And you aren't alone. Hope to see you tonight." He turned and walked away, Audrey giggling at his side, while Alex and Morgan continued in silence. I noticed Morgan take an unusually long look at Brian as she walked away.

Chapter Two – The Gang

"I don't like this, Ash," Brian said for the umpteenth time as he picked at the gauze wrapped around his burned hand. We left school right after the encounter and by the time we'd gotten back to the condo, blisters had formed on his hand.

"Stop playing with that," I scolded, smacking his other hand away from the bandage. "We know they have gifts and Ken said they weren't the bad guys. They couldn't be worse than CES and, as I recall, you're the one who encouraged me to use them."

Brian scoffed, but continued driving towards the coffee shop. I understood why he was concerned. These people that were about the same age as us, knew us, found us, and were able to take us off our guard fast enough to do real damage if they'd wanted. Brian hid it well, but I know my three weeks in a coma still troubled him.

I sighed and reached over and stroked his cheek. "It's going to be fine. Promise," I said convincingly.

We drove the rest of the way in silence, both caught up in our own thoughts. I was intrigued by Audrey's ability to jump around unnoticed. I wondered if she was fast or could teleport herself. And what were Alex and Morgan doing there? Did they have gifts, too? I felt oddly manipulated and vulnerable by the time we arrived and had to silently convince myself of the words I'd last spoken to Brian while he walked around the Jeep to open my door. "Thank you," I said quietly, still trying to calm myself.

He said nothing as he took my hand and we walked towards the door of the busy coffee shop. As Brian reached for the door, Audrey was suddenly next to us. "This way," she said, her voice serious and stern.

We followed her around back and downstairs in silence. What was waiting behind that door for us? I quickly connected with Brian before we reached the bottom of the stairs. *If things don't look right when she opens the door, don't go in. We'll run back to the car and drive away.*

He nodded his head and we waited for Audrey to open the door. But she didn't open the door; she vanished right in front of us. Brian squeezed my hand hard enough for me to let out a soft cry and we started up the stairs when we heard the door open behind us.

"You guys coming in?" Ken asked from the doorway as we reached the top step.

I could hear Audrey laughing in the room and relaxed slightly, trying to hide my irritation from Brian. "Let's just get this over with," I whispered as Brian looked to me for direction.

I grabbed my purse and rummaged through it. "Oh, here it is," I said playfully as we turned around and walked down the steps. "We were just going back to the car to look for my lip gloss," I continued, then applied it to my lips, smacking them as we reached Ken.

"Sure," Ken said, welcoming us into the dimly lit room.

I quickly scanned the faces as we entered, recognizing Audrey and Morgan, who was still attached to Alex's hand. There were six others I hadn't seen before, all of whom were staring at us.

"Why don't you guys do your own introductions? I'm not a game show host or anything," Ken stated, then sat at a wooden table, waving his hand across an unlit candle that suddenly sparked alive with fire.

I quirked my brow, but stayed quiet, and waited for someone else to start talking.

"Geez, Ken. Fine, I'm Halolani, but you can call me Lani," said a girl with beautifully tanned skin and long, dark hair. She came over to me, tilting her head to the side. "So you can really make me do anything you want?" she asked, staring thoughtfully into my eyes.

I was caught by surprise. How much did they know about me? Were they in league with CES somehow? "I... err... umm..." I stammered, not really knowing what to say.

A tall, blonde-haired boy from the far corner nimbly jumped off the table and walked over to us, a girl that looked just like him following close behind. “No, we’re not connected to CES. And we know everything we need to know about you,” he explained plainly. “I’m Deven and yes, I can read minds. This is my twin sister, Eve. She’s gifted, too.”

Eve reached for Brian’s injured hand, removed the bandage, and closed her eyes. Within moments, the blisters and burn were gone. Eve opened her eyes and smiled warmly at Brian. “All better,” she said kindly and turned to me, touching my face. “I can’t heal your wounds, but I’m very glad you’ve decided to join us.”

“We haven’t decided anything,” Brian interrupted, turning back to Ken for answers, absently stroking his healed hand. “We’re still waiting to hear what you guys want with us.”

“We want her,” Deven interrupted. “You’re just the sidekick.”

I noticed Morgan shift uncomfortably and Brian tensed. The mood was getting a little more aggressive than I’d be able to deal with, but suddenly the tension seemed to be lifted. “Chill out, Dev,” a plain looking boy with light brown hair said as he walked over to us. “I’m Simon. We are a group of gifted people like you, Ashlyn. I’m an empath. Ken’s a firestarter. Dev can read minds. Eve heals, as you’ve seen. Audrey teleports. Alex can move things with his mind. Logan erases memories. Lani can stealth herself. Khari controls temperatures and states of matter. And Chel... you’ll meet her later. She’s a little different than us.”

I stood looking around, trying to internalize everything, afraid to think or do anything. Thankfully Brian was more composed than I was.

“So what do you want with us... err, Ash? Do you guys just sit around and amuse each other with your tricks?” Brian couldn’t hide his irritation with the situation.

Ken chimed in again, relighting the candle he’d just blown out. “Not quite. We meet once a week or so and go out together to do good things with our gifts.”

I elbowed Brian in the ribs as he scoffed. “How long have you guys been doing this?” I asked, having gotten over the shock.

“A few years now, I guess. We occasionally find new people to recruit to our ‘club’. Alex and Tom were sort of our founding members,” Ken explained.

“Tom?” I asked.

“Tom is no longer with us,” Simon explained, calming the room again.

“He was killed,” Deven interjected and I heard Morgan gasp. “What?” he responded innocently as he pretended not to hear the thoughts of the others in the room.

“How many others are ‘no longer with you’?” Brian asked directly.

“A few have left us to join CES or other organizations, but Tom is the only who has been killed for his gifts,” Alex spoke up. “We’re careful about how we use our abilities and we trust each other with our lives. We are very talented, Ashlyn, and hope that you and Brian will decide to join us.”

“See, like you, we have all had to hide our gifts from people all our lives. This group lets us be who we are and to use our talents in ways that we think they were intended,” Khari said, speaking up for the first time.

I kept waiting for the bad news, but nothing I heard was making me want to leave. These people were just like me. I didn’t know them yet, but I felt a bond to them and wanted to be a part of the good they were doing. It had been too long since I’d done anything good for anyone but myself and Brian. I was about to accept their offer on a trial basis - I needed this to be okay with Brian, too – when Deven started walking towards the door.

“I’ve got other plans for tonight. She likes you guys, so have fun comparing all your gifts. See you on Saturday.” Deven nodded to Eve as he exited.

Eve walked up to me and gave me a hug, speaking in a gentle voice quite different from her brother’s. “I know you’ll love it. We’ll talk soon.” She smiled at Brian and then followed after Deven.

Brian nodded politely at Eve as she departed, but his posture was still rigid. I knew something wasn't sitting well with him, but I didn't have time to connect with him because I was suddenly dragged away from him by an invisible hand.

After I was forced into a chair across, Lani rematerialized, giggling. "Now it's your turn. Use your gift on me."

I threw an "I'm sorry" look at Brian, who was then shown to the table where Alex and Morgan had been sitting. Alex started talking to Brian. I wanted to know what he was saying, but Khari and Audrey had joined us and were anxious for me to put on a show.

"She already used it on me, Lani," Audrey bragged.

I tuned everyone else out; Ken, Logan, and Simon were at another table deep in conversation, Brian seemed to be relaxing into the conversation with Alex and Morgan, and Audrey and Khari began playfully bickering about who Deven had used his gift on first. Thinking quickly, I connected with Lani and instructed her to use her gift to blow out Ken's candle.

She disappeared before she stood up, my connection with her still intact. I watched as she moved to their table.

"*She should stay with Alex for a few weeks. Brian will be more comfortable around someone he can relate to,*" Simon was saying as Lani approached.

"*Her gift will be better suited with Dev's, though. Eve is there if anything were to happen to him. You know that's a better match,*" Ken said a moment before Lani blew out his candle and they were alerted to her presence. "*Ha, ha, Lani. Very funny,*" Ken said sarcastically.

When Lani unstealthed, I quickly left her mind, feeling like I'd been caught. She didn't seem to care, though, and giggled all the way back to the table. "That was amazing, Ashlyn!" she exclaimed, sitting on the table next to me.

The other two stopped their discussion and joined us. We talked for a long time about our gifts and experiences, my attention distracted by the serious conversations being held elsewhere in the room.

"Let's go grab some coffee," Khari suggested, grabbing her purse.

"Sure, I'm up for it," Lani agreed. "Ashlyn, you should come, too."

I looked at Brian, who was still intently listening to Alex and Morgan and decided to connect with him. "*Everything okay?*"

He nodded, but I wasn't sure if that was in response to me or them.

"*I'm going to go upstairs for some coffee. I'll be back soon.*"

I waited for a moment, then he drew a small heart on the table with his finger and I returned to my body. "Sure, that sounds good. And call me Ash," I added with a smile, standing up with my purse in hand.

"Last one there buys," Audrey declared a second before she disappeared.

I saw Khari roll her eyes and we laughed, walking upstairs together.

The drive home was strangely quiet. Brian was trying to work through things and I knew I had to give him time. Coffee with the girls was nice. Until I'd met them, only a few people knew of my gift, but none of them were talented. It was exhilarating being with people who could relate to me on the same level.

It wasn't until I was climbing into bed that I tried to talk to him. "So, what were you guys talking about?" By the time I was done with coffee, Alex and Morgan had left and Brian was sitting at the table with the other guys, staring into the flame that Ken kept igniting.

"Do you remember back at prom when you asked me if I thought I had a choice to be with you or if we were somehow forced by some external influence?"

His voice was low with a hint of sadness. I didn't like where this questioning was leading. But before I could respond, he continued. "You always told me that being around me made you stronger. I'd always thought that was because of our love for each other..." He trailed off and turned off the light.

I looked in his direction in the dark, frowning deeply, and then turned the light back on. "Have I ever given you anything less than all of me? Have I ever once treated you like a tool? I love you because of the amazing person you have always been, not for whatever messed up reason they led you to believe tonight."

I threw the blankets off and stormed out the doors to the balcony, breathing in the cool night air. Nights like these reminded me of our first nights out in the desert. Those days seemed so much simpler, yet so far gone.

For several minutes I waited for Brian to walk up behind me, kissing my shoulder, telling me that it all would be okay, but I knew that wasn't going to happen when I heard him snoring. I was too angry to sleep, so I grabbed my exercise clothes from the chair, turned off the light, and walked downstairs. I tried to leave a nice note, in case he woke up while I was gone, but when I looked at what I'd written, it said, "Went out. Have phone. BBL. Ash." I shrugged, grabbed my phone and keys, and left the condo.

I didn't get far before I heard someone matching pace with my brisk walk. I balled my fist, like I'd done to Michael all those months ago, and turned, swinging hard where a face should've been.

"Woah," Deven said as he stood up from his crouch. "Didn't peg you for the violent type."

My brows came together in confusion, my fist still clenched. "What are you doing here?"

He ignored my question. "If I hadn't known you were going to hit me, that might've really hurt both of us. Where'ya going?"

"Nowhere. What are you doing here? It's after midnight. Don't you sleep?" I asked, still annoyed he was avoiding my question.

"Don't you?" he retorted. "I can read minds, remember? I knew he wasn't thrilled about things tonight and I knew it would probably get worse before it was better. And since we're going to be working together, I just thought I'd be here."

I was furious when he started his sentence, but relaxed by the end. "Really?"

He shrugged. "Sure. They weren't kidding when they said we're a tight group. Who else do we have to be around that understands all of this crap?"

I shrugged back. "I have Brian and his sister and my best friend..." I began.

"Yeah, but none of them are gifted. So do they truly understand what it's like to be you? Or do you think there's a part of them that resents your abilities and their lack of them?" He instantly held up his hand. "Don't answer that. My sister has harbored resentment since she was told after my parents died."

I tilted my head in confusion. "But Eve is gifted, too."

Deven started walking away from me. "Are you coming or just going to stand there?" he remarked.

I slowly caught up with him, trying to keep my mistrust out of my thoughts.

"Eve is gifted, but our younger sister isn't. Why don't you think you can trust me?" he asked, still walking slowly down the sidewalk away from my condo.

"I'm not used to having anyone in my head. I don't understand you and your cavalier way of dealing with everyone. It's obnoxious."

His laugh echoed along the empty street. It was strangely pleasant. "You'd be surprised by how many people have thought that, but no one has dared say it aloud to me. I don't understand you, either. How can someone so powerful rely on someone not gifted? I'm proof that you don't need an amplifier to be among the elite."

"Wait. Amplifier? What are you talking about?"

"Your boyfriend..." he started, but then I interrupted.

“Fiancé and his name is Brian.”

“Whatever. He’s sort of like a power source for you, drawn to you by your gift. You think you need him, but most of us have never had use of one.”

“I love him for more than what he does for my gift,” I explained.

Deven shrugged. “Maybe, but you still think you need him to be good at your gig.”

“I’ve tried it without him. I completely lost my ability to use it when we broke up in the spring.” The words got stuck in my throat and unwanted tears filled my eyes.

“Maybe you were broken because you wanted to be.”

I moved to slap him, but he caught my wrist. “Your anger speaks volumes. But I’ll let you go on believing what you want for now. When you’re ready to stand on your own, let me know.” He released my wrist and walked to a car parked in a nearly vacant lot.

“Where are you going?” I asked rubbing my wrist where his hand had just been, a range of emotions swirling inside me.

“Home. I’m tired. See you Saturday.” He opened his door and was driving away before I could think to respond.

Lost in unsettling thoughts, I walked along the street a little further. I considered the possibilities that Deven presented, but wasn’t willing to believe them. Finally I made my way home to my bed, curling up on my side without bothering to undress.

My sleep was dreamless and when I awoke, it was very bright in my empty room. I knew it was late, but my mid-terms were done and didn’t have to be at school again until Tuesday. I rolled out of bed and walked downstairs, finding Brian in the spare room we’d made into an office.

“Hey,” I said from the doorway, not knowing what kind of mood he was in.

“Oh, hey, Ash. Glad you’re finally awake. I was starting to get worried about you,” he said with unusual care in his voice as he shut off the computer.

“Good. Now you know how I felt last night,” I said sourly.

“I got that impression from the note you’d left. I know you can take care of yourself, but I hate you leaving by yourself late at night.” He stood up and walked to me, wrapping his strong arms around my body.

I melted at his touch and buried my face in his chest. “So unfair,” I muttered, kissing his right peck. I breathed in deeply then asked, “So are you going to tell me what last night was all about?”

He led me to the couch and sat down next to me, searching for the right words. “You know Morgan isn’t gifted, right? She’s like me... along for the ride, I guess. They were telling me about what she does for Alex and for his gift. They called it...”

“An amplifier,” I interjected. “Deven started telling me about it, but didn’t get into the details. I’m not sure I believe it, you know?”

“Yeah, I’m just not sure. Wait. When did you talk to Deven?” Brian leaned back, creating an obvious gap between us.

“I ran into him on my walk last night.” I didn’t feel weird about my unexpected meeting until this moment. A part of me felt a little like I’d betrayed Brian.

Brian shook his head and stood up, walking into the kitchen. “I don’t know about him, Ash. I had concerns about him last night at the meeting and then he shows up here last night?” He didn’t finish his thought, but I suspected there was more bothering him.

I gazed lovingly at Brian as he tried to masquerade his frustration. An unintentional giggle escaped me as I made my way into the kitchen. “You’re very cute when you’re jealous,” I teased.

Brian grunted, but I could see he was only keeping up the act with effort. I moved behind him while he washed some dishes, tickled his ribs, and then wrapped my arms around his torso, holding him tight.

He dropped the cup he'd been washing and flicked soapy water at me. I playfully screamed and ran upstairs and onto the bed, laughing harder than I had in a long time.

Brian chased after me and we got lost in each other.

Curled up against his side, his strong arm stroking my bare side, I couldn't help but smiling. "You are and have always been incredible. I don't like when you doubt your importance to me."

"I know I'm important to you, but this whole thing about being your power source has thrown me a little," Brian admitted. "It's made me question everything."

"What did they tell you?" I asked, moving closer to him.

"Alex and Morgan have been close since they were just kids. Not always in a romantic way, but they were drawn towards each other since a chance meeting when Morgan was seven. She lived in Canada and spoke mostly French. They were visiting Niagara Falls with their families and met overlooking the falls."

"That sounds romantic," I said, kissing his side.

"When you're eighteen, yes. Not when you're seven. They were able to exchange addresses and wrote to each other frequently. Alex learned French and she got better with her English. They were best friends. When Morgan turned fifteen, she ran away from home and moved in with Alex, who was barely eighteen and living with Tom."

"Wow. That's crazy," I started.

"Wait. There's more. When she was with him, his powers got stronger. Instead of juggling things with his mind for fun, he started to move people and large objects. It's when he and Tom started the club thing. Tom worked for CES and had access to the information on other talented people. He approached a few and the club started growing. But none of the others they found had a non-gifted person that they were tied to. Through some 'investigating', Tom uncovered the theory of amplifiers and shared the information with Alex and Morgan. Morgan was obviously aware of their gifts, but the idea that she didn't have a choice really upset her. She ran away from Alex and tried to make a life of her own. She was only sixteen and didn't know anyone in the states and refused to return to her parents in Canada.

Alex struggled without her. He had to sit out during the group's outings and ended up drinking heavily. Thankfully, Tom was able to track her down within a few months. She had gotten herself into prostitution in Vegas and he had a hard time convincing her to return with him, even though she admitted last night that she felt empty when she was away from Alex."

"Like I did when we broke up," I sighed, drawing circles with my finger along his abs.

"Me, too. Don't you see? It's like we don't have a choice here and I guess I feel a little overwhelmed," Brian admitted.

"And trapped?"

"In the moment... yes, a little trapped. Like my future was not my own, that it was chosen for me and it's dependent on your choices." He stopped for a moment, but I knew he wasn't done. "I felt used, Ash."

"And now? Now that you've had time to think about things some more, do you still feel that way?" I moved away from him, sitting on my knees towards the foot of the bed, allowing him space to tell me the truth, not some watered down version that would be easier for me to accept.

He folded his hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. "At this moment?" He paused, then propped himself up on his elbows, looking at me with an unreadable expression. "I think you just want me for great sex."

My eyes widened and he laughed before lunging at me, knocking me backwards.

I screamed and playfully beat his back while he smothered me with kisses. "Brian Nathaniel Turner! You're awful!"

He rolled off me with a goofy grin. "You don't mean that. And I'm sorry for how I acted last night. It's just a lot to take in, you know? I mean, I saw how excited you were to be there last night. I know it's always been hard for you having to hide a big part of yourself. I guess I hoped that I was enough for you." He shrugged.

I leaned towards him, touching his cheek, looking in his eyes. "You are more than I have ever dreamed. If I had to give up my gift forever to show you how important you are to me, I'd do it in a heartbeat. I love you."

"I love you, too, Ashlyn. Just be patient with me, okay? I just need a little time to adjust to the idea of being your sidekick," he explained with a smirk.

I rested my forehead against his. "You know, Deven doesn't believe that we need amplifiers, that it's a choice that we tie our powers to a person. I need you for so many reasons, the least of which is my powers. Don't ever forget that, please?"

"I could care less what Deven thinks. But I'll try not to forget what you said." He kissed me softly. "Ready for lunch?"

Chapter Three – Rookie

We arrived at the bar fifteen minutes early, still unsure of exactly how things were going to play out. Ken emailed me a link for tickets for the concert being held inside, but it was a twenty-one and over show and there was an amazing lack of instructions with the link.

"It said to meet at the show at eight," I said, checking the time on my phone. It was still a few minutes before eight, but no one else was anywhere in sight. I paced back and forth while Brian calmly leaned against the car he'd bought me while I was recovering in the hospital.

"Give them a few more minutes and we'll check inside, OK? Just please calm down. You look guilty when you're pacing around like this. The bouncer won't let you in if he sees you like this, even if you use your gift on him."

I glared at the grinning Brian. "Not funny," I replied, looking at my phone again.

Suddenly something was looped through my arm, tugging me towards the door. The shock wore off as soon as I heard the giggle. "Lani. You've gotta stop scaring me like that," I complained.

Brian was already walking towards me before Lani reappeared. "What are you guys doing out here? Everyone's been inside for half an hour or so."

"Fantastic," I sighed, intertwining my fingers with Brian's, approaching the line to get in.

"Got your tickets? Good. We're hanging out near the bar. See you inside," she said cheerfully, cloaking herself and going back inside while we made our way to the end of the line.

"Don't be nervous," Brian whispered as we approached the door. "Ready to work your magic?"

I made a face at his ill-placed joke and then focused on the bouncer, easily connecting with his mind. *Take their tickets and let them inside.* The man took the tickets from Brian and allowed us to go in, no questions asked.

Brian grabbed my hand again, lifting my fingers to his lips to kiss as we made our way to the group gathered at the end of the bar. *I love you*, I spoke only to Brian just before we reached the jovial group.

"Hey," Ken said from the bar, taking another sip from his beer.

"Hi," I said nervously, looking around at the large crowd mulling around before the concert started.

Audrey suddenly appeared next to me, handing me a glass of clear liquid. "Here, drink this and try to relax. This shouldn't be too bad tonight."

"Thanks," I said and took a drink from the glass without smelling it first. My eyes went wide and started watering as I coughed uncontrollably, setting the glass on the counter.

Brian was rubbing my back while I heard others laughing around me. "Try to calm down and take a deep breath," he whispered.

I nodded and breathed in deeply, coughing a couple more times before feeling in control of myself again. I gripped the edge of the bar, composing myself before turning to face everyone. The world spun for a moment longer than it should have, but Brian had a strong hold on me, so I didn't fall. "I'm guessing that wasn't water," I finally said. I saw a few grins and felt a little less embarrassed.

"Nice one, Audrey, but maybe you should wait to get her drunk until *after* we're done here," Alex said as he came to stand on my other side. "Glad you made it. You're going to be with Morgan and me tonight. Just act natural, enjoy the show, and if things start happening, we'll step in. Everyone set? Where's Dev?"

"... and just think about me, and I'll find you after the show," Deven said to an attractive woman who was slightly taller than him with her stiletto heels on. He kissed her aggressively, then smacked her ass, shooing her away. "Hey guys," he addressed us, then turned to Ken who hadn't spoken anything aloud since he greeted us. "I thought you said she was working with me and Eve. Fine, but I don't see

how that makes a difference. Come on, Eve.” I smiled at Eve as she followed behind her brother and disappeared into the crowd.

“Good to see some things never change. Dev always gets what he wants, doesn’t he?” Khari mused.

“You’ve never been asked to make an emergency call to erase anyone’s memories because of his ‘winning’. I hate those calls,” grumbled Logan.

“Okay, let’s just stay focused. Ashlyn and Brian are going to be with Alex and Morgan in the back,” Ken began.

“I’m by the stage. Bye,” Audrey said and disappeared from the group.

“Dev and Eve are patrolling the middle of the crowd. Logan and Khari, I’d like the two of you to stay by the bar.”

“Aye, aye, capt’n,” Logan said, taking a seat and ordering a drink from the female bartender.

“I’m going to go up with Audrey,” Ken continued.

“Of course,” Lani mumbled just loud enough for me to hear.

“Lani, I know you hate it, but could you be on bathroom duty tonight?”

She sighed and cloaked herself, leaving without a word.

“Simon will be here later. He couldn’t get off work tonight,” Ken explained more to me than the others.

“Okay,” I responded, then my attention was diverted to Alex who began explaining in detail what to look for, how to communicate with the others, and what he expected from the crowd.

The four of us made our way to the back of the room and the concert began. I was too anxious to enjoy the music, but Brian seemed to be relaxing and enjoying the show. Alex would occasionally point out people in the crowd and check his phone for texts, relaying the information from the others to me. “You’ll be able to connect with anyone on the team and make these phones obsolete when you get up to speed,” he joked.

Morgan stayed close to Alex, but seemed to be enjoying the concert like Brian was. I caught glimpses of Deven, Audrey, and Simon, when he finally arrived. But there didn’t seem to be any issues for us to help with, aside from the glass that Alex slowed as it fell so it didn’t shatter on the ground.

“Some nights are slower than others,” Alex explained as we migrated to the bar after the band was finished. “I was hoping for some action to break you in tonight,” he joked.

I stood with Brian while the rest of the crew joined us, ordering drinks and laughing with each other. I noticed Eve sitting alone at the end of the group and walked over to her, leaving Brian to his football discussion with Simon.

“Can I sit here?” I asked as I pulled out the barstool next to her.

“Of course,” she said kindly and then stared back at the sweat running down her glass.

“Dr. Pepper, please,” I asked the bartender when she had served everyone else. “I like your outfit,” I said to Eve, trying to engage her.

“Thanks,” she smiled momentarily, but continued looking at her glass. “How’s Brian’s hand? I hope I didn’t do a poor job. Sometimes if I don’t have my focus, I don’t fix things all the way.”

“It was perfect,” I said, then took a drink from my glass. “I was wondering... you don’t have to answer if it’s too personal. But what’s it like to have someone close to you be gifted?”

She laughed and pushed her drink forward, swiveling in her chair to face me. “I don’t know what to compare it to. Dev and I have always had each other to understand what it’s like. But we had the other side of it, too, having to keep it from our sister and parents. I guess it we had that part easier than the rest of you. But Dev liked to cause problems and get into fights. He has made things a little more challenging for me at times.”

“Wow. I can imagine. Kinda. I guess not really.” I laughed uncomfortably. I guess there were benefits of growing up without anyone knowing. I had always looked at it as a curse and a punishment, of sorts.

“You have a brother. You probably understand a little,” she said and touched my hand unexpectedly.

I tried to not show how startled I felt by that. I wasn’t used to people touching me, aside from Brian and Kara, of course, when she lived here. I felt my face frown as I thought about her and how much I missed her. We wrote each other at least every other day when she first moved. It’s been three weeks since I’d heard anything from her, though. I made a mental note to write her when I got home.

Eve took her hand from mine. “Sorry,” she said quietly and turned back to face her drink.

I let go my thoughts and smiled at her, placing my hand on her forearm. “Please don’t be. I was just thinking about how much I missed my best friend.”

“You really should’ve emailed her sooner,” a voice interrupted from behind us. “Three weeks is a long time. And you call yourself her friend.” Deven scoffed playfully and pulled up a barstool between us.

“Didn’t realize I was thinking that so loud,” I said sarcastically, grabbing my drink again, thinking only about the bubbles floating to the top.

Deven laughed.

“See what I have to put up with?” Eve asked playfully. “We were having a private conversation, Dev.”

Deven looked around and then back to her. “You’re in the middle of the bar. There is no ‘private’ here. Besides, there’s something more interesting going on than your little conversation. There’s going to be a fight outside here soon. Pack up your stuff. It’s time to get to work.” He stood up and walked over to Ken and Alex, relaying the same information.

“Sounds like some fun outside. Let’s go check things out,” Alex started. “Ashlyn, stay with me. The rest of you spread around and see if we can dissipate this before it gets out of hand. The goal is no weapons, no cops. Got it? Eve, I’d like you to hang back with Morgan and Brian for this one. They are the only ones you need to worry about tonight.”

Eve nodded, but I could see the scowl on Deven’s face. I wasn’t sure if it was because she wouldn’t be with him or because she had to stay with the amplifiers, who he obviously objected to.

I smiled and kissed Brian on the lips, holding it for a moment longer than necessary. “Don’t worry. This isn’t a big deal.”

His forehead touched mine momentarily and then he stepped back. “You’d better get going or you’ll miss out on the fun,” he said with a smile.

I ran to catch up with Alex; the others were already outside in positions around the parking lot. Deven took stride next to us, startling me when he started talking.

“See that guy over there? He’s pissed that his girlfriend was looking at the guy over there.” When he pointed with his head at a large man leaning against a Mustang, unaware of the assault coming, a lock of his blonde hair swept across his forehead, distracting me long enough for him to be aware. He gave me an odd look as he brushed it aside and nodded at the unspoken directions Alex was texting to the others.

“Okay, to catch you up, Ashlyn, you are going to focus on diverting the disgruntled boyfriend. He’s fairly drunk, so we’re here if you can’t convince him to leave peacefully. Dev, keep a mental ear on him and provide Ashlyn with insight that will help her adjust her strategy. Simon is already in position, working on soothing the mood over there. But like I said... alcohol complicates things. I’m going to work on getting his keys so when things do calm down, he doesn’t get in his car and drive home drunk. Lani will be close by if anything physical goes down, she can step in.”

I was trying to calm myself by taking slow, deep breaths. I'd never strategized like this before using my gift. It was usually impromptu and without an audience waiting for me to fail so they could jump in. I looked back over my shoulder and saw Brian along the wall with Morgan and Eve who were casually talking.

Deven leaned close to my ear and whispered, "You don't need him for this. You can do it."

I nodded and walked next to Simon, benefitting from his calming. I stared at the man who was still working himself up, aware that his girlfriend was escalating things to a dangerous level. He raised his hand to slap her and I immediately connected with him, stopping him just before he connected with her face. Furious, she stormed off with her friends, leaving him to turn his unsoothed rage on the other guy.

Go home for the night. Sleep this off. It's not worth going to jail, I urged him, but he reached into his car and pulled out a wooden bat.

I jumped back into my mind. "It's not working. I can't get him to stop," I said urgently.

"It's okay, Ashlyn. I got his keys and we can stop him physically before he makes it over there," Alex explained and took out his phone.

"Wait. No, Alex. She can do this." Deven turned to me and gently took hold of my forearm. "I think I can talk to her when she's connected with him and help her break through his thoughts."

"You have thirty seconds or we're stepping in," Alex said.

I immediately connected with him again, the bat in his hand beating angrily against his other hand.

"He's only thinking about beating the crap out of that guy. Get him to think about the girl."

It was odd to hear a voice in my head when I was connected with someone. But I knew I didn't have much time. I didn't want to fail my first time out with everyone. *She only has eyes for you. Put the bat down and go make love to the woman you love so much.*

The man paused and I could see from his perspective the man he was going after talking with Audrey. The bat fell to the ground and he turned around, calling after his girlfriend.

"You did it," Deven said before I was back in my own mind.

I severed the connection with the drunk man and a little laugh escaped my lips. I'd almost forgotten the euphoric feeling I got from using my gift for good.

"Good work, guys," Ken said as he approached us with the others.

"How'd you know that would work, Dev? That you could communicate with her when she was connected to someone?" Alex asked while pulling the car key off the man's keychain.

"I didn't know for sure it'd work, but I've been paying attention to Ash's thought patterns and thought I might be able to continue to communicate with her. It didn't work when I wasn't touching her, so I thought I'd try physical contact."

I didn't recall telling him he could call me Ash, but I suppose after listening to my thoughts, he knew that's what I preferred people to call me. "I didn't expect it to be that hard. I think it helped that Audrey was talking to the other guy and that Simon was trying to calm him down at the same time," I admitted.

"That's why we're a team, Ash. We all have parts to play. Everything isn't straight forward, but we're here working together to get the job done," Lani explained, revealing herself right next to Ken.

Deven finally released my arm and stepped away as Brian came to stand next to me, wrapping his arm around my waist. I relaxed into his touch, leaning into him.

"Who's up for a late dinner?" Simon asked above all the side conversations that had erupted.

"Sounds good to me," Brian said unexpectedly.

"Sure," I resounded.

"I'm up for Denny's," Deven said, startling more than just me.

"Don't you have a woman thinking about you?" Khari teased.

Deven shrugged. "There will be others."

I caught a look that Eve threw at Deven, and I'm assuming it was followed by a few thoughts. He just smiled at her.

"Okay. Last one there buys," Audrey said playfully, then disappeared.

"She's so cheap," Ken complained and took off for his truck.

Everyone else disbursed, Brian and I walking at a slow pace back to my car. "That was different," he said once the doors of the car were closed.

"I didn't realize that alcohol altered things so much. I didn't think I was going to be able to do it," I admitted.

"I never doubted you," he said kindly and squeezed my leg.

Chapter Four – Amped

The group's outings continued once a week and I quickly found my niche with their operations, becoming the valuable team mate they'd been hoping for. Deven and I worked together, but it was his sister that I spent time getting to know. Brian and I also hung out with Alex and Morgan a lot. Brian relaxed more and more as he got closer with Morgan. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy, but I was getting close with the other gifted people, so I didn't have much to justify those feelings.

When I wasn't consumed in the group, the wedding took the forefront. My simple wedding was getting blown out of proportion because I'd agreed to allow Brian's sister, Stephanie, to help the moms coordinate everything.

On one evening in early December, I arrived home after having dinner with mine and Brian's mom. Stephanie was there, too, and the amount of bickering between the three of them over the flower the men should wear almost pushed me to the point of eloping.

"Brian?" I asked to an empty house.

I found his note on the counter, explaining that Simon had picked him up to go to the bar to watch a football game. I made a face and tossed it in the trash, grabbing a Dr. Pepper from the fridge, and settling into my favorite spot on the couch to catch up on some of my recorded shows.

The characters on the screen were about to uncover a dead body when my phone rang, causing me to jump up off the couch. "Hello?" I asked, trying to compose myself.

It was Eve, and even though she wasn't Kara, she was a good friend that I'd grown close to. "Hey, Ash. I'm in the neighborhood. Could I stop by for a few?"

"Of course," I immediately responded. "Brian's out with Simon and I'm just relaxing."

"I know," she said and then I heard a soft knock at the door.

"That was fast," I grinned, opening the door for her.

"Thanks," she said, putting her phone away. "Sorry to show up like this, but I needed to talk to you before I went home and Dev got in my head."

"Oh? This sounds serious. Let's sit down. Can I get you a drink?"

"No, I'm fine," she said, sitting down on the couch.

"What is it that you don't want Dev to know about? Got his Christmas gift today?"

She sighed and stood up, walking over to the fireplace where my pictures of Brian and me were placed. "What was it like to find him?" she began, studying the pictures closely.

"It was strange. My stomach was in happy knots, I felt safe in his presence, and mostly, I felt like I could trust him with my secret. I'd never told anyone about my gift before I met him. Why? What's going on?"

She turned around with a smile on her face. "Oh, Ash. I think I found my amplifier. His name is Ethan and he just started working at the coffee shop. I've never felt like this around anyone."

Her face was glowing with happiness. "How long have you known him?"

"I just met him tonight. He made me the BEST mocha I've ever had." She was practically singing her words.

"Did you actually talk to him aside from thanking him for the best cup of coffee?" I inquired.

"Well, no. But that's why this is so strange. I know he felt it, too, because there was a pause when he handed me my drink. Oh, Ash. I don't know what to do," Eve complained.

"What's the problem? Everything you told me sounds really great. You should ask him out for a bite to eat. You can always bring him over for dinner with us sometime," I smiled.

Her body changed; her shoulders dropped, her face looked sad, and she came back to the couch, flopping down dramatically. "Hello? Do you *remember* who my brother is? Mr. Anti-Amp, I-Can-Do-Everything-Myself Guy. He's not going to accept this, best case scenario."

“And worst case, he’ll hunt him down and kill him,” I said, only half joking. “Yeah, I see your point. I think you need to find out for sure if he’s really the one, Eve. Until then, avoid Dev.” I grinned, trying to get her to relax after my murder suggestion.

“Can I stay here?” she begged, her big blue eyes pleading with me.

“You know you’re always welcome here. I have a better idea, though. Let’s go back there and find out if this is real or if you were just really thirsty for coffee,” I grinned.

The smile returned to her face and she practically ran to the door. “Come on,” she pleaded as I got my purse and phone.

“Calm down. I think maybe I should drive.” I sent Brian a text and drove us to the coffee shop.

“That’s him,” Eve whispered, looking in the direction of the brown-haired barista. He was about my height and trim, probably casually worked out or played sports on the weekend.

I walked to the counter and started to order a tea, but Eve spoke over me, “Two mochas.”

I rolled my eyes, but didn’t correct the order. If she was staying the night, I might need the caffeine to keep up with her. She was fidgeting around so much while we waited; I had to use my gift to get her to calm down.

Relax and take a deep breath, I instructed.

I felt her body loosen and heard her breathing more steadily until he spoke, calling her name for the order. Her body got jittery and she just stood there smiling at him. I couldn’t quite read the expression on Ethan’s face, but it looked like he felt something, too.

After a moment of looking between the two, I stepped up to the counter and got the drinks.

“Thank you,” I offered Ethan and walked with the coffees to an empty table towards the back.

Come sit down, I instructed, connecting with the still gawking Eve.

She snapped out of her daze and joined me at the table. “What do you think?” she asked, wrapping her hands around the cup that he’d just prepared for her.

“I don’t know. I’ve only experienced it with Brian. I couldn’t tell for sure.” I didn’t want to get her hopes up.

She lowered her head and voice, keeping an eye on Ethan. “Well, do your thing. Make him come here and talk to me.” She was nodding, trying to encourage me.

My eyebrows came together in a frown. “I won’t use it on him. If he’s really the one, then this has to happen without my influence. Look. There’s no one in line. Just go talk to him. Ask him if he’d like to get something to eat after he’s off work.”

“You think I should?” She was biting her lip nervously. “How about you make me. Then I won’t be so nervous.”

I shook my head again. “I’m not getting involved like that. Go talk to him or I’m going to drive you home and you can deal with Dev without knowing for sure.” I smirked.

“You’re so mean, Ash,” she scolded as she walked back to the counter, her mocha in her hand.

Curiosity got the best of me and I connected with her to observe the conversation.

“Is something wrong with your coffee... Eve?” he asked.

Her eyes lit up again when he said her name, but I think he read it off the side of the cup.

“Oh no. You make the best mocha I’ve ever tasted,” she beamed and then stood there in awkward silence.

“Oh, Okay. Good to hear. I’ll have to remember to put that on my resume,” he joked.

Eve giggled and then fell into another silent state.

Ask him, I finally told her.

“Oh, umm, I was wondering if you’d like to get something to eat. When you’re done working. With me. I mean eat with me when you’re done here.” Her lack of composure was surprising to me. I wonder how much I acted like that around Brian in the beginning.

Ethan laughed. *"I knew what you meant. Thanks for the invite, but I have a girlfriend."*

"Oh, right. Of course you do. Well if you ever..." she trailed off and was already walking swiftly back to the table.

I broke my connection as she sat down in the chair opposite the first one, facing the wall. "I'm such an idiot," she moaned into her hands. "Why'd you make me do that?" she asked furiously.

I held up my hands. "I didn't make you do anything. I know it's not what you wanted, but at least you know..."

My words were cut short by the sound of someone clearing their throat. I looked up to see Ethan standing behind Eve. With a swift kick to the shin, she was alerted and turned around to face him.

"On second thought, I do need to eat. I'm off in thirty minutes. Can you wait?"

Eve smiled and nodded, barely able to contain her excitement long enough for him to walk away. "Oh my God, Ash! Can you believe it? He's got a girlfriend, but he's going to go out to eat with me."

She held on to the last "e" and it made me laugh. "And since you didn't drive here, you'll have to get a ride with him," I pointed out.

Lani and Khari sat down at the table just in time to hear what I'd said.

"Him? A ride? Eve has a date?" Lani teased.

"With a guy who has a girlfriend, too," I added.

"Wow, Eve. I didn't expect that from you. Taking dating advice from your brother now?" Khari said curtly.

Eve looked to me for help. "Do you want me to tell them, even if we don't know yet?" I asked cryptically.

"Tell us what?" Lani demanded.

"You've already said too much. Now you have to tell us," Khari insisted.

"Go ahead," Eve said, standing up from the table, her eyes on Ethan. "I have to use the restroom."

Lani and Khari followed Eve's gaze, then waited for her to disappear into the bathroom before grilling me.

"It's that barista back there, right?" Khari guessed.

"Oh, he's cute," Lani said, Khari nodding in agreement. "But she's not usually like that, pursuing someone who's already involved. What gives?"

I leaned in, speaking in hushed tones. "You have to swear to keep this to yourself for now. And try to avoid Dev." I took a deep breath, building their anticipation. "Eve thinks he's her amp."

Both their jaws dropped followed by smiles. "Aw, no way. She's so lucky," Lani declared.

"What do you think, Ash. You're an expert in this area. Is he?" Khari asked.

I shrugged. "Not really sure. He turned her down when she asked, but then ended up here agreeing to it. There was something there, but I don't know if he's the one or not. We'll all just have to wait and see, I guess."

"Dev is going to flip!" Khari said with a laugh.

Eve returned, making a sour face at Khari's remark. "I know. I just need to know for sure before he finds out. So please try to avoid him until I can talk to him."

"Might be hard seeing we're all going out two nights from now," Lani pointed out.

"I know," Eve groaned, returning her hands to her face. "I'll need every one of those forty-eight hours to figure out how to deal with him."

"I'm going to grab a drink," Khari said. "Need anything?"

"If you mean you're going to go check him out, count me in," Lani said with a smile, leaping from her seat.

Eve groaned and buried her face further in her hands while I rubbed her back. "This isn't a big deal. Go out with him tonight and see what happens. You're welcome to stay the night at my house. And if we need to, we'll come up with a way to deal with Dev."

"Thanks, Ash," she muttered from behind her hands.

"Oh, Eve. He's really hot. I hope he's it for you," Lani said, sitting back down at the table.

Eve just groaned again.

"Hey, so I thought I'd instigate a little... see if I could get a better feel for this guy," Khari said as she sat down. "So I asked him if he wanted to go to the movies with me sometime."

Eve's face was bright red as it emerged from behind her hands. "You WHAT?! He watched you come sit down over here. He's going to think I'm messing with him. Ugh! Why couldn't you just leave it alone?"

"Relax, Eve. I didn't really do that," Khari said as she turned her hot coffee into a frozen drink, but added, "But I did ask if he had a girlfriend." She casually took a taste of her newly created drink, looking satisfied with her work.

Eve sat in mortified silence.

"Well, what did he say?" Lani asked.

"He said, 'It's complicated.'"

I smiled. "Interesting response."

"It doesn't mean anything," Eve sighed, but I could tell by her tone that she felt better about the situation.

Five minutes before Ethan's shift was over, Eve disappeared into the bathroom with Khari. Five more awkward minutes after he was off, Eve emerged.

"Ready?" Ethan asked as his eyes not moving from hers.

"Yes," Eve responded with a warm smile and the two left the coffee shop together in silence.

"Good job," I said to Khari as she returned to the table.

"What can I say? I did the best I could in a public bathroom. So, you think he could be it?"

I shrugged and hooked my purse on my shoulder. "We'll know soon. I'm going to head home and wait. See you guys Saturday."

"Night Ash," they said in unison.

Brian was a little less than sober when I got home, so my discussion with him was brief. He fell asleep fully dressed. I turned off the light, closed the door, and walked downstairs to wait alone for Eve to return.

It was after two in the morning when I was woken up on the couch by a text from Eve making sure it was still okay for her to sleep at my house.

After replying that it was, I walked quietly upstairs, brushed my teeth, and got in my pajamas. I was barely down the stairs when I heard a quiet rapping at the door. "Welcome back," I said, suppressing a yawn.

Eve walked in, set her purse on the couch, then turned and hugged me. It was so sudden that I nearly fell to the ground.

"Oh, Ash," she gushed. "I never understood what you and Brian had until now. I could *feel* myself getting stronger just by being near him."

"So, you think he's your amplifier?"

"I have no doubt. I've always had Dev to talk to, but this was something different."

I walked with her to the couch, sitting on one of my legs, facing her. Her porcelain face had a glow and I knew exactly how she felt. At least the connection part. Having to face her brother was another issue that I didn't have experience with.

Eve talked in detail about everything that happened from the drive to dinner, to ordering, what they ate, all their conversations, and finally to their first kiss when he dropped her off. I had conflicted emotions. While I was very happy for her, I was also incredibly worried about what Deven would say and/or do. In the weeks I'd been working with him, we'd gotten very good at using our talents together. But he never failed to tell me how much I didn't need Brian.

"Did you tell him about your gift?" I asked hesitantly. I remember having told Brian about mine before we even went on our first date. But that was because he'd seen me use it and asked.

"No, I didn't know how to bring it up and I was afraid I'd scare him away." She sighed, leaning back against the cushion, hugging a throw pillow.

"Yeah, I can understand that. I was afraid Brian was going to leave me stranded in the desert when I told him. But he had a surprisingly open mind about it. Maybe you could talk with him and Morgan and get their perspective on things before you open up to Ethan?" I suggested.

"Hmm... that's a really good idea. You don't think Brian would mind me talking to him about it in the morning? I have to deal with this before Dev finds out and I'm running out of time."

"I don't think he'll mind if he's not too hung over," I chuckled. "What about Ethan's girlfriend. What's he going to do about her?"

"He didn't go into specifics, but basically admitted that he felt strangely drawn to me and couldn't imagine going back to her. I feel a little bad about that, but it's not like I intended this to happen." She yawned and relaxed into the cushion.

"Let's get you to bed. It's been a long day," I said with a yawn, escorting her to our guest room.

"Thank you, Ash," she said as she laid her head on the pillow.

"Sweet dreams," I smiled and turned off the light.

I walked downstairs after ten the next morning. Eve was talking excited to Brian while he mulled over a cup of coffee. "Good morning," I said, kissing Brian on the neck. I stayed behind him, rubbing his shoulders while Eve continued recapping the night.

"When are you supposed to see him again?" I asked.

"We're meeting for lunch today before he has to work. So, do you think I should tell him?" Eve looked between us with expecting eyes.

In unison, I said, "Yes," and Brian answered, "No."

Eve's expression changed from jubilant to confused and maybe a little hurt. "No?" she asked cautiously.

I suspected Brian was joking, but his response was completely serious. "You should probably cancel lunch today, too, and any other plans you have with him."

I smacked his arm. "Knock it off. That's not very nice."

He continued speaking without looking at me. "Do you think it's nice to draw someone into this world? Even if you keep him sheltered from most of it, he's still going to find out someday and feel used."

I took steps back, steadying myself on the couch, trying to hold back my tears. "Is... is that how you feel?"

Brian turned around to face me. "Not on most days, but sometimes... yes. I mean, I see you working with Deven and it's like you don't even need me."

"Where is this coming from?" I managed.

"And then there's Morgan. Look at what happened to her when she found out what she was. Look, I'm only suggesting that maybe Deven's right. Maybe you guys don't need amps to be strong and it might not be in this guy's best interest to be a part of this," he said flatly.

"Oh, I see," I whispered and walked upstairs.

Chapter Five – Downward Spiral

“Ash? What do you think?” Mom prompted while the wedding planner and Brian’s mom waited my response.

“Oh, um. Sure. Sounds fine,” I responded without any idea what I was agreeing to. It was Saturday afternoon and I was exhausted from studying for final exams, from trying to help Eve come up with a plan to tell her brother about Ethan, but mostly from the stress of being at odds with Brian. We’d barely spoken since his advice to Eve about letting go of Ethan before he got dragged into our world. Eve, of course, didn’t listen and was with Ethan almost all of Friday. Not that I blamed her. Remembering back to happier days, I couldn’t have let Brian go. Even now with our strained relationship, I couldn’t imagine my life without him.

“I think I have everything I need for today,” the woman said, shaking Mom’s hand. “We’ll see you after Christmas for the dress fitting.”

“Sounds good,” I managed with a forced smile.

“Are you feeling okay, sweetie?” Mom asked when we were outside.

“Yeah, just exhausted from studying, I think,” I explained, unlocking my car. “I think I’m going to skip lunch and go take a nap.”

Mom kissed me on the forehead. “Okay, Ash. Hope you feel better. Call me after finals so we can make Christmas plans.”

I nodded and waved then drove away. But instead of going inside when I got home, I went for a walk. Clouds had rolled in and a cold breeze was blowing, making the day mirror my mood. I hadn’t brought a sweater, but I didn’t care. I just wanted time alone; I needed things right with Brian.

I walked for a while and ended up at a park. Finding a vacant bench near the water, I sat down, pulling my knees to my chest and hugging my legs. Unable to come up with any great ideas to make amends with Brian, I connected with a bird that had been circling the lake. Peace filled me as I enjoyed the effortless flight, letting the problems of the moment start drifting away.

“*I can’t help you with this one,*” I heard a voice say and knew it was Deven, the only person who could communicate with me while I was connected.

I ignored him a little longer, returning to my body when the bird started diving for its meal. “That’s the point,” I said sourly, still holding my legs. “I’m not really in the mood for company right now.”

“Too bad,” he said and finally took his hand away. “Why’s my sister avoiding me? I know she’s been staying with you,” he asked outright.

I stood up and started walking away. “Not now, Dev. I really can’t deal with this at this moment,” I said, thinking only about the meeting with the wedding planner.

Deven jogged in front of me, putting his hand on my upper chest to stop my forward momentum. “I could care less about the problems you’re having with your boyfriend. Everyone’s avoiding me. So you’re the lucky one who is going to tell me,” he said, narrowing his eyes at me.

“Or what?” I demanded, glaring in his searching eyes. I knew he was trying to read my thoughts and I wasn’t going to let him in my head.

He seemed to consider his options then grabbed the back of my head, kissing me fiercely.

Confusion swept over me, but as soon as I stopped spinning from the unexpectedness of his embrace, I connected with his mind and told him to stop.

“It doesn’t work on me, Ash. I already knew what you were going to make me do,” he said still holding my face to his.

“Let go of me,” I said through gritted teeth, pushing on his chest.

“Give me what I want,” he demanded, not letting me go.

I didn’t have any other choices. “Fine, but let me at least get Eve here to tell you.”

"I'm not letting you go until I have my answers, so take all the time you need. I'm enjoying this," he grinned.

I growled low, pulling my phone out of my pocket. "Eve, I need you to meet me at the park by my house. I've got Dev here," I said, being as vague as I could. He was searching my eyes and presumably reading my thoughts, trying to get anything from me. But I was just as stubborn as he was and just kept thinking, "I hate you," over and over.

"I know you don't mean that. You have thought it too many times what a great team we make."

I chuckled darkly. "That didn't mean I wanted you to assault me," I complained. I closed my eyes and connected with Eve. "She's pulling into the parking lot. Can you release me now?"

"Not until I have my answers," he repeated with a sadistic grin. Then his features changed and released me almost immediately.

I knew Eve was near and she was probably repeating the story she intended to deliver to him over and over. "Deven!" I raced after him. "Please. Just listen!" I stopped running and connected with him. *Come back and sit with me. Hear her out. Please?* I knew I couldn't manipulate him like everyone else, but I thought maybe if I asked, he would consider my words. I closed my eyes and replayed the whole story in my head, hoping he'd hear my thoughts, including the part where Brian suggested Eve not pursue it. When I opened my eyes, Eve and Deven were under a tree having a discussion. Well, it looked more like Deven lecturing Eve. "I guess he didn't hear me," I said quietly and walked back to the bench, throwing rocks into the water.

About ten minutes later, Deven sat down on the bench with me, picking up a few rocks and throwing them at the water. "Does this help?" he asked, his voice calmer than I'd expected.

I shrugged, not saying anything. I closed my eyes and connected with Eve again, who was sitting in her car crying. *Try and calm down.*

"*She'll be fine,*" Deven said while I was still connected to Eve.

I returned to my mind. "You didn't have to be so rough on her. It's not like it's her fault."

"I just told her what she needed to hear. She doesn't need to become dependent on someone; she's very strong without him. He's going to make her weak." His eyes returned to their focus on the water. "Look what this crap with your boyfriend has done to you. You're out here controlling the minds of animals when you have so much more potential."

"I'm here because it's peaceful to me. Haven't you ever been in love with someone other than yourself?" I didn't wait for him to answer. I didn't care to hear about his love life. "Amp or not, when you're with someone who really loves you, you are stronger and better at everything. I don't care how powerful you think you are, if you have an amp out there and you connect with them, you'd be even stronger."

"Your boyfriend agrees with me. He doesn't want to be your tool and neither does any self respecting man. This guy Eve found..."

"Ethan," I interrupted.

"Whatever. Do you expect him to be excited about having to adjust his life to tag along behind her?"

"I still don't think you needed to treat her like that. She's your sister. Why aren't you happy that she's happy?"

"What did I say to her?" Deven turned to face me finally.

"I don't know. I respected your privacy and stayed away. But she's in tears, so it couldn't have been supportive."

"I told her the truth. It isn't just her life, it's all of ours," he said.

"And his," I added.

"Right. And his," he grudgingly corrected.

“So what’s that leave her to do? If she chooses to continue with Ethan, she’s going to feel like she’s betraying you and the rest of the group. If she lets him go, she’ll have to carry that with her forever and know she’ll never find that happiness or strength again.”

“I guess she has to figure out what’s most important to her.”

“That’s not fair,” I responded.

“Talk to Brian or Morgan or even Alex about fair. Or what about you? You’re sitting here wondering if your wedding is even going to happen. Do things feel fair?”

“I wouldn’t change things with Brian. I love...”

Deven cut me off, “...for more than what he does for your gift. Yeah, I’ve heard that. So if he wanted out of the deal, would you let him go? Would you feel sorry for yourself and let your abilities falter? Or would you be determined to survive and thrive without someone else?”

“I hope I never have to find that out,” I said quietly.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” he insisted.

“No, I don’t think I’d give it up. I know I’m supposed to use it and to not would be damaging to me and I guess throw the world a little out of balance.”

He half smiled at me and stood up. “Good. See you later tonight.”

I kept my thoughts buried until I knew he was long gone. Did he know something he wasn’t telling me? Had he heard Brian’s thoughts and knew that Brian wasn’t going to stick around much longer? My stomach knotted up and I walked quickly back home, holding my stomach, trying not to throw up.

I showered slowly when I returned to an empty condo. I didn’t know where Brian had gone, but I knew I needed to shake off my irritation of Deven’s unwelcome kiss before I saw him. His actions were meant only to get what he wanted – answers. But I knew it’d be fuel to the fire where Brian was concerned.

It seemed like the closer I got with the group, the farther apart we were getting. And I hated it. I wanted things back the way they had been before I’d met the others. Although, I didn’t want to give up the connections I’d made with them, either. I’d told Brian too many times how important to me he was and even offered a couple of times to stop doing the weekly outing. He insisted that I had to go, that they were relying on me.

I was blow drying my hair when Brian walked in, leaning against the doorway. “There you are,” I said with a smile, feeling the relief I always felt when he was near. I turned off the hair dryer and walked towards him, looking to have his strong arms wrapped around me. “I missed you,” I whispered, holding on tighter to him than he was to me.

“It seems like we’re missing each other a lot lately,” he said sadly, but kissed the top of my head.

I closed my eyes, savoring his embrace, but felt his sadness seeping inside me. “After finals, we should go on a trip. Somewhere far from here, just the two of us,” I said, looking up at him with hopeful eyes.

“Maybe,” he said, “but right now, we have things to take care of here. You have to meet with everyone in half an hour.”

“That’s okay. I don’t care if we’re late,” I smiled.

“I’m not going with you tonight,” he said softly, his hold on me wavering.

“What do you mean? I need you with me,” I pleaded.

He shook his head and retreated from the bathroom. “I don’t think you do. You and Deven have a good thing going. I’m just standing there trying to not get in the way. I’m not blaming you, so get that look off your face.”

I tried to relax the tense muscles, but they were helping to hold back the tears. “I don’t want to do this without you,” I whispered.

"You have to. I'm meeting with Ethan and I have strict orders not to let him anywhere near the group. Morgan is going to stop by afterwards, too. He deserves to know the truth, Ash," he added in response to my disapproving face.

"It's not your place to do that, is it? Shouldn't Eve be the one?"

"She called me in tears not too long ago and asked if I would help. Isn't this my part in all of this?"

I looked into his blue eyes from across the room, searching for the man I was in love with. Where'd everything go wrong? "I guess I should get dressed then."

To me, the entire group felt disjointed. Eve's red eyes weren't addressed by anyone. Audrey made a single comment wondering if Deven had hired a hit man yet. Deven had surprisingly little to say to anyone, including me even though my thoughts were completely on Brian. Thankfully it was a slow night and we left early.

I was exhausted and looking forward to curling up with the ice cream in the freezer when I got a text from Brian. *"It would be best if you didn't come home right now. I'll text when things improve."*

My head hit the steering wheel as I let my phone drop to the floor. The ringing in my ears was almost deafening, but I jumped when I heard tapping at the car window. Opening one eye to see who it was, I unlocked the doors and closed my eyes again.

"Don't you want to know why I'm here?" he asked, breaking the silence after several minutes.

"Not really, Dev."

I heard the squeak of his jeans against the leather seat and the door close after he'd gotten out. *That was easy*, I thought, and then was startled again by my door opening.

"We are going back into the bar for some drinks." He tugged my arm until I was out of the car and then hoisted me over one of his shoulders.

I beat angrily against his back, allowing my all my frustrations to resonate with each hit. Tears streamed down my face as I felt as helpless as a child.

"That's it, let it all out. Beat the crap out of me. I can take it."

The unintended emphasis on some of the words as I hit him harder made me laugh. The pummeling continued until he plopped me down into a secluded booth inside.

"I hope you saved some of that for later. I want to see how hard you can hit after you've put a few down," he smirked, still in good spirits.

"I hate alcohol. I'm not drinking." I folded my arms in defiance and moved away from him.

He scooted himself closer, wrapping his arm across my shoulders. "It wasn't a request. I get what I want, remember, and right now I want you to relax."

I bit the inside of my cheek as he called a waitress over and ordered a variety of drinks. "You will like one of these. And then we'll order you three more."

I made it a point to grumble nonsense in my head to try to piss him off. Apparently it was more amusing than annoying, so I stopped when the waitress returned.

Deven looked between me and the glasses, but finally had to wrap my hand around one of them. "To happy endings," he said, clanking his glass against mine.

I nodded my head and then released the glass, pushing it back, but continued my icy stare at the colorful drinks. I was wondering what it was like to be Alex and never have to move a muscle to get what he wanted when the golden drink with reddish hues found its way in front of me.

"It's called a Tequila Sunrise," Deven explained as he moved his hand back to his glass.

"Of course," I said trying to will myself to just take a drink.

Deven was amused by my hesitation, laughing as he took another drink of his. "It's not poison." He inserted a straw from the table, disturbing the bottom layer of the drink. The red swirled like wisps of smoke through the orange liquid, beckoning me to take a drink.

I leaned forward, pressing my lips lightly against the plastic, and swallowed about as much as had been in the straw. "Mmm," I said, pushing the drink back.

"I know you're not a chicken, Ash. Let's make a game of this. Whoever finishes their drink first gets to decide what the next drink is."

"So if I win, I can pick Dr. Pepper?"

"If that's what you want, yes." Deven grabbed the glass that looked like Coke. "Ready?"

"Wait. You're cheating, aren't you? That's just soda," I said, narrowing my eyes at him.

"You still don't trust me? Here, take a whiff." He pushed his glass in front of me.

I didn't need to breathe in deeply to smell the alcohol. "Woah. Wow, I'm glad you're drinking that one," I said, quickly grabbing my drink before he suggested a switch.

"Ready? On the count of three. One, two..." He nodded and said three as he put his glass to his lips, his eyes focused on me as he quickly started downing it.

My eyes widened and I began sipping through the straw and then gave up, throwing it onto the table and trying to swallow directly from the glass to catch up. My eyes closed, feeling the immediate effects of the tequila as fast as it reached my stomach. When the ice fell flat on against my lips and no other liquid entered my mouth, I set down the glass triumphantly and looked at Deven.

He had a snide grin on his face, his empty glass already leaving a ring on the table. "You'll get faster the more you get used to it," he chided.

"Maybe I don't want to..." I hiccupped and sighed, crossing my arms across my chest, feeling more of the alcohol affecting me.

"Now that you are feeling it a little, I think I'm going to choose shots as our next drink." Deven motioned the waitress back. "Two Kamikaze's," he instructed.

I shook my head slowly. "I don't like how that sounds."

"In case you haven't noticed, drinking isn't about sounds, but taste and feel. How do you feel, Ash?"

I swayed. "Fine."

The drinks were smaller than I'd imagined and felt a little less intimidated until Deven explained. "This isn't a race this time. You have to drink this in one gulp, though. I'll go first." He saluted me with his glass and then tilted his head back. With the liquid quickly gone, he turned his glass upside down on the table and grabbed his beer, taking a long drink. "Easy," he said in a challenging tone.

I grumbled, picking up my glass, and then swallowed the entire shot without thinking about it. At the moment I was feeling most victorious, turning the glass upside down on the table, I began coughing and sputtering.

Deven roared with laughter and offered his beer.

Continuing to hack, I shook my head. I didn't want to add anything more on top of an already out of control situation. I'd end up spewing his drink all over him. Suddenly, the thought of that happening was very amusing to me and I grabbed his beer, drinking a third of the bottle, ending with a loud burp that surprised even myself. "Wow!" I exclaimed, signaling the waitress. "Let's have another of those."

"Make them doubles," Deven said, upping the challenge again.

My smile grew. "They can do that?"

"You are too innocent, Ash." We both laughed.

The empty glasses were covering most of the table and our laughter had to be echoing throughout the bar. I hit Deven's arm when an idea entered my spinning head. "Hey. You know what we should do?"

"Yeah, I hear ya," he grinned.

I scanned the crowd, trying to focus my blurry eyes on a single person. When I finally found someone who wasn't moving around too much for me to keep my eyes on, I made a connection with them. *Turn around in a circle three times.*

Deven slapped the table, laughing at the women in high heels spinning around. He grabbed my arm and pointed across the room to the crowd dancing. "Do that one. Make him do something funny. He's trying to impress some girl."

My head moved around until I was able to follow the moves of the lengthy man moving to the beat of the music. *Strut around like a chicken*, I commanded him.

"Good one, Ash. Look at him!" Deven had fallen sideways in the booth, laughing harder than I'd ever seen anyone before.

I joined him in his fit, falling to the other side, tears streaming down my face.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself so much," a serious voice said.

I straighten up, brushing the hair from my face, trying to compose myself. "I...", I began, but the laughter burst out from me again.

Brian didn't look amused. His fingers wrapped around my arm and he tugged me towards the end of the booth. "We're going home."

Deven unexpectedly grabbed my other arm, tugging me back. "I think she'd rather stay here." He leaned into me, breathing his alcoholic breath on my cheek as he tried to whisper, "He's really pissed at you."

I tried to harden my expression, but the giggles continued to come.

"Fine. You've made your choice then?"

"Oh, Brian. Don't be so serious. Can't you see she's finally letting off some steam?" Deven punched my arm in comradely.

"Ouch! Hey, knock it off," I complained through the hysterics. I could palpate the anger radiating from Brian, but I didn't have the capacity to deal with it.

"You create messes around you and leave me to deal with them. I'm done with this." Brian pushed his way through the crowd towards the door.

"No you don't." Deven grabbed my wrist stopping me from following.

I felt like I'd been slapped across the face and sobriety wasn't funny. "Good night, Dev. And thanks." I slid out of the booth, stumbling after Brian.

Outside, I steadied myself against the cold, brick wall. *Don't go. Come back and talk to me.* I didn't know if he'd stay if I asked, so I mustered every ounce of will power I had to command Brian to come back.

A moment later, he grabbed my arm and brought me to the dark, musty smelling alley. "I'm not in the mood for your games, Ashlyn. Why didn't you answer your phone?"

My eyebrows furrowed and I shook my head, the world continuing to move after my head had stopped. "I don't know. I didn't hear it." I opened my purse, but it wasn't there. "I don't have it," I said quietly.

"That's just great, Ash. I thought something had happened to you. I went out of my mind to find you and you were here getting drunk." He scoffed, but didn't look away. "What happened between the two of you in there? Did he try to kiss you?"

"No, of course not. Not tonight," I said and wished I could've taken those words back.

"Not tonight? What's going on between you?" The gap between us was widening and I lacked the ability to think clearly enough to reel him back.

"Nothing's going on. He knows things have been rough between us and just wanted me to relax." I crossed my arms, defending myself.

"But he's tried to kiss you before tonight?"

"Yes, but only to..."

Brian turned his back to me, walking towards the parking lot.

"Where are you going?" I cried out to him, stumbling as I took steps to follow.

"Away before I do something I'll regret." He turned around and shot me a look that knocked the drunken stupor out of my system. "If you try to stop me, I will never forgive you. Never." The cold stare lasted a moment longer and then he slammed the door to his Jeep, squealing his tires as he raced out of the parking lot.

After the shock had worn off, I sank to the ground and switched between uncontrollable sobbing and vomiting. Someone came and held my hair until Simon came and forced my mood to calm. Lani drove me to her house, helping me to the couch to sleep.

Chapter Six – Splintered

As I walked around the lake, the cold, morning mist on my face was the only thing reminding me I was alive. We were a week into Christmas break, but it had been nine days since Brian had left for San Francisco. The morning after the scene at the bar, I went home and we had a very long discussion about how he didn't know me anymore and that he thought we both needed time apart to re-evaluate our relationship. I begged him to stay, but didn't use my gift to force it upon him. He knew I wouldn't, but a part of me wanted to believe that he wanted me to make him stay, to take the choice away from him. It hurt us both, but not more than it hurt me to know that he resented being with me.

I saw the pained look of knowing on Morgan's face and knew this had also put a strain between her and Alex. With Ethan knowing the truth, thanks to Brian and Morgan, much to the irritation of Deven, Eve had retreated away from the group to help him try to adjust to life with the freaks.

That's exactly what we were... freaks of nature. I'd known it in my heart growing up, but had forgotten it when I met Brian. He'd always made me feel special for being different until different wasn't what he wanted anymore.

I barely spoke to anyone after the night at the bar. I refused to answer the phone unless it was Kara or Brian, although he hadn't called. I cancelled my Christmas plans, telling Mom that Brian was taking me on an unexpected trip to Europe. She was jealous and happy and told me to call as soon as we'd returned. I'd also not attended the group outings.

Kara called me infrequently, but wrote me emails more often, although it seemed like weeks between updates. Brian was staying with them for at least the entirety of Christmas break, but she had hinted that he might withdraw from his Spring classes and stay longer. She tried very hard to comfort me, but her news on Brian was that he was doing, "surprisingly well," and was "adjusting to life". I needed him as miserable as I was, selfish as that was to think, so he'd come back and things could return to normal.

Brian, of course, wouldn't take my phone calls so I stopped trying about five days after he'd left. I emailed him every night to let him know about my day, but they were never responded to. I mailed Brian's Christmas gift to him, but as of the moment I'd left the condo, I hadn't received anything from him.

The happy buzz of kids exploring new toys made me nauseous, so I walked back to my home. It had become hell for me to be there without Brian, but I knew I deserved all the guilt and anguish, so I stayed.

The door closed behind me and I breathed in the air, searching out scents of Brian still lingering, my head resting against the door, my eyes closed. If only he were here to surprise me...

"You've been gone awhile."

My eyes shot open and narrowed in on the blonde-haired figure sitting on the couch.

"I was going to help myself to some food, but the fridge is pretty empty."

I instantly put my guard up, protecting my thoughts. I didn't know whether I was angry Deven was in my house or relieved to see him. I knew I didn't want him probing my thoughts and finding my unrest. "Yeah, well it's Christmas and the stores are closed." I walked into the kitchen, throwing my phone and keys into the bowl on the counter. "How'd you..."

"I've known for a long time where you hide your spare key. And since you refuse to answer my calls or emails, I thought I'd pay you a visit in person. Would you have let me in if you'd been here when I arrived?" he asked pointedly.

"No," I replied frankly, trying not to dwell on the question too long. Deven had been the main source of confusion and conflict for me since we first were introduced to the group. His "truths" resonated with a hint of real insight and had resulted in many sleepless nights. He'd also been a constant, yet often annoying, friend who didn't have a problem with me speaking my mind to him. And

yes, there was a bit of an attraction I'd developed, too. But it didn't compare with what I had with Brian and would have always repressed it. "What do you want, Dev. I'm not in the most accommodating moods, if you haven't noticed."

"We have both found ourselves in situations we didn't want or anticipate." He laughed ironically. "Can you believe this? The two of us didn't see this coming and didn't stop it from happening."

"Hilarious, Dev. Any other obvious things you want to point out?" My arms were folded tightly across my chest as I continued standing near the kitchen.

"Yes. We need to embrace this time and prove to everyone how strong we are: you without your amp and me without my sister. I know you agree with me. Despite this sadness, you still have that voice in you that says you can't give up. You told me you wouldn't. Did you lie to me?"

"Let me think," I began and started pacing the floor, looking upwards at imagined reasons. "You were forcing me to answer at the time and wouldn't have let me go if I didn't tell you exactly what you wanted to hear. You always get what you want, remember? So if I did or didn't lie to you is beside the point. When you demand people tell you what you want to hear, you'll probably be told half-truths at best."

"I don't believe you," he said in a low voice, not having expected that response.

"What? Now or before?" I walked towards him, challenging him. "What is it that you want now, Dev, so I can make sure I accommodate you?" My words were forcibly angry.

"I want you to think about me the way you do about Brian," he said quietly, looking directing in my eyes.

The anger was shocked away. "You can't have that, Dev." I spoke softly like I was telling a child he couldn't have the puppy he'd been wanting.

"You can't have that, either." His words were twisted with frustration and jealousy as he arose from his seat. "He doesn't want you to think about him like that anymore. He wants normalcy. And you can't offer him that."

I stumbled back against the wall, like I'd been stabbed with a knife. I knew he was right. I wouldn't ever be able to give Brian what he lost when he found out about his lack of choice in loving me.

Deven walked in front of me, putting his palm on the wall next to my head. "I know you've considered it, even if it was in the dark reaches of your mind. It's what I want, but for once, I'm going to let you make the decision."

As cryptic as he was being, I knew exactly what he meant. I closed my eyes, a tear falling down my cheek as I imagined him kissing me and me kissing him back. I took a deep breath as he touched my face, his breath warm against my cold skin. I took off my engagement ring and slid it in my pocket as our lips connected.

By the time our embrace was over, wet streaks lined my face. His eyes that were the same color as Brian's didn't look anything like the ones I was truly in love with, but they gazed at me with a soft expression I hadn't seen from Deven before. He brushed my cheeks with his thumb and kissed my forehead. "It wasn't that bad, was it?"

My lips twitched a grin and a confused laugh escaped me. "No. It's just a lot for me to internalize right now."

His finger covered my lip, requesting my silence. "I have somewhere to be right now, but if you'd like, later tonight we can meet... maybe start doing outings without the rest of the group?"

I shrugged, but responded a meek, "Okay."

His smile was both warm and triumphant. He pulled my chin up and kissed me again. "Merry Christmas, Ash."

“Merry Christmas,” I responded following him to the door. “Bye,” I said softly as he left. I waited with the door open for several minutes, letting the kiss replay in my head. Finally, I connected with him while he drove away and knew I was safe to retreat inside.

The door closed and my shaky hand struggled to work the locks. My back pressed against the door by some invisible force and I sank to the ground. My head fell against my knees and I sobbed uncontrollably until my eyes were puffy and dry. I squeezed the ring from my pocket and stared at it, wanting something to happen. I caressed the delicate birthstones along the side and tilted it in every direction, awed by the light reflecting through the large diamond. It was too good for me. I didn’t deserve the ring, the car, the condo... Brian.

Anger hit me suddenly, a sharp yell resounding from my throat. I hated Christmas. I hated myself. I hated my freaky gift. I hated Brian. I hated Deven. I hated the stupid picture the interior decorator had chosen for over the fireplace. I stood up and threw my ring hard, but looked and it was still in my hand. Angry, hot tears flowed again and I tucked the ring back in my pocket, moving towards the fireplace with a mounting rage. The picture yielded to my energy and flew across the room, raining shards of glass throughout the kitchen. I didn’t stop there. The picture frame that Brian had given me, the one I’d made for him, graduation pictures, birthday pictures, pictures from us at the beach over the summer... all crashed to the floor effortlessly. I wanted them to put up a fight. I needed something to stop me from my tirade or at least give me satisfaction, so I just continued upstairs to our bathroom. Brian’s cologne I’d bought him at the beginning of the school year shattered in the bathtub wafting reminders of memories and dreams now gone. His shaver, deodorant, and comb hit opposite walls and my arm cleared off the counter. My makeup, tooth brush, and perfume met the same end.

Glass crackled beneath my feet, splintering to my angry steps as I made my way into the closet, ripping clothes off hangers and throwing them in all directions. I paused at the bridesmaid dress that had doubled as my prom dress. It put up the struggle I had been looking for, but eventually gave in. The ripping sound of the fabric filled me with a sadistic pleasure and a malicious laugh erupted from my chest.

You’re acting like a child throwing a tantrum, I heard Brian’s voice in my head.

“I don’t care!” I screamed out loud to the imagined voice, pulling the heels off my favorite silver shoes. I crumpled to the ground among the buttons, beads, and shreds of clothing, my chest heaving with sobs.

My eyes opened and focused with effort on the disaster around my dark room. I looked on with an angry pity, but lacked remorse for my actions. I made my way to the bathroom and splashed my face with water for several minutes before I looked at myself. The mirror had cracked when something hit it and I stood and looked at a broken reflection. I laughed without humor at the irony and took a deep breath, walking away from the destruction.

I stepped on top of clothes to the few still hanging up, purposely removing my brown dress I’d bought on our trip to the ski lodge on New Year’s from the hanger, hugging it as I walked to the bed. I laid it down with care and started undressing, like I’d done for Brian so many times, slowly and seductively removing each piece of clothing. I welcomed the cool fabric against my body; it matched how cold I felt inside. I slid my feet into the boots Brian always liked me wearing and returned to the bathroom to try to mask my distress.

When I was finally satisfied with the crafted face I put on, I bent down and picked up a broken piece of my perfume bottle, wiping it masochistically along my neck, across my wrists, and then up my forearm, pressing too hard and cutting into my flesh. My breath hissed as the unexpected pain burned my arm. I reached for a towel and dabbed at the trickling fluid already dripping on the counter.

“Crap,” I whispered, holding my arm under the cool water.

Several minutes later, the bleeding had ceased and I pulled down my sleeve, straightened my hair and walked downstairs, composed as if I was already putting on a show. I crunched my way to the kitchen, grabbing my keys and phone, glancing at the calls I'd missed. Seven unanswered calls and a voicemail. I flipped through my caller ID – three calls from Deven, one from Lani, one from Ken, and two from a blocked number. I threw my phone hard at the fire place, adding to the destruction on the floor, and slammed the door closed as I left.

Mind your business. Go back inside. I had no issue with connecting with the nosy neighbors and making them go away. My anger was in control of me now, and I didn't care to change it. People driving in front of me made unexpected lane changes out of my way, a couple almost caused accidents. I turned the music up louder and drove carelessly.

Chapter Seven – Miracle

The coffee house look abandoned, except a few cars I recognized in the parking lot. I didn't know there was a meeting, but felt stupid for not remembering the coffee house was closed for Christmas. "Stupid holiday," I grumbled and slammed the car door shut, not moving towards the downstairs entrance.

My decision was made for me when Simon pulled into the spot next to mine. His head was cocked as he eyed me getting out of his car. "Let's get you inside, Ash," he said, grabbing my cut arm and walking me towards the door.

I winced at his touch and felt a stronger wave of calm rush over me.

"Sorry," he said, noticing the bottom of my cut visible where my sleeve had moved up my arm a little. "Eve will fix that for you."

I quickly covered it up. "That's okay. It's not a big deal."

Simon opened the door for me. Eve and Ethan were in the far corner at a table with Alex and Morgan, of course. Audrey was listening to her headphones and Ken was at another table speaking quietly with someone I didn't recognize. My apprehension about being there skyrocketed.

"I think I'm going to have to keep a close eye on you tonight," Simon said, taking my other arm and leading me to the table Audrey was at. We both nodded at her and then he leaned in and spoke quietly to me. "I didn't realize you were struggling this much. You should've called me," he said kindly.

"I'm just having a bad day, that's all." I was glad Deven wasn't there to hear my internal dialogue.

"Just know you can always call me, even if you just need someone to talk to. I don't always have to mess with emotions, you know?" Simon smiled and I felt better than I had in a long time.

"Thanks," I said softly as Lani and Logan came and sat by us.

I could tell by the looks on all of their faces that they didn't know what to say to me. I didn't make any attempts to ease their discomforts, but I felt a tinge of guilt for making Simon work so hard.

"Pssst. Ash," Deven called from the doorway.

Can this wait until later? I asked in my head. *When we're alone?*

The last part made him smile and he came in, taking a seat at his usual table.

Thank you, I thought, mentally kissing him on the cheek.

Khari was the last to arrive and soon after, Ken began speaking. "Most of you haven't been with us long enough to know that we have a special tradition for Christmas. I think everyone but Ash and Ethan have met Chel," he said, motioning to the woman at his table. "Her talents don't suit our weekly outings," he stated.

"Not that they'd let her come," Audrey remarked.

The others nodded while Ken continued. "But we are very lucky she's able to make arrangements to be with us on Christmas. We aren't going to a bar or a sporting event or even to the bad part of town. Tonight we are going to the children's hospital and bringing a little Christmas miracle to some very sick kids."

I felt the effect of Simon lift as the mood of the room genuinely became happier. I still searched for a way for us to perform these miracles, unless Alex and Ken were planning some kind of magic show.

"Chel has a dual talent. She has the ability to create immunity and to infect people with illness," Deven said answering my unspoken questions. "She was manipulated in the laboratories at CES and still holds a job there, am I correct?"

Chel nodded in agreement, but allowed Ken to continue to speak for her.

"Tom met Chel when he worked at CES. He was one of the first gifted people she'd met, even though that building is swarming with them. At that time, Chel was still undergoing treatments and was kept relatively isolated. She only had the ability to create immunity in people. Unlike Eve, who can heal,

Chel couldn't change a process that was already occurring. She only has the ability to make a person resistant to future attacks of an illness.

She had access to information that Tom couldn't get a hold of, though, and with Morgan in the picture, Tom was getting more and more involved in finding out answers. Chel played a big part in helping Tom and the two became very close friends. Since then, Chel has always been considered part of our group even though she's only with us for a few assignments."

I remembered back to my tour of CES and seeing the laboratories. Sonya had lamented about losing people to the lab, but I didn't fully understand what that meant.

"So they manipulated her gift?" I asked, apparently startling everyone except Deven and Chel.

The skinny blonde stood up, speaking for the first time. "Yes. I am one of the many who have had their talents altered and made stronger," she said calmly as she walked towards me.

"And you still work for them," I stated rather than asked.

"I don't have a choice. I am essentially their property," she explained.

"That sounds awful," I said, folding my arms across my chest, thinking for a moment about how close I'd come to accepting their offer, even though it was for my own selfish reasons.

"It's the only life I've known. They are a powerful company and I'm well cared for," she said, stopping before she reached me and looking back towards Alex and Morgan, and then at Ken.

Ken stood up, rallying everyone. "So, let's go do some good tonight. Everyone knows how to get there?"

There were no more questions spoken, but I had a ton and felt uneasy about the new knowledge I'd gained. Almost everyone was smiling as they walked out the door. Eve had a protective hand on Ethan and they stayed back while Deven walked to my side, escorting me out. "I'll drive," Deven said quietly to me, pulling on my injured arm to let the others walk past.

I hissed quietly in pain and Deven immediately pulled up my sleeve, looking at my injury with disapproval. "It's nothing," I insisted, pulling my arm back and hiding the cut again.

"I'll make Eve heal that when we get to the hospital." He searched my eyes, reading my volunteered narration of the events that took place after he'd left.

"I don't want it healed," I spoke quietly as the metallic door was opened for me.

Deven was silent. My door closed and I sank into the plush leather seat, waiting like a child about to be scolded. He sat down in the driver's seat, closed the door, and sighed, looking at me with sad eyes. "Why did you do that?"

"The cut was an accident," I said plainly.

"Not just that... your house, your phone, your belongings. When I left you, I thought we were both in better places, ready to move on, ready to take on the world?" An unhappy smile appeared on his lips.

"This isn't about you or what happened between us today. Tell me honestly, what did you do when you were alone with your thoughts after you found out about Ethan? Did you paint pictures of bunnies and dance around happily?"

"You're sitting in what I did."

"What? You went car shopping?"

Deven turned forward, gripping the steering wheel tightly. "Well, yes. After I wrecked my other car." He turned his head, a sly grin on his face.

The shock of what he did quickly faded. "Really? You crashed your other car?" I asked between giggles.

His eyebrows went up and he nodded. "I loved that car, Ash."

"That's what you do to things you love?" I asked in mock horror.

“Not usually,” he smiled. “I prefer to take care of the few things that have earned my affection.” He caressed the steering wheel and then looked at me. “You don’t think you’ve earned it?” he questioned my thoughts.

I looked at my arm and thought about all my anger earlier, shaking my head. “I don’t believe I deserve anyone’s affection.”

“You’re so stubborn, Ash. Let’s see if I can change that by the end of the night.” He weaved his fingers through my hair, squeezing the back of my neck as he pulled me to his lips.

There was comfort in our kiss, so I buried the unease I still felt. Deven reminded me a lot of the guys I dated before Brian, the “bad boy” types. I knew there was more to Deven than that, though, which was why I was allowing any of this. He gave me a different sense of strength, too; we made a very good team.

Deven smiled at me and started the car, driving towards the hospital.

“I like your new car,” I said with sincerity. “It suits you.”

“See? Sometimes good things do come out of bad situations.” He reached over and squeezed my leg.

“We’ll see,” I smirked and then rolled down the window, letting the cold air rush against my face, enjoying the shocking sensation.

“You are very strange,” he laughed and sped up.

I glanced sideways at him with a grin. *You have no idea*, I thought and closed my eyes, appreciating the contrast of the hot tears caused by the extreme cold hitting my frigid cheeks.

“You’re gonna get sick,” he playfully complained when we were parked at the hospital.

“Maybe.” When I rolled up the window, the warmth of the car made me shiver. I rubbed my arms, realizing that my actions were probably stupid.

“Probably?” he asked, standing outside his door. “Are you coming?”

I abruptly opened my door and got out; I was accustomed to Brian opening doors for me. “Of course,” I said, walking next to Deven. He wrapped his arm around me and I felt myself melt at his warm touch. *Thank you*, I thought.

Before we reached the entrance, he pulled me inside a niche in the building. “I think you look amazing tonight,” he said as he gazed into my eyes, holding my face in his warm hand. “I’d like to take you out after we’re done here.”

“I think I’m at your mercy where that’s concerned, seeing that you’re my ride,” I noted playfully.

“I’m not good at this, Ash, and I know you’re enjoying watching me struggle. I’m not used to asking for things I want, but I’m trying. Will you do something with me tonight?”

The cold air stinging my face in the car had helped my mood. I decided to torture him a little longer and thought about walking home from the hospital.

“You wouldn’t…”

I nodded sincerely, but then smiled. “Fine, I guess you can take me out after we’re done.” My tone got serious after that. “But I’d like to keep things between us for now.” I hoped he understood what I meant and wasn’t offended by my request. I did like him and was enjoying being closer to him, but I was technically still engaged and didn’t need things complicated more than they were.

He raised a brow at my request and picked up my left hand. “No ring, but you’re still going to play this game? Fine. For now, but someone will find out and you need to think about how it’ll look if we’re being secretive.”

“I know, I know. Just for now. Please?”

He dropped my hand and released my face, walking back towards the sidewalk. “Fine,” he said. *Brat*, I thought and followed behind him inside the hospital, joining the rest of the group in the lobby.

It was honestly a miracle the work we performed at the hospital. I was able to convince employees to allow Chel and Eve back to the sickest children while Alex and Ken performed for the ones who were not bedridden. Deven shocked me and played Santa (without the suit) and gave the children the exact gift they'd wanted. Khari made it snow a little by turning a pitcher of water into ice crystals. Everyone, including Morgan, looked happier than I'd ever seen.

Lani and I were idly chatting on the way out when Eve caught up with us.

"Ash, let me see your arm," she insisted, grabbing my injury arm.

I pulled it back from her, but the wound was already visible. Lani's eyes grew wide and Simon came over to calm things down.

"Please. Just don't," I begged, looking at the three of them in the eyes. "It was unintentional, if that's what you're wondering. But I don't want to be fixed." Deven caught my eye from across the hall and I glared at him. *You shouldn't have told her*, I scolded in my thoughts.

His cocky grin made me angrier. I was about to go through with walking back to my car at the coffee shop when Chel approached me.

"Do you have a few minutes, Ashlyn? I need to speak with you." She looked at everyone listening in on her request, and then added, "Alone."

Their facial expressions changed and the group awkwardly dispersed, save Deven, who remained propped against the wall, watching us both closely.

"Excuse me a moment," she said and walked over to speak with Deven privately.

His scowl indicated he didn't get his way and he left without a word. I connected with him and said, *We'll meet up later, okay?*

"Whatever," he grumbled and got in his car, leaving quickly.

I sighed inwardly and returned to my mind, Chel greeting me with a smile. "Your gift is quite amazing," she started and motioned for me to walk with her. "And you've gotten much more powerful without any treatments. It's remarkable."

My mind was racing with questions and concerns. I was relieved that Deven was long gone because these I didn't want to share with anyone. The group as a whole may have trusted her, but I couldn't. She worked for... no, was the property of a company I held much anger for. Even the one person I felt I could trust there disappointed me with the note she had Emily deliver before I knew anyone in the group. "If you're here to recruit me, let me save you some time. I have no interest now or ever of working for CES. You seem nice and everything, but I don't believe anything related to that company has my best interest in mind," I snapped.

Her laugh was melodic and very pleasant. "I don't have any desire to recruit you or even to change your mind about CES or me. I know Sonya has contacted you in the past and she's asked me to deliver a message to you. She would like you to come by the office after hours on New Year's Eve. She promises to give you some of the answers you seek."

I scoffed, shaking my head. "How am I supposed to believe that this isn't a setup?"

"Believe what you'd like. I only know what she's told me and that she went to great lengths to get me the message to give to you."

"Why can't she just come meet me like you have?" The thought of stepping foot inside the building again made me uncomfortable.

"She's never allowed to leave. She is, in sorts, wired into the building."

"What? She was walking around the building just fine last May," I said in disbelief.

"Silly, Ashlyn," Chel laughed. "Sonya isn't literally connected to wires; she's a technopath. She monitors everything technological that goes in or out of the building."

"Holy crap," I whispered and sat down on an outside bench near the doors. Hot air escaping when the doors opened had been keeping me warm, but I was too busy trying to wrap my brain around a gift like that to notice the cold.

Chel giggled. "Can I tell her you're coming?"

"I... I don't know. I still don't know that this isn't a trap or a test or that they'll inject me with something and forcibly try to modify my talent," I stammered.

"If I told you more about my experiences, would it help ease your concern and trust me? Alex and Ken trust me, despite everything."

My curiosity was piqued. "I guess I have time," I responded, then added silently, *since nothing else I'd planned is working out.*

She led the way to her Jaguar. "Do you mind if we talk at your place?"

I opened the passenger door and sat down, remembering the mess I'd left. "Errr... umm... I'd rather not. How about your place?"

She smiled. "I live in a CES owned home. I doubt you'd want to go there."

I shrugged. "You're probably right."

The engine roared to life, a beautiful sound cutting into the dark night. "That's okay. I know where we can go."

Chapter Eight – The Otherside

She drove fast down the highway to the west, a look of pure pleasure on her beautiful face. “I don’t get a chance to get out and do this often,” she said with no sound of remorse in her voice.

Not wanting to interrupt her joy, I kept my hundreds of questions for her to myself and sank deep into thoughts of my troubles. The most minor of them being my phone and condo. I’d have to go to the mall in the morning and find a replacement. Or maybe I didn’t. Would it be bad if I didn’t have a way to be contacted, to just be able to disappear at will. That led me to think about Lani and she can just disappear. Audrey, too, to an extent. Then I remembered the last time I wanted to disappear and was almost envious of Rick Thompson’s ability to disappear from everyone...

“This will do,” Chel said, getting out of the vehicle at an old farmhouse.

“I didn’t expect this,” I admitted, stepping out of the car and my dark thoughts.

“Someone tried to convince me to leave CES once and this is where we stayed.” She smiled and continued toward the doors, brushing flecks of old paint off the decaying wood. “It’s so romantic, isn’t it, Ashlyn?”

I walked into the mold smelling building, the floor covered with dirt, and cob webs covering every corner. Romantic is not how I’d describe it. Creepy, old, and smelly were better words.

She didn’t need me to respond. She sat down with her memories and continued looking around in silence for several more minutes. “My mother worked for CES, though she wasn’t gifted. My father left before I was born, so I spent most of my time in the care of CES employees. I wasn’t even able to talk yet when they discovered my gift. I was never sick and only upset when they gave me my vaccinations. One clever doctor realized I had a gift and ran tests on my blood to confirm this. I have to take their word on this because I don’t remember. My memories go back to around three or four when they were using my gift to help others in the building. It was a game to me and enjoyed every chance they gave me to help.”

I interrupted, anxious with questions. “Who did you help? What did your mother think? What did she do for the company? What does she think about what they did to you?”

“I’ll get to more about my mother in a bit. I helped anyone they brought to me. I believe most were CES employees, but some were powerful allies of the company, too: heads of state, leaders of companies, even a princess. I only knew the important people because there were so many more precautions with them.

When I was eleven, I was given the choice to enter into an experimental program with the doctor who had first discovered my gift. He was like a father to me, so I willingly entered into the contract. My mother, who was a general secretary, objected. I had been pulled away from her frequently, but the experiments meant she would lose her parental rights and might not see me again.”

“You chose to leave your mom when you were eleven?” My eyes widened in horror. I couldn’t imagine making a decision like that when I was that age.

Chel nodded like it was no big deal. “She worked most of the time and I guess I worked a lot, too. She was more of the woman who did my laundry and stocked the fridge than anything you’d think of as a mother. Don’t get me wrong. She loved me and I loved her in my own way. But I didn’t require a maternal figure; I was literally being raised by the CES doctors and employees. They were and are my family.”

“Why help our group then? We seem to be the antithesis of CES,” I interjected.

“True, but I’ll get to that.” Chel winked at me and continued. “So I started treatments almost immediately. They were often days of pain followed by weeks of isolation. The only visitors I had were in hazmat suits. I was very lonely and started dreaming about the world outside the walls of CES. After a year of isolation, they began bringing visitors to me again. I was instructed what to do with each one before I was introduced to them as whatever would be most appealing to them. Sometimes I was a

prostitute, other times a genius. It didn't matter, only that I was becoming the bringer of pain and death to people in opposition of my family. The joy I'd felt when helping people didn't exist on these days, but I was rewarded with toys, pets, exotic trips, and chocolate chip ice cream."

I stared at her in horror, not comprehending how she was loyal to them.

"My treatments continued for years, although the periods of isolation became less and less as I learned to control my abilities. I was sixteen when I met Tom. He'd been recruited for his ability to freeze time." Her smile grew and I had an idea of where things were headed.

"Tom helped me escape and enjoy life outside those glass walls without anyone knowing. By the time I was seventeen, we were in love and plotting a way for me to escape." She looked around at the meager surroundings with affection. "It was about that time that Morgan moved in with them and Tom became obsessed with finding out why Alex was getting stronger. His plan to get me out was put on hold while he did all he could do to find answers to his infinite questions. With all my personal connections, I provided him access to information he would've had trouble finding it even existed.

Do you mind if we head around back?" she asked suddenly.

"Lead the way," I said, glad to get out of the dark enclosure.

We walked outside to the rear of the building and looked out on a dark, overgrown, neglected plot of land. "This was our dream," she sighed happily.

Her ability to look fondly at a dream that was cut short confused me. I remained quiet, allowing her to appreciate it. I let my thoughts drift to Brian and what I was going to do with him and Deven now, too. My life felt like the rotten wood on the farmhouse, left to decay and have its color flake off. My frustration escaped my lips as a sigh that Chel mistook for shared contentment.

"Life was good, Ashlyn. But it wasn't the life that was intended for me. Eventually someone found out about my relationship with Tom and the information that had been leaked to him. Since he was using his gift against the company, the company felt betrayed. He was tagged by the higher ups as a traitor."

Chel walked some more, watching the first of the stars appear. "It was a night like this, although not a holiday. Tom had agreed to set aside his research for a night and join me out here for real time alone. We ate a rich dinner, drank old wine, and made love under the stars... these stars." Chel reached for my hand and for the first time, I noticed her hands were gloved. "It was my family verses my love. I owed them everything and it was my job to terminate him. It was punishment and a test for my loyalty."

I quickly pulled my hand away and backed up from her, looking towards her with horror and disgust. "What?" I was sure I heard her wrong. "You..." The words got stuck in my throat. Then panic set in. I was here alone with her without a phone. What was going to stop her from getting rid of me, too? *Stay away from me*, I commanded her as I briefly connected to her mind.

She hadn't made an attempt to move towards me. "I have no orders to terminate you, Ashlyn. Please don't be afraid. I will always love Tom. I'm lucky they forgave me for my wrong doings."

"The only wrong in that story was what they did to you and the fact that you did that to the man you loved," I insisted, still moving backwards.

"If Brian asked you to kill someone, wouldn't you?"

My frown deepened, my face almost hurting with how upset I was. "First, Brian wouldn't ask something like that of me. Second, I make my own choices, not follow orders."

"Aren't you the one inexplicably in love with someone based on a supernatural force? How is that making your own choices?" she fired back.

"Do you see Brian anywhere around now?" I asked angrily, my arms flailing around.

"Touché," she remarked.

"I'm struggling with how Alex and Ken trust you now. You murdered Tom and are apparently unremorseful."

"You misunderstand. I mourned deeply for what I'd done. I called Alex after I'd said goodbye and confessed what had happened. Tom was dead and there wasn't anything anyone could do to bring him back. Alex was furious, of course, and brought Ken out to dispose of the body before CES could confiscate it. I watched from nearby as all hope burned before me. As they were leaving, I begged them to kill me, too. When CES employees showed up, they accused me of trying to get them, too. I'm sure CES would have been happy to experiment on them, but I was cunning and bought them time to escape. We met weeks later, when I was trusted to leave again and began working on the understanding that we still have today."

"And what does that entail?"

"They are allowed to use me for my original talent on a limited basis. In return, they've promised to not interfere with my other duties."

"How can they trust that you'll be honorable in your assistance?"

"I have never given them reason not to trust me."

"Except for killing their friend," I shot back.

"He was my lover. I didn't have a choice. They would've found a way to dispose of him and it wouldn't have been peaceful or painless. I gave him a magical last night and gently put him into a forever sleep."

I groaned in frustration and sadness, sitting down on the ground, looking out at the sky. The cold chilled me deep, but not close to how deeply I was lost without Brian.

Chel sat next to me without touching me. "In a way, I know how you feel right now. Somedays it doesn't feel like it's worth going on without him, but on days like today... days when I've done something he would've been proud of... days when I honor his memory with happiness rather than regret... these are the days I hold onto."

"But then you go and perform atrocities for them." I shook my head. "I don't see how we're anything alike."

"One man's evil is another's good. I've seen how Deven hovers over you now. It's not my business what's going on there, but it seems to me that your current choices have not been for the 'good' of your relationship with your amp."

I sighed. She was completely right. "Touché," I remarked in a playfully mocking tone. "Did Tom know before you infected him?"

"No," she said softly. "I asked him to trust me and to lie back and relax. I was his forever. I kissed him as he took his last breath and keep the coin from his pocket with me at all times. It's the only thing I can get away with holding on to without drawing suspicion."

"That's very romantic," I finally agreed, feeling in my purse for my engagement ring. "I can't seem to let go, either."

"I should get back. I've stayed out longer than usual and people might start to get concerned. Can I drop you off at your car?" she asked, offering to help me up with her gloved hand.

I rose on my own accord. "Yes, that'll be fine. And you can tell Sonya I'll be there."

The following morning, I rolled over to see if Brian had returned in the middle of the night and was sleeping next to me, then I reread the note that was left on my car at the coffee shop again. *"It's late and I'm tired. Catch up with you another time. -Dev"*

Sighing, I wrapped my robe around myself and looked around my wreck of a room. "Why couldn't this have been magically cleaned up?" I asked aloud as I slipped on a pair of shoes, prepared for the glass that awaited me around the house. While the coffee bubbled and gurgled, I began searching the drawers for a clean spoon when I happened upon the letter from Sonya. I took my cup of warm liquid and the letter to the office, reading her words, but thinking about the conversation with Chel about Brian and Deven. What was I going to do? I was at a point where, if I let them, they could get

very serious with Deven. But I also hadn't allowed anything to happen that would destroy my chances of getting Brian back.

I flicked the mouse, bringing the screen alive as I took a long drink of coffee. I skimmed my email, but still nothing from Brian. Kara had written me three emails. That was unusual. I read through the first one, sent Christmas Eve, wishing me a happy holiday. The next one was from the following morning. Brian received my gift, but refused to open it, taking it in his room and closing the door where he stayed most of the day. *Good*, I thought, hoping he felt as conflicted as I did.

The third one was sent late last night and was written with urgency. Kara was concerned that my phone was going straight to voicemail and no one had heard from me since the twenty-third, including Brian. I set my mug down and began composing a reply:

You worry too much. My phone is broken, but I'm getting ready to go to the mall to get a new one. Hope you had a good Christmas. Miss you. –Ash

It didn't take long for her to write back.

Broken? Did you drop it in the toilet? Lol Everything okay? You didn't ask your usual question and I asked Brian and he said he hadn't seen any emails from you lately. Miss you, too. –Kar

He was at least aware that I was sending emails. I didn't know if I should be relieved or angry because he hadn't bothered to write back.

No, not in the toilet. More like in pieces around my fireplace. Should've lit a fire before I threw it, honestly. Don't care how he's doing right now. I'm tired of being the only one making an effort. Gotta shower so I can go to the mall. TTYL

I pushed away from the desk when an urgent email dinged and got my attention.

Ashlyn Taylor. Don't be like that. He just needs to get his head straight. Go get yourself a new phone and call me as soon as you have it.

I frowned as I read her response and fired back:

I'm tired of waiting around for him to decide if what we had was real or whatever. I've got life happening around me and I have to participate or I'm going to die a sad and lonely woman. I'll try to call you when I get a chance.

I hit send and quickly left the room, pounding my feet on the stairs as I ascended to my bathroom. I showered fast and with my sandals still on, furiously cleaning each part of my body. My arm was puffy and sore, so I scrubbed harder on it, the pain adding to my rage.

The ground crunched loudly as I stepped out. I wrapped my robe around my shivering body and began to dry my hair with the towel.

"Wow, this looks worse in person than it did in your head," Deven complained from the doorway.

A low growl erupted from my chest. "Get out! I'm trying to get dressed!"

Deven laughed. "Okay, Okay. Keep your panties on... or put them on... or don't. I'll wait downstairs."

I picked up the first thing that caught my eye and threw it at him, but it was a washcloth and landed unsatisfyingly at my feet.

I took my time to get dressed, but was pleased to see Deven sitting on the couch watching TV. "I expected you to look a lot better than this for all the time it took," he complained playfully.

"If you don't like it, leave," I said without humor.

"Hey, what did I do to deserve that? It should be me pissed at you for taking so long last night." He stood and walked towards me, wrapping his arms around my torso.

I didn't immediately hold him back, but felt his good mood was wavering, so I slipped my arms around his waist. "Sorry. Guess I'm a bit moody."

I felt his body smile and he kissed the top of my head. "This should help your mood. Come here. I got you a present." He grabbed my hand and led me to my table where a stuffed brown bear was sitting. "Berry Christmas" his shirt read and my smile was unavoidable.

"Very cute," I conceded, picking up the bear and hugging it. It had a wonderful smell that reminded me of the inside of Deven's car.

"Glad you like it. It was on clearance today and I don't think I can return it. Oh, and this is yours, too," he said, handing me a small wrapped present.

I eyed the box, then him. "I didn't get you anything," I admitted, still not opening the gift.

"You can owe me, then," he said, taking the package from my hand and unwrapped it. "I knew you needed a new one after last night, so here. I already programmed my number."

I took the phone from him, inspecting the screens to see what had been installed. "Very nice. Different from my last one, but I think I can get used to it." I grinned at the parallel between my phone and my... well, love life, I guess.

"So, I'm your new phone?" Deven grabbed the phone from me and tossed it onto the couch. "I guess I should've gotten you a more expensive one."

I combed my fingers through his hair, pretending to inspect him. "I don't know. I think I'm pretty happy with it."

"You think?" he asked playfully, lifting me up by my waist and setting me on the table while he kissed me intensely for a long time.

"What do you want to do today?" he asked as we held hands, walking around the pond at the park. It was sunny and crisp outside - the perfect weather.

I stopped dead in my tracks. "Are you feeling alright?" I asked, touching his forehead with my spare hand.

He looked at me funny, jerking his head away from my hand. "Of course I am. What's wrong?"

"You asked me what I wanted." I grinned as I watched his brain process my wit.

Finally, he rolled his eyes. "That's right. Abuse the person who brought you gifts this morning. I should take it back," he said and snatched my phone from my back pocket.

"Hey! Give it back!" I jumped as he dangled it above my head, laughing at me. I finally got it back and shoved it deeper in my pocket. "I'm just not used to this side of you."

"Fine. We'll ease you in slowly and do what I want today. Let's go for a drive."

I should've asked him how long the drive he wanted to take was going to be. I fell asleep after two hours and woke up after the sun had set.

"Where are we?" I asked, rubbing my eyes.

"Mexico," he said, parking at what appeared to be a resort.

"I don't have anything with me but my phone and purse. What are we doing here?"

"We're on vacation for the next few days. You and me and the sun. Come on. Let's check in."

I sent a quick text to Kara to let her know I was in Mexico and would be gone for a few days, not to freak out.

I turned my phone off after I got her reply telling me to be careful and not do anything stupid.

Chapter Nine – On the Inside

We returned from our vacation on New Year's Eve. "I'm looking forward to midnight," Deven said, pulling my hand so I bumped into his chest. "It will be something like this..." He backed me against the wall, kissing me so fiercely that my knees nearly buckled underneath me.

His hips grinded against mine and a soft moan escaped my lips. My body wanted him; it was my brain that was the problem. Kara's warning resonated with me and I kept things between Deven and me in check in Mexico. When I asked him to be patient with me, he was frustrated, but agreed for the time being. It didn't stop him from trying, though. I kept my conflicts buried deep when I was with him, but I struggled in private over the intense feelings I still harbored for Brian; his ring was always with me in my purse.

I managed to remind him between kisses that I had somewhere else to be.

With his advances still getting him nowhere, he pushed himself off the wall in frustration. "Of course you do. It's been on your mind since we left. Can you stop obsessing about that and think about us more?"

"You sound like Brian," I said before I could stop myself.

Deven growled at me, the look in his eye revealed more than his words could've.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to say that."

"Say, think... it doesn't matter, Ash. You still have feelings for him and it's starting to piss me off." He pulled his keys from his pocket stormed to the door.

When his hand turned the doorknob, I connected with him. *Don't go. Stay here longer,* I commanded.

"It doesn't work on me, Ashlyn," he yelled over his shoulder then slammed the door, walking with purpose towards his car.

A minute later I heard his engine roar as he raced away from here... from me. I sighed and tossed my bags of souvenirs onto the table and started picking up larger pieces of glass that still covered my house, tossing them forcefully at the trash can.

Two large bags later, my downstairs was almost back to normal. I'd have to get someone to come repair the walls and the counter, where a chunk of marble had been knocked off. And the carpets needed to be vacuumed about fifty more times. I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and walked into the office.

The computer was exactly how I'd left it before I was snatched away on the impromptu vacation. Kara had written me once a day, acting more like I had been when Brian first left. She was concerned about me and what I might be doing. As I read through her emails more, she admitted that she accidentally left my last email open and Brian had openly asked her if I was involved with Deven.

I don't know what's going on with Deven, I admitted in the reply back to her. *I honestly feel something for him, but I can't stop thinking about Brian. Help me. What do I do?*

My phone rang within minutes. Even though I suspected it was Kara, I was hoping it was Deven... or Brian. I didn't care. I needed something to sway me in one direction. My heart was urging me in one direction, but I didn't want to be miserable my entire life waiting for Brian to maybe never return. Kara had also mentioned in her email that he was staying with them for the spring semester. My heart hurt.

"Hi, Kar," I said sadly as I clicked to answer her call.

We talked for a while about almost everything. I didn't mention where I was spending New Year's Eve, only that it was with an old female acquaintance, with the emphasis on the gender. She asked me more details on Deven, since Brian had, in her words, "ranted for over an hour about what an ass he was."

"Yeah, he is an ass, I guess. He decides what he wants and usually gets it," I conceded.

"And you're one of those things?" Kara questioned, but knew the answer.

"Yeah, I guess so." I sighed, my head hitting the desk. *"What am I supposed to do?"*

"I don't know, Ash. You've got yourself quite a mess. I've got no experience with this supernatural attraction, love triangle stuff."

I groaned and hit my head again.

"Hey, I wanted to let you know that we're having some friends over here for a party tonight."

"Why are you telling me that? To make me feel like I'm missing out on more of life?" I felt defeated.

She laughed. *"Not at all. I just wanted you to be aware that people will be here drinking and enjoying the night... single people. And I wanted to see how you would feel, since you have something going on with Deven, if Brian had the chance to explore life without you..."* She trailed off, but I heard her holding her breath.

"I wouldn't feel good at all. Have a good night, Kar," I said and shut off my phone. It took every bit of self-control I had not to break it like the last, but I wasn't in the mood to explain to Deven that I broke his phone because I was pissed about the possibility of Brian dating someone else.

I ran upstairs and buried my face in my pillow, screaming until my throat felt like I'd swallowed razorblades. Then I calmly got up, kicked the glass on the bathroom floor to the side, cleared out the bathtub, and drew a hot bath. I slowly sank lower and lower under the water until only my face was out and stayed there until darkness had fallen and the water was stagnant and cold.

I parked my car in a structure being used by party-goers. Instead of following the crowd to the hotel, I made my way down the dark street in my black hooded jacket and dark jeans towards the CES buildings. They looked ominous even lit up with Christmas lights. I stayed focused on my task and left all my emotional turmoil in my car. What could Sonya want to see me about? And why tonight? Was she really a prisoner in the building? Who else would be there that I'd have to avoid?

I filled my lungs with fresh air and held it in as I approached the front doors. I heard the door unlock at the same time someone approached me from the shadows. My mouth was covered before I could release my breath and cry out.

"Please don't make a sound. It's me, Ash. Dev." I felt his fingers loosen and release my mouth.

I punched his shoulder with all the adrenaline pumping through my veins and heard the door lock again. *"Oh great,"* I complained. *"What the hell are you doing here?"* I whispered loudly.

"You didn't answer your phone," he stated plainly.

"I didn't want to talk to anyone," I responded likewise, thinking about how I wanted to smash the phone.

"You didn't, did you?" He seemed a little hurt that I thought about that.

"No."

"Well, you can't do this alone, no matter how mad I am with you," he said, but there was a hint of genuine concern in his arrogant words.

"I can and am going to do this alone," I fired back. *"Just go home, Dev. I need to be able to stay focused right now."*

"You can't make me. Besides, I will be able to help you in there. I can tell you when people are near so you can maneuver unseen."

I grunted at him, but considered his idea.

"Besides, I've always wanted to be a spy." A childish grin appeared on his face.

"God, Dev. Fine. But you have to stay in the shadows and no one can know you're here."

"No one's supposed to know you're here, either."

"Whatever. Let's just get this over with." I walked to the door and heard it unlock again. I opened the door just enough for me to walk through and held it for a moment for Deven to follow.

"That way," he whispered, already moving towards a hallway leading to a stairwell.

I heard a click when we started ascending the stairs and the red lights on the cameras stopped blinking. Someone was alerted we were there and I hoped it was Sonya. Remembering my way from the tour I'd had, I let Deven know what floor to enter without speaking a word.

He stopped at the doorway and held his finger up to his lip. I listened hard, but couldn't hear anything until footsteps approached. I closed my eyes and connected with the man still in a business suit who was reading a text on his phone. I was able to skim the message and saw it was from Sonya. She was redirecting the man to do a task in another part of the building.

Wait for him to get in the elevator, I thought, looking at Deven.

He nodded and we waited, separated by a few inches, but it might as well been a few miles; he was so involved in the spy game he was playing, he didn't consider that I might need a friendly squeeze of my hand in encouragement.

This is what you wanted, I thought to myself and then added because of Deven, *this meeting to find out the answers.*

The elevator doors closed and we crept at an uncomfortable speed, being especially cautious. Deven led the way, hearing the thoughts of our host long before I could make out the dim light in the corner conference room.

Sonya greeted me with a friendly smile, but spoke in hushed tones. "I'm so glad to see you again, Ashlyn. How's Brian?" She embraced me in a friendly hug, but I cringed inwardly when she mentioned Brian's name.

"He's fine. Spending time with friends out of state," I said diplomatically, noticing Deven's eyes narrow at the scene.

Sonya released me and turned to Deven. "Hello again, Deven. I wasn't expecting you here tonight."

Deven said nothing, but nodded at her addressing him.

I shot curious glances between the two, but was diverted immediately from speculating when Sonya ushered me to the stack of papers and the laptop on the table.

"I wanted to ease your concerns and give you a little more than you expected." She pushed a file folder in front of me.

I looked at it then her. "What do you want from me in return for this information?"

"Nothing," she said pleasantly, folding her hand in front of her.

I raised my eyebrow, opening the folder and pausing for a moment before I looked down.

"You see," she began as I looked at the gruesome pictures being presented to me, "Rick Thompson is in fact dead. Those were taken by our medical examiner at the autopsy we conducted."

Page after page of medical notes and pictures, weights of body parts, ounces of fluids... I closed the notes and pushed it back in front of her. "Why did I have to come here now to see this? Chel has the ability to leave. Couldn't you have given this to her?"

"Oh, no. Chel doesn't have access to handle this information. No, this is level four classified. She only has level three." Sonya spoke to me like I was a school child and she was explaining something painfully obvious.

"Tell her about the experiments," Deven interjected.

"Very good, Mr. Reynolds. I'd forgotten I was in the presence of a mind reader. Yes, after the autopsy, Mr. Thompson's brain was taken to a level nine experimental laboratory. You see, Ashlyn," she turned the laptop to face me and began a video without pressing a button, "we didn't expect you to be victorious. Rick was far superior in talent than you and he lacked your sense of loyalty to people around you. Yes. He was expected to do great things with his gift."

I watched the screen as a group of people in full hazmat suits attached probes and wires to the mass set on a silver table and was taken back when they were able to cause the brain to disappear. A few more adjustments and the brain reappeared.

“What?” I didn’t know what to say or think. This was far beyond the morbid scope that I’d given CES credit for. I gripped the chair in front of me to steady myself. *They expected me to die.* I struggled hard to comprehend the game they were playing.

Deven came over and held me steady with a strong grip on my upper arm. “There’s more,” he said, challenging Sonya.

“Oh, yes. There’s more. And this is why I have you here when this place is virtually deserted.” Her tone was pleasant, like she was teaching us how to prepare a delicious dinner. “The doctors have had tremendous success in a very short time. They have been able to harness Rick’s gift and can use it in small increments.”

My fingers pinched the bridge of my nose. “Small increments? You mean they can use it to disappear for periods of time?”

“Yes, well the subject has to already be gifted, so they are a considerable threat when they have this added boost to their ability. We’ve only had one person not tolerate the experiment. A great success.” She was beaming with pride.

My jaw clenched and I was gnashing my teeth as I spoke. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I’ve been privy to information suggesting they are interested in one of your new friends. They are planning to use this new tool to help them retrieve this person. I like you, Ashlyn, and I want you to trust me because I would still love it if you ended up working here.”

“Who are they going to take?” I demanded.

“The decision has not been made yet.”

“Why don’t you do something to stop it from happening then?”

“That’s not part of my job. The ones responsible for this wouldn’t take my input on the matter anymore than they would from you. But you have the knowledge and it’s in your hands to do with it as you see fit.” She closed the laptop and removed the papers from in front of me.

I could see fireworks sparking outside, but I stood there trying to figure out what to do.

“The cameras will need be back on in this part of the building in three minutes. I ran a diagnosis on the system to provide you with the ability to move in here undetected. But you will need to take your leave now.”

My brain was screaming obscenities at her. I didn’t know it was time to make a hasty escape until Deven grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the stairs as a hurried pace.

“Shhhh...” he insisted, although I wasn’t making an external sound.

We continued running down the street until we were a safe distance away from the building, running through a crowd of celebrants on their way to another party.

“Happy New Year!” they cheered as we ran by, their collective breath reeking of a mix of alcoholic drinks.

Deven pulled me into a quiet alley, immediately wrapping his arms around me. “You need to slow down with all that speculation. Take a breath. Please. You’re killing my head.”

I hugged him tight and buried my face in his chest, uncontrollable, tearless sobs escaping.

“Shhhh...” he said again, a little more gently while he stroked my hair. “We’ll talk to Ken about this tomorrow and figure out a way to keep everyone safe.”

I scoffed, but didn’t continue with my list of reasons why I doubted him.

Ground fireworks were set off by a group of passerbys, startling me out of my fit. With a deep breath, I stepped back from Deven. “I think I’ve had enough of today. I’m going home to sleep. Thank you for coming. I know I don’t sound like I mean it now, but I sincerely appreciate you being there tonight. Have a good night, Deven. And Happy New Year, I guess.”

Chapter Ten – In His Words

The following morning, I woke up with a purpose. I bought Deven breakfast and took it to his house to apologize, which he accepted to both my surprise and relief. After we ate, we called Ken and met with him and Logan, telling them everything from the meeting.

“She honestly didn’t know who they were after,” Deven confirmed. “Everything she told us she believes is true.”

“I’m glad you were there last night,” Ken remarked.

“We’re a team, right?” I commented.

“Right,” the three of them said in unison.

“We’ll need to come up with a way to keep the group together as much as possible, but not stop doing what we do,” Ken soliloquized.

“I have school starting up again in two weeks. But I doubt they’ll come for me.”

“I can pick up a class or two to keep her on the radar still,” Deven offered. I could see a hint of a grin on his face, though he tried to hide it well.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Logan remarked, oblivious to the subtle gesture.

We spent the next hour discussing security and adjusting our outings for the next month. Ken said he’d call a meeting after everyone had returned from the holidays and we’d go from there.

Deven and I left, spending the rest of the day working on our own strategies and using our gifts together at the mall. It felt good to be laughing again, too. I was allowing myself to get closer to him, but I still had that shiny reminder of my other love that I carried with me.

“Can I stay here tonight?” he asked, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

My back was pressed against my door and I was spinning from his strong lips against mine. “No. Yes. No.” I didn’t mean to laugh, but I sounded ridiculous to myself.

“Which is it?” His hand was on the doorknob, ready to go inside.

I bit my lip and closed my eyes tight. “Not tonight, Deven. Please... just give me a little more time.”

Deven didn’t get angry. He kissed my forehead and stepped away. “Good night, Ashlyn,” his voice low and riddled with disappointment.

“See you tomorrow?” I asked hopefully.

He grunted a noise and disappeared into the night.

I beat the back of my head against the door several times and stood there until he was long gone before turning the knob and stumbling inside. *Brian had always honored my wishes to take things slow.* As soon as I had thought it, I knew that’s what part of my problem was. Everything that happened between Deven and me, I was comparing to the only other real relationship I knew... the one I was comfortable with. What I had with Deven was nothing like what I had with Brian and if I didn’t stop comparing the two, I was going to lose Deven, too.

I ran up the stairs, skipping every other step, searching through my purse for my ring. I looked at it with different eyes than I had the day I tried to destroy my home. *It’s just a piece of metal with rocks attached,* I told myself, placing it on Brian’s nightstand, a twinge of pain in my chest.

I quickly looked away from it and started picking up the clothes that were displaced from my tantrum. I made a face at the shredded dress and tossed it in the trash along with the silver shoes. Brian’s clothes were thrown into a pile until all of mine were sorted and put away. Then I put them in a trash bag and dragged them back in the closet, hiding it in the far, dark corner where I wouldn’t be forced to look at it every day.

As I turned to leave, my eyes wandered up to the top shelf and a stack of notebooks I’d never noticed before. I stared at them with a tilted head for several minutes before I dragged in a chair and

retrieved them, blowing off the dust. Climbing down, I carried the stack to my bed and flipped through the top one.

"Ash is still unconscious, even though they took her off the meds that were forcing the coma. I hate how..."

I quickly flipped to the end, dated just after we'd met Alex and Morgan for the first time. "I didn't know Brian kept these journals," I said aloud and pulled the bottom one from the stack.

I laughed a little because his handwriting was so bad. He started these when he was in foster care.

"Steph's so lucky. Everyone likes her. I didn't like those people anyway. The lady had an ugly mole on her nose. It was gross. I miss mom."

My heart fluttered as I thought about Brian as a little kid losing both his parents. I continued reading through the early writings. His words were heartbreaking, but the pictures he'd draw of the people coming to visit them made me laugh. He'd exaggerate their bad features and made some of them into monsters. The drawings stopped when the Turners adopted him and his sister.

He wrote about fishing trips, camp outs in the back yard, summer vacations... I read every word. I read about his move and his first day at our high school.

"...There's this girl and she's in one of my classes. I didn't catch her name, but she smiled at me and I started sweating. Steph laughed at me when I told her so I took her favorite CD and hid it. What does she know about high school? She's only in eighth grade. Anyway, I think I'm glad we moved here. Can't wait til tomorrow."

I recalled Brian telling me about him seeing me on his first day of school. I hated that I didn't have the same memory of meeting him. I was so caught up in trying to repress my gift that I barely noticed anything or anyone back then.

I quickly moved past the parts where he wrote about his girlfriends and love interests, finally arriving at the entries from the day I told him about my gift.

"I don't have the time I'd like to spend on this now. Ashlyn is at her house getting ready for the dance. I can't blow this. It felt so good to punch that asshole after hurting her like that. I can't believe I didn't get detention. What a coward."

I can't believe she agreed to go out there with me. And then to have her tell me her secret... I'm not even going to write it here, in case someone reads it. Un-fricken-believable! I can't believe she's even more amazing that I'd imagined."

Gotta go put the top on the Jeep and pick up something for us to eat. I wish I'd gotten that door fixed."

My heart beat faster remembering those happier days. "What happened to us?" I asked myself, stretching my neck and checking the time - two in the morning. I still had two and a half more notebooks to read. I stood up, letting the blood move through my legs again as I walked downstairs to start a pot of coffee.

While it brewed, I went to check my emails. There were only two and they were both from Kara. The first was her asking me to call her back and the second, sent a few hours before midnight on New Year's Eve was her yelling at me about how childish I was acting and it was no wonder Brian had left. Her words cut me deep, especially after just leaving a happier time upstairs.

I know I've been saying I'm sorry a lot lately, but I am. Please don't be mad. How was your party? Talk to you soon."

It was the middle of the night, so I didn't expect a response back. I went in the kitchen and retrieved my cup of coffee and went back upstairs to resume my reading.

Between dozing off and rereading, it took me until after seven to get to the end of the stack. "There's more. Where's the rest?"

I was borderline obsessed with finding out how the story ended. I had learned so much about Brian in those notebooks than I'd ever imagined - the simple things I did that made him smile, the way I walked when I felt good about myself, just how badly it hurt him when I woke up with nightmares about Rick because it took him to the dark place he lived in while I was in a coma.

I searched his nightstand, the rest of the closet, his pillow, even under the mattress, but didn't find the newest journal. After searching through the desk in the office, I flicked the computer back to life.

"You have a lot to be sorry about. Look, Ash. I'm not going to lie to you. I'm really pissed at you this time and I think you'd be best to just give things a rest for now. Go have your fling with that guy and maybe when you've decided to stop shutting everyone out, we can be friends again."

I scrambled to find my phone, turned it on, and called Kara. It rang twice and then went to voicemail. "Kara, please don't do this. I'm so, so, so sorry. Call me?"

I buried my hands in my face and rubbed my temples. It was only the second day of the new year and it was already turning out to be worse than the previous year when both Brian and I almost died. I yelled out in frustration and hit the keyboard. A window popped open with a list of recently viewed documents – some school papers, our list of places for us to go on our honeymoon, and a document with a cryptic title, which I naturally selected.

Password protected? *Really, Brian?* I thought. I typed "AshenB", the name of the star he'd given me for Valentine's Day, and it opened immediately. It was his journal. I adjusted the monitor and started reading intensely.

"I see how they act around each other when they're working together. I know Alex and Morgan have assured me it's innocent and that they are doing some really great work, but I'm feeling more and more like I don't belong in this world with her anymore. I'm tired of being there all the time, but only having her there when there's nothing else going on. What have I gotten myself into? Do I really love her or is it a trick? God, I wish I knew the answer. I can't imagine life without her, but lately, it's hard to imagine what life will be like with her."

I swallowed hard and continued to another entry.

"How could she get drunk with him? I swear I don't know her anymore!!!. I'm losing my mind worrying about if she's dead or kidnapped or all the horrible things that have crossed my mind since she almost died and she's out kissing him. I'm done. Just done. I can't be here anymore. Michael already said I was welcome to stay with him and Kara. It sounded like a bad idea at the time, but I just need to get away from her."

I'd hurt him so bad and drove him away from me. How could I have ever thought that it wasn't my fault he'd left me? I wiped angry tears from my face and ran upstairs, changing my clothes and getting my purse. I ran downstairs, got my keys and phone, and started to open the door before I realized my ring was still up on the nightstand. I dashed back up the stairs, picked it up and kissed it before sliding it back on my finger. The feel of the cool metal hugging my skin made me smile. *That's premature*, I told myself and placed it back in my purse.

Grabbing the top two notebooks, I ran back downstairs and right into Deven. "Oh!"

"Woah," he said, grabbing my arms. The amused grin faded as he heard the plans in my head and he released me.

"Kara's pissed at me and won't take my calls. I have to go make this right." My voice pleaded with him to understand.

"You're going to see him, too, aren't you?" His words were icy. He already knew the answer because I was not masking my thoughts.

"I have to try," I said, tears threatening to spill.

"You're an idiot," he said and walked away.

"I love you, Deven," I called after him, shocking myself that I said those words out loud.

He didn't pause in his retreat. "Not enough," I barely heard him say as his car door slammed shut and he was gone.

I blinked the tears out of my eyes, grabbing hold of my purse and keys, and walked to my car, determined to make amends in San Francisco.

Chapter Eleven – “The City of Complications”ⁱ

The first half of the relatively short plane ride was spent worrying about Deven. I had been his distraction as much as he'd been mine. I managed to send a cryptic text to Eve before take-off, asking her to look out for him. I sent another text to Ken so he wouldn't worry that I was gone because I was sure Deven wouldn't be conveying that information to anyone. And finally, I sent one to him, simply saying, “I'm sorry.”

When the plane began its descent, my stomach dropped for reasons other than the minor turbulence. I had Kara and Michael's address, but I'd never been to San Francisco. I hoped to find a cab and give them the address and sit back and relax. I laughed out loud at the thought, disturbing my sleeping neighbor, and then braced myself for something I was more nervous about than knowing I had to face off against Rick Thompson.

I pulled out one of the notebooks I'd brought and read it for the remainder of the flight, allowing the positive, happy times Brian was writing about give me the confidence I lacked.

The cab driver was very friendly and gave me a scenic tour of the city on the way to the apartment, pointing out all the notable landmarks and even some really good, lesser known restaurants.

“Thank you, Miss, and enjoy yourself,” the cab driver said after I'd tipped him generously.

I closed the cab door and looked at the apartment I was going to. But my legs didn't move. *Come on, Ash*, I goaded myself. With a deep, wavering breath, I slipped the ring back on my finger and walked upstairs.

The blinds were open and the first person I saw was Brian sitting on the couch, laughing. My face lit up and without meaning to, I connected with him. *Brian!* I exclaimed, visible startling him. I was about to say something else when I noticed a blonde haired girl wearing only an over-sized shirt walk back in the room, handing Brian a cup of coffee. She sat right next to him on the large, empty sofa and put her free hand on his thigh.

I... I stuttered before the connection broke. I forcefully pulled the ring from my finger and hooked it on the doorknob, stamping my feet angrily as I moved quickly away. The coward that I am hid behind a tree and looked on as Brian exited the apartment, the ring dropping to the cement at his feet.

“*Just a sec. I think I heard something. No, it's fine. Just stay there,*” I heard him say as he closed the door. He kneeled down and picked up the ring, scanning the parking lot before cautiously walking in my direction, still looking around unknowingly for me. “Ashlyn?” He was practically whispering and it sounded like he doubted I was even there despite the fact my ring was being held between his thumb and index fingers.

I ducked behind the tree and looked up for divine intervention, but nothing came. I would've accepted being struck down by lightning if it meant I was far away from this place. *Go back inside*, I instructed him as he got too close to where I was.

His hand reached up and squeezed his forehead, but his forward motion continued. “I forgot how much that hurts,” he complained out loud, reaching the tree, but not yet discovering me.

I broke my connection again and silently stepped away from the tree and him.

When his eyes caught mine... those gorgeous blue eyes that made me forget everything bad in this world... a brief moment of joy followed by sadness crossed them. He spoke softly, moving cautiously towards me. “What are you doing here?”

I shook my head, either unwilling or unable to speak. I couldn't quite decide which.

“Your eyes...” he said, but stopped. He was the only one who ever kept track and told me what color my eyes were. He looked to the ground when his words continued. “I guess you saw Jen.”

I shrugged, still not betraying my anger and hurt with words.

Brian looked up at me and frowned. "What did you expect me to do, Ash? I don't want to be your tool, so I have to know if there's something else out there for me besides your life." His words were angry and cut me deep.

"You have your ring back. You're free of me and can do whatever you'd like," I whispered, still trying to hide my emotions. "Oh, and one more thing." I fished his journals from my purse and handed them to him with shaky hands. "I'll have Steph take the rest to your parents' house, I guess."

"You... you read these?" he asked dumbfounded.

I nodded. "I'm sorry if they were private. But it gave me hope for... you know... us." I shrugged again, not knowing anything else to say. I had never felt so awkward and distant from him as I did in those moments, yet inside I could still feel the strength he unintentionally gave me.

Unable to say anything else to me, I decided that was a good cue for me to leave. So without any of my thoughts spoken, I turned my back to him and walked away, holding my shaking hands close to my stomach, trying not to break down or throw up in front of him.

"I heard you've been seeing Deven," he called out from behind me.

I stopped dead in my tracks, but didn't face him. The knife in my heart was slowly being twisted. "Like you said, you had to find out if this was all some cosmic joke being played on us or if we were capable of any kind of choice."

He scoffed. "And you chose him?" he asked with spite.

I spun around quickly and glared at Brian. "I'm here, aren't I?" I closed my eyes, exhaling angrily. "Or was here. Good bye." As I turned around, my cheeks lit on fire with the streams of water I'd been trying hard to hold back.

"Where are you going to go?" he called out after me with a hint of concern in his words.

"To hell," I said and kept walking. I knew there was a park near the bridge. Since I could see the bridge, I felt confident I could make it at least that far and then try to figure things out. I hadn't booked a return flight because I had hoped hard enough that I actually started to believe that Brian would be returning with me.

There was a strong, cold wind blowing off the bay, but my trembling wasn't from the chill in the air. I got to the park and sat on a bench overlooking the water and huddled up into a ball and just stared blankly at the scenery. So many memories I couldn't erase, such a big future I couldn't picture myself in anymore.

An older man in ragged clothes came and sat on my bench. "I've lived this day a thousand times and have yet to see a wave out there that looked like any other," he said randomly, taking a drink from his brown bag.

I followed his gaze to the water and watched the waves, but didn't respond to the man's observation.

"But you," he said turning to face me, "I know you. Your world has just come crashing down around you and you feel lost. But you see those waves crashing against the pillars? They get it a little wet, but look at all that's left untouched. You, my dear, are a pillar. You're much more than the little part being bombarded by waves. You'll dry soon enough."

I chuckled softly through my tears and forced a smile at him. "Thank you."

He offered me his drink and for some unknown reason, I accepted it. I threw my head back taking a large swig of the foul drink, swallowed, wiped off my mouth and handed it back without coughing. "Thank you again," I managed with a nod.

"Enjoy your evening, Miss," he said, toasting me with his brown bag and walked away.

I sat on the bench watching the waves against the concrete, wondering if the man could be right. Kids laughed and played around me, adults kicked around their hacky sacks, some people flew

kites... the world was alive around me. Yet as the sun set beyond the ocean, I felt stagnant. Even the stray dog that happened by snorted as soon as he sniffed me and quickly scurried away.

I was wondering how long I could sit there without the police or a park ranger being called on me when a warm body sat close to me. I didn't bother looking to see who it was.

"Hey," a female voice said.

I made a small sound indicating I heard her, but didn't move or offer any other invitation to converse with me.

"Sorry about my last email," Kara began, not taking the hint.

"Okay," I said and stood up, walking away from her towards the water.

She stood up and raced after me. "See? This is what I was talking about. You're shutting everyone out. At least yell at me." She ran her fingers angrily through her hair.

"Don't you have people worrying about where you are?" My tone was cold and without inflection.

"Don't you?" she tried to fire back.

I turned and stared at her with a disbelieving expression, then turned back to the water. "No."

"That's not true and you know it."

"What? My mother? She thinks I'm having the time of my life in Europe. Deven? He basically told me to go to hell because I wouldn't sleep with him and came here to try to make things work. You? Michael? Brian?" I scoffed and stopped there.

"I'm here, aren't I? Doesn't that prove that you're wrong about that, which means it's likely you're wrong about other things, too."

"Yeah, I've been made quite aware many times over how wrong I am. I think you should just go and take care of your life." My feet moved without provocation to the little stretch of beach. The wind was colder without the sun warming the air and I shivered as I cradled my legs to my chest.

"You're impossible!" she yelled at me. "She's impossible," she complained in a quieter tone and I heard her footsteps fade away.

My chest quivered as I took another forced breath. I kicked my shoes off and dug them into the cold sand, searching for something warm. Failing to find anything satisfying there, I stood up and walked to the water, gasping loudly as the icy water rushed over my feet. After a moment, they were numb, so I ventured farther in. My pants were wet up to my knees. I flung my arms out, tilted my head back, and let out a loud cry of frustration. I looked up to the bridge and connected with people in the cars, enjoying being in someone else's life for the brief periods when I was suddenly forced back to mine. Someone grabbed my arm and lifted me up, throwing me over their shoulder.

"LET ME GO!" I yelled, hitting their back as hard as I could.

"Are you trying to kill yourself?" His voice was livid as he set me down in the sand next to my shoes.

"No. If I wanted to do that, I'd be up there instead of down here," I said defiantly, crossing my arms and staring angrily at Brian's frustrated face. "Why are you here?"

"Because you're stubborn and impossible and are destroying everything that's important to you. You know Kara's in the car in tears?"

"She shouldn't have come to find me. You shouldn't be here. And I'm done here," I said and picked up my shoes, walking past him towards the street.

Brian grabbed my arm and spun me around into him, looking down at me with lost eyes.

His closeness was intoxicating, but I forced myself to stay rigid, my jaw clenched. "Don't make me force you to let me go," I threatened.

"No," he said and he pulled me to his lips and kissed me with raw passion.

The wind gusted and my body felt like it was going to blow away with the trash that floated by, but Brian held my shivering body tighter, long after our lips had parted. "Do you have somewhere to stay tonight?" he finally asked.

"The bench was pretty comfortable," I stammered. The cold water coupled with the wind had chilled my lower body to the bone. I wanted nothing more than to spend the night in his bed.

"I'll get you a room at the Mandarin. You can stay as long as you like, but I need to know that you're not going to freeze to death out here."

"Will you come back with me?" I asked, looking into his eyes.

His expression was both sad and pained. "No. I need to stay here." He sighed and released me. "I have to know, Ash. I have to know if this is really my choice. God! This is so frustrating!" He turned his back to me, running his fingers through his still perfect hair, squeezing his head.

"So you're staying with her then?" I asked in disbelief, shaking my head, trying to negate the words I'd just said.

He turned and looked at me. "Yes."

Unwanted tears fell silently down my cheeks. "This *is* a cruel joke. I hope someone somewhere is having a good laugh." My words were twisted with pain and frustration.

Brian took another step towards me, but I took one backwards, practically falling off the sidewalk.

"No, you don't get to look at me like that after you've chosen to stay here with her." I pulled out my phone and called for a cab, staring with disbelieving eyes at Brian, who was frozen in place. We remained that way, in a silent standoff, until my cab arrived. Still not taking my eyes off him as I got into the car, I whispered, "Good bye," and closed the door before I could hear his voice. I wanted to leave with the last word he said to me as "yes", not "good bye".

Chapter Twelve – Where to Begin

I tried not to look back as the cab drove away, but my masochistic side had to take one last glance. His “yes” echoing forever in my head, a positive word that cut so deep, my final sight of him was him looking sadly after me, holding onto my ring. My heart ached, but I had to let him go if that’s what he wanted.

I rented a car at the airport then spent the next several days in California driving along the PCH and stopping to sit on the beach or a cliff overlooking the ocean. It was beautiful and peaceful. There wasn’t much time spent feeling sorry for myself. I was focused on finding a way to rise above the waves that crashed around me and to find my place in the world again.

When I returned home, I boxed up all of Brian’s things and called Steph to come get them. She was shocked and sad, but I didn’t give her many of the details.

“You’ll have to talk to Brian. It’s not my story to tell anymore,” I said sadly as I helped her put the last of the boxes in her car. “Don’t be too hard on him, though. He really just wants a chance to make a choice of his own.” I shrugged and hugged her.

The call to Mom was difficult and I put it off as long as I could. When I finally got up the courage, I stayed as calm as I could and explained to her the wedding was off. At first, she thought it was a joke, but as I continued to explain it was over, she fell silent until I finally told her I had other things to wrap up and got off the phone with her.

I trudged around the condo for days, feeling completely out of place until I finally made the decision. The night after meeting with a real estate agent, I sent Brian an email, the first one I’d sent since before Christmas.

I just wanted to let you know that I’m putting the condo and my car up for sale. If you want anything else from here or the money from the sales immediately, let me know. Otherwise, I’d like to donate most of the furnishings and invest the money in an apartment near campus. I’m going to get a job so I can start repaying you. I hope you are well and finding happiness in your choices. Tell Kar I love her.

XO,

Ash

I clicked send and said aloud, “I hope you know I still love you, too.”

I began packing the things in the office I planned to donate when there was a soft knock at the front door. I brushed my dusty hands on my jeans and peaked out. The knock was too delicate sounding to be Deven, not that he was speaking to me anymore. I’d tried contacting him when I returned. I wanted to see if we could make things work. I wanted to tell him that things were over between me and Brian. But he refused to return my calls and was never around when I went by his place to see him in person. The last time I’d try to call him, his phone number had been disconnected, so I stopped making any more efforts to make amends. Eve wasn’t any help, either. He apparently spoke to her and she honored her brother’s request to keep information from me.

“Hi, Lani,” I said warmly as I opened the door to her.

“Hi, Ash. How was your New Year’s?” she asked hesitantly as she walked into my house of half-filled boxes. “Are you moving?”

“It was crappy. And yes, I’m selling the condo.” There was an edge to my voice I didn’t like, but I’d been avoiding having to have this conversation.

“Getting a bigger house? You’re not pregnant, are you?” Lani’s eyes got big with excitement.

I held up my ringless finger. “Brian’s living in California with a girl named Jen now.” I bit the inside of my cheek as soon as the words were out of my mouth to stop myself from having an emotional outburst.

“He didn’t. He can’t!” she yelled at me.

“He doesn’t want to be a part of our world anymore, Lani. Can you blame him?”

“Yes,” she insisted, taking my hand and pulling me to the couch. “Is that why you and Dev have been... you know?”

“Been what?” I asked, needing her to spell out exactly what she meant.

“I saw you two outside the hospital on Christmas. I was sneaking up on you guys to scare you when he pulled you into that niche, his mind obviously on something more important if he didn’t hear me coming. There’s something going on there more than the two of you just working together.”

I sighed. “It’s complicated. He took me away to Mexico before New Years, but since I was technically still engaged at the time, I didn’t let anything happen.”

“But now you’re not engaged anymore. So does that mean...?”

I shook my head. “He’s pissed at me for going to see Brian and has been avoiding me. I’ve screwed everything up so bad.” I leaned against her shoulder and softly sobbed.

She wrapped her arm around me and rested her head on top of mine, just letting me get it out. “Shhh...” she’d say occasionally, stroking my arm or hair. “They’re just stupid boys, after all. Not worth all of this.”

I chuckled then hiccupped, sitting upright again. “Definitely stupid boys,” I agreed and we both laughed.

I let her help me pack things while she told me about her holiday in Hawaii. “We were going to get married there,” I commented.

“I’m glad you didn’t. It’s too cliché for you.” She winked and wrapped the last glass in newspaper. “So where are you going to go?”

“Not sure yet. I have my realtor looking into apartments near campus.” I shrugged and sealed the box with tape. “There. Another box for charity,” I said proudly.

“You’re donating all this stuff? Would you mind donating it to the Lani/Khari/Audrey house?”

I laughed. “Sure. Take whatever you’d like.”

“You’re the best!” Lani pulled her phone out of her pocket and made a phone call, walking back towards the office as she spoke. “Yeah, whatever we want...” I heard her say as her voice trailed off.

I got a new box and walked upstairs to begin packing away the clothes I wouldn’t immediately need.

A few minutes later, Lani bounded up the stairs. “Ash, Ash?”

“In the closet,” I called out.

“Hey Ash. Me and the girls think you should move in with us. It’d be perfect!”

“Oh, I don’t know, Lani. I don’t want to intrude and I don’t want you guys offering out of pity.” I threw several bras in the box with a little more emotion than I’d intended for her to see.

She dragged me out of the closet by my arm. “Listen here. I don’t do anything out of pity. It’s just the three of us and we have a spare room we didn’t know what to do with. Khari thought it was a great idea and Audrey will be fine with it, too.”

“It sounds great. Just make sure it’s cool with Audrey and I’ll have my new furniture delivered there.” I smiled outwardly, but my head was telling me not to screw this up, too.

The new semester was only a few days away from starting. I’d moved in with Lani, Khari, and Audrey and bought a new bed, dresser, and car. My condo was in escrow and life seemed to be getting back on track. Our group outings had resumed and everyone knew about Brian leaving the group. It was awkward that first night with everyone staring and creating their own story about what had happened, but once I made a joke about it, everyone seemed to relax.

Deven was absent from everything. Eve explained he was away on a trip, which no one questioned – except Lani and me. She had been a great housemate and friend. She kept what I had shared with her about Deven between us and for that, I’d be eternally grateful.

I had just told the girls good night after a night out at a concert. I entered my dark room, closing the door as I turned on the light, startled by the dark figure on my bed.

"Not as big as your last one, but I think I like it better," Deven said, rolling on his side and propping his head up on his hand, patting the bed with his other hand.

"Get out," I yelled in a whisper, pointing to the window.

"No wonder you don't have any guests visiting you here. You're very inhospitable." He remained lounged on my bedspread, still beckoning me towards him. "Just come here, Ash. I'm not going to bite, unless you want me to." His grin was devious. "I'm not mad anymore."

"And you think I'm going to run back to you now that you've decided you want me again?" I shook my head. "That's not how it works, Dev."

He dangled a set of keys in front of me. "I just got a new car. It's a convertible and it's dying to give you the first ride," he said, still grinning.

His persistence was wearing on me and I cracked a smile. "Another new car?"

He sat up and motioned with his head for me to follow.

I grabbed my sticky notes from my desk and scribbled a note that I'd gone out, but had my phone, checked to make sure I had my phone in my purse, and grabbed my jacket. "A quick drive," I warned.

We slipped out my window and walked around the corner where his shiny, red, expensive-looking car was parked with the top off. He pressed a button and it roared to life a moment before he jumped into the driver's seat. "Pick it up," he complained and I quickened my step, unlocking then opening the passenger door and sitting down on the comfortable black leather.

"Not bad," I offered, breathing in the smell of new car and leather. "Do I want to know what happened to the last one?"

"Traded it in," he said, pressing his foot against the clutch and pulling the stick into gear before racing off towards the highway.

Ten minutes out of town, I'd had enough of the convertible. Deven drove a constant speed of one oh eight with the top down. My hair was knotted and my teeth clanked repeatedly together. "Ppppleeeeezzzz," I stammered.

Deven exited at the next off-ramp onto a road that looked like it hadn't been used since the car was invented. We bounced our way down it for several minutes and then pulled off to the side, shutting the car and lights off.

"Wow!" he exclaimed with a huge smile on his face. "Can you believe this thing?"

"Mmmm." I *couldn't* believe I was shivering in the dark on a forgotten about road with him.

"I told you I'm not mad anymore," he stated, commenting on my internal dialogue.

"Oh, right. Because it felt like you were trying to punish me driving like that with the top down or something." I crossed my arms out of stubbornness and because I was trying to retain the little body heat I was generating.

He ignored my statement and continued with his own agenda. "So... I hear your amp is living with a blonde in California now."

I opened the door and got out of the car, walking back towards the highway.

Deven jumped out and chased me down, walking backwards in front of me, forcing me to face him. "Hey," he said, putting his hand on my chest like he did at the park in December before he forced our first kiss. "Don't be like this. I just meant that I guess you're both really moving on now."

I stopped my forwards cadence and stared angrily at him. "That's *not* what you meant. I don't have to read minds to know that you're ecstatic that he's finally out of the picture. You are selfish and inconsiderate and can go to hell, for all I care."

"Hell, eh? Sounds warm. Will you be there?"

I pushed my way by him, bumping against his shoulder hard. "I'm already there," I mumbled.

He jumped back in front of me. "Would you stop? We're going to have to hike back to the car if you don't quit this tantrum you're throwing."

"Why did you bring me out here?"

"Because I've missed you," he said sincerely.

I growled. "Now you're trying to tell me what you think I want to hear. All I want is the truth, Dev. You wanted Brian out of the picture from the very beginning. Why?"

"Because I wanted you all to myself," he said slyly, moving in front of me again.

"You're so full of crap," I said and hit him in the chest. "I said the truth or I'm walking home." I stared him down, waiting for his response. Finally, I walked past him again. "Good bye, Deven."

"Wait," he yelled. "I thought you said you loved me."

I cringed as he used my words against me. "Maybe I was just telling you what I thought you wanted to hear," I called back over my shoulder. I slowed my pace, waiting for his witty reply, but it was silent except for a gentle breeze blowing through the dead brush. I stopped and turned around, squinting in the dark. "Deven?"

There was still no response, so I turned around and moved back towards the car, calling his name every ten feet or so. When I reached the car, he was leaning against the back bumper, staring into the night sky. I joined him, bumping my shoulder against his. "You okay?"

"You know, if it had been a different situation when you said that to me, it would've been what I wanted to hear. You really didn't mean it?"

"I don't know, Dev. In the moment it popped out of my mouth, even I was surprised by it. I enjoy being with you... except when you're being an ass like tonight." I paused, hoping for some reaction from him, but he remained silent. "You've become one of my closest friends."

"Friends," he scoffed.

"Don't take it like that. You knew how screwed up I was before you pursued me."

"Yeah, you are very messed up."

"I believe you used the word 'idiot'?" I nudged him again to let him know I wasn't upset.

"I meant it, too," he said, nudging me back.

"Gee, thanks. So will you answer my question now?"

"Yes, I used the word 'idiot'," he said smugly.

"Are we back to this again? Answer me now or I'm going, Dev," I threatened stepping in front of him, forcing him to look at me.

"I don't know. I guess I was jealous of the way you two were. I'd watch Alex and Morgan for a long time. They're solid, but different than you and Brian. Maybe it's because of how you communicated with him and were in complete unison. But at the coffee shop wasn't the first time I'd seen you." He pushed himself off the car and began walking in the opposite direction than I had.

I fell in step next to him. "What do you mean?"

"I was at the mall one day when you were practicing with Brian. I think it was your birthday or close to it or something. Anyway, I listened to how you used your gift and the way you interacted with him. It was like nothing I'd seen before. I went to Alex and talked to him about you. Chel helped us get a little information from CES about you, but we were told in exchange, we couldn't interfere with what was happening."

I rolled my eyes and grumbled.

He continued, "We sent you flowers when you were in the hospital, but I'm sure you got lots of them. You were the first of us to really be pinned up as a hero." His laugh was soft and out of place.

"You were jealous of that, too?" I inferred.

"Maybe. We were going to talk to you after you got out of the hospital, but you left town too quickly."

"Did you just make up all that crap about not needing an amp?"

"It was a theory, but I only pursued it because I wanted to be the one that connected to you," he admitted to my surprise.

"You're such an ass," I said, but I wasn't angry. Not living in the house I shared with Brian with all of his things and all the memories and scents helped my perspective. Did I feel like I was missing something? Definitely. Did I feel broken? Not so much anymore.

"I'd like to try this again with you, Ash." He stopped walking and took my hand.

"You're going to have to work hard to get me back," I warned, visualizing his lips moving with mine in my head.

He laughed. "Sounds like a tough task. I'm not sure I'm up for that," he teased.

"Kiss me, you ass," I demanded, pulling his face down to mine and kissing him eagerly.

He lifted me in his arms as our lips refused to part and carried me to the car, laying me on the hood. His strong hand felt incredible as it moved slowly along my side.

My body ached for his touch, arching up towards his as his lips caressed the soft skin on my neck. "Are you finally ready?" he whispered softly against my skin.

"Please," I begged.

I felt his smile as he forced himself away from me. Propping myself on my elbows, I watched as he took off his jacket and lifted his shirt over his head. I joined him in front of his car, softly caressing his chest with my lips, teasing his cool skin with my warm breath.

"You..." he started, but then both of our phones sounded with a ring that was designated for group emergencies only.

We looked at each other confused for a moment, then jolted for our phones.

Simon's missing. Meet at CS ASAP.

I noticed an exchange between Lani and Khari as Deven and I got out of his car at the coffee shop. Our passionate exchange had been put on immediate pause when the phone rang. We talked the entire way there of strategies to get him back.

When everyone was there, we were briefed on the scene at his apartment that Logan had stumbled upon when he went to pick him up to go the bar.

"He definitely put up a struggle," Logan explained. "It looks like they came in through his bedroom window and front door. I just left him for a few to go shower."

"Not your fault, Logan," Ken said and we all nodded and made affirming noises.

"Where'd they take him?" Audrey asked, teleporting herself on the table next to Ken.

"The CES building, we're guessing," Alex said.

"What are they going to do to him," Ethan asked suddenly, startling many of us.

"Manipulate his gift painfully for months and then force him to work for them under threat of death." Deven's voice was harsh and annoyed.

He's just scared, I said in my head, taking Deven's hand and squeezing it under the table.

"He shouldn't be here if he's scared," Deven said aloud, startling everyone. "We can't afford weakness when we're talking about breaking someone out of CES."

"I need him," Eve said defending Ethan.

"You never did before," Deven responded with venom in his words.

Lani looked at me with begging eyes, hoping I'd jump in and stop this exchange.

"Everyone just calm down," Ken said standing between Deven and the couple. "We need to work together here, not fight with each other. Dev and Ash have the best knowledge of the inside of CES. We'll need the two of you to lead. Eve, you'll be needed immediately when Simon's located. He's most likely been beaten and drugged. Lani and Audrey will be able to scout and patrol inside. Logan, I'd like you inside, too, in case anyone gets past Ash and Dev. Khari and I will be outside on the east making sure the route out is safe and secure. Alex and Morgan will take the west side. We can't use any

technology to communicate in there, so we're going to have to work together." Ken looked between Eve and Deven as he spoke this. "Got it?"

"Yeah," Eve said immediately.

Deven grumbled and finally said, "Sure."

"Okay, then. We're not wasting any time. Meet at the hotel behind the CES building in thirty minutes."

Everyone filed out, murmuring with each other. I walked out in stunned silence. I couldn't understand how we'd let our guard down so quickly and was frustrated with how disjointed we felt as a group. Maybe it was the shock of it actually happening. I wasn't sure, but I knew I had to get my head focused or I'd be the failure point.

I rode back to the house in Audrey's car, sitting in the back with Lani while Deven drove to his house to change his clothes.

I'll tell you about it later, I told her as I briefly connected with her. She'd been staring at me for the entire ride, like she was trying to read my mind.

She nodded and left me alone, hopefully mentally preparing herself for this task instead of worrying about my love life.

I changed quickly into head to toe black clothes and was the first back outside in the car. Khari was second. "So, you and Dev?"

"Not now, Khar," Lani said as she joined me in the backseat a moment before Audrey appeared in her seat.

"Let's go," Khari said, pointing towards the city.

Chapter Thirteen – Diversions

We drove in complete silence, all consumed by our thoughts. Deven and Logan were already there, having a quiet conversation when we parked. The rest arrived within a few minutes of us. If people had seen us congregating in that garage, they probably would've been concerned about gang violence or a terrorist attack. We were ominous in our black outfits, huddled together, speaking quickly and quietly about the plan.

We moved in unison, silently through the still night. Eve was skilled in lock-picking and got us inside through a service entrance within two minutes. Logan was assigned to take over the control room, erasing all knowledge of our penetration that was caught on camera and by the guards. Lani, Audrey, Eve and Ethan, Deven, and I all walked swiftly towards the hallway.

"I hear Simon's thoughts. Third floor, west side, I believe," Deven whispered.

We all nodded, Logan going to the control room and the rest of us on our way to the stairwell. *Please don't interfere*, I begged in my head of Sonya, who I knew had to have some knowledge of our break-in.

Deven gave us the "all clear" nod and we exited into the middle of the third floor. It was eerily quiet and foreboding, but we seemed to be staying calm and focused; except Ethan who, with his lack of any abilities or experience like this, was visibly scared.

"Mummy dad... he was a cop... he was kkkkilled by a thief he was chasing in a building after dark like this," Ethan stammered, trying to explain his uneasiness.

"Shhh!" Deven said.

The group continued to the west side towards offices and a conference room. Most of the office doors were open, but a few were closed. Audrey took the lead to go into the closed ones and search for signs of Simon.

On the second to last one, there was a startling noise, followed by a sharp cry.

"Audrey!" Lani, Eve, and I yelled in unison.

I connected with Audrey's mind while Lani tried to open the door. There was a motion detector in the room that she triggered when she teleported in, shooting five or six darts across her body. She was foaming at the mouth and started convulsing, causing me to break my connection.

"You have to get in there!" I exclaimed.

"The door's locked!" Lani yelled back, banging her body against the door, still trying to twist the knob.

"I'll need some more things to pick this lock. It's complicated," Eve said studying the mechanism.

"Get out of the way, Ethan," Deven barked, pointing towards the open conference room.

Eve nodded. "You'll be safer in there, babe," she said.

I ran into an open office and starting opening drawers, looking for anything small that could pick a lock. Didn't this company use paperclips? As I entered the office next to the conference room, I heard Deven speaking low to Ethan.

"You're pathetic. Look how easily you're frightened. You aren't worthy of my sister..."

Shocked by what I was hearing, I stopped my search and connected with Deven. *Stop scaring him and get in here and help me*, I insisted. My gift had no effect on him and he continued backing Ethan into a dark corner.

Deven! Enough! Leave him alone! I shouted at him, but watched helplessly as a shadowy figure appeared behind Ethan, a grin spreading across Deven's face as he nodded.

Noooooo!!!!!! I screamed to no avail. Ethan's body fell limp to the floor.

Deven stood there for another second and then turned for the door.

I broke my connection with him and ran out to stop him at the same time I heard a door break open and Lani yell, "All clear."

Deven pushed me hard against the doorframe, knocking me slightly dizzy. I felt my head as I swayed disconnected, feeling the hot liquid on my fingers.

"Get up, Ash," Lani insisted, "and help Audrey out."

I squeezed my eyes shut then opened them, grabbing onto Audrey's heavy arm. "Okay, but Ethan. He's in there," I said as Audrey pulled me along with her, the effects of the poison and toxin already almost completely gone from her system thanks to Eve's gift.

We ran outside and continued until we'd reached the vehicles. Shock was setting in for me as the adrenaline was wearing off. I barely saw Deven carrying a dazed Eve away from Logan and put her in his car, speeding away.

"Ash is hurt," Audrey yelled at the red car to no avail.

A moment before the concussion consumed me, I saw Lani lay the body of Ethan on the ground and heard a collective gasp.

"No!" I yelled out, then instantly regretted it. My head felt like it'd been split open, a lot like after I woke up in the hospital after having my head smashed by Rick Thompson.

But I wasn't in a hospital room or even in the parking lot, where I last remember being. It was daytime and I was in my bed.

"What's wrong?" Lani rushed in, followed closely by Khari and Audrey.

"You have to stop him. He planned it!" I said, throwing off the covers and trying to walk to my keys on my desk. My legs gave out under me and I was caught by Audrey, who'd teleported next to me just in time.

"Who planned what?" Audrey asked, helping me back to bed.

I shook her arm off and held onto the bed, walking more carefully to retrieve my keys. "Deven. He had Ethan killed."

Lani came to my side and rubbed my back. "Hun, you got a pretty big knot on your head. I don't think you really mean that."

I growled at her. "I know exactly what I'm talking about. Where's Deven? Where's Eve?"

"No one's seen them since they left last night. He's taking care of her, though. This can't be easy," Khari explained.

"Losing your amp is like losing a part of you. But I doubt she even knows he even existed, thanks to Deven. Did Logan say anything about taking her memories?" I questioned, my head clearing up quicker than I'd imagined.

"Not that I know of. He's with Ken right now. I'll give them a call," Audrey said and left the room.

We waiting in awkward silence for Audrey to return and confirm my assumption. "I don't understand," Lani said dumbfounded.

"We didn't get Simon back either, did we?" I asked sadly.

They shook their heads and the anger flared in me. "God, I *am* such an idiot! Why didn't I see this? How could I have fallen for the trap? Me?" I started throwing things around my room.

Khari evaporated the water that flew towards her. Lani ducked just in time to dodge the book flung at her head.

Audrey teleported behind me and restrained my arms. "Enough," she said in my ear. "This isn't helping anything. Logan said Dev had asked him to erase Eve's memories if anything were to happen to Ethan in there."

I grumbled something low and fell into the chair next to the window. "I hate him," I said through gritted teeth.

"We're all pissed at Dev, Ash. Let's just get everyone over here and figure out what to do next. Do we go after him or try again to get Simon? Ken and Alex will know what's best," Lani explained.

"Not Deven," I growled. "Brian." I practically spat his name. "If he had been here, I might've been strong enough to stop Deven. But he's off sleeping with some bimbo, trying to figure out if I'm worth all the crap that follows me."

"Maybe you should lie down again," Khari said, helping me up.

I shook her hand off. "No. Ugh. I'm sorry guys. This is all my fault and I can't see any way to make it better. It'll never *be* better, though. Ethan is dead. Simon's still kidnapped. And I'm on the verge of being useless."

"She's right," Audrey said.

I nodded and gestured to her.

"Shut up, Audrey," Lani said.

"What are you going to do if I don't, invisible girl?"

"Enough!" Khari yelled, standing between the two.

Audrey teleported away. A moment later, her car was speeding away. Lani vanished and slammed the door to her room.

Khari sighed and rubbed her temples. "You have to get Brian to come back," she said. "We need you strong now, more than ever. And with us arguing and splitting apart like this, it's only going to get worse."

"She's right," Ken said, entering the room as Khari left already dialing on her phone. "Alex and Morgan left this morning. The amp situation has got them questioning everything again, so they're going away to see how they can make this work." He sat down in the chair I'd recently vacated.

Logan stood in the doorway. "You really think Dev planned this?"

"You erased her memories of Ethan, didn't you?" I questioned sadly, thinking for a moment what it'd be like if Brian was erased from mine.

"Yeah. He told me before everyone showed up that he was worried about Ethan, that he seem scared. And since he knew the inside of CES, I didn't question the danger of the situation we were getting into. It just made sense for her to not have to suffer, you know?" He scratched his head, trying to figure out how he'd failed.

"None of us could've known. Deven was one of us and while he might have disagreed with the use of amps, he didn't show any signs of going to this extreme," Ken explained. "I left a message for Chel last night, but she hasn't called me back. I'm hoping she can shed some more light on what went down."

"We were all perceived threats to CES last night. There's nothing that would've stopped her from doing that to any of us to protect her 'family'. It's not like she hasn't done it before," I said sourly, recalling Tom.

Ken grunted. "Even if she happened upon us last night, she wouldn't have killed any of us on sight like that. She kills on orders, not on whims."

"So someone ordered her to kill Ethan?" I asked.

"We can't assume it was her," Ken said defensively.

"Audrey's okay. She said she just needed some fresh air and will be back by tonight. She wants you to call her when you can, Ken," Khari explained as she returned, walking past Logan to hand me a glass of water and some Tylenol.

"Thanks," I whispered, taking the pills.

"You should go talk to Lani," Khari suggested to Logan.

"Right." He left and knocked on her door, gaining almost immediate access.

"I've got a few calls to make," Ken explained and walked out of my room, already connected to the first caller. "Hey, long time no talk..."

Khari sat next to me on the bed, touching the glass, chilling the water. "Thanks," I smiled and drank down the medicine.

"I don't pretend to understand the dynamic between you and Brian. Nor do I know exactly what was going on between you and Deven, but you've gotta get your head back on straight, Ash. I know you're strong alone, but with Brian you are one of the strongest gifted people I've ever known. We need *that* Ashlyn when we go to get Simon next time. You need to get Brian back here."

"It's not that easy. He's with someone else now. He doesn't want to be a part of this anymore," I whined.

"Too bad. He became a part of it when the two of you met. Did you have a choice?"

"Well, not really. No." I shrugged. Even though I'd chosen not to use my gift for many years, I didn't get to choose to not have it. Khari was right. I couldn't force Brian to be with me if he wanted something else, but he couldn't deny that he wasn't tied to me. "Maybe he'd agree to help out under the circumstances," I said quietly, still not believing he'd return.

Khari handed me her phone. "Call him now."

"But I... I can't... I mean, I don't know." I frowned.

"Then I'll do it," she said with an evil grin. She jumped up and grabbed my phone off the desk and started clicking through the buttons.

"No. Gah! Fine. I'll call him." I snatched my phone from her and shooed her away.

She wasn't lying about calling him. The phone was already dialing his number.

"Ashlyn?" Brian sounded confused that I was calling.

I sighed and fell down on my bed. "Hey, Brian. Are you busy right now? I have something I need to talk to you about." *Please say yes*, I said to myself.

"Ummm... hold on." The phone was muffled and I heard his voice, but couldn't make out the words. A door closed and then he came back on. "No, now's fine. What's up? I told you I didn't need any of the money from the condo or the car, if that's what this is about."

"What? Oh, no. But thank you."

There were moments of awkward silence before he spoke again. "I don't have much time. What did you call about?"

I sighed inwardly, feeling a bit lost hearing his voice again. "Oh. Right," I finally said. "Umm... well this is hard for me to ask, so let me start with telling you that it's fine if you say no. But it would mean a lot to me if you could."

"Spit it out, Ash." Brian was growing impatient.

"Last night Simon was taken by CES and we went to rescue him, but Ethan was killed," I said really fast, stringing the words together.

"Wait. What? Slow down. Simon was taken?"

"Mmhmm," I said.

"And Ethan?"

"Was killed while trying to help rescue Simon," I said quietly.

The other side of the phone was quiet. I knew this wouldn't go over well with him. He had been just like Ethan, an involuntary tag-along. That could've been him.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "Things are a mess here, Brian. And we still have to find a way to get Simon back. I wouldn't ask you this if I didn't really think it was important. But is there any way you could come back for a few days. To help get Simon? To help me?" I bit my lip hard enough to taste the salty red liquid dripping out.

It had been more than a minute and Brian still hadn't responded.

"Brian? Are you still there?" I asked, hoping the connection had somehow been broken.

"Yeah, I'm here. I don't know what to say," he said, but the emotion behind his words said it all to me. He was shocked and angry that I would ask that of him.

"I know it's more than I can expect from you now. And I wouldn't have called at all, but Khari and Ken both told me I should get you back here for this." I needed him to know that it wasn't me trying to ruin his new life.

"I can't do it, Ash. Things are just starting to feel normal again. I'm starting school here soon and things with Jen... well, things are great. And you want me to go back? And then to ask me to go into a situation where someone like me just died because he was stuck with you? I can't believe you'd even ask."

"Ethan was set up by someone to be killed. It wasn't an accident and it wasn't because we couldn't do the job," I shot back. "You know, you're not the only one without choices. No one ever asked me if I wanted this stupid talent and this messed up life." I hung up the phone and threw it on the desk, pulling the pillow over my head and yelling obscenities at Brian.

"I guess that didn't go well," Khari said, sitting down on my bed.

I removed the pillow from my face and threw her a look before dropping the pillow back on my face. "I shouldn't blame him. But I do." I held the pillow tight against my face and screamed, "I'm so pissed off at him!"

Khari gently patted my leg. "We'll figure something out, Ash. At least you tried. We'll be fine without him."

When I heard my door close, I tossed the pillow behind me and stared at the ceiling. *You guys will be fine without him*, I thought, *but a part of me will always be broken.*

Chapter Fourteen – A New Plan

The following day, I called the school and dropped all my classes. It was enough that I had to be a super hero without the super part, but to try to do well in school at the same time was asking too much of me.

We were all busy training to retrieve Simon from CES. We knew we had to be better prepared than we had been on the first attempt. Ken had contacted a few people and made arrangements with one to stay with him on his ranch in Montana for a few days to learn how to craft custom weapons. Khari was busy with boxes of various locks, figuring out how to manipulate the atoms just right so the lock would open, but not melt completely. She struggled for several hours before she found the sweet spot and became an expert lock picker.

Lani and I were assigned to surveillance. We went at different times in the day and night over a week's time and observed the comings and goings of CES – employees, sales people, servicemen, law enforcement, deliveries... anything and anyone coming or going was seen by us and documented in a log. Meanwhile Logan got in touch with an old friend and was given the blue prints to the CES building.

Deven, Eve, Alex, and Morgan were all still MIA. And Brian, too. I held on to little hope that he'd change his mind and do the right thing... well, the right thing in the big picture, which was a huge contrast to what was now the right thing for him. Lani and Khari did a good job of encouraging me, even with his absence. But I overheard Audrey in a frustrated rant on the phone admit she doubted our ability to pull this off, especially when I wasn't able to convince my amp to join us.

I doubted myself, too. One night when we were bored watching the quiet building, Lani had joked with me about driving out to California and forcing Brian to help. "You are very persuasive," she said playfully, nudging me.

I smiled sadly at, wishing I didn't care about his right to choose how his life went and could go there and force him to come back. I loved him too much, despite everything, to disrespect him like that.

I worried constantly about what they were doing to Simon. I kept replaying Chel's story in my head, how she'd told me how painful and long the experiments were to manipulate her gift. I worried about him dying in there, too. And I convinced myself it was entirely my fault he'd been taken in the first place.

"If only I hadn't fallen for Deven's tricks," I complained to Lani one afternoon.

"I don't think everything was entirely a trick with him, Ash. I've known him for over a year and never seen him feel anything for any the women he dated. But you were different. He cared about you, despite everything else."

"I shouldn't have let him get so close to me. I should've tried harder to keep everything on a friend level," I complained.

"Love does crazy things to you," she laughed, playing with the bracelet Logan had recently given her.

I chuckled. "I guess so." I didn't entirely believe it, though. Love had made me weak and vulnerable. I didn't see either of those two things as being worth risking everything again.

Ken returned towards the end of the week with a variety of daggers, knives, swords, and stars he'd crafted. "Pick what you'd like and start practicing defensive moves with them. Not everyone who works inside those walls is gifted; most are regular people just earning a paycheck. I don't want any accidents with them or us, so let's be smart and learn everything we can with these new tools."

I picked a pair of daggers. They were perfectly balanced and felt good against my skin. The tips were very sharp and pricked my finger. I even enjoyed that pain and watching the blood drip.

"Gross, Ash," Khari complained.

I laughed and sucked the blood off, then rinsed off my finger and bandaged it.

"We will also be having a few guests come to help us. Most of these people are old friends of mine who prefer to work alone. Please be patient with them as they learn our group dynamic."

"Aye, aye," Audrey joked, and saluted Ken.

By Sunday night, the downstairs of the coffee shop was crowded with our new, temporary additions. Their talents ranged from levitation to extrasensory vision. I was confused by how some of their unique talents would be able to help us, including one guy had the ability to breathe underwater, but Ken assured us that there would be jobs for everyone willing to go and that our strength would come from the numbers of gifted people, not necessarily by the individual gifts.

I felt like he was talking about me when he said that. No one said it out loud, but I felt their disappointment with me for not convincing Brian to return.

Ken also shared that Chel had made contact with him. She hadn't seen Simon, but had good information that he was still alive.

A tall man with broad shoulders standing in the back who hadn't been introduced to us let out a small laugh at Ken's statement.

As we stared at the stranger, Ken introduced him. "This, everyone, is Cowan. He isn't going to participate in the rescue, but has great interest in our success and has been invaluable in providing some things that will be key to our victory."

"I have a little more than interest in this, friend. But will we move in that direction after Simon is safe," Cowan said cryptically.

"Of course," Ken agreed and went straight into our assignments for the next week. "We're going in Saturday night, so I need everyone to focus and work together as a team this week. This might be our last chance to get Simon back."

When we were dismissed, I left with Khari, but doubled back as soon as we reached the car. "I left my phone in there. I'll be right back," I said and ran down the stairs.

"No, I don't think we need to do that. She should be able to convince him," Cowan was explaining to Ken as I entered.

"Sorry to interrupt. I just forgot my phone," I apologized and grabbed it from the table, holding it up with an embarrassed grin on my face.

Cowan smiled at me and then turned to Ken, "We'll talk more tomorrow. I need to get back to the hotel and make sure my secretary hasn't run the company into the ground in my absence," he said lightheartedly.

Ken laughed, too, and shook his hand.

I nodded to both of them and made a hasty exit ahead of Cowan.

"Do you think you can do this?" he addressed me from behind.

"I... umm... the team already feels stronger again. I'm sure we'll be fine," I fidgeted.

"Not what I asked," Cowan said. "Can *you* do this, Ashlyn Taylor?"

I frowned. I didn't like his inquisition. "I am part of a team. And I will do my part to the best of my abilities. I'm not a fortune teller, Mr. Cowan. I can't tell you the outcome."

"If you see yourself failing, you will succeed in failing. If you know in here," he said and touched my head then my chest, "then you won't lose."

I stared at him with a confused look, but said nothing.

He walked past me towards a black limousine parked in the fire zone. "Have a good night, Miss Taylor. Oh," he added, one foot in the car already. "It's just Cowan."

We ran hard that week in preparing for our mission. The mornings started off at a gym where we worked out our bodies. My favorite part of the three hour sessions, well besides the massages

afterwards, was the self-defense classes. I took much of my frustration and anger I felt towards Brian and laid it into the practice dummies.

After lunch, we worked together to practice our gifts. I was assigned to run messages between the groups, so I spent the afternoons becoming familiar with everyone, their gifts, and their minds. While it made sense that I would be assigned this task, I couldn't help but feel like I'd lost the group's confidence on my ability to be successful as a leader in the operation.

Our plan was simple in concept but would be difficult in execution. We were going to break into the main power room for the building and cause a cascading failure; Jordan, one of Ken's friends, had the ability of electrotonus, which basically was the ability to spread an existing electronic charge. He was gifted enough that he was able to use his own electro-impulses and overload systems. With the power interrupted, a team lead by Katrina, who could see exceptionally well in the dark, would move quickly to the laboratory. From information Cowan had provided us and the blueprints we'd studied, we suspected Simon was being held in a secured hallway deep within the lab. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to make a connection to Simon's mind, no matter how close I got to the building. Once through the obstacles leading to that area, Khari would break into Simon's cell and the group would leave without incident. At least that was the hope.

Audrey would be teleporting where she was needed, but would have to search the cells in the lab for the right one for Khari to open. She hated this task since the last time it nearly got her killed and Eve wasn't with us to heal if it happened again. Logan, Lani, and their team were in charge of patrolling the escape paths within the building. Ken, Jordan, and I were going to stay with another group near the power room, keeping the systems down and acting as a base camp.

Friday night was our first chance to relax. Ken issued an "order" for everyone to go out and do something not related to their gift, training, or the mission. Lani and Logan were going out for dinner and dancing and Ken and Audrey were doing something secretive. I didn't feel like doing anything. Khari was going to the movies with a few of the guests and wanted me to go, but I felt exhausted and just wanted to take a long, hot bath then go to sleep.

The house was quiet for the first time since I'd moved in. I lit candles and eased myself into a hot bubble bath, closing my eyes and enjoying the peace. The bubbles were almost gone when I finally pulled the drain open with my toes and wrapped my robe around my relaxed body.

I hummed happily all the way to my room and dressed in a new pair of comfortable pajamas. As I pondered over the nail polish colors, there was a knock at my door.

"Back already?" I asked, smiling as I opened my door, expecting to see Khari.

My instinct when I saw someone other than Khari standing there was self-defensive. My fist connected with his face before I even knew who it was.

"Is that how you greet all guests to your home or am I just lucky?" Cowan asked as he turned his head back to face me, rubbing his jaw.

I was horrified by my action. "Oh! No. Please, come to the kitchen. Let me get you some ice."

I led him to the kitchen table by his arm and grabbed a bag of peas from the freezer. After wrapping it in a towel, I handed it to him. "I'm so, so sorry. Are you okay?"

He laughed. "I'll be fine. Please don't worry. It's good to see you don't let your guard down."

"I wasn't expecting visitors tonight. Everyone else wanted to be far away from here."

"Yes, I got that impression."

My brows came together. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been needing to have a conversation with you and this was the first opportunity to catch you alone," he began.

"Lucky for you I didn't go to the movies with Khari then," I said, somewhat irritated by his cryptic answer.

He smiled and adjusted the peas on his face. "Luck isn't a factor, Ashlyn."

I made a sour face, but didn't feel comfortable enough with him or the tone of the conversation to comment out loud.

"I've watched everyone closely this week, but I'm concerned about you and your mental facilities," he continued.

"My mental facilities?" I echoed.

His features were solemn as he nodded. "You are isolating yourself and keeping everyone at a distance."

"I have been working as hard as everyone else and working with everyone to be able to do my job for this assignment. How can you make a statement like that?" I leaned back against the counter, folding my arms across my chest.

He looked around the empty house. "Is that what you're doing now?"

"I'm tired. I just wanted to relax tonight. What does it matter to you what I do in my down time?"

"Because I know you doubt your worth to the group. I know you feel like you've let everyone down. And you will, if you don't change how you perceive yourself and your abilities."

I glared at him, angry about his perceptions. "What gives you the right to come here and tell me this? Who are you to know this anyway?"

He smiled gently. "It's my job to know these things as it is for me to be here tonight to tell you what you need to hear. You will put all your doubt, anger, frustrations, and pity aside or you will fail. You are strong and capable, so stop feeling like a victim and get your head back where it needs to be."

"What, do you have the power to read minds, too?" I fired back.

A hint of sadness fell across his features. "My gift isn't relevant nor is it my responsibility to make sure Simon is returned."

This was the first anything was mentioned that Cowan had a talent. My interest piqued. "If you're gifted, why aren't you part of our team? And don't give me some BS answer about your gift not being valuable for our mission. A lot of their talents aren't useful to this mission. Look at Ken. It's not like we're going to set the building on fire."

"Ken is naturally a strong leader. He would be leading this with or without his gift," Cowan explained calmly.

"You're a leader, too. I overheard you say something about your company."

An amused grin appeared on his face. "Very perceptive. But again, my gifts and talents are not of your concern. Why do you insist on looking outside yourself for solutions? You need to trust yourself."

"How can I trust myself when I feel like I've lost both my arms?" I admitted quietly.

"Good thing you don't need your arms to make your gift work," he said, standing up. "Thank you for the peas, Ashlyn."

I stared at him in confused silence as he walked out to his limo and disappeared into the night. After a few minutes I threw the peas in the sink and stormed off to my room.

"Who is he to tell me what I should or shouldn't do? '...don't need arms to make your gift work'. What a bastard!" I swept my arm across my desk, clearing it onto the floor and sat down at my computer, staring at my empty email inbox. I was formulating an email to send to Ken, to tell him what an ass his friend was and find out why he was unwilling to help us, but felt it his place to stick his nose into things he had no business in being involved in. But the cursor continued to blink on the blank email while my fingers hovered over the keys.

"Gah!" I yelled, pushing myself away from the desk and standing up. I paced in frustration for several minutes before sitting down again. My fingers flew across the keyboard, but when I'd finished, I was surprised by what I'd written.

This is it. By the time you read this, I'll probably be deep inside the building, trying to save our friend. I don't know if I'm meant to survive this. I don't know if I'm strong enough to be the person that everyone's depending on me to be. I know I've been silent in letting you make your choices, well mostly, but I need you to know that there's nothing I want more than for you to be here right now. I'm not saying this to make you feel guilty, I just needed you to know.

We have a strong group and I know they are ready. But I'm scared and you're the only person I've ever really been able to trust with, well, knowing me. So that's why I'm writing you now, the night before. Everyone else is out enjoying their night off from training. I'm glad you won't get this until tomorrow. I wouldn't want you to feel obligated to write back or call. And I don't need to sit around and wait for a response that you'll probably never send.

I'm sorry for keeping things from you and for causing you stress and worry. So here it all is... I hated the way you looked at me after I'd had a bad dream about Rick. So I kept a letter from Sonya hidden from you. She offered me information that confirmed my suspicions. I met with her recently and found out some really bad things about the aftermath of Rick. You don't need the details. But I'm sorry I didn't share that letter with you from the start. I should've trusted you to support me regardless. Secondly, as we started to drift apart, I did feel something for Deven. But I would've buried it forever if I could've held onto you. I never let things get too far with him, even after you left. You don't need or probably want the details, but I never slept with him. You will always be my one. And finally, during this past week when I've been training, you were the unknowing cause of two training dummies being retired.

I know you are making things work for you, but my biggest regret will always be driving you away and my biggest fear is facing everything without you.

I really do wish you only good things, Brian. You will always and forever be my happiness.

I love you. Goodbye.

Ashlyn

The message was sent on a delay so he wouldn't receive it until just after we were scheduled to start. It was a Saturday night and he would probably be at a party or on a date and wouldn't read it until much later anyway, but I tried not to dwell on that. Knowing that he would know how I have always felt will allow me to face whatever may come.

I felt relieved having told him all the little things that'd been eating me up. As I laid on the bed, I took deep, fulfilling breaths and fell into a deep, restful sleep.

Chapter Fifteen – Shot in the Dark

My black jeans slide over my curves and fastened just above my hips. I watched myself closely in my mirrored closet door and I moved my hands down my legs, sitting on my bed to put on my black flats. I watched as I pulled my hair into a low pony tail before pulling my black cotton shirt over my head. Mesmerized, I gazed at my reflection as I reached to my nightstand and gripped the cold, metallic weapons. She appeared calm and collected and moved with grace as she began performing some slow martial art moves that she'd learned in the past week. That girl... that woman in my mirror didn't seem like me anymore. At the end of the routine, I bowed to myself and slid the knives in their sheaths, strapping one to my left wrist and the other tucked against the small of my back. I took one last look at the woman with dark eyes staring back at me and wondered for a second if they'd ever be green again.

I wasn't filled with the nervous energy that was buzzing around the house. I was calm and prepared to do my job and, if required, sacrifice myself for the good of the group. I wasn't suicidal, but I didn't have anything keeping me tied to this life anymore, either. I wiped off an accidental tear and shook off the last of my emotions. I was ready.

Some people held a silent vigil on the ride while others tittered and laughed, seeming to enjoy the limo ride that would drop us off a few blocks from our destination. Audrey listened intently to her headphones. Lani fidgeted nervously in her seat, holding tight to Logan's hand, who gave her comforting squeezes every couple of minutes. Khari was laughing with some of the others about the movie they saw. Ken, Katrina, and Jordan mulled over the blueprints and went over strategies again, including numerous emergency routes and procedures they'd come up with.

I sat in quiet contemplation, staring out the window, watching the world pass by. I saw the restaurant Brian had taken me for Valentine's Day the previous year. I hoped that Lani and Logan and Audrey and Ken would be able to enjoy Valentine's Day this year. Maybe I'd go out drinking with Simon. I smiled to myself, wanting nothing more than to get our friend back. I didn't know how much of the future I got to look forward to, but in the moments leading to our destination, I'd never felt so confident and at peace with myself.

When the limo stopped, I was among the last to step out into the cool night air. I was surprised to see Cowan holding the door open for us and nodded at him respectfully as I stepped aside. It was hard not to react to the bruise on the side of his face, but the existence of time outside the moment I was in seemed so far removed. The animosity I had for him from his visit had evaporated. My only focus was on completing this job.

As the group started walking away from the cars, Cowan grabbed my arm and pulled me back. He put a strange necklace around my neck. It was heavy as I lifted it to see the design: a circular charm with a sun and what looked like a woman's silhouette.

"It's the symbol for inner light. Let yours shine in the darkness tonight," he said sincerely.

I looked at him curiously. "Thank you, but I can't accept..."

He cut me off. "You don't have to understand, you just have to wear it. This is not a choice tonight. Also," he reached into his jacket and pulled out a vial of clear liquid and a syringe. "This is for you to use at your discretion."

I stared at him without moving to take his "gift". "Unless this is liquid luck, I don't want it."

"This is not a request," he said sticking it in my front pocket. "You need to stay with the group. Strength and light be with you, Ashlyn."

"Wait!" I called after him. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"You will know what to do when the time arises." Cowan entered the car and it drove away.

I looked down the street and saw the group turning into the alley leading straight towards CES. Tucking the vial deeper in my pocket, I grabbed the necklace and ran to catch up. The chatting had

stopped by the time I caught up and everyone's mood was somber and focused as we approached the ominous building.

"There you are," Khari whispered.

"Thought you got lost," Lani joked in hushed tones.

"I thought you ditched us," Audrey said, but then smiled.

We all shared one last small laugh before the seriousness of the situation took over. Once at the service door, Khari got to work, silently and quickly gaining access. I hugged my three closest friends and wished them good luck before we parted. Lani, Logan, and their team left quickly to intercept guards while Jordan connected to the system and overloaded the grid. He would have to remain there, emitting continuous pulses to keep the systems disabled. Finally, Katrina, Audrey, Khari, and their team left to go to the laboratory.

I connected first with Lani. Seeing that she was stealthed, I observed their movements through the dark hallways. The youngest of the group, who was only sixteen, had the ability to sedate people. I watched as they encountered three guards, knocked them out, and then took away their memories and the glow sticks they'd been carrying.

"The patrols are going well. There haven't been any silent alarms sounded," I reported back to Ken when I returned to my mind.

He nodded. "Excellent. How close are the others?"

I silently connected with Khari and then went back to the control room. "They are just getting out of the stairwell. They had to move slowly because it's extremely dark."

"Good, good. Can you have Logan do a sweep around those stairs, in case they had someone following?"

"No problem," I said and connected with Logan.

Ken needs you to patrol the stairs near the labs, I instructed Logan.

He tapped the others on their arms and pointed in a new direction.

"They're on their way," I reported back. I sat on the floor with my back to the wall, waiting for the next assignment. My fingers traced the necklace Cowan had given me. The syringe was pressing uncomfortably against my leg, but I didn't adjust it. The pain help keep my mind busy when I wasn't relaying messages.

I was asked to check in on the lab team. I connected with Katrina and looked around with her at the deserted room. Emergency lighting had finally triggered, so I could make out things like flasks of liquid, large, locked cabinets, and lab coats hanging on backs of chairs.

Suddenly, my phone rang in my pocket and I was forced back to my mind.

"Shut it off!" Ken ordered in a loud whisper.

I scrambled to my feet and pulled it out of my back pocket, only glancing to see it was Brian calling before I turned it off.

Ken rushed over and confiscated the phone, making sure it was off. "Connect with the groups and let them know we have a situation. Sonya will know you're here," he said with urgent disappointment.

I hit my head against the wall. How could I have been so stupid? I quickly made contact with Lani, letting her know to be on high alert. Then I connected with Khari. *You guys have to be quick. They know we're here.*

She nodded and walked quickly ahead, the rest of the group following. I stayed connected to her as they approached the hallway of cells. She bent down, pulled out a small, high-powered light and inspected the lock before placing her hand on the lock. An audible click was heard and the group was into the final hallway.

I quickly reported back to Ken their position and then connected with Audrey as she moved cautiously from cell to cell. She entered every room, but didn't find Simon. My heart sank. *Keep looking*, I urged.

"They checked all the cells, but Simon wasn't there," I said to Ken who angrily ran his fingers through his hair.

"Tell them to keep looking... maybe for a hidden door or something," he suggested.

My confidence was wavering; I'd screwed up again, but knew I had to keep it together for a little while longer. *Look for a hidden door or passageway*, I said as I connected with Khari.

She started touching walls and I was impressed by how they changed minutely as she used her gift to change the composition slightly, testing for false walls. "*I've found something*," she said to her group from inside one of the cells. She seemed to melt away the wall, revealing a door as the rest of the group filed in. This time, instead of Audrey teleporting through, Khari disabled the lock and the door opened, revealing an unconscious Simon.

"They've found him," I exclaimed to Ken.

I connected with Logan again to communicate the news to him and make sure they were still safe. *Is everything clear for them to exit?* I asked.

Logan nodded and I jumped back to my mind, letting Ken know.

"We're running out of time. They need to get him out now. Can you make sure they grab him and run?"

I tried connecting with Khari again, but wasn't able to. I tried everyone in that group, including Simon, but wasn't able to communicate.

"I can't find them," I said in a panic to Ken.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't make a connection to them, not since before they entered Simon's hidden cell."

"Have Logan get there now!"

I didn't hesitate to connect with Logan and give him the orders to carefully, but quickly get to the lab. As I was about to break the connection with him, I heard a familiar voice from behind them.

"*You guys weren't invited here tonight*," Sonya said calmly, moving towards them with two guards with weapons.

The young girl lunged towards one of the guards, but was halted with a bright electrical charge and fell to the ground.

Lani disappeared, but also met the same fate and became visible again when the pulse connected with her sleathed body.

"*Where are your friends?*" Sonya asked, approaching Logan, but keeping at a significant distance.

"*We're here alone*," he lied.

"*I seriously doubt that, especially since it was a call to Ashlyn's phone that alerted me*," she explained.

I groaned internally, watching this disaster unfold like a bad car accident in slow motion.

"*I don't know anything about that. If she's here, she's acting on her own*," he lied.

I was impressed by how calm Logan was. I watched Sonya try to figure out if he was telling the truth, then her eyes got wide. "*Have a team get to the lab NOW!*" she said, fury entering her normally calm voice.

I jumped back to my mind and started running towards the hallway.

"Where are you going? Ashlyn!" Ken called after me.

"I can fix this. Just have the cars ready to pick us up."

"Get back here!" Ken yelled after me, but I was gone too fast.

First, I ran to where Logan, Lani, and their team were being held. I knew I'd be seen if I tried to sneak in and control her mind... my hand grabbed the vial and syringe, which were making it exceedingly difficult to run and think clearly.

As I reached the corridor, I could hear Sonya talking to her guards and to Logan, telling him if he took another step, he'd join the others on the floor.

Without thinking, I filled the syringe with the clear fluid from the vial and stuck it in my leg, releasing all the contents. It was either going to kill me or help me; I was hoping for the latter. There was a sharp pain that quickly moved from the injection throughout my entire body. As I stared at my shaking hands, they disappeared.

I was invisible? I was invisible! I resumed my quick pace and then slowed as I approached Sonya. *Dismiss the guards and call off the others*, I ordered her.

Sonya turned her head from side to side. "You two can go now and have the others leave the building with you. I have this under control," she instructed.

"Ma'am?" one questioned.

Order them away or they will be punished, I demanded, hoping that's how they dealt with disobedience.

"Are you questioning me? I told you to leave," she said, pulling out her phone.

The guards' eyes lit up and they started backing towards the stairs, their guns still pointed at my friends.

Logan did an amazing job of not reacting while I worked, but was instantly at Lani's side as soon as the guards were gone.

Quickly, erase her memories. I have to go help the others, I said only to him, still invisible.

As I was leaving, Logan was moving towards Sonya and grabbed her arm, controlling her as he wiped her mind of all knowledge of our break in.

I ran as fast as I could, still invisible, to the lab. *Please don't let me be too late*, I begged anyone who was listening to my thoughts. I rounded the corner to the hallway and almost ran into the back of someone standing there.

"Don't do this, Chel. We're your friends. Let us go," Khari pleaded, but was trapped in Simon's cell with everyone else.

"You shouldn't have tried to get him, Khari. You guys have broken the one rule of our agreement and there's nothing I can do but comply with the contract," Chel explained, but I could hear a hint of regret in her words.

"Contract? Who cares about a stupid piece of paper. We're human beings, Chel. You can't do this to us," Audrey stated.

Chel shook her head, moving inside Simon's cell with the rest, blocking their only exit. "They only wanted Simon. But since the rest of you have caused so much trouble, they want you all eliminated." She took the gloves off her hand.

Audrey closed her eyes and tried to teleport out of the room, but didn't budge.

"And don't try to use your gifts in here," Chel explained. "There's a dampening field that renders them useless unless you've been given special CES clearance." She smiled sweetly, but her intentions were cruel.

"NO!!!" I yelled out as she backed Khari into a corner.

Chel turned around and everyone else looked in my direction. She stuck her fingers in her ears, acting like she was cleaning them out, like she'd imagined my outburst.

"Stop it, Chel!" I couldn't connect with her when she was in that room, so I couldn't force her to stop. I looked down at my body and saw it starting to fade back.

Chel blinked and rubbed her eyes, walking towards me. "Ashlyn? Is that you? Are you a ghost?"

"Maybe. Why don't you come closer and find out," I taunted, trying to get her to leave the cell.

"What? Why?" She shook her head and moved closer to Khari. "I have to eliminate you. You've broken in and are trying to steal property." She sounded off-balance and unsure. Grabbing the light from Khari's hand, she shined it in my direction.

I squinted from the brightness, holding up my barely visible hands to try to block the light. I was blinded and didn't see her moving towards me.

"What's that?" Chel questioned curiously.

"Move, Ash! She's coming straight towards you! Her gloves are off," Khari yelled.

I didn't move, though. I was frozen in place, waiting for my death to come. I felt her pull on my necklace. "Where'd you get this?" she questioned me.

I was almost completely visible again and Chel was almost out of the cell. I pretended to be caught off guard by the tug on my necklace and stumbled backwards.

She came with me, still staring at my neck adornment. *They are your friends. Let them go. It's the right thing to do,* I ordered her.

Chel nodded. "Yes, of course. You guys are free to go," she said absently.

Khari and Audrey exchanged shocked looks, then hooked their arms around Simon and carried him out past me. When the team was safely out, I ducked out of the necklace and back away with the rest of the group. "It's a gift for you," I whispered and ran out behind Katrina.

"Get in, get in!" Ken ordered as we rushed out the building. There was a minor explosion in the room and he and Jordan stumbled out and into the car. "Let's go," he said to the driver and we sped away.

"Where's everyone else?" Khari asked, still holding onto Simon's limp arm.

"They left about three minutes ago. Everyone's accounted for," Ken explained, then let his gaze fall on me.

I quickly looked away, feeling my body shake with every heartbeat. I was still pumped up on adrenaline, but knew I was in serious trouble when Ken could talk to me alone. I secretly hoped the driver would get lost.

Simon was ushered into our house. Khari and Audrey took up the task of caring for him until he regained consciousness. Logan sat with Lani in the kitchen trying to help her recover from the electrocution. The others had either decided to return to their real homes or stay another night at the hotel. We were done. It was a success and no one was left behind this time.

"Come walk with me, Ashlyn," Ken said softly.

It was approaching three in the morning. It was eerily quiet outside except for our feet crunching the pebbles and dirt on the sidewalk.

"I know you've been struggling with things in Brian's absence, but I didn't expect you to be that careless," he scolded softly.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't even realize I'd brought it," I said.

"Why didn't you double check when I told everyone else to check that theirs were off?"

"I must not've been there when you said it," I apologized. "Cowan needed a word with me and I fell behind." I looked down, ashamed.

"He did? Hmm. He didn't mention it to me." Ken was speaking aloud to himself more than me.

"What happened in there? Both Logan and Audrey told me you were invisible. How'd you do that?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. I was given a vial and told to use it at my discretion. I didn't know if it was going to kill me or help me, but I knew I had to do something when Sonya had them

cornered." I sighed. "I'm so sorry I screwed things up. I seem to be pretty good at that. I understand if you don't want me to participate with the group anymore."

Ken didn't react to my voluntary resignation. "I need to have a discussion with Cowan. You should go back to the house and get some sleep."

I nodded.

"Oh, and here. You can have this back."

"Thank you," I said taking my phone from him and walking back to the house.

Chapter Sixteen – A hui hou kakou

I slowly got out of bed the next morning. I hadn't slept well, my body ached, and I felt like I had failed, even though Simon was awake and joking when I walked into the kitchen.

"It's very good to see you, Simon. How are you?" I asked, reaching for a Dr. Pepper.

"Very happy to be here. I understand you went all super-ninja on their asses and got us out of there," he said with a grin.

"Yeah, well, you know." I shrugged and went back to my room with my drink, my mind wondering if Brian had written back.

My computer buzzed to life and I managed a smile, seeing a reply from Brian. Above his was another one from a person I wasn't familiar with. Jen Ramsey... Jen Ramsey? As soon as I figured it out, I clicked the email open.

Who do you think you are contacting Brian? What kind of sick person are you to mess with him like this? Don't you get it? He left you. He doesn't want you in his life, so you need to get the hell away. He may not see through your words to know what you're trying to do, but I can. Don't interfere with our relationship again or I will personally put an end to it. Get your own life, you pathetic bitch, and stop messing with ours.

I wasn't sure whether I was amused or felt betrayed. I finally resolved to being fed up. I was done being the one who was screwing everything up. Using some of the money from the sale of the condo, I logged onto a website and booked the quickest flight out of town.

I threw a few clothes and my daggers in a suitcase and started writing a quick note when Lani came in.

"Going somewhere?" she asked, eyeing my suitcase.

I shrugged and handed her the note.

"Hawaii? Interesting. How long will you be gone?"

"I only purchased a one-way ticket. I don't know right now," I admitted.

"Give me your pad of paper." She began scribbling some things and handed it back. "These are a few of my family and friends there. They will all welcome you to their homes and treat you like family."

I looked at the note and felt the emotions pooling in my eyes. "Thanks," I said, choking back tears.

Lani hugged me tight. "Please don't be gone too long," she whispered.

I bit my lip, nodding. "Don't tell anyone I've left. Wait and let them find the note."

"Sure. I'll miss you," she said.

"Mahalo," I said as I set my phone on the night stand. I left quietly through my window with only my purse and suitcase.

I spent the first several days in Hawaii exploring the tourist traps and enjoying warm afternoons with a cool drink in my hand on the hotel's private beach. The days melted together and the only concerns I had were what tour was I going on and whether I would use my gift to play with the dolphins or look in on the new baby whales still residing near the shore.

After a week or so of solidarity, I contacted Lani's parents and asked if I could spend the day with them. I'd fallen in love with Hawaii and wanted to know more about its history and secrets that only the natives knew. They welcomed me without hesitation and told me Lani had told them I'd be stopping by. I laughed to myself, feeling grateful for having her as my friend.

The day was amazing. The closeness of her family was heartwarming. They spoke affectionately about her and told me I had to convince her to come home soon. I wondered just how much Lani had told them about me, but then I remember that her family didn't know about her gift, either. I was

bombarded with pictures and stories, both of their family and then the history of the natives. I hung on their every word and was treated to an authentic luau and taught how to make a real lei. I gave mine to Lani's youngest sister, who was only eight. In return, she gave me a shell necklace she'd made at school.

After stuffing myself with pork, salmon, and more pineapple than I thought possible to consume, I thanked them for their hospitality and returned to my hotel as the sun was setting. I quickly changed into a dress that reminded me of a shorter version of the dress Kara had worn to prom and hurried out to sit in what had become my favorite spot.

"Excuse me, Miss. The beach is closed this evening," a man in a white shirt explained as I came to a halt in front of him.

"Closed?" I asked, not sure I'd heard him correctly.

"Yes. It's Valentine's Day and there's a private wedding being held here tonight. The beach will be open to hotel patrons again in the morning."

"Oh," I breathed, suddenly feeling like I'd been punched in the gut. With brows furrowed, I turned around and walked through the hotel back to the road.

Valentine's Day? How was it possible I didn't know? I felt bad for intruding on Lani's family on a holiday, but mostly I felt hollow and sad. I sat on the curb, ignoring the couples who'd stopped near me for a kiss and a picture as the sun went down behind me. Feeling confused and lost, I walked back into the hotel and went directly to the bar.

"Something strong," I said to the bartender. *You've already verified her age*, I connected with him briefly when he threw me a questioning looking.

"Coming right up," he said and sloshed liquids in the tall glass, topping it with an umbrella and a pineapple.

I nodded and sipped the aromatic beverage, avoiding eye contact with anyone else in the bar. After that one disappeared, the bartender returned. "Would you like another?" he asked, taking my empty glass.

"I think I'd like a kamikaze this time," I said with a grin. "Oh, and leave the glass. I need to keep track of what I'm consuming tonight."

He laughed and put together my shot, filling it almost to the top.

I snatched the drink from the counter and swallowed it quickly, not spilling a drop. "Keep them coming," I announced, giving the man a hundred dollar tip.

"And that bish had the neeeeerve to threaten meeee!" I exclaimed to the crowd that had gathered around my stack of empty glasses to hear my rant about how crappy love was. "Another round for evvvv'ryone," I announced throwing my arms in the air.

The crowd cheered and chatted among themselves, enjoying the free alcohol at my expense. I drank another two shots, happily peering around the blurry room.

My eyes struggled to open and when they did, it was just long enough to see that I was in my room... alone. I groaned and pulled the pillow over my head, wishing to be asleep again. But the pounding in my head was too much.

"Miss?" I heard a man's voice call out and the pounding continued.

"Oooh," I moaned and rolled out of bed. "Hold on," I said too loud and winced in pain, holding onto furniture as I made my way to the door. "What is it?" I asked softly.

"Room service, Miss," the man in a hotel uniform said.

"Room service? I don't think I ordered anything," I said confused.

"Miss Andrea Chase, room 1423? Yes, this is for you," he confirmed.

I used a fake name to travel, making sure I could be disconnected as long as I chose. Lani's family were the only ones who knew my real name on the islands. "Okay," I said and opened the door to him, feeling in my pocket for tip money.

"Thanks!" he said eyeing the twenty dollar bill I handed him.

"Just try to walk softly on your way out. Mahalo," I said, closing the door to the man literally tip-toeing away.

I set the food on the table, my stomach reacting negatively to the thought of eating. I lifted the tray to see if the site of it would be better, but was distracted by a note sitting on top of a banana.

You'll feel better after you eat the banana and drink the coconut water. Trust me. After a shower, you'll almost feel good enough to meet me down on the beach by your usual chair. See you in thirty minutes. Don't disappoint me.

I peeled the banana and walked into the bathroom, starting the shower while reading the note again. The fact that I was already starting to feel better helped ease my hesitation to do as I was requested. I didn't recognize the handwriting.

I walked back to the tray and picked up the water, smelling it. "Doesn't smell awful," I commented and took a drink. "Not too bad, but not something I'll make a habit of needing to drink." I wrinkled my nose and drank the rest of it before undressing and stepping in the shower.

The sun was covered by clouds, but it still seemed too bright. I pulled my over-sized hat down to the top of my sunglasses and sat in the first empty chair I happened upon. I was able to keep an eye on my normal seat and scan around for the person who requested my presence. In the back of my shorts, hidden under my shirt, I slid my dagger, not knowing who exactly I was going to be dealing with. It was the first time since Simon's rescue that I had the stress of being on high alert.

"This isn't your usual spot," Deven said as he sat on the edge of my chair, startling me.

I immediately jumped up, my hand on the small of my back. "Get. Away." My words were sharp and precise.

"Or what? You'll stab me? We both know you won't do that. Now sit down. It's been a bitch tracking you down. Andrea Chase? Good one. Wait... what's that? You were hoping I was Brian?" His wicked laugh startled the few people who were enjoying the cool morning outdoors.

"Go to hell," I said through gritted teeth.

"We already had this discussion. And I agreed I would because you said you were there. But this doesn't look like hell, Ash. Superheroes live a good life these days. You found yourself a nice getaway. A suite, too? Wow, I'm very impressed."

"What do you want?"

"You, of course. Not in that way..." he paused. "Okay, that way, too. I'd love to take you up to that suite of yours and spend days showing how it should be done." He stopped, apparently amused by my thoughts that first flashed to the night we almost did and then thoughts about all the ways I could use my knives to torture him. "Very kinky, Ash. I didn't know you had it in you."

"You have twenty-five seconds to tell me why you tracked me down when I obviously didn't want to be bothered. Twenty-four... twenty-three..."

"Then what? You can't make me leave and I know you won't do anything to draw attention to you in public."

"Eighteen... seventeen..."

"Okay, Okay. I want you to join me. You can't argue what a great team we made. Our talents work together well and we'd be unstoppable."

"What are you doing now? Mercenary? Free-lance murders? How's your sister, by the way?"

His eyes narrowed, showing he still had a weakness. "She's comatose, but being cared for by the best doctors."

I scoffed, but didn't get a chance to comment out loud.

His eyes lit up like a child when he told me what his actual job was. "I'm employed by a company I know you're quite fond of. And I'm living my dream of being a spy."

A part of me was amused, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing it on my face, regardless of if he heard it in my head. "Pass," I said coldly and walked back towards the hotel.

Deven jumped up and took pace beside me. "Aww, Ash. Don't be like this."

"Don't be like what exactly?" I scolded, pushing him while backing him against the wall.

He continued to have an amused look on his face. "I like it when you're rough."

I pulled out my knife, pressing my body against his to hide the knife I had poking his throat.

"Should I be more like you, willing and able to murder someone who meant the world to my sister and then try to have all memories of him removed? Do you know why she's in a coma? I have a great idea. You ripped a piece of her away and then tried to patch it by cutting some more away."

His smile faded and he grabbed my right hand hard. "How did you do it? How did you make yourself invisible?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Give it a rest, Ash. And people are starting to wonder what's going on over here. You have about thirty seconds before that woman gets a security guard."

I backed away from him, hiding the dagger again. "What do you know?"

"About the team's little stunt to rescue Simon? Probably just about everything. You see, the higher ups weren't too thrilled you guys got away. They couldn't really punish Sonya... she did all she could, but then had her memory of the events erased. I hadn't realized how good Logan was until they attempted to retrieve those missing memories from her and she nearly died." He shook his head without feeling any remorse. "But Chel," he continued. "Chel wasn't so lucky. She lost her focus, but kept her perfect memories. I overheard on her... debriefing... that you appeared ghost-like. So I'm asking you again, how'd you do that?"

I was thankful for the dull pain in my head. It helped keep me from answering his questions in my head. "I don't know, Dev. Maybe it's a natural evolution of my gift?"

He looked at me intently for several minutes without a word, finally shaking his head. "You're hiding something. Where'd you get the necklace Chel took from you?"

"It was a gift from a friend... a good luck charm of sorts."

"From Brian?"

I smiled. My thoughts were safe for the moment. "If only..." I closed my eyes, sharing with him the email from Brian's girlfriend.

Deven nodded. "Sounds like a great catch," he laughed.

I couldn't help but laugh, too. "You're still a despicable ass who's employed by the most evil company on the face of the earth. I can't be friends with you."

He shrugged. "That's probably my only regret. Take care, Ash. And I wouldn't recommend breaking into CES again anytime soon. It might not turn out so well for you."

"Thanks for the advice. I think I'm content staying here for a while longer. Try not to kill anyone," I said as he started walking away.

He laughed my favorite laugh, the one he only did around me when we were alone, and waved as he disappeared through the doors.

Chapter Seventeen – Odd Man Out

It was the start of March. I had only been back a few days, but had spent large parts of those days and nights alone walking the streets. Since the night of the rescue, the distance between me and the rest of the group was widening. Audrey and Ken were closer than ever. Logan and Lani got engaged on Valentine's Day. And Khari and Simon had formed a close bond of friendship in my absence; I was the odd man out. It was a strangely comfortable place for me - I'd spent most of my life as that person. It had only been the last year and a half that things had been different.

I had no use of a phone since I'd left for Hawaii and cancelled my service after the first week of my sabbatical. When I returned, I didn't care about anything that anyone said to me in my absence, so I hadn't bothered opening my email. I figured my inbox would be full of junk in no time and the account would be suspended. It mattered very little to me. I kept waiting for my life to find a direction. So I continued to walk, my knives my only companions.

"Those are well crafted."

I was startled out of my thoughts. "Hmmm?"

"Your knives. They're remarkable," Cowan commented again.

"Oh, yes. Ken did an amazing job with them. I think he missed his calling." I continued walking.

"Did you enjoy your trip?"

I stopped and turned towards him. "It was good. Thank you. How'd you know about that?"

"I was looking for you a few weeks ago. Ken mentioned you were in Hawaii. You know, my company owns some property not far from where you were staying. If you ever want to go back, I'm sure we could arrange for you to stay there."

My brows furrowed. "You know where I was staying?"

An amused grin appeared on his face. "Don't be upset, Ashlyn. We respected your need to be left alone."

"At least *you* did," I said sourly.

"Ah, yes. Deven and his new job. I take it you declined the offer?"

"I don't know. You seem to know so much more than you're supposed to, why don't you tell me?" I was irritated by his arrogance and uncanny ability to always know everything.

"I know that you're a good person, Ashlyn. And you know there's something better for you than what he or that company can offer you."

"Like long walks alone?" I shot back.

"You're not alone. I'm here, aren't I?" He patted himself mockingly.

"For now." I continued walking. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Cowan didn't hesitate to walk along side of me. "How are things between you and Brian now?"

I growled at him. "Not your business."

"Actually, it is." He stopped there, in his infuriatingly cryptic manner.

I stopped walking again and let him walk a few feet ahead before I gave in. "Fine. You win the 'Mysterious Man of the Year' award. Why is it your business to know how my ex and I are getting along?"

"Because he is your amp, Ashlyn. And since I can't offer you a job at my company without him, it is very much my concern how things are between you."

I frowned deeply. Another person, another company wanting to recruit me. "You should probably find someone else to fill that position. I don't foresee any reconciliation with my amp anytime soon."

"Have you tried?"

I opened my mouth to shout out all the attempts I'd made, and then closed it suddenly without saying a word. I'd gone to San Francisco to get him back, but left without putting much effort into

bringing him back. Then I'd written him the email telling him that I wanted him with me, but respected his decision. His phone call and email to me were unanswered. I hadn't really tried to get him back. "What's the point? He's made it clear that he wants this new life. And his new girlfriend threatened me if I contacted him again."

Cowan laughed. "You've faced death on several occasions and have the potential to be among the most powerfully gifted people in the world, and you're worried about what his girlfriend will do?"

It sounded pathetic when he put it like that. "I respect him too much to force him back. It's not what he wants."

"He doesn't know what he wants, Ashlyn. If you don't offer yourself as an option, he'll never know he has the choice to come back." Cowan reached into his pocket and pulled out two business cards. "When you both are ready..."

I took the cards from him, but didn't read it before tucking it in my back pocket. "Okay," I said to his back as he walked toward his car.

"By the way," he said as he opened the door, "thank you for returning the necklace to Chel." The door closed and he drove away as I stared after him with a dumbfounded expression.

It was just after sunset when I returned from my walk. I spent hours going over the conversation with Cowan and staring at the business card. His company's name was "Tri-Omega Metaphysics", but there was very little else on the card aside from his first name and his cell phone number. "How does anyone do business like this?" I said to myself as I sat down at my computer, blowing a layer of dust off the monitor.

The computer groaned to life, like it was complaining that I woke it from a good dream. "Sorry," I apologize out loud and clicked open my browser. I knew before I started that it was going to be a challenge to uncover anything useful, but that didn't stop me from sitting in front of the screen for hours trying.

Finally I'd had enough and pushed my chair away from the desk. I turned to walk out of my room and let out a sharp cry, startled by someone standing in my doorway.

"So that thing does still work," Brian said, not moving.

I cursed silently as my heart immediately began racing. "How'd you...?" I began, but didn't know which question I wanted answered.

"Not easily," he said flatly.

"Oh," I said, still confused and excited by his presence. "Wh... what do you want?"

"I had to see with my own eyes that you weren't dead," he said with an angry tone.

"You came all this way for that?" I was still frozen in place, staring at him.

"What? No, we're visiting my parents for my birthday," he said, relaxing slightly.

"We? Oh, right. She's here, too?" I asked with venom in my words.

"Yes. No. She's out shopping with Steph," he said.

My face fell. I hadn't spoken with Stephanie since a few days after she took Brian's stuff from the condo, but it was just another reminder that I'd been replaced. I turned my back to him, not wanting him to see my disappointment. "Well, here I am. Not dead."

I heard my door close and assumed he left. I inhaled a shaky breath when I was suddenly spun around.

"I'm so pissed at you, Ashlyn. Why isn't your phone working and why haven't you written me back?" His blue eyes stared angrily at me, piercing my soul.

"Why are you so mad?" I asked, freeing my arm from his grip, feeling my temper rise.

"You send me an email saying you may be going to your death and then disappear completely? No one would tell me anything about where you were for more than a month! Steph, Kara, Michael,

your friends... no one knew anything! How am I *not* supposed to be here right now? How am I not supposed to be pissed at you?"

"I'm not your problem anymore, Brian. You have no more right to know than I have a right to tell you. That's what your girlfriend wanted, right?" I practically spat the word "girlfriend".

"This isn't about her. This is about you and me and how we're supposed to exist apart. You can't have things both ways, Ash. Either you're my friend and we act like friends or we part ways forever."

"Is that what you want?" I asked quietly, desperately searching his face for clues about what he was thinking.

"I don't want to feel the way I felt when I read your email and then lost all contact with you."

"I don't want to feel the way I have since you left," I said sadly.

"What am I supposed to say to that?" he asked in frustration.

"Do you love her?"

Brian sat on the end of the bed with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. "Of course I do," he sighed. "She's exactly what I needed, I guess."

I sat down next to him, but kept my distance. "Oh." As we sat there in solemn silence, the conversation with Cowan ran through my mind. "Come back to me, Brian."

He shook his head, not lifting his head from his hands. "I can't," he whispered.

"You're here now, so I know you can," I argued.

"Being here now is the easy part, Ash. It's when I leave and return to a normal life that this," he said gesturing to the two of us, "makes it difficult."

"Maybe it's hard because you know it's not what's meant for you."

"Damn it, Ash," he burst out, standing up suddenly. "Why isn't that meant for me? Why can't I live a normal life and make easy decisions about who I'm with and love?"

I shrugged, looking up at him sadly. "I don't know."

He moved towards the door. "I have to go. They're going to be back soon and I don't want to have to explain why it took so long to get a newspaper."

"You lied to come find me?"

"Goodbye, Ash," he said walking out.

I watched sadly as he left, but then jumped up, practically knocking Khari to the ground as I chased after Brian. "Don't leave me, Brian!" I shouted as he stepped into his Jeep.

He sat staring at me through his windshield, not closing his door. His expression was pained and caused my heart to ache.

"Please?" I begged, looking at him through blurry, wet eyes.

He reached into his pocket and threw me his phone. "I'll call you later," he said and started the engine, backing out of the driveway, unable to take his eyes from mine.

"I hope you don't mind that I let him in," Khari said quietly as she walked up next to me after he was out of sight.

Looking down at his phone while running my thumb across it, feeling the warmth that was his, I whispered, "Thank you."

Khari hugged me and walked me back in the house. For the first time since my trip, I got to really talk to someone. I told her about everything from the dolphins to the amazing sunsets, Lani's family, and even about Deven showing up.

"I know this is stupid to say after everything that happened, but I'm really worried about Chel," I said, finally setting the phone down on the coffee table.

"She was going to kill us, Ash. She deserves whatever punishment CES feels necessary to dole out to her," Khari said defiantly.

I shook my head. "I think there's something more. Cowan gave me a necklace before I went in. She was distracted by it. And then when I talked to him again, he thanked me for returning it to her. There was something more important to her than her loyalty to CES and her 'family'."

"That's a stretch, Ash, but it's worth considering. We're meeting up with Ken and Audrey at the bar in a bit. We can talk about it there. You wanna come?"

I looked at the phone, then back at her. "No, I think I'm going to stay home tonight. But thank you."

She smiled. "I hope he comes back. You're not the only one who misses him."

The house was dark and quiet. I'd been pacing for hours with my eyes fixated on Brian's phone, but it remained silent. Ten o'clock. I grabbed my jacket, car keys, and his phone and left. I didn't know exactly where I was driving, but I was going slightly insane waiting in my room. I rolled the windows down and drove fast and hard to nowhere. At least I thought I was going nowhere specific, but as my car slid to a stop at the top of a dirt hill, I realized my subconscious mind had taken control of my driving.

I cautiously got out of my car and walked towards the decaying concrete table. Running my fingertips across the dirty surface, I recalled the night I'd made love to Brian on that table. I continued up the hill to the spot where everything had started, where I'd told him my secret. I swallowed hard as I looked around, finally sitting down on the large boulder. So much had changed since I'd been there last. Not just the development encroaching on the once serene scenery, but also the entire showdown with Rick, how he almost killed Brian and then almost killed me. Then there was meeting up with the group, making new friends and learning more about my gift and ultimately losing Brian. I was a different person. And I didn't know if that person was able to get back anything that she lost.

I shivered as the cool breeze swept off the desert floor at the same time my pocket vibrated. The caller ID said Steph, so I answered cautiously. "Hello?"

"At least you remember how to use one of those," he said, a hint of bitterness in the undertone.

"It's good to hear your voice," I said, ignoring his comment. I pulled my legs in close to my body, hugging them as I gazed out in the distance.

He seemed to ignore mine, too, and went straight to questioning me. "What was it like when you were with him?"

I paused, thinking back. "Powerful. It was like I was defying the universe. And I was angry at you, so it was freeing to do things that would get a reaction from you," I admitted.

"Could you picture yourself with him long term? Did you daydream about a life that you'd have together, raising superhero kids?" He wasn't saying it hatefully, but more like he was trying to work through something.

I sighed. "No. Everything was always in the moment. If I tried to think about anything outside the time I was in, you're all I could think about. And, well, that didn't go over well with him reading my mind and all. What about you? Are you thinking of your future with her?" I wasn't sure I wanted to hear the answer and felt a little sick asking it.

"Of course we've talked about it," he said and I heard a door close and his engine start. "She comes from a big family and wants lots of kids."

I laughed, but without joy. "Just like you, huh?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, I suppose. We seem to be perfect for each other."

My heart fluttered in sadness. "Seems like it. Why are you talking to me about this if you've got it all planned out with her?"

"Because everything I talk about with her, however perfect her answers may be, I'm constantly comparing it in my head to what you'd say or do. You know when we talked about future family and she said she wanted a big one, all I could think was, 'Of course you do. Ashlyn put up a fight when I suggested more than two.'"

I laughed softly, strangely amused by his conflict, but also remembering the horror I felt when he suggested five kids running around. I broke from my thoughts when his tires screeched over the phone. "Woah. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just distracted. Stupid red lights," he grumbled.

"Why don't you pull over until we get off the phone," I suggested.

"I'll pull over in a minute," he said stubbornly, his engine roaring to life again.

"Don't crash," I whispered, begging him. Then it was my turn to ask questions. "What did you do when you thought I was dead?"

"I got in my Jeep and tried to drive here," he admitted. "Michael had to chase me down to stop me. Jen was devastated and that's when she saw your email. I'm sorry about that."

"It is what it is, Brian. If the roles had been reversed, I'm not sure I would've stopped at an angry email in retaliation. Remember what I did to Abigail?"

As we shared a mutual laugh thinking about me punching her in her perfect nose, I saw a pair of headlights approaching from a distance.

"Where are you driving?" I asked.

"Don't know. The Jeep's driving where it wants tonight," he said mysteriously.

I continued to watch the lights approaching for a few more moments. "How did you know where I was?"

"Tracked the phone. Built in GPS system in case it gets lost or stolen," he said smugly.

"You and your toys," I said and hopped off the rock, going to meet him when he pulled up.

"Why'd you come out here?" he asked still talking into the phone while parking next to my car.

I stared at him through his window as I whispered into his phone. "To be closer to you again." A single tear rolled down my cheek as I myself just put together why I was there. I hung up the phone and waited for him to get out.

"Seems like forever ago, doesn't it," he said, stepping out onto the rocky ground.

"If I'd know you were going to hunt me down, I would've gone somewhere else. This probably isn't someplace you want to be."

He shrugged and walked towards the table, just as I'd done. "More good memories here than bad ones." He bent down to pick up something from the ground. "Unbelievable," he said inspecting his find.

I moved closer to him. "What is it?"

He held out his hand to me. "I believe this belongs to you," he said smiling.

It was a bittersweet discovery: my diamond earring I'd lost the last time we'd visited this spot. It was a symbol to me of when things started to go bad. He was on his way back out to the desert to look for it when he was abducted by Rick. I looked sadly in his eyes. "Thanks." I closed my hand around the jewelry until it hurt, turning my back to Brian, unsure of what to do or say next.

I heard the crunching of the ground as he continued his tour around our old spot. "Not quite the same as it used to be, is it?" he called down.

I wasn't sure if he was talking about the desert or us. Since I didn't want to talk anymore about how different things were between us, I decided to join him and comment on the view. Easily climbing up and standing next to him, I looked out with him. "It seems like this won't even be here anymore in another year."

"I wish we could go backwards and live it all again," he said, still gazing in the distance.

"Would you really do it again knowing everything you know now? Or would you have repressed your urge to come to my rescue, saving yourself from this life?"

He considered my question for a moment, but avoided answering it. "Do you remember when we danced out here after prom?"

A sad smile formed on my face as I looked up at him. "Of course I do. 'We don't need music to dance,' you told me when I tried to object to it."

He turned and faced me. "Well, am I wrong?"

My smile felt less forced. "Not this time," I joked.

He held out his hand to me, "So?"

I tilted my head, questioning his action. "So... what?"

"Dance with me," he whispered, stepping towards me so our bodies touched. When I hesitated, he added, "It's my birthday and I would like to dance with you. Please?"

I placed my shaky hand in his. He wrapped his arm around my waist and held me close, swaying to a song that didn't exist anymore.

Breathing him in deeply, I rested my cheek on his chest, closing my eyes, enjoying the moments I got to be the only place I ever felt completely safe. Stupidly, I broke the silence. "Where are you supposed to be right now?"

Brian stopped dancing with me and released me. "I said I was sad about getting older and needed to take a drive to clear my head."

"Are you sad about getting older?"

"I could care less about how old I am, but I am sad tonight. I needed the drive and the dry, cool air."

"But you were talking to me the entire drive," I pointed out. "Not really good for clearing your head."

"True, but I've been thinking all day about how the conversation would go."

"Did it go like you thought... or hoped?" He was close to me, but I didn't know how long until he left to go back to his "normal" life with his "perfect mate".

"You've never been what I expected, Ash."

I made a face that he could see in the moonlight. "Nice and cryptic." I sighed. "I'm glad you're here and you asked me those questions. What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I don't know what my choices are," he admitted.

I sat back on the rock. "You have infinite choices, Brian. You always have. But I'd like it if you considered me as one."

He sat down next to me, folding his hands in his lap. "Is it really a choice, though? At this moment, I can't imagine being anywhere else with anyone other than you. But in the back of my mind, I still feel like it's only because I was designed to be your amp. And then I'm back to feeling frustrated and trapped."

"I can't change that, Brian. I feel the same way, so in a sense, I'm as trapped as you are. But here's something I've learned over the past three months. I can exist outside of you. I am capable of using my gift without you by my side. I struggle every second with the feeling that I've had my limbs cut off, but as someone pointed out to me, I don't need arms and legs to influence people. Can I live without you? Yes. But do I want to?" I stood in front of him, touching his cheek with my hand, staring into the face that I loved, and shook my head.

"I'm going back to California in the morning," he said, tilting his head into my touch.

"If that's your choice," I reminded him, closing my eyes, trying not to connect with him and change his mind.

"I need to finish out the semester before I decide anything," he said and kissed the palm of my hand.

"Will you stay with her?" I asked, a lump forming in my throat.

He nodded. "I have to know for sure."

I nodded sadly. "Will you stay here with me tonight?"

His head shook slowly, but I saw hesitation in his eyes. "Ash, you know I can't. What would I say?"

Tell them the truth, that you couldn't stand to be without me. I wish I had the courage to connect with him and say that or say it out loud. "I don't know. Maybe you could tell them that you just needed a night alone with your thoughts?" My hand fell down his arm, taking hold of his hand. "I'll even dance with you again, birthday boy," I teased.

He stared at me with a hint of an amused grin.

"I promise I won't do anything that could make things more complicated for you when you go back to California." I held up two fingers. "Scout's honor."

"You were never a scout," he retorted, standing up with me. "Do you mind if I put on music this time?"

"Anything you want."

We held hands, descending the short distance to the vehicles. While Brian found a song, I stepped up on the concrete table and waited. Finally, a slow, acoustic song came on and he got out of the Jeep, grinning at me on the table.

"Come on," I said, motioning him up.

He barely had time to find his balance after he jumped up before my arms were around him. We swayed gently, listening to Pink Floyd's lyrics and our own thoughts.

How I wish, how I wish you were here

We're just two lost souls

Swimming in a fish bowl

Year after year

Running over the same old ground

What have we found?

The same old fears

Wish you were here

The lyrics echoed loudly in my ears and I held onto Brian tighter. "I'm glad you're here," I whispered as a new song started.

If I could've made time stand still, I would've stayed in that night forever. Brian and I talked and laughed and cried on that hill until after the sun rose.

"I really should get back," he said, still sitting beside me, our feet dangling off the side of the table and our fingers intertwined.

"I know," I sighed, silently cursing the sun for ruining the night.

We stood up together, walking back towards the cars. I reached in my pocket and offered his phone back to him. "Keep it," he said, closing my fingers around the phone. "I need some way to contact you."

I smiled sadly as he opened his door and sat behind the wheel. "Thanks. Be careful, please?"

"You, too," he said and closed his door. His engine started up immediately as I stood there waiting for an act of God to stop him from leaving. "Oh," he said rolling his window down. "I'm coming out here again in a few weeks to go fishing with Michael. Could I call you while I'm here?"

I nodded, unable to swallow the lump in my throat.

"We'll talk soon," he said to my silence and backed down the hill, waving.

I waved back. "I love you," I squeaked out.

He honked and smiled and then drove away.

Chapter Eighteen – All the Cards on the Table

Brian and I texted every day after his visit. He called me when he could, which was usually late at night when he could escape out or when he had to drive somewhere alone. By the time he arrived for his fishing trip with Michael, we were almost acting like normal again. Almost. He was still insisting on needing time to figure out where he wanted his life to go. So our romantic life was still on hiatus. But none of that mattered to me. He was close to me and I felt safe in his presence. If he needed to take things slow, I was willing to wait forever.

His spring break was over too quickly and soon we were back to our regular calls and texts. One afternoon, he called me very excited.

“It’s pretty early for you to be calling me. What’s up?” I asked as I answered his call.

“I just got some really great news. I had a letter sitting on the counter when I got home. And when I opened it, it was a request for me to do a summer internship.”

“Wow, Brian. That’s really great! I didn’t know you applied for an internship. Doesn’t that usually happen towards your third or fourth year?”

“I didn’t apply. But the opportunity is too amazing to pass up. And do you want to hear the best part?” he asked cryptically.

I laughed. He was so excited, it was very endearing. “If I say no, will you explode?”

He ignored my comment. “The job will have me there all summer.”

“Here?” I questioned.

“Mmhm.” He sounded pleased that I’d been thrown by his announcement.

“Not working for CES, I hope,” I said jokingly.

“No, not CES. The company’s called Tri-Omega something... I’ll have to pull the paper out again.”

My stomach dropped. “Tri-Omega Metaphysics?” I asked, hoping I was wrong.

“Yeah, that sounds about right. Have you heard of them?”

I cursed under my breath. “I have to go take care of something. I’ll text you in a bit.”

I hung up the phone while he was saying a confused goodbye, but was already looking for the business card Cowan had given me. My fingers tapped anxiously on the desk as I waited for the phone to connect.

“Mr. Turner. It’s good to hear from you. I hope...”

I cut him off. “It’s Ashlyn. We need to talk. Now,” I demanded.

“I don’t talk business over the phone. Meet me in twenty minutes for dinner. I’ll text you the address. Oh, and try to dress nice. It’s not a jeans and t-shirt establishment.”

I opened my mouth to retaliate, but he’d already hung up. Within a minute I had a text message with the address to a very expensive restaurant downtown. I yelled in frustration, causing Lani to peek her head in.

“You okay?” she asked hesitantly.

“No. Men are such idiots!” I screamed, yanking a dress off the hanger.

She looked outside the room then whispered back at me, “You’re right. Is this about Brian?” She stepped into my room and closed the door.

“Not yet,” I said, pulling my boots on. “I have to meet Cowan for dinner because he won’t let me rip him a new one over the phone.”

Lani laughed. “Complaining about a date with the mysterious Cowan. I don’t know, Ash. Sounds like a pretty good deal to me.”

I refrained from growling at her. “He’s gotta be ten or more years older than me. There’s NOTHING romantic about this. Trust me,” I said, grabbing my purse.

“Well, try to enjoy yourself,” she called out to me as I stormed out of the house.

"You're eight minutes late, Ashlyn. Please, have a seat. The first course will be served any minute."

I sat in front of him, taking the napkin and placing it in my lap. "Why did you offer Brian a job?"

Cowan held up his hand. "First, we eat. Then we'll discuss business. Care for a roll?"

I shook my head. "No thanks. I'm not particularly hungry." Of course, as soon as the food was in front of me, I had to force myself not to eat it fast. It was close to the best food I'd ever tasted.

Finally after I picked at the dessert, Cowan placed his napkin on the table and stood up. "Ready to go?"

"Go? No. I need to talk to you, remember?" My temper was flaring again.

"Of course. I simply meant were you ready to go to my car where we can talk in private."

"Oh," I said, feeling a little foolish. I stood and followed him to his waiting limo right outside the front doors.

"Now," he said, taking a bottle of water from the fridge and offering it to me.

I shook my head. "Now you tell me why you offered Brian a job."

"For the same reason we offered you a job."

"Is his employment dependent on me working there or was that just my stipulation?"

"His is free of your obligation. But I presume you will accept our offer if he's already working there." He watched me as he took a drink of the water.

"So you failed to mention to him that you were trying to recruit me?"

"I'm not sure the exact verbiage of the letter he received, Ashlyn. I can call my secretary and pull up his file, if you'd like." He took his phone from his jacket pocket.

"No need. I already know he doesn't have any idea of the offer that was made to me. You might want to mention that to him when he calls to accept," I said reaching for the door.

"We won't be doing that. I don't make it a habit of sharing offers we made to others with interns."

My hand dropped. "He has a right to know. He left me because of this game. What do you think will happen when he finds out you only want him there so I'll work for you?"

"If Brian truly wants to control his life, he will have to make that decision when the choice is presented to him."

I grabbed the handle again, flinging the door open. "You're an ass. Brian will know and I'm going to tell him." I got out and slammed the door closed.

The car started pulling away when the rear window opened. "One more thing, Ashlyn. You did a good job of bringing him back into your life." The window closed again and the car drove away leaving me as angry as I'd been when I showed up.

Coupled with the rage was the dread of having to tell Brian the truth about his job offer. My stomach lurched and I barely made it to a bush before my meal came up. To the horror of some passerbys, I wiped off my mouth and walked back to my car.

"Please don't be mad, Brian," I begged as the phone went silent on his end.

He wasn't mad, though, he was furious. "Even when you're not here, you're screwing up my life! Damn it! I knew this was too good to be true!"

"Cowan said they wanted you regardless of me," I added, trying to take the sting off.

"Bull, Ash. You know as well as I do that the only reason they'd offer me that job there would be to get you. This is it. I'm done with you and your messed up world of lies." He hung up the phone before I could plead with him.

I called him right back, but he hung up the phone as soon as he'd answered. He didn't even want me to be able to leave a message. I sent a text and waited, pacing and wringing my hands. I had been so close to getting him back.

I waited ten minutes before trying to call him again after my text messages went unanswered. The phone had a message that the caller was unavailable and the line went dead. Infuriated, I banged my computer mouse on the desk and pulled up the travel website. If he wouldn't answer me from another state, he'd have to hear me out in person.

The more obstacles that got in my way, the angrier and more tunnel-visioned I became. There weren't any flights available to San Francisco until late the following night. Cursing as I thrashed my way through the house, I got in my car and sped to the highway. It was almost a day's drive, but I was going to be there first thing in the morning before Brian had a chance to escape anywhere.

I struggled with my radio for most of the drive. Everything was too soft and calming me down. I wasn't in the mood to be calm, though. I finally had to slow down when I reached the city. Stupid people designed stupid roads on hills that would seriously damage my car if I'd continued at the speed I wanted.

I could feel the effects of being close to Brian when I slid into a parking spot at his apartment. The power from being close to him coursed through my angry veins as I skipped every other step on the way up.

I silently connected with Brian, checking the door. It was unlocked, which would allow my planned grand entrance to be even more dramatic. Jen was relaxing on the couch with her coffee, still wearing her night clothes. Her legs were draped lazily across Brian's lap, who was stroking them as he drank coffee and watched the morning news.

I threw open the door, connecting with Jen's mind as soon as she stood up. *Ignore Ashlyn and get the hell out*, I commanded.

She stared in confusion at me for a moment and then diverted her eyes and grabbed her keys.

Brian was instantly between us, but concerned about what she was doing. "You don't have to go," he said softly.

Still dazed, she rubbed her head. "No, I think I do. My head hurts so bad if I think about anything but leaving." She walked past me without looking at me and left the apartment.

Brian grabbed my arm, pulling me further inside, slamming the door closed. "What do you think you're doing? You're not welcome here."

Sit down and listen, I demanded as I connected with his familiar mind again.

He struggled to defy me.

"Sit!" I yelled out loud.

He sat on a barstool near the kitchen, folding his arms in front of his chest. "You have no right being here or controlling my life."

"I didn't set you up. The job... I didn't even know. If I'd known, don't you think I would've stopped them? Geez, Brian. Are you that stubborn that you can't give me credit for the month's I've let you live this stupid life?"

"Why didn't you tell me about the job offer?" he asked, his jaw tight with anger.

"Because the last thing I wanted to do was make you feel like you did before you left me. I didn't want the job. They couldn't offer me anything that would make me want to put you back in that place. Don't you get it? I don't care about this gifted/amp crap."

"You've gotten very good at lying, Ash. I can't trust a word you say. It's all been a game to you, just like Jen said. You're manipulating me to make me want to go back to you. Too bad. You've lost." He grabbed his keys from the counter and walked up to me, looking down on me with hate in his eyes. "Let me try this on you. Get the hell out. I don't want to ever see you again. Let's see how much that hurts you to try to defy my commands."

As he reached the door, there was a knock. But before we could react, it opened and a man and teenage girl blocked his escape.

"You need to calm down, Brian," he said.

"Haven't you done enough harm, Cowan? Just leave us alone!" I shouted.

"I can't do that. You've forced my hand again. I need you both to come with me. We have some business to discuss," he said evenly.

"I'm not going anywhere with anyone," Brian said defiantly.

Cowan nodded at the girl and I knew Brian would be on the floor in a matter of seconds.

"No!" I shouted, but it was too late. The girl that had helped us at CES by knocking out the guards used her gift on Brian. He fell to the ground unconscious.

"Are you ready to come with me now?" Cowan said, picking up Brian's limp body.

"Never. You'll have to drag me out," I said through gritted teeth.

As I connected to the girl's mind, everything went black.

Chapter Nineteen – The Truth of It

I awoke with a headache that split down the center of my skull. When my eyes focused, I saw that I was in an office on a couch. My head hurt too much to focus on the details, but I sat up and tried to discern more about where I was.

“Ah, finally awake, Ashlyn?” Cowan’s usual soothing voice was like nails on a chalkboard at that moment.

I jumped up and looked around. “Where’s Brian? What did you do with him?”

“He came out of his sleep a while ago. I had one of the other officers take him on a tour. Here,” he said handing me a glass of water and two pills.

I stared at him defiantly. “I don’t want anything from you except to get the hell out of my life.”

He set the glass and medicine on the table in front of me and walked back towards his desk looking at the abstract portrait on the wall behind his chair. “You are a very stubborn woman, Ashlyn. And if there wasn’t a reason for needing you, my generosity would’ve worn off long ago.” He turned to face me again, leaning against his desk. “I am going to tell you what you want to know. And if after you’ve heard me out you still want to go, you will be free to do so without any further interference from me. Can you promise you’ll listen to me and not sit there stewing in your anger instead?”

Leaning back on a cushion, arms crossed and jaw clenched, I nodded.

“This company is one of a kind. I built her from the ground up from plans that don’t exist yet. Every purchase, decision, acquisition have had to be stored in my head and on this single piece of paper, along with a select few others that remain sealed and hidden.” He threw a worn, folded piece of paper on the table next to the medicine.

I didn’t move to pick it up. I was still waiting for the end of the story so I could get far away from him and his company that, in my opinion, was no better than CES. Lies, abductions, twisted meanings... I could understand why Brian wanted nothing to do with this life.

Cowan shrugged when I didn’t look at his paper and continued. “When we first met, you wondered about my gift and why I wasn’t more actively helping to rescue Simon. Let me start with telling you about my talent. I am able to split myself in two, to make an exact duplicate of myself with all the knowledge and physical abilities as the other half. I’m limited by only being able to create one other self. And if something physically happens to one of my bodies, it affects the other, too.”

My eyes went wide and I looked around for signs of his doppelganger. “So you have your other working in another office, overseeing whatever it is you do here?”

He shrugged slightly. “In a matter of speaking, I suppose. My other half is in stasis in a building similar to this one.”

My left brow scrunched down. I was both confused and intrigued. I reached for the water and swallowed the pills. “Is it dying and you’re trying to find a way to save yourself?”

He smiled and shook his head. “No, my other half is perfectly safe. But because of how I traveled here and the length of time I’m expected to stay, it was necessary. Besides,” he stood and walked to the window, which changed from a dark tint that you couldn’t see through to a normal window, looking out over the bay, “we weren’t completely certain how I’d be able to live in two different times.”

I shook my head, trying to decide if I’d misheard him. “What?” I scrambled for the paper on the table, but as I began unfolding it, Brian and another woman entered the office. I froze, not knowing which of my thoughts to pursue: running and holding onto Brian, looking at what was on the paper, or demanding Cowan tell me everything.

“Mr. Turner has seen the operations. Are you ready to discuss with the two of them the details?” The woman was probably around the same age as Cowan and dressed in business attire. She looked very serious, but smiled at Brian as he stood towards the door next to her.

“Not yet, Mary. Could you take Brian to the lab and show him the project he’ll be working on?”

“Wait. Lab? Project? No, you’re not going to do that to him.” I connected with Cowan’s mind, but before I could tell him to let Brian go, I saw Brian step towards me.

“It’s okay, Ash,” he said, all the anger from earlier gone from his voice.

I went back to my mind to see Brian standing across the table from me. I searched his eyes for signs that he’d been drugged or manipulated. “Everything’s okay?” I swallowed hard, trying to push away the emotions I was feeling.

He smiled at me and nodded.

“You’ll have a chance to catch up in a bit,” Cowan said.

“You’re not mad anymore?” I whispered.

“Come along, Mr. Turner. Many are looking forward to meeting you downstairs,” the woman said taking Brian’s arm and urging him towards the door.

He winked at me and left the office.

As the door closed, Cowan gestured to sit on the couch.

“What did you do to him?” I asked in horror, still standing.

“Gave him the truth. Please, take a seat. There’s a lot I need to discuss with you and our time is running out.”

I sat with my hands in my lap, holding tightly to the paper that I’d picked up from the table. Exhaustion from driving all night with elevated emotions was setting in. I was struggling to make sense of everything that was happening, but sat quietly while Cowan continued.

“As I was saying, this company was created in the future to be built up from the past. My co-founder was unable to effectively have a role in the company as her past self in this time, but has trusted me with key events that had to be triggered for us to be successful.” He motioned his head towards the paper I was holding.

I unfolded the paper and looked it over. It had business plans, a list of contacts, including Ken, and events. Many were crossed through, but one that caught my eye was “necklace to Chel”. “So you’re manipulating the past to make the future turn out how you and this other person want?”

“Not exactly. The future I live in exists because things happened in the past. I’m here to oversee those things happen and encourage them, if needed.” He looked at me with amused eyes. “You’re a much bigger challenge than I expected.”

“So, do you know me in the future?”

“I can’t tell you that, Ashlyn. You know that just like if I interfered in the past it could change things, so could you knowing the future change things.”

“But... I want to know if me and Brian...” I stopped there.

Cowan was shaking his head. “That is something you’ll have to discover for yourself.”

“Do you have contact with your co-founder’s past self? Are you planting the seeds for what will happen to his future?”

“Her path is being directed as she told me it would. I haven’t had personal contact with her past self and don’t anticipate ever meeting her. Same goes for my past self, who is probably getting ready to go play with the neighborhood kids right about now.” He smiled with genuine amusement.

“I wonder what little Cowan would say about stuffy old Cowan?” I mused.

“I’m sure I’d have the answers to a lot of the questions he’s struggling with,” he said sadly.

I nodded. I understood, as did most of the other gifted people, how difficult it was growing up with a talent. I was anxious to get back to Brian, so I moved the conversation along. “How do you know what to do with this and when?”

“Not easily. Do you know exact dates and times things happened to you now? Try going twenty years in the past and know when important and seemingly insignificant things happened.”

“I’m only eighteen,” I interjected.

Cowan continued, ignoring my point. "It's not a science, but I have clues and markers to watch for. Not everything goes as smoothly as they said they would. Our memories fail us sometimes, especially when they have emotional ties to events."

"So can you tell me why you won't offer me a job without Brian? He has free will and could choose to walk away. And you'd be done with me if that happens?"

"He could walk away. You could be hit by a car when you leave the building. The future for you is unknown and you have to treat it that way."

"How do you know I haven't already screwed things up too much?" I asked quietly.

"I'm still here, aren't I? So you haven't done anything too drastic to alter my timeline." Suddenly his eyes went wide and he fell over on the couch, convulsing.

"Oh my god! Cowan!" I yelled, jumping up to help him.

He was laughing before I reached him. "I'm sorry, Ashlyn. I couldn't resist."

I frowned and punched his arm. "I didn't realize they had a sense of humor in the future."

"Touché," he remarked. "You try being ripped from the lives of your friends, family, and loved ones to be solely responsible to build a company that you know is destined to do great things and affect the lives of millions... then you tell me how much time and energy you have for jokes."

"Millions?" I gulped.

"Billions," he replied and then smiled.

"What can I do?" I asked seriously.

"Right now, there's nothing to do but wait. Brian needs to decide what he wants and then things can take a direction."

"Are you going to tell him everything you've told me?" I asked, handing Cowan back his paper.

"He already knows some. I think the rest is going to be best received coming from you. I have made reservations for the two of you tonight at a private restaurant."

I made a face at him. "I'm not sure first, he'll want to go anywhere with me. He's still with Jen, remember? Second, he doesn't believe me, so I don't know if it's in your best interest for me to tell him your story." I yawned. "And finally, I'm very tired." I sat back on the sofa and closed my eyes.

"You can rest in my office for a little while."

I heard the leather couch squeak as he stood up and felt the lights dim, but I was too exhausted to open my eyes and look.

I sat anxiously at the table, trying to comfortably sit in the tight, strapless dress they'd given me to wear. I was fairly certain that it was Cowan's plan to make me suffer for all the trouble I'd been to him. I didn't even know if Brian would show up. I'd woken from my nap and was told that he had gone home to take care of some things and get changed, but would meet me at the restaurant at eight. It was eight twenty-three. I picked at the bread that I'd started eating thirty minutes prior, then threw it on the plate, took my purse, and pushed myself away from the table.

I walked quickly outside and started searching for a cab to take me back to my car at Brian's apartment. I would pick up a shirt and jeans at a store on my way out of town.

As a cab was about to pull up, a black Jeep cut in front of it and stopped in front of me. "Need a ride?" Brian asked, reaching across and opening up the passenger door for me.

Too stunned to say anything, I accepted his invitation and got in before he took it back.

"Where'd you get that?" he asked with a laugh, motioning to the dress. He was wearing a black button up shirt and a nice pair of tan slacks. I looked like I was going for a job interview at a strip club.

I crossed my arms and stared ahead, embarrassed and nervous. "Cowan," I grumbled.

"I didn't peg him for having a sense of humor. I guess I've been surprised by a lot of things today," he said, driving away from the restaurant.

I didn't know where to begin, so I started with, "I'm sorry."

"There'll be time for that later. Right now, I only want you to look out your window and look at the lights."

We drove up and down and around on the hilly streets. I was confused by his request, but did as he asked, mostly because I didn't know what else to say to him. So many things crossed my mind, but I kept them all to myself and let him take control of the night.

Soon, the lights became fewer and more spaced out. The stars began appearing and by the time Brian parked, they were the only lights I could see. "We're here," he said, opening his door.

I reached for the handle and had the door cracked open before he was on my side of the Jeep.

"Forgotten already?" he asked as he opened the door the rest of the way.

I shrugged and smiled out of embarrassment. "Sorry," I said quietly, having a feeling that I'd be saying that a lot in the next little bit of time.

"Can you walk up stairs in that outfit?" he asked, trying not to laugh.

I sighed. "Yeah. Probably."

"Come on then." He walked up to a stone building and opened a heavy door.

I followed him into the dusty building and up the stairs until we were in a circular room with glass walls. I looked around as he unlocked another door that led out to a small balcony. I'd seen lighthouses on TV and in the movies, but had never been inside one or even near one in person.

"Out there. I hope you'll be warm enough," he said, holding the door for me.

I continued to look around as I walked past him, brushing my hand along the rusted railing, feeling a mist again my face. I closed my eyes and breathed in the cool, ocean air while he waited patiently for me to take it in. "You always did have the ability to find the best places to escape," I finally said.

"Unlike the desert spot, this one isn't being threatened by civilization yet," he said.

I opened my eyes to see him leaning forward against the rail, looking far in the distance. "Why did you bring me here?" I asked, watching him closely.

"I've been bringing you here since I returned from my birthday trip," he said, still looking at the water. "I thought it'd be nice to bring you here in person."

"You came out here to call me?"

He finally looked over at me and smiled. "You're the only one who I've trusted here with me."

I felt my heart ache, unsure that he really meant that after he'd called me a liar twelve hours earlier. "Trust me?"

"The company is pretty amazing. Did you get to see much of it?"

I shook my head, looking out at the waves. "No, I was too exhausted for the tour."

"Yeah, they told me you were sleeping..."

I interrupted him abruptly. "Cowan travelled from the future to start the company," I burst out.

"Really? Hmm..." he said thoughtfully. "That makes a lot of sense."

"Wait. What? How does that make sense? And how aren't you pissed about this?" I was getting upset about how casually he was accepting this information.

"The project they want me on... it's very complicated, but has to do with displacing time. Their theories aren't quite right yet, but I think with a little work..." He trailed off.

"You...You're taking the job?" I stammered.

"I felt in my element when I was there. The people, the atmosphere, the project... it all felt right."

I made a face that I don't think he could see. "Sounds like another choice that you're going to question as being a choice down the road," I said bitterly.

He was quietly watching the waves, massaging his hands like they were in pain. "I ended things with Jen."

"Oh," I said quietly, swallowing hard.

"She doesn't know about what you did to her, but was pretty upset that I let her leave and you stay this morning. I told her it wasn't like that, but that I didn't think her and I were meant to be together anymore."

"I wish you would've waited until you had all the facts before you did something else you'll regret," I said with great effort.

"I have no regrets, Ash. I've come to realize that I do have choices. And if I deny myself the opportunities to explore them, that's when I'm trapped. With you, without you, beside you, from afar... it's my choice to decide where I fit in. I'm glad for the time I had with Jen, but that's not where I choose to be anymore. Likewise, I'm glad for all we've had."

"But you choose not to be with me anymore either, right?" I felt the emotion twisting my words into something ugly and not necessarily intentional.

"I haven't decided that yet. Nor have I asked you about what you want. You have choices, too. I don't think that I ever appreciated how trapped you've been in all this."

I steered the conversation away from a topic that was going to send me emotionally over the railing. "I'm not sure I can accept a job with them, not that I've been told what it is they want from me," I said bitterly, pushing myself away from the edge. "But that shouldn't affect you. They wanted you with or without me."

"I know," he said quietly.

"I guess that's what you needed... to be important independent of me. What you never realized is that you were that with or without me. You have always been important, to more than just me." I shivered, leaning against the thick, dirty glass wall.

He turned around to face me. "You're important, too."

I shrugged. "That's what people keep saying, but I disappeared for over a month and the world went on just fine without me. You got along great when I wasn't around. And the only reason Cowan has needed me was to draw you in for whatever it is you do in his future that's important." I went back inside, warming my arms with my hands. "Can you drive me back to my car? I think I'm ready to go home."

Brian sighed. "I don't think it's a good idea that you drive tonight. You need sleep first."

"I'll pull over and sleep in the car if I get too tired," I said and started descending the stairs.

Brian didn't follow. "No, I'm not going to let that happen." He leaned back over the railing, looking out at the ocean again.

I connected with Brian, about to make him drive me back, but then decided against it and walked back up the stairs. "Why not?"

He kicked a rock off the balcony and turned to face me. "Probably for the same reason you didn't just force me to do it. I care about you, Ash. I can't imagine being in this world without you in it, too. I don't know what the future has in store for us, individually or together, but I know..."

I cut him off with an angry outburst. "What? What do you know? That I'm special, important, needed for great things? That's such crap, Brian. I'm tired of people telling me how great I am then leaving me to stand on my own. I just want to be in your arms where I feel safe." I fell to my knees with my face in my hands, hot tears dripping from my jaw.

He moved towards me, "Ash..."

I stood up quickly. "No! Don't you dare touch me out of pity." I turned and ran down the stairs, outside past the Jeep towards the road. If I had to hitchhike back to my car, that's what I was going to do. When I got to the road, I pulled my shoes off and threw them in the bushes, walking faster on the cool asphalt with my thumb out. Cars rushed by, some honking until Brian Jeep cut sharply in front of me and stopped.

He was instantly standing in front of me, his hands holding strong to my arms. "Why are you doing this? Why do you always shut people out? I brought you out here tonight to ask you if we could

start over and you're running away. If you don't want me in your life, just tell me and I'll drive you back to your car and we will go our separate ways."

Brian searched my face for his answers, but I just stared back while my insides screamed at him to not let me go.

He finally released my arms. "Just tell me what you want, Ash."

"Can I sleep on your couch tonight?" I asked quietly, looking into his eyes.

He pulled me into his shaking chest, his laugh echoing in the night. "Of course."

I wrapped my arms tightly around his torso. "Thank you," I whispered.

Things felt different when I awoke the next morning on Brian's couch. Kara and I sat and talked over a pot of coffee while Brian and Michael cooked breakfast. It didn't feel like old times, but it reminded me of how we'd spent our last summer and that made a lot of the tension of the last months melt away.

Jen came by to get the last of her things when I was in the shower. I'm not sure I would've known except she was yelling about me being in his shower after she'd been gone less than a day. Finally when she accused him of cheating, I connected with his mind. *I'm here, if you need me.*

When she slammed the door shut, I returned to my mind. I'd been standing there so long connected to Brian that the water was cold. Shivering, I rinsed my hair and stepped out of the shower. I borrowed a casual dress from Kara and put it on quickly while my teeth chattered.

By the time I'd finished in the bathroom, I was warm again. I was looking forward to the drive home. Brian had agreed to ride with me then fly back to San Francisco to finish the last month of classes.

"I think I'm finally ready," I said as I entered the living room. Brian was sitting alone on a barstool, resting his forehead in his hands. "Hey, is every okay?"

He turned to face me, his face lined with stress. "Yeah, it's fine," he said.

I shook my head, walking to him. I rested my head on his shoulder and rubbed his back. "I can't say that I'm sorry she's gone, but I am sorry that you feel like this. Sometimes it seems easier to just have everything planned out for you," I added with a forced laugh.

"Maybe," he said, returning my humorless laugh. He sighed, rested his head against mine for a second, and then stood up. "So, are you going to let me drive your new car?"

"It's not new; I bought it used. But sure, it was your money that bought it." I smiled softly.

The unhappiness melted away from his face and I followed him to the door. "Oh, by the way, Kar and Michael asked me to tell you bye and that they want to plan to spend time with you this summer."

I handed Brian the keys and we left together.

Chapter Twenty – “...let old wrinkles come”ⁱⁱ

Brian was on a flight back the same day he drove me home. Even though things were better between the two of us, there was no mistaken they were different. I didn't expect him to want to jump back into a relationship with me so soon after breaking it off with Jen; he had a lot on his mind from dealing with that emotional baggage, to school, to his new job. I wasn't anxious to jump back into things with him, either, so when I dropped him off at the airport, we left with a long hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Most nights in the month since he'd left, when he wasn't working too late, we talked on the phone. Sometimes the conversations were quick while others last hours. It's been a strange time getting to know him again. I'm not sure if the distance made things easier or harder. I struggled internally since the lighthouse with our relationship. Part of me wanted to have things back how they were and how they could be once Brian got out of school, but a larger part of me didn't trust him or possibly myself.

I was strong and confident with my abilities. In my free time, which I had a lot of, I took up Eskrima, a form of martial arts that would utilize my daggers. I took classes three times a week and was quickly becoming proficient.

A couple of days after returning from California, I officially turned down Cowan's job offer. When I wasn't working on my weapon skills, I spent time working with my gift on my own, the way the group used to work together. It had been since the rescue of Simon that we'd actually done anything together as a group. Alex and Morgan were still gone. Ken had heard from them, though, and they were living in Canada because Morgan's mother was very ill. They hoped things would turn around soon and they'd return.

While I still lived with the girls, we rarely saw each other. Lani and Logan had bought a house together and as soon as it was done being built, she was moving out. Khari was enjoying life by traveling and making new friends around the country. She sent me emails and text messages frequently; I missed her immensely. Audrey was rarely around, and when she was, it wasn't often we spoke. I'd never formed a strong friendship with her like I'd done with Lani and Khari... and Eve.

It was on the morning of my birthday that I really began thinking about Eve. The house was quiet as I mulled over my coffee. I sighed deeply, sadness threatening to consume me as I considered what it must've been like to be severed permanently from her amp, then have all that was good stolen from her memories. There had been several times when I had been tempted to ask Logan to erase mine, but I could never justify my pathetic love life as a good enough reason. After my coffee was finished, I slowly made my way into the shower, trying to forget everything unassisted.

I spent over an hour practicing with my knives then meditating after my shower until I was startled by my phone ringing. I'd already spoken to Mom and Dad and since I knew Brian wouldn't call until the evening, I was genuinely surprised by the interruption.

“Hello?”

“So you didn't hide yourself from the world today. I need for you to come with me for a bit. I assume you don't have any other plans?”

“Cowan. How unexpected,” I said, making a face into the phone. “I suppose I have a few minutes I could spare for you. What's up?” I put my knives away and started searching my closet for my shoes.

“Nothing important. Will you be ready in five minutes?” he asked cryptically.

“Umm... sure? Does that mean you're already waiting out front for me?”

Cowan laughed, which was an unusual sound coming from the almost always serious man. I had only seen him take down his guard twice. “See you in five minutes, Ashlyn.”

I walked to the front window and peered out, seeing his signature black limo waiting for me. "Good thing I didn't tell him no," I grumbled and went into the bathroom to finish getting ready.

We walked into his office and closed the door. "Have a seat, Ashlyn. I have a few things I'd like to talk to you about." He motioned to the seat in front of his desk.

I sat down on the edge of the chair, making it obvious I didn't intend to stay long. "I don't understand. I thought we had an understanding that I wouldn't be working for you unless something urgent arose. Is something wrong? Is Brian okay?" My eyes went wide with worry.

Cowan's left brow was raised at my reaction. "I'm not aware of any problems with Brian." He pushed a file folder in front of me. "What do you think about this?"

I opened the folder, watching his face as I did. He motioned for me to look inside, so I looked down and began flipping through pages of medical records:

Shows no signs of improvement.

Brain activity at a minimum. Going to administer serum X380.

Baby responding strongly to treatments, but mother still unresponsive.

Child's growth is accelerating. Already at third trimester development. Birth expected within a week.

"What is this? Is this what Brian's been working on?" I asked as my muscles in my face tensed into a frown.

Cowan laughed. "Why would Brian be acting as a doctor? No, I was going through some old papers and came across these. It's a copy of Eve's file from CES."

"Old papers? You mean hidden and sealed papers?" I said, making a face.

He grinned, leaning back in his chair. "You're getting more perceptive in your old age. Happy birthday, by the way."

I grumbled. "Yeah, happy birthday. I'm spending it here. So what does this mean? Eve's pregnant?"

"It appears CES believes she is," he laughed again when I glared at him.

"I don't care what CES believes. I want to know what you know and why you let me see this today."

"This is stuff that has happened in your past now and it was important that you had knowledge of it. Yes, Eve was pregnant with Ethan's child when she had her memories stolen. I'm not sure if she knew, but CES soon found out once Deven took her there."

"And they experimented on the baby before it was born?" I was horrified and felt sick. "Why didn't you tell me sooner so I could've saved them?"

"You think you could've single handedly gone into CES and saved her after you barely got out with Simon when you had an entire team? You're good, Ashlyn, but not that good."

"I could've rallied people to help," I said softly, sinking back into the chair. "Or you could've given me another one of those vials and I could've gone in stealthed."

"That vial was the only one we possessed. No more pretending to be Rick, Ashlyn."

I shuddered, just realizing that it was Rick's gift I'd used to help my friends. I suddenly felt dirty. "That came from CES, didn't it?" I asked with a disgusted look on my face, horrified that something created by that company had been in my body.

Cowan pressed his fingers together in front of his chin, rocking slightly in his chair. "Does it matter where it came from? You used it to help your friends. It's the result that matters."

"If you think like that, then you're no better than everyone at CES," I countered.

"Not everyone there is bad. Some people are there because their situation doesn't allow them to leave."

"Like Sonya?" I asked, thinking about her gift.

Cowan shrugged. "Yes, but Sonya chooses to work there. She feels important and valuable. Isn't that what we all strive for? What are you going to do with your life? Eventually the money from Brian will be gone and you'll have to find a source of income. Where will you fit in? Where will you go to find acceptance and appreciation?"

"I... I'm not sure. How long will you be in my time and willing to offer me a position here?" I was struggling with his truths.

"I'm here now. Are you willing to reconsider the offer?"

I shook my head. "No. I don't see myself happy here. I don't know how my gift would be put to good use here when I don't even have an understanding of what this place does. What do you do? What is Brian working on?"

"We do many things, but mostly we're laying the foundation for future greatness. I understand how you feel, so I'm not going to push you into making a decision that could eventually be wrong for you. Your future is ahead of you and you will find your own path. You just need to know you have choices and that you aren't trapped because of your gift."

I laughed, but wasn't amused. Not only did I feel trapped, but I also felt lost and alone. "Can you tell me when I'll figure this all out?"

He stood up and walked around the room. "It took me a long time to buy into this plan. You think you feel trapped by being tied to a gift and an amp? Imagine what it would be like to have someone come up to you one day and tell you all that you know, all that is good that exists is dependent on you to make happen. And not only that, but that you have to leave all you know and do it alone." He sighed and leaned against the window, peering out over the city. "There are days when I think being incompetent and lazy are the real talents in this world."

I was shocked by his honesty. "I didn't consider that. I'm sorry. Can you tell me about the life you left? Were you married? Kids?"

Cowan pulled out his wallet and handed me a picture of a woman holding a baby. "Her name is Heidi. Our son's name is CJ. We were planning our wedding when I got recruited to do this," he said sadly.

"Cowan Jr.?" I smiled. "He looks just like you. Does she know about your gift and about your job?" I asked sadly, staring at the happy faces in the picture.

"Yes, she knows everything. She's not my amp, but my soul mate. There isn't a day that goes by here that I don't miss them both. I'm missing out on so much of his life..."

"How long have you been away?" I asked softly, walking over to stand by the window, too.

"A little over three years. We've accomplished so much in that time, though."

A small gasp escaped. "Three years?" I thought about everything that had happened to me in the past three years and then to not being able to communicate with Brian for that long and my heart ached. "I'm sorry," I offered, touching his arm.

He smiled at me and touched my hand. "I think I'm ready for lunch," he announced. "Please join me?"

"I'm not sure I could say no right now after hearing that," I said with mock irritation.

Cowan laughed and checked his phone. "Glad to hear I'm so compelling when I'm pathetic."

"You should use pity more often," I said and followed him out of the office.

I spent the afternoon getting to know Cowan better. He told me about how he'd met Heidi and their unexpected baby who had become Cowan's reason for existing. It was endearing to see this side of him.

"Who else knows about your reason for being here?" I asked on our way back to the limo. It was getting dark and I wanted to be home for Brian's call.

"My first task was to stop Ken and Alex from taking revenge out on Chel after Tom died. I had to give them a reason to listen to me, so they knew from the beginning who I was and where I came from. They have been invaluable partners over the years."

"I wondered how they could come to trust Chel after she killed Tom. Wow." I shook my head in amazement as I sat in the back of the black car.

"You trusted her, too, to go out alone with her and hear her story. You didn't need to know why she had been trusted." He closed the door and the car started moving.

"I didn't once I knew the story. And now after she was willing to kill her friends, I'm not sure I trust her at all."

Cowan smiled. "I don't blame you. But try to remember she's been tortured because of that gift you gave her. If she wanted your help to get out of CES, would you?"

"You mean the gift you tricked me into giving her for you?" I scoffed. "I don't think I have it in me to trust her. And you're borderline on trustworthiness, so watch it," I scolded.

"Maybe it's I that should be worried about how trustworthy you are," Cowan remarked with a raised brow.

"I trust you already know the answer to that one," I added and looked out the window with my thoughts on the future and what my part in it was... and how much of it Cowan was keeping from me.

"Enjoy your night, Ashlyn," Cowan said as I stepped outside the car.

"You, too," I said sincerely and walked to the door.

"SURPRISE!!! HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!" People jumped from behind furniture and turned on the lights as I walked into the house.

I blinked in disbelief, looking at everyone's laughing faces. "I... uh... thanks?"

Lani and Khari skipped over to me hugging me tight. "We hope you don't mind... we just wanted to do something special for you," Lani explained as Logan approached.

"Yeah. Wow. You guys shouldn't have." I was speechless. The house was covered in streamers and balloons. Then it struck me that Khari was standing there. "Khari! When'd you get back?" I hugged her again.

She laughed. "This afternoon. I couldn't miss out on seeing your face. Look." She held up her phone and let me see the picture of my astonished face as I walked in.

"You'd better erase that," I warned.

"Not a chance," she laughed and kissed my cheek. "Did you get my last email? I can't believe you didn't figure it out that I was close to home."

I rolled my eyes. "I guess a good detective I'll never be," I joked and took a cup from Audrey. "Thanks," I smiled, smelling the drink first before taking a large gulp. I scanned the crowd for Brian, but my face fell when I didn't see him.

"He said he had to work and couldn't make it," Lani whispered.

I nodded and sighed, taking another drink of the alcohol. I talked to all the people who'd come, many of which were friends of Ken and Audrey or new friends that Khari had brought with her, and then walked out back with a full cup and stared quietly at the stars.

I was slow to answer my phone when it rang, having been caught up in distant thoughts and regrets. My mood was spiraling downwards as the party inside was getting louder. "Hello?"

"Sounds like quite a party. You having a good time?"

My insides smiled at the sounds of Brian's voice. "You know me. A party animal," I said sarcastically.

Brian laughed. "So if you didn't want a crazy surprise party, how did you want to spend your birthday?"

I closed my eyes, imagining the ideal birthday. "I think I'd like to go to bed and wake up as far from my birthday as it can possibly be."

"That's boring. Try again."

"Hmmm... I might have liked to have spent mine like you spent yours," I admitted.

"You mean spend the day lying to your family and loved ones?"

I sighed. "Somewhere far away from everyone, alone with you."

"Why don't you come out front and see if we can get you to that place."

My heart skipped a beat and I looked inside at the party happening without my presence. *Could I really ditch my own party?* I thought to myself a moment before the cake went flying across the room and laughter erupted. "Guess so," I said aloud and walked around to the gate leading to the front of the house.

Brian drove to the desert without saying much, respecting my contemplative mood. Finally, when he'd parked his rental car and I didn't move to unbuckle my seat belt, he asked, "So is this what you envisioned, sitting in a car that smells like old cigarettes on top of a hill while there's a nice breeze and a full moon outside?" He didn't wait for my answer and got out, stretching his arms and sitting on the hood of the car.

I made a face behind his back and got out, walking past where he was sitting to look out at the moon rising over the mountains. My eyes closed, capturing the image in my head as I felt the calm that was so familiar with that place – and with Brian's presence. "Yes, this is about what I was hoping for," I said finally and turned around to face him. "How'd you make it here? I thought you were working?"

"Work will be there when I get back. I didn't want to miss your birthday, though." He walked towards me.

My emotional turmoil was off the charts. To be close to him and alone and in our spot again... but I was scared to feel his resentment and lose him again. And I was angry with him, too.

While I was figuring it all out, he handed me a wrapped gift. "Happy birthday, Ash."

I raised my brow at him and didn't take the present. "You weren't supposed to get me anything. You're not even supposed to be here."

"I can go..." he offered, taking a step backwards.

"No, I don't want that, either. I don't know what I want," I complained kicking the dirt at my feet.

"Well, let's start by having you open this and we'll go from there, okay?" He put the package in my hands.

I slowly opened it, handing him the paper as I got down to the box. When I took the lid off, my engagement ring sat on a satin pillow. A lump formed instantly in my throat and I put the lid back on the box. "I can't accept this."

He looked confused. "What do you mean? This belongs to you. I know, I know. We're taking things slow, but I wanted you to have it back."

I shook my head. "No, I can't." I shoved the box at him and turned away, hiking up the small hill to the rock I'd come to find solace in sitting in. Tears streamed down my face as my heart screamed at me for turning him away.

He casually made his way up to where I was. "So does that mean we're completely done?"

I wiped my face dry and pulled my knees to my chin. "I hope not," I whispered.

"What does that mean, Ash? What's going on?" He stood in front of me, pulling my chin off my knees to look at him.

I unloaded on him. "It means I hate you for sleeping with her. I did everything in my power to not sleep with Deven. And you... you were living and sleeping with her. Even when I was still wearing your ring! And now because you suddenly realize that you aren't just a tool to me, that you are

important in both worlds, everything is suddenly better? What happens when this job is over? What happens when I need you to be with me to go rescue Eve or something?" I snapped my chin from his grip and stared angrily in his eyes.

He sighed and sat down next to me, fidgeting with his fingers in his lap. "I'm sorry I hurt you. While I might have been stupid and not caring about how you felt then, I do regret making you feel like that now. I needed to know if I had a chance at a normal life."

"I know, you've said that. As opposed to the messed up life that you're stuck with when you choose to be with me. Got it." I stood up and climbed higher on the hill, looking straight up at the night sky with my arms spread out, tears pooling in my eyes until they spilled over. "I'm always going to be the 'have to' girl to you."

He spoke up to me from below. "I don't have to be here now. I didn't have to bring you out here or give you back the ring. I know I'm selfish and stupid, but this is my choice now. If you don't want me, that's your choice. I'll go back to California and cancel my plans to move back over the summer and continue working for Tri-Om there and you can go on doing your superhero thing here."

I let my arms fall to my side and looked down at him with blurry eyes. "That's not what I want. But I don't want this weird thing that's between us now. I don't want to not trust that you're really here with me and aren't going to resent me again. The Jen thing cuts me deep, but I'll figure out a way to deal with that. I know I wasn't your first, but it's hard to rationalize how betrayed my heart feels when I have been faithful to you."

"But we weren't together anymore, Ash. You didn't owe me that. Not that I'm not relieved to hear that you and Deven never..." He trailed off.

"Slept together. Right. How stupid of me to be faithful to the one thing I've always felt was right in my life."

"That's not fair. You may have never questioned us, but I did. Would you rather have me always wonder if there was something else out there for me and continue to harbor resentment or have me know for sure how important you are to my life?"

"I'm glad you found your answers," I said quietly with spite.

Brian climbed up the rocks and grabbed my forearms. "Is this how you want things to be between us now? I can't change the past any more than you can. I hate knowing that you felt something for him before I was even gone and that it didn't take long afterwards for you to explore that. Do you have any idea how bad that hurt me when all my suspicions were confirmed?"

My tone softened when I heard the genuine hurt in his voice. "Why didn't you ever talk to me about how you felt about me and Deven working together?"

"Because it was all for the good of the group. You guys did amazing things together and I felt like you didn't need me anymore. I had become the sidekick. I hated that feeling and the feeling like I was less important to you than him."

"You were always more important than him. Even when you were gone. I had to focus hard every time he was around to not think about you or compare him to you. Do you know how hard it is to be around a mind reader when all you can think about is someone else? Why do you think I told you time and time again that I'd leave the group to make you happy again?"

His grip hadn't loosened on my arms and he was staring down in my watery eyes. "It was your world, you thrived with them. The good you were doing, how good it made you feel... I couldn't take that away from you."

"But you did take it away from me. You were the one I wanted to feel good with. You were the one I wanted to be myself around. You took my world away." My voice was quiet and sad. I knew we were both hurting, but the fact that he still had a hold on me, both physically and emotionally, gave me hope.

He sighed. "That's not how it felt to me, especially at the end." The moon shone on his troubled face.

I reached up to touch the frown lines etched on his skin. "I'm sorry I ever made you feel like that. I guess we should've had this talk five or six months ago." My hand slowly slid down his face, stroking his warm cheek. "What do we do now?"

"I guess that depends on what you want and if you can get past the last five months." He released his grasp on my arms, stroking where he'd been holding.

"I want things back how they were before the group, when there was never any question where we belonged. But I don't know how to get there," I said sadly.

He pulled me into his chest and held me close, kissing the top of my head. "I don't know, either. But if we both want that, I'm sure we can figure it out somehow."

We held each other for what felt like hours. I could feel my pain and anger melting away as the minutes passed. I wondered what he was quietly contemplating, but didn't dare break the peaceful silence to find out.

Finally he broke the silence. "So, can we make this work or is this how we end?"

"I want to make this work, but it isn't solely my choice, is it?" I looked up in his face.

"No, it's not. It's just taken me a long time to understand that. I want to get back to us again, Ash. But I know it's going to be a long road and different this time. As long as it's what you want, too, I'm willing to do what I have to do to get you back and make up for these past months."

I smiled up at him. "So slow... I can do that. It'll be easier with you so far away."

"Only for another month. Then I'll be back here. Unless you don't think that's a good idea and I can stay away longer..."

My eyes went wide as I shook my head. "No, I want you back here with me. I've missed you so much."

Brian relaxed and embraced me again. "I've missed you, too, you stubborn, complicated woman. Happy birthday."

The moon was high in the sky and we'd been sitting on the rock, holding hands, catching up on our lives. "So can you tell me anymore about what you've been working on? Cowan won't give me any clues."

Brian laughed. "No, I can't tell you. But I think you'd be proud of the work."

"I don't doubt it. Do you know much about the rescue mission to get Simon back?"

He shook his head. "No, they don't tell me what's going on with you, no matter how much I ask."

"You've asked about me?" My smile got bigger.

"All the time," he said nodding.

"I think you would've been impressed," I boasted. "Cowan gave me this vial without any explanation... and when I injected it, I turned invisible." I felt like a child talking about a day at the amusement park. Regardless of the source, regardless of the history of it, taking that serum was one of the coolest moments in my life.

"Invisible, eh? Just like you'd wished so many times."

"Yeah," I said softly. "So what about the other stuff that Cowan's been feeding me. Did you know about what happened to Eve?"

"Only that her brother stole her away after Ethan died," he said with a hint of spite.

"After Ethan was murdered, Deven had her memories of him removed and dragged her away catatonic to CES. That's when they found out she was pregnant. But here's the weird part... she's apparently already given birth."

"Was it Deven's," Brian joked.

I punched him hard. "That's not funny."

He rubbed his shoulder. "Come on. He was a jerk and doesn't deserve you defending him."

"I know he's a huge ass. But it doesn't change the fact that I cared about him." I snuggled against Brian's side again.

He grumbled. "That doesn't make any sense. How'd you find out and how did she give birth so quickly? Was it premature? Did it survive? How's Eve doing?"

I shook my head, my arms snaking around his middle, holding him close again. "I don't know for sure. But the medical records I saw didn't indicate there was anything wrong with the child. CES had been experimenting on them both."

"That sucks. Poor Eve."

"I know," I agreed, a yawn escaping me as the eastern sky was beginning to light up. I closed my eyes, trying to hold onto the night. "When are you going back to California?"

"My plane leaves around three tomorrow... errr today." He laughed.

"Would you come back to my house and get some sleep before you go?"

"It would beat sleeping in that car or in the waiting area at the airport," he said. "Do you think there will be a spare couch?"

An image of cake and beer flying through the air, coating the couch entered my mind. "Not that you'd want to sleep on. So maybe you could share my bed for the morning?" I moved my head away from him, opening my eyes to see his expression.

"I don't know. Is that really what you want?"

I smiled. "Consider it my birthday present. I really miss sleeping in your arms," I admitted quietly.

"Only because it's your birthday," he chuckled softly and stood up with me.

"Technically the day after my birthday, which I'm liking much better."

"I am, too," he whispered and lifted me in his arms, carrying me to the car.

Chapter Twenty-One – Reunion

“Pass me the marshmallows, Alex,” Lani said from across the fire. A moment later, the bag of marshmallows floated through the air to Lani and Logan as Alex continued his conversation with Ken while lazily stroking his fingers through Morgan’s hair.

We were all sitting around a large campfire, enjoying the cool summer evening away from the city. The last few months had flown by; Lani moved into her new house with Logan, Brian moved back and was kept very busy working out of the local Tri-Om office, and I was taking summer classes at the university. Alex and Morgan had recently moved back, too, and the group started doing outings again every other weekend. This was one of our off weekends.

Khari was busy making margaritas while Simon was telling us about a group of foreign tourists that came by his work. I relaxed back against Brian’s chest and absorbed the surroundings. With help from his hectic work schedule, we’d kept true to our promise of taking things slow. My hurt had dissolved once he had moved back and was living in an apartment not far from my house. And while we were taking things leisurely – mostly because of his work schedule – things were getting closer to how they were before we split.

Ken excused himself from the group to answer his phone. “I thought we were leaving those off this weekend,” I commented to Audrey.

“Yeah, well most of us *did*,” she said loudly, but Ken was too wrapped up in his call to hear her.

Lani threw the marshmallows back to Alex. “Thanks!” she called as she speared it and stuck it into the fire.

I watched them fly through the air. Alex took control of the bag midflight and set them on the table next to Khari. I observed Alex and Morgan closely. They hadn’t said much to me since they’d returned and a big part of me felt responsible for all their troubles. I decided I needed to remedy our relationship. After giving Brian’s thigh a squeeze, I stood up and walked to them, sitting on a nearby tree stump. “It’s pretty amazing out here, huh?”

Morgan smiled and nodded, but Alex spoke up. “Look, Ashlyn. You don’t owe us anything.”

I was going to play it off like I didn’t know what he was talking about, but then my shoulders slumped and my forehead frowned. “Yes, I really do. I’ve messed up a lot of things up lately and I can’t stand that there’s something strange between us. You two were there for me and Brian when things started to get complicated. Morgan, you were invaluable in helping Brian process this strange new world. And I don’t think I could ever say thank you or I’m sorry enough to really express my feelings. I want you both back as friends, not just strangers doing similar things.” My eyes pleaded with them to accept my words.

“Why didn’t you stop Brian from leaving or Deven from killing Ethan?” Morgan’s voice was riddled with emotion.

“I tried to stop Deven. His gift counters mine and I was helpless to do anything. I was too weak.” I sighed and then screwed up my face to answer the rest. “I would never force Brian to be where he didn’t want to be. You left Alex once. Would you have wanted him to force you to stay?”

She looked down and shook her head. “Well, no.”

“What can I do to fix things between us? Anything, just tell me. Yell at me... something!” I threw my hands up in the air in frustration and then felt Simon’s calming presence. “Not fair,” I whispered and glanced over my shoulder at him. I turned back to Morgan and Alex. “Please?”

Alex unexpectedly took my hand. “You’re a good friend, Ashlyn. The struggles we had weren’t just because of you. We had a lot of things to work through and the environment here wasn’t letting us address things. Time away is what we needed and apparently it’s what the world needed from us, too. Morgan got to be with her mom before she passed and made amends there, something that wouldn’t have happened if we’d stayed here.”

Morgan nodded.

"Oh," I gasped, not aware that her mother had died. "I'm so sorry for your loss," I said feeling sad, but instantly reverted to a relaxed state, thanks to Simon's careful attention.

She smiled. "It's okay. Thank you, though. I got to meet my sister for the first time. She's adorable... five years old. It was a shock to me, really. My parents decided to not have kids after my twin sister died a few minutes after birth."

Her revelation shocked me. I never knew she had a twin. I kept my curiosity in check and continued the original conversation. "And your dad? Is he doing okay?" I asked hesitantly.

"Mom had been sick since Chloe was born. So my dad's been her primary care giver for her entire life. He's sad, but accepts his fate," she said with an unusual, knowing grin.

An unintentional scoff escaped me at the mention of fate. "I'm glad you got a chance to reconnect with your family." I paused and looked around, speaking softer. "But I'm selfishly glad you two are back."

"It's good to be back. Things are different now. Right Alex?" she asked smiling over her shoulder at him.

He grinned and rubbed her stomach. "Very different."

My eyes widened. "Are you...?"

Morgan's smile told it all. "Shhh... we're trying to wait until second trimester to tell anyone."

I scooted closer, hovering my hand over her belly. "May I?"

She giggled. "Go ahead. Just be quick." She looked around playfully nervous.

"How far along are you?" I whispered.

"About two and a half months," she beamed.

Brian stood up and was walking towards me. I withdrew my hand and gave Morgan a hug.

"Congrats. I'm so happy for you both. If there's anything you need, let me know. Promise?"

Morgan hugged me back. "Thank you, Ash. I'm sorry for being so cold towards you. I know it was just as hard for you, if not harder."

A happy tear dripped from my eye as I broke from our embrace. I slid my hand into Brian's as he made small talk with Alex.

Ken rejoined the group a while later, a worried look on his face. Audrey was at his side trying to find out what was wrong, but he kept shaking his head, shooting fireballs at the campfire. A large ember jumped from the fire onto Khari's leg.

"Hey! Watch it! What's your prob?" she yelled, frantically brushing off her leg.

Simon was instantly by Khari's side, but looked to Ken for an explanation.

"Sorry to disturb everyone's weekend," he said, throwing looks between Audrey and me. "If it wasn't important, I wouldn't have taken the call. It was Cowan. He was just visited by Deven, trying to get some information. Chel's missing and CES wants her returned. Naturally, they assume we're involved."

"Missing?" several of us asked in unison.

"What does that mean for us?" Simon interrupted, probably the one with the most concern about being approached by CES, though he hid it well. We still didn't know what the long term effects of the experiments they started on him were going to be. But thankfully, his ability was intact without any obvious issues.

"I honestly don't know. Cowan wasn't forthcoming with helpful information." Ken rolls his eyes while looking at Alex. "He wanted us to be aware and vigilant. I know that some of you have doubts when it comes to Chel and her trustworthiness." He paused to look between Audrey and Khari. "But Cowan has assured me that she wants out and will need our help to succeed."

Everyone was silently considering what all this information meant. My heart ached for Alex and Morgan; they had to stay out of the crossfire to protect their baby. But what I was most worried about

was how Brian would react to the first major incident after his return. My stomach hurt with stress, despite Simon's efforts to keep the group calm.

"So what do we need to do now?" Brian asked, shocking almost everyone present.

"We need to figure out how to find Chel and then how to defend ourselves against CES," Ken began.

"If Deven was with Cowan, he's been sent to kill her," I admitted out loud.

"Chel can handle Deven. But that does put a further stress on this group. CES has always been this evil entity without a face. Now its face is someone we all knew and cared about." Simon's eyes and several others fell on me.

I quickly looked down. "We don't know what experiments Deven has submitted himself to, either. For all we know, he's gained the ability to influence people's thoughts, similar to me. Chel may not be as well prepared as we assume. I'll make contact with him. He won't hurt me and maybe I can find out some information that'll be useful."

Brian squeezed my hand hard.

I didn't need him to voice his protest. I already ran through all the reasons *not* to make contact before I volunteered. *I know. But I have to do what I can to make sure no one gets hurt this time. Please trust me*, I begged while connected to his mind.

"That's a good idea," Logan commented. "Maybe Ash can find out if he's been altered and why they want Chel back so badly."

"We know the why," Khari said. "She's their property, remember? They've invested a lot into her to have her walking free of their control."

"She's a threat to them, too," Morgan added. "What would stop her from turning her modified powers against them?"

"And us, too," Audrey said sourly. "I for one don't want to be the one who finds her. She's likely to strike out against anyone who shows up."

Ken was nodding. "All of this is true. Chel will only listen to a couple of people, so it has to be myself and/or Alex to make contact with her."

"No," I said suddenly. "Not Alex." My eyes darted quickly between him and Morgan, and then back to Ken. "She might trust me. I returned that necklace to her. It's what started this all, isn't it?"

"She might blame you for this, too," Brian reasoned. "I don't want you to go," he said quietly for me.

"I agree with Brian," Khari announced. "Let Ken make first contact with her."

Audrey shot Khari a hateful look.

"Everyone needs to calm down. You're giving me a headache," Simon complained, stumbling backwards towards a chair, holding his stomach. Within a couple of seconds, he threw up. He looked at me, wiping off his mouth. "What did you do to me?"

All eyes turned to me. I had been holding my stomach, but let my arms fall. "What? Nothing. I swear!"

"I was trying to control the growing unease when I suddenly honed in on you, Ash. I felt your stress... not like I usually do. Your stress physically affected me."

"I didn't do anything. My stomach was hurting, but I..." I shook my head, frowning deeply and backing away.

Ken held up his hand as Simon threw up again. "Everyone stop. Ashlyn, no one's blaming you. Let's try to figure this out. Take a deep breath and try to relax yourself."

I closed my eyes, took deep breaths, and tried to relax. Had Brian not been there rubbing my shoulders, I doubt I would've been able to calm down; there were too many things in the moment to worry about. But there was something magical about him that both excited and calmed me to my soul. When I opened my eyes and looked at Simon, his posture had relaxed.

"That's much better," he said. "I don't know what happened. The group's emotions were getting pretty intense. I normally just kinda see the emotions. It's hard to explain, but I'm not affected by them anymore than the rest of you are. But I was suddenly drawn into Ash's emotions and felt what she was feeling: sadness for Alex and Morgan and then extreme stress, followed by stomach pain." He looked questionably at me.

"I didn't connect with you, Simon. I was lost in my own thoughts. I'm so sorry."

"This has never happened before?" Ken asked.

Simon shook his head. "Never."

"Hmmm..." Ken paced around, caressing small balls of fire in his hand. "Is it possible?" he asked himself.

Audrey grabbed his arms, stopping him. "What?!"

Ken shrugged. "I'm not sure. I'll have to run it past Cowan, but this might be a result of the CES experiments... a manipulation of Simon's gift."

Simon growled quietly, dropping his face in his hands. Khari rubbed his back, whispering to him.

Brian took my hand and walked me into the woods, away from the group. He looked at me for a long time before speaking. "Why are you sad about Alex and Morgan and what's got you so stressed?" he asked. "Well, besides the obvious."

"Morgan's pregnant," I said in hushed tones. "They just got back and things were good and calm again... and now this?" I shook my head. "I'm not going to let this crap ruin her pregnancy or their future. Did you know that Cowan has a son he hasn't seen in more than three years?" I fell helplessly against Brian's chest. "And I don't want something like this mess to tear you away from me again," I admitted.

Brian lowered his head to the top of mine, kissing and speaking into it. "I won't lie. I'm going to do everything in my power to try to talk you out of meeting with Deven and involving yourself in this hunt for Chel, but I'm here with you as long as you want me."

"Thank you," I whispered, wrapping my arms tightly around him.

Eventually, Brian and I rejoined the group. I made a huge effort the rest of the night and following day to keep my stress in check for Simon's sake. He seemed to be back to normal after the one episode, but Ken was still insistent on consulting with Cowan.

I intended to do my own interrogation of Cowan, so Monday I called him and made arrangements to meet him in the afternoon. With no classes or studying to do and Brian at work, I decided to contact Deven and arrange a meeting with him, as well, but it went directly to his voicemail.

"Hey, Dev. It's Ash. Just wanted to see if you were up for a cup of coffee sometime. Call me. Hope to talk to you soon."

I rolled my eyes at myself for the message. I didn't know how to come across without sounding spiteful or like I just wanted information from him, both of which were true. I accepted that I held on to my anger for him because deep down I really did care about him. Not in the same romantic way that I once had, but as an ex who only wanted him to find happiness and inner peace. I wanted to be strong enough to be able to convince him to leave CES and return to the group, but I knew that was too much to hope for. CES had given him his dream job and the only thing the group had for him was the reminder that I would always choose Brian over him. I frowned at the thought.

I spent the rest of the morning in thoughtful meditation without any interruptions. By the time the afternoon arrived, I was mentally prepared to meet with Cowan, feeling renewed and strong.

I knocked on his office door and then entered without the invitation. Cowan held up his hand and continued with the phone call he was on. I momentarily felt bad, then squared myself up again, determined to get answers.

Cowan hung up the phone and began talking to me before I could say a word. "I'm going to tell you the same thing I told Ken. I can't help you other than the information I've already provided. Chel needs your help."

"How can we help her if we don't know where she is? I know you know." I narrowed my eyes at him.

He nodded, an amused grin appearing across his lips. "You know, too, if you'll just consider what you know of her from what she shared with you at Christmas."

I searched my memories of the conversation I'd had with Chel and shook my head. "She mostly just talked about being at CES until..." My eyes widened as it hit me. "But..." I began as my mind continued to race. "If I know and I have to meet with Deven, won't he know then, too?"

"You're in quite a predicament. You've kept things from him before, haven't you?"

"I know I tried. I don't know how much of it he just chose not to pay attention to. What am I supposed to do? Just tell me!" I crossed my arms and walked to the window, leaning my back against it with a scowl.

"You know I can't, Ashlyn," he said with a laugh. "You know you look just like Brian did after you refused to take your ring back."

"What? You knew about that?"

Cowan laughed again. "Everyone knows about that."

I groaned. "Why does everyone seem to always know more about me than I want?" I turned away, looking out the window, trying to remember what it was like to not be on everyone's radar.

"It's not as bad you think. Some guys from his department in California got tired of seeing him mope around and took him out for drinks. He drank a little too much and blurted it all out."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

"It's up to you how to feel. I'm just telling you what happened."

"Why can't you be that forthcoming with details on what *will* happen? Just give me a hint about something... anything! Who finds Chel? Why is she so important? Are Brian and I still together in your time?"

Cowan was silent.

I turned around to really yell at him when I saw him stumbling to his desk, flinging papers and pens around frantically, looking like he could barely stand.

"What's wrong? What is it?" I rushed to him.

Blood was dripping from his nose and ears. He was still determined to find whatever it was he was looking for.

"Oh my god! Cowan! What's happening? Did Deven do something to you?" I looked around frantically trying to find a hidden trace of what was going on. "Did you make contact with Chel? Did she infect you?" My eyes widened, my heart was racing, and I felt a surge of pure hatred course through my veins.

With shaking hands, Cowan handed me a jump drive before collapsing to the ground. "Save... her..." he stammered and then went limp in a heap partially under his desk.

My hands were trembling and I pounded on his chest. "Cowan? Cowan! No! What's happening? You can't die! I need your help! What about your family?!" It was too late, though. I crumpled over his lifeless body, a trail of blood falling from his face to the floor mixed with the tears falling from mine. "Your son..." I whispered.

I sat with Cowan's body for a long time not knowing what to do. I finally called Brian, but got his voicemail and asked him to call me as soon as he could. My next option was to call Ken. Thankfully he answered and said he was on his way and for me to wait there. I sat on my knees on the floor, mindlessly fingering the small drive Cowan had given to me as his last act, waiting for Ken to arrive. When I heard footsteps approaching, I shoved it in my pocket. At the same moment, my phone rang.

“Hello?” I said softly, still mourning my friend.

“Got your message, Ash. Wow, you sound like crap.”

My nostrils flared. “What did you do to him?” I demanded.

Deven sounded genuinely innocent. “What did I do to whom?”

I couldn’t stop the little growl that escaped from me. “Coffee shop. Now,” I snapped and hung up the phone.

On my way out, I bumped into Ken. “In his office,” I said, feeling a hint of remorse for leaving Cowan’s body alone.

“Where are you going?” he called after me.

“To get coffee,” I said cryptically as the elevator door closed.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Save Her

I grabbed Deven's arm and pulled him down the stairs to the basement of the coffee house. "What did you do to Cowan?" I asked again as the door closed and the fluorescent lights flickered on.

Deven shook his head and then laughed as I shared my memory of Cowan's death. "So future boy died in the past? How anticlimactic," he said with jest.

"What did you do to him?"

"I wish I could take credit for that one. Wow. But I'm just as stumped as you are." He walked over to the table he used to sit at with Eve.

"Cowan had a family and a life in the future. How can you be so cold?" I stared at him, barely recognizing him anymore.

"Death is a part of life, Ash. Hate to break this to you, but everyone meets that end." He sat down on his old table.

"And you just help that right along, don't you? Is that what you intend to do to Chel? Bring her to an early end?" I stood at the end of the table he was sitting on, staring him down.

"She made her choices. I have a job to do, so why don't you make this easier for all of us and tell me where she is instead of trying to hide her. I got pulled away from a vacation for this and would like to get back to my mai tai's and barely-clothed women."

"You have a choice, too. You don't have to kill her. Go now... play on your beach... enjoy your life."

He laughed coldly. "It's not like that and you know it. But if you'd like to join me afterwards, I'm sure I could find a spare chair for you to occupy. Just tell me where she is and we can be on the next plane out of here."

I shook my head, not hiding my disappointment. "What would your sister think of you now? I heard she's given birth..." I trailed off, deciding to play his game.

He growled loudly and slammed his fist on the table. "That bastard kid. I see Ethan every time someone shows me his picture or mentions his name. I want to rip his eyes out. And they don't even care that Eve's still in a coma with bedsores. They bathe her maybe once a week and wouldn't do that if I didn't go in and make sure it was being done. No, they've found their new child to replace Chel as their favorite. And the rest of us be damned."

"Sounds like a nice place to work," I commented, turning my back towards him and let memories of the two of us working together scroll through my thoughts.

Deven laughed. "Nice try, but I'm not going back to that joke of a group. You think you're all high and mighty and noble, but the fact is, you guys are no better than CES. You're all selfish and self-absorbed and looking for ways to be better than everyone else. At least I'm earning a paycheck with CES." He jumped off the table and grabbed my arm, spinning me into him. "Come with me, Ash. You know as well as I do what a great team we make. Just tell me where Chel is and we can go back to how things were."

My heart was beating fast and my mind raced through the events of the day... meditating, meeting Cowan, learning that everyone knew about my rejection of the ring, having Cowan refuse to answer my questions, but confirming I did know where Chel was, Cowan's death...

Deven released me as my thoughts scrolled through my head. I thought he was mad about me thinking of Brian until he whispered, "Of course... where she was going to escape to last time." He pushed open the door and ran up the stairs.

As soon as I realized, I ran after him. "No! Dev! She wouldn't be there! Please!"

"Thanks, Ash. I knew I could count on you," he said as he jumped into his red convertible and backed out, almost hitting me. "Oh, by the way, I won't hesitate to take anyone else out who tries to stop me." He nodded his head and drove off.

I screamed after him, but whether he heard me or not, I wasn't sure. I pulled out my phone and tried contacting Brian again with the same result – straight to voicemail.

“Brian, I know where Chel is and so does Deven. I have to stop him. I need you with me. Please call me.”

I tried calling Ken next, but the world seemed to be ignoring my calls. After leaving him a quick message, I got in my car and started driving towards the farmhouse. About five minutes down the highway, my phone rang. I didn't even bother saying hello when I picked up.

“*Ash, come get me from work. I'm going with you,*” Brian stated very calmly.

I squealed the tires switching lanes to make the off-ramp. “Thank you. I'll be there in two minutes.”

“*Be careful,*” he whispered as I disconnected the call.

Careful? There was no “careful” at this point. I was using my gift to move traffic out of my way without thinking. My only delays were red lights. I pulled up to the building and drummed my fingers anxiously on the steering wheel while he climbed in.

As I tore off, Brian grabbed the seatbelt and put it on. “Do I need to drive?”

I threw an unwelcome look at him and continued back to the highway without responding.

After a few minutes of hearing nothing but road sounds, Brian finally broke the silence. “Are you going to tell me what's going on or am I going to have to figure things out as we walk into an ambush?”

“It's not an ambush. Cowan's dead, Deven knows where Chel is, thanks to me, and no one else is answering their phones to help. So I don't really have much choice now, do I?”

Brian held up his hands in surrender. “Don't be pissed at me. Wait. Cowan's dead?” He shook his head like he heard me wrong.

“I don't have time to be sad about this right now. I was talking to him and then he was dead on the floor.” I grappled to hold onto emotional control.

“Deven?” Brian asked instead of inferred, which went a long way towards helping my focus.

“No. He said he didn't have anything to do with it. Ken's there now trying to figure things out. He gave me this as he was dying,” I said and fished the jump drive from my pocket, tossing it in Brian's lap.

“What's on it?” He was inspecting the normal looking drive closely.

“I haven't had a chance to look at it yet. He just asked me to save her, handed me that, and then died.” I sighed.

“Okay, so how did Deven find out where Chel is?”

“He read my thoughts,” I frowned darkly, pressing my foot harder on the accelerator. “I'm so stupid. I should've buried it deeper.”

Brian reached over and stroked my thigh, giving it comforting squeezes. “You're far from stupid. Did you get it from Cowan where she was?”

“No, he refused to tell me anything. He just told me I knew where she was and to think back to what I knew of her from when we spoke on Christmas. It confused me at first, but then I put it together. The last time she was going to escape from CES with Tom, they'd planned on moving into this farmhouse about an hour from here. She took me there to talk.” I looked at the clock on the dash. We were about twenty minutes behind Deven, if he drove somewhere close to the speed limit. It was a stupid assumption and I put the gas pedal all the way to the floor.

“Do you have any way of contacting Chel to warn her?” Brian pulled his phone from his pocket, ready to dial.

“No,” I said sadly. “I've only spoken to her on Christmas... in person. Well, aside from the night she almost killed us.”

“Why are you saving her again?” Brian asked, turning his body towards me.

"I don't know. Because Cowan said it's important. Damn it! Why'd he die?" I slammed my fist down on the horn, scaring a small car out of the lane in front of me.

The sun was quickly setting in the west and I knew we'd have a better chance of helping if we could still see. "This is the off-ramp," I said, veering suddenly off the highway.

We came to a stop away from the property. Brian quickly came around to open my door, but I'd already stepped out. With hands linked, we walked quietly and quickly to the house. Deven's car was parked by the barn, but no one was visible.

Let's check in there first, I told Brian silently.

We walked into the barn together and I started trying to connect to Chel or Deven's mind. "He's in the main house, first floor," I whispered as I broke my silent connection with Deven. "He's calling out to her, saying that he can hear her thoughts loud and clear. Come on," I encouraged, pulling him with me as we approached the cracked front door of the house.

When we were about to enter, another car pulled next to Deven's. Brian shook his head and pulled me around the back side of the house. We could clearly hear Chel in the room with Deven.

"I like you, Dev. Don't make me kill you," she said calmly. *"I just want out. I won't retaliate against anyone at CES. So turn and walk away before something happens."*

"Oh, something's going to happen, Chel, and it isn't me that's going to be lying on this filthy floor in the end."

Frustrated by his arrogance, I grabbed hold of Brian's hand tighter and connected with Deven, letting him know I was there. *Please just walk away now.*

"I told you I wouldn't hesitate to take anyone out that tried to stop me, Ashlyn," Deven said aloud. *"And that definitely includes him, too,"* he added with an evil flare, referring to Brian.

I returned to my mind and looked with sad eyes into Brian's. "Maybe you should wait in the car," I whispered to him, caressing his cheek with my hand.

"Not a chance," he said firmly.

I heard Deven laugh from inside. *"Not nice, Brian. And I thought Ash was the sadistic one."*

I arched my brow at him and then smiled. "I love you," I said quietly.

He smiled back and kissed the palm of my hand. "Ready?"

Taking a deep breath, I nodded and reconnected with Deven. I could see Chel in ten feet front of him, discretely taking off her glove. *Please go now before you get hurt or worse, Dev.*

"Go away, Ashlyn!" Deven yelled out at me.

While he was distracted by my thoughts of happier times and the trust that we had, Chel lunged at him quickly with her ungloved hand.

GET BACK! I yelled in his mind.

He immediately jumped back and walked backwards into the open room. *"I swear to God, Ash. Get the hell out of my head NOW!"*

"Awww... is poor Dev distracted by his lover?" Chel chastised him, still moving towards him.

Deven reached into the back of his pants, pulling out a handgun. *"Stay right there,"* he commanded.

No! I screamed and then jumped to Chel's mind. *Put your glove back on. We can get you out of this without anyone else dying.*

She immediately slid her glove back on her hand and took a step backwards. *"This won't win her, you know?"* she spoke to Deven. *"She'd never love a murderer."*

Tom wouldn't want this for you, I told her and she took another step backwards.

"Tom loved you, didn't he? And you've willingly tortured and killed hundreds. So you don't get to lecture me about that."

Still connected with Chel, I saw a figure move in behind Deven, who was apparently too distracted to hear the extra mind. Before I could change minds and warn Deven, an electric bolt shot from the figure, striking Deven and sending him flying across the room.

Run out the back of the house. Now!

Chel turned quickly and ran while the man walked over to Deven's twitching body. I quickly told her to go to the Tri-Om building in San Francisco, that she'd be protected there, and then left her mind.

"Who is that?" I begged of Brian.

"I don't know. Should we leave now, too?"

I frowned at him. "Of course not. Come on." I walked quietly with Brian around to the front door again, listening closely to the conversation.

The man was speaking too low for me to understand his words, but I heard Deven reply in a shaky voice, "Go home, kid."

As we entered the house, I saw Deven struggling to stand up. As I started to cry out, Brian covered my mouth and put his finger to his lips.

They were near the kitchen, about where Chel had been when I first connected with Deven. The man's voice was more discernable after we entered the house.

"You destroyed my entire world," he was saying. "My mom never even had the chance to look at my face before they tossed her body in the incinerator and made me watch. And my father... well you took care of him before he knew I existed, didn't you?" Sparks were flying between the man's fingers as he crept closer to Deven.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Why don't you go cry to someone who cares," Deven said, finally standing upright again.

Without hesitation, the man shocked Deven again, sending him flying into a wall, showering dust and particles around the room.

I cried out in Brian's hand and he held me tighter. I connected with the man's mind. *Turn around and leave.*

He winced and fell against a nearby wall, holding his head. "Ashlyn Taylor. How gallant of you to come to his rescue. Where were you when he was murdering my father? Oh, right. You were in the next room, connected with him, watching as he died." The man turned around and looked in my eyes as Brian and I stood by the door.

"What are you talking about?" I asked in a confused whisper.

The man continued without acknowledging my question. "But that was all your fault, anyway. If you hadn't gone chasing after Brian, Deven wouldn't have sought revenge against you by seeking out CES for employment. He wouldn't have had the resources to kill my father, if it wasn't for you and your selfish act. Was it too much for you just to love the person you were with?" He wiped the blood from his nose and held up his bloody fingers to me. "Much harsher than I'd expected."

I was shocked, looking between him and Deven struggling on the floor. "No, this isn't possible. It can't be true."

"Not only is it possible, but it's very true. You're self-centered crusade to get back into Brian's pants drove Deven to kill my family."

Tears pooled in my eyes as I shook my head. "No!" I yelled out in defiance. "This is LIES!"

The man shrugged, wiping his fingers on his pants. "Is it? Why don't you ask him?" he asked, motioning to Deven.

Before I could utter another word, the man turned and unleashed on Deven. He cried out until all the life was shocked from him and his body fell to the floor.

"Guess you'll never know." The man dusted off his hands and rushed past Brian and I as we both moved to help Deven. "Gotta go save Mom now," he said as he exited.

I stood in horror, looking as Brian examined Deven's smoking body.

"He's dead, Ash," he declared as he stood up, opening his arms to me.

A sharp cry escaped my throat as I wrapped myself around Brian's body, shaking from an outburst of emotion that had been building all day.

I was barely aware that my phone rang or that Brian answered it. I was buried in his chest, trying to block out all the death and truths that I'd been witness to.

"Yeah. He's dead." "Okay. I have to get her out of here, though. We're going back to my apartment." "Let me know what else I can do to help." "Talk to you later." Brian put my phone in his pocket and lifted me like a baby in his arms. "Come on. Let's get out of here," he whispered, kissing my forehead.

I felt limp and numb in his arms, but I wrapped my arms around his neck and took one last look at Deven's corpse as the sun set out the window and we escaped out the front door.

I don't remember the drive to Brian's apartment, only that my phone seemed like it was constantly ringing. Brian answered every call and allowed me to retreat into myself.

"I told him I loved him," I said suddenly after Brian had hung up with another person.

"Sorry?" he said, barely taking his eyes off the road.

"Before I came to see you that first time... I told him I loved him," I repeated.

"Did you mean it?"

"Yes, but not in the same way I love you," I explained while staring at Brian. After a few moments of silence, I continued. "I drove him to CES the same way I drove you to San Francisco and," I gulped back the lump, "Jen."

"Aren't you the one always telling me everything was always my choice? Well Deven," he said with as much difficulty as I'd said Jen's name, "had choices to make, too."

I could hear the hurt in his voice despite his words. I'm not sure why I continued, but I needed to get rid of the horrible feeling inside me. "I was going to sleep with him... the night we got called to save Simon... I had mentally given myself to him when we were interrupted. If that call hadn't come..." I didn't know how to finish the sentence. If we hadn't got called away, I would've slept with him? Ethan wouldn't have been killed? Brian wouldn't be with me? Deven wouldn't be dead? Cowan would still be alive?

"Why are you telling me this?" Brian said with a clenched jaw.

I shook my head, looking sadly at him. "Because I need someone to tell me I didn't sentence two people to death today. I want to be assured that more things aren't going to cascade down on me and I'll lose something much worse... you."

His voice was kinder when he spoke again. "No one can know that. We can't see into the future..."

I cut him off. "The future! The drive that Cowan give me. It has to have something on it that explains what's happening."

Brian rested his hand on my thigh. "Slow down there, Ash. We don't know there's anything on there that will help with this situation. Ken said he's finishing up at Tri-Om and then heading out to take care of things at Chel's house. He'll call us all to meet tomorrow. We'll give him the drive then and work as a team to figure the rest of this out, okay?"

I sank back into my seat. "Fine," I said and resumed staring out the window in silence.

Chapter Twenty-Three – On a New Course

My nose was the first thing to wake up the next morning. It had been too long since I'd smelled Brian's scent around me as I stirred from my deep sleep. Forgetting the tragedies of the day before, I smiled and reached behind me for Brian. It wasn't until I felt the cold bed that my eyes opened and the smile faded. I sighed and picked up the note that he'd left on his nightstand along with a glass of water and Tylenol.

Good morning, my Ashlyn. I hope you feel better today. Had to go to work, but should be able to sneak out early. Call me as soon as you get this.

-B

PS – Don't forget that I love you.

The smile returned to my face as I swallowed the medicine and put the note down. I hunted down my phone and called Brian, but it went straight to voicemail, as always. After leaving him a quick message thanking him for the note and kind gestures, I put on a fresh pot of coffee and strolled into his bathroom to shower.

As the hot water rained down on me, I wondered what Brian did for Tri-Om and why he never answered his phone while he was at work. Did he work with explosives that could be set off by a spark caused by a ringing cell phone. I laughed out loud at that ridiculous idea, but my curiosity about his job and his importance there continued to plague me. My thoughts moved on to wondering what happened to Cowan and what would happen to Tri-Om now that he was dead. A sharp pain hit my chest as I replayed his death in my mind, knowing that his future self had also suffered a similar death, leaving his young son fatherless and his fiancée widowed. I lingered on those thoughts for a while and then began wondering what was on the drive Cowan had given me in his death thralls. Brian told me to wait and give it to Ken, but I had questions that might not be answered if Ken or anyone else got to look at it first.

I pushed the water off, grabbed a towel for my hair, and walked dripping to Brian's room to locate the drive. "Please don't have taken it to work with you," I begged out loud, hoping Brian left the device lying around his room. I searched the drawers of the nightstand, but only found the satin pillow with my engagement ring still tied to it. I was distracted momentarily by it, touching the circular symbol of another life with the tip of my index finger. Finally, I closed the drawer and resumed my search.

"Ah ha!" I exclaimed, finding it on top of his dresser, next to his deodorant.

I snatched it and hurried to the living area where Brian's laptop was set up on the coffee table. Wrapping the towel around my body, I crossed my legs under me, sitting on the couch, and pulling the computer into my lap. "Please don't fry his computer," I begged as I slid the drive into one of the USB slots on the side of the computer and turned it on.

I opened the file directory and glossed over the names: so many files with such nondescript names. "Ugh! Men and their filing systems!" I highlighted a file and pressed enter, but the screen went crazy with lines blurring the image. I quickly hit escape and the screen returned to normal. I breathed a sigh of relief and tried a different type of file, but with the same results.

"Crap," I complained out loud and drummed my fingers on the keyboard. My eyes wandered around the room looking for an answer and spotted my car keys on the counter. "I wonder..." I jumped up, turning off the laptop and removing the drive, grabbed my keys, and ran out the front door before I realized I was still wearing only a towel.

"Sorry," I apologized to an old man walking by and walked backwards into the apartment again.

My shirt had a blood stain from Cowan on it, so I tossed it in the trash and began digging through Brian's clothes for something to wear with my shorts. There was something about stealing one of his favorite shirts to wear that made me giggle like a child. It was big, but felt like I had Brian wrapped around me.

With a giant grin on my face, I left his apartment again, ignoring his neighbor's curious looks as they fumbled to unlock their door.

I tried to contact Brian again on my drive to Tri-Om, but had to leave another message. I was hoping he'd have his phone turned on and would join me.

I knew it was wrong, but I used my gift to convince the employees there that I was allowed back to Cowan's office. The door closed quietly after I entered and I stood for a moment looking around. The lights were off and everything but the desk was in its usual tidy place. The smell of bleach lingered in the air and made my eyes water as I approached Cowan's chair. I couldn't bear to roll it over the spot where he died, so I moved the chair to the side of the desk and repositioned the monitor and keyboard.

While I waited for the computer to start, I riffled through some of the papers scattered across the desk. Most were office memos and requests for resources, but one was an unlabeled file folder. I took it and sat down in the chair, putting my feet up on the corner of the desk as I began flipping through the papers: receipts, ticket stubs, printed maps with addresses handwritten on them... all fairly boring things. As I dug deeper, I came across unused tickets and itineraries, including a flight to San Francisco scheduled for the end of the week.

A meeting notification on the computer popped up, startling me back into focus. I plugged the thumb drive into the USB port and patiently waited by drumming my fingers on the desk. Finally, the computer showed me a list of file names and I clicked on the first one, holding my breath. It opened without issue and revealed a list of names and contact information. My eyes quickly scanned the list. A few people I knew, but mostly were business contacts and not gifted people. I looked for Chel's information and quickly entered it into my phone before closing the file.

The next few I looked at were blueprints to buildings and tax papers. I had to suppress several yawns looking through the scores of boring documents. Finally, I came across one that sparked my interest – Cowan's detailed timeline of notable events. I sat upright in the seat, scooting it closer to the desk. Dates and times of things that had happened in my past along with notes on each were listed down the page in sequential order:

Purchase first building in San Francisco and begin recruitment of key personnel.

- Closed the deal for less than anticipated. Used the extra funds to hire consultants to redesign interior.

- Hired Katie, Marcus, and Freeman and have them working on building assets

Make contact with Ken and Alex.

- Spoke with Ken. Planned a meeting for the day after tomorrow, just after Tom's death.

The file was large and I continued scroll through, looking for important things, most notably anything that explained what had happened to Cowan or anything concerning me.

Attend group meeting when they discuss Simon's rescue.

- Had my first interaction with Ashlyn. She's much different than I'd expected. Needs encouragement to find her way.

- Hopefully she'll get her head straight to be able to give Chel back her necklace. My faith in her is questionable at this point.

I growled at his remarks. "He didn't even know me. And I was dealing with a lot of crap that night." I shook my head and continued skimming until I reached current in his notes.

Ken to make contact with Chel and send her to San Francisco office. Meet with her on Friday following her arrival.

I read it again to make sure I didn't misread it. Ken was supposed to contact Chel? Cowan was planning on meeting her there on Friday? My eyes grew big and my hands started shaking. "He didn't know he was going to die..." I whispered. "Things have changed from how they were in his future."

I tried to refocus on the words after, but I knew they probably would play out differently now that time had been altered. As I read more about the events over the next few weeks, my phone rang. I quickly answered it, afraid someone would hear it and come in Cowan's office.

"Hello?" I whispered.

"Sorry I missed your calls. Why are you whispering?" Brian asked.

"I snuck into Cowan's office and don't want anyone to hear me," I admitted.

"You did WHAT?! Ashlyn, what are you thinking?" His voice was raised enough for me to have to move the receiver from my ear.

"Shhh..." I insisted. "I couldn't read the jump drive Cowan had given me on your computer. So I just thought... well... that it might be encrypted or something and I needed to be here to read it."

"I thought we agreed to take that to Ken to look at."

"You agreed to do that. I needed to know why he gave it to me," I insisted, slumping back into the chair.

"I'm on my way up. Just try not to get into something you'll regret later," he warned and hung up the phone.

I spent a moment mocking his words like a spoiled child and then sat up and closed the file I'd been reading. Knowing I had a couple of minutes before Brian would come in and probably make me leave, I reopened the file and read further down.

Explain to Chel about Tri-Omega Metaphysics. She'll need lots of convincing before she'll believe that it's her company. Tread lightly around the subject of Tom.

Assure project is still progressing with Brian and his team. Give them realistic goals, aligning with the discovery.

The last entry on the screen, which was only six months into the future was "Go home". I closed my eyes and held back my sorrow.

The doorknob turn and I jolted to attention, closing the file and removing the thumb drive, sliding it into my shorts pocket. Thankfully, it was Brian and my posture relaxed. "Hey," I said tentatively.

"It looks good on you," he said from the doorway motioning to his shirt I was wearing as the door closed. Then he walked over and wrapped his arms around me. "You shouldn't have come," he whispered into my hair as he kissed my head.

"You know I had to. He gave it to me and told *me* to save her, not Ken. But look at this," I said pulling away from him and reconnecting the drive. I pulled up the file I'd just been looking at and scrolled to the part about Ken and Chel. "See? Ken was supposed to make the contact and Cowan was meeting with Chel this Friday. He wasn't supposed to die, Brian."

"You don't know that. Why would people in the future tell him when he was going to die? What if this was known by the people who sent him here?"

I thought about it for a second before I dismissed the idea. "These were his friends. He had a family waiting for him in his time. This wasn't supposed to happen. Besides, he was still overseeing the project you're working on. It said something in here about a discovery?"

"What?" Brian leaned in and read the screen. "I have no idea what that's about. We were all pretty shaken by what happened to Cowan, but it didn't get in the way of our work much. I think we'll be fine."

"I'm going to San Francisco Friday," I announced. "If Cowan was supposed to meet with Chel, it's up to me to do that now."

"You can't do that. You have no idea what he wanted with her or was going to say. How do you know you won't mess up that future more by going?"

"He told me to save her," I said softly. "Besides, I know more now than I did yesterday. Chel is the owner of Tri-Om."

Brian looked away from the computer at me with a confused expression. "That doesn't make a lot of sense. She just barely got away from CES, but Tri-Om's been around for a while."

"I know. Cowan said he was sent to the past by Tri-Om to establish it. I don't understand it, either, but there was a reason he was sent here before she left CES to get this company going."

"Because she needed a reason to leave CES," Brian stated.

"Maybe. She seemed solid with them until I gave her the necklace... the one Cowan tricked me into giving her, I might add."

Brian was quietly thinking things over for a moment. "You might be right. But that still doesn't mean you have to do this alone. You need Ken and the others help with this."

A mischievous grin appeared on my face and I sat back down, plugging the drive back in. "I'll agree to that if I can have a few more minutes with the files. Do you have to get back to work?" I asked, looking over my shoulder at him.

"No, I'm off for the afternoon. You have five minutes and we have to get going to meet with Ken and the others."

I didn't say another word and started clicking open and closed file after file. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I needed to know what Cowan had kept hidden on this drive.

"Two minutes," Brian said, looking nervously towards the door.

"Uh huh," I said as I delve into another file, this one with more potential. It was a file on Eve and Ethan's child. He was born two days before my birthday, which was five months before his real due date. "Stupid CES experiments," I mumbled, but continued scanning. With Eve in a coma and none of the procedures to cure her helping, the child, who remained nameless, was in the full time care of the doctors and nurses at CES. His gift was discovered very early, though the current part of the file I was reading didn't mention his talent.

"One minute," Brian warned, approaching me.

"Just a few more minutes. Please?"

"Forty-four, forty-three..."

I put my head in my hands and read faster, skimming through the boring report trying to find more details.

"I'm sure you can read it later," Brian said with his hand on the computer's off switch.

"No!" My head was moving back and forth with my frantic reading. The word "electricity" and the name "Edric" were the last two things I saw before Brian flipped the switch. I growled at him.

"I warned you," he said.

"If this is ruined because of that, I'll never forgive you," I said, continuing to glare at him as I took the drive and shoved it back in my pocket.

Brian laughed and took my arm, leading me out of the office. "The data is fine. And besides, I'm sure I could find *some* way to earn your forgiveness."

"You assume too much, Brian Turner," I grumbled, following him out into the empty hallway.

We were the last ones to the meeting. We quietly took our seat and waited for Ken to start.

"As you all have heard by now, Cowan died yesterday in his office at Tri-Om. We still don't know the cause of death," Ken began. "What most of you don't know is that Deven was able to track down Chel yesterday."

A couple of gasps were heard around the room.

"Thankfully she managed to get away and is safe for now." Ken nodded towards Brian and me. "However, we have another complication. Ashlyn? Brian? Would you care to elaborate?"

Brian stood up and spoke. "Someone else showed up while we were trying to stop Deven. We don't know who he is..."

I interrupted. "I believe he's Eve son. His name is Edric and he's able to electrocute people." I looked down sadly, recalling the horror of watching Deven die.

"Wait, what? Eve has a son who's old enough to be walking around and electrocuting people?" Logan stood up and walked to Ken's table.

"I can't explain it," I said. "It's on these files that Cowan handed me before he died." I set the drive on the table near Ken and Logan. "I know they were experimenting on him before he was born, but I don't understand how he was there as an adult last night.

"We'll take a look at these files and see if we can come up with anything more definitive," Ken said.

I shook my head. "I had to view them on Cowan's computer. That's why we were late. They're encrypted."

"Good to know. I have a key to his office and have been given the go ahead to take care of matters there." He was about to take the drive from the table when the door was forced open and six men entered.

One was wearing a suit and was obviously the leader. Another stood by him while the other four took hold of Simon, Brian, Morgan, and Lani.

"Everyone just stay calm. If anyone attempts to use their gift against us, your friends there will die," he stated, motioning around the room. "Now that I have your full attention, you are going to tell me what I want to know."

I was barely breathing as I watched in horror as my friends were held at gun point.

As I was trying to come up with a way to free them all simultaneously, the man addressed me. "Ashlyn, I'm afraid I've lost you. Should I remove your distraction?"

The very large man hold Brian cocked his gun.

I closed my eyes and then turned to face the man in the suit. "What do you want from us?" I asked, my jaw clenched in terror and anger.

"That's more like it. But I didn't think I'd have to spell this out for this group." He put his foot on a chair next to the table where the jump drive was sitting. "We want our property back. Where are you hiding Chel?"

No one spoke. Thankfully only Ken, Brian, myself, and possibly Alex knew where Chel had gone. But that knowledge didn't help our current situation.

"You guys are certainly loyal, so let's put it to a test. Who is worth more to you - one of your friends in this room or someone responsible for one of their deaths?" He looked around at all the faces and then his eyes found the drive. He walked closer to it, continuing his threats. "You see, if you help us get back what is rightfully ours, you guys are free from us bothering you. If you refuse, we will pick you off one by one until Chel has been recovered." He held up his gun and pointed it at each of us, pulling it back in a jerking motion like he was firing it off.

Morgan squealed when Alex was targeted, tears streaming down her face. I couldn't stop myself from connecting with her. *Calm down*, I instructed. *They will be gone soon and you and Alex will be safe*. Her breathing calmed down slightly.

"I really don't feel like I have your full attention, Ashlyn Taylor," the man said shaking his head and walking towards Brian.

I quickly jumped back in my mind. "No, I've heard every word you've said," I said calmly, silently willing him back to the table.

He stopped and turned back to face me. "The interesting thing about you people with amps is you have such an obvious weakness. Let's start with something easier. Why don't you tell me what's on that drive over there."

I stared the man down, my lips pressed together tightly. My eyes left him for a moment to make sure Brian was still safe.

The man nodded and I tensed, but he turned back to the table and reached for the jump drive. Without verbal communication, Alex used his mind to move the drive out of his reach and directly in front of Khari. She touched it and the drive melted.

For the first time, the man lost his composure. "Insolent children!" He nodded to his henchmen. The clicking from their guns cocking was deafening.

"Wait!" I yelled out. "The farmhouse," I blurted out.

Everyone's eyes fell on me. Ken and Khari were shaking their heads.

"Is this code or are you trying to tell me something?" The men holding guns were one nod away from killing half our group.

"Where Tom died..." I stammered. "Chel's there." I immediately looked down, ashamed that I'd given him that information, even if it wasn't necessarily relevant anymore.

The man in the suit smiled, but the captives still weren't released. "Now was that so hard? I hope that this will be our last meeting," he said as he walked towards the door. "Although, it might be fun if it isn't." He signaled for his men to follow.

I relaxed slightly as their guns clicked back to non-lethal mode and they followed their leader out of the room.

Morgan was crying hysterically. "Shhhh..." Alex said soothingly, rocking her in his arms.

Simon left shortly after the men's car drove away, apparently unable to stop from internalizing the swarm of emotions circling the room. Khari ran after him.

Lani looked angry and talked with Logan in the corner.

Brian was immediately at my side, our hands fused tightly. "I'm sorry," I whispered to him as we walked closer to Ken and Audrey. "I'm sorry," I said out loud to them.

Ken shook his head. "No, it was a smart thing to do. We don't have a lot of time, though, before they discover she's not there. The fresh tired marks out there will clue them in that we'd been there. They will be back, so we need to be ready."

Morgan had resolved to quietly crying into Alex's chest as they walked over to join us. "We can't stay here. This isn't healthy for Morgan or the..."

Morgan cried louder again, retreating deeper.

Can I tell them? I asked her gently, connecting to her mind.

"Yes," she wailed, startling everyone.

I looked at Alex who nodded at me. "Morgan's pregnant. Her and Alex can't be here," I declared.

Simon and Khari were re-entering the room and Lani and Logan came over with the news. I didn't need Simon's gift to feel the mood lift slightly as the happy news was delivered.

Ken sat quietly away from the group as the congratulations were delivered, stopping Morgan's outburst. "Okay. Alex and Morgan will leave as soon as possible. I know you have places you can go. I'll be in contact with you soon," he said to Alex, walking over to him and shaking his hand.

"Take care of her," I whispered to Alex and hugged them both.

Alex and Morgan left quickly as the rest of us began strategizing.

"We are going to stay paired up. No one is left alone at any time. You eat, sleep, pee together. We are not going to be surprised by CES again."

Everyone nodded at Ken's instructions, some more pleased about the arrangements than others. I was worried about how Brian and I would be able to maintain contact when he had to work. Cowan's notes indicated he was on a path of discovering something important; there wasn't any way for him to take time off.

"I'm going to go talk to Chel," I said suddenly.

"I've already made arrangements to travel to her next week. If we go now, we're going to lead CES right to her," Ken stated.

I looked at the melted drive on the table and then at Ken, shaking my head. There was information on that drive that needed to be combed through. I had pieces of it in my head, but without knowing it all, it was unclear if we'd be successful carrying everything out. "We needed the information on that drive. Chel... she's important to the future that Cowan died to protect. I need to be the one to talk to her. Cowan's last words were for me to save her. I'm not going to let him down." I turned to Brian. "Can you work from the San Francisco office for a few days?"

"I don't think that'll be a problem," he replied, pulling out his phone and stepping just outside the door, still in sight.

I looked back to Ken with pleading eyes. "I can do this."

He took a few moments before he responded. "Okay. Ashlyn and Brian will go to San Francisco. The rest of us will stay here and try to find out more about that new guy... Edric?"

"What about Deven? Won't he follow Ash to California?" Lani asked.

I couldn't make the words come out of my mouth and was grateful when Brian returned and wrapped his arms around me from behind.

"Deven was killed last night by this Edric guy," Ken said.

Lani and Khari gasped and looked at me.

I nodded and chewed on my lip trying to contain my emotions. I felt Simon's gift wash over me and I let out the breath I'd been holding in. "Thanks," I whispered to him.

"So do we all know what we're doing?" Ken asked.

Everyone nodded.

"Good. When will you guys be leaving for California?" Ken asked us.

"We just need to pick up some clothes and things and we'll head out," Brian said.

"Okay. We'll need to stay in contact with each other without giving out too much information."

Ken sat down along with Simon, Logan, and Brian to discuss coded messages to use.

Khari and Lani were immediately by my side hugging me.

"He got what he deserved," Audrey said sourly.

"Shut up," Khari said, stroking my hair.

"You okay?" Lani asked me, ignoring Audrey's remark.

I looked at Audrey as I spoke with a coldness in my tone. "For witnessing the death of two people I cared about less than twenty-four hours ago, I'm holding up just fine."

Audrey conceded to the situation and looked down.

I held out my hand to her. "Please help Ken. He needs you," I begged of her.

She smiled slightly. "Yeah, he does need me."

We all let out a tension-relieving laugh and joined the men as they finished hashing out their coded messages.

Chapter Twenty-Four – A Small Delay

We drove to my house first and I quickly filled my suitcase with some clothes and my knives. Brian followed me in, standing watch in the doorway as I packed. Within five minutes, we were back in his Jeep driving to his apartment.

“I’ll only be a minute. Do you just want to wait in here?” he asked as we pulled into the parking lot.

I shook my head. “No, we’re supposed to have our eyes on each other at all times.” I unbuckled my seatbelt and got out with him.

He took my hand and we rushed up the stairs to his apartment. I followed him into his room and watched him closely as he systematically packed some clothes and toiletries into his suitcase. My brain finally had time to replay the events at the coffee shop. I was moments away from being witness to Brian’s murder. I started considering all that I hadn’t said to him and all the regrets I would’ve been left with long after I’d stopped mourning him. I rushed to him, forced his face to mine, and kissed him feverishly.

Startled momentarily, Brian tried to break free, but I refused to stop. I grabbed the clothes from his hand, threw them on the floor, and then pushed him back on his bed, my lips unwilling to part from his.

Between kisses I managed to said, “I’m so sorry for everything.”

Brian rolled over on top of me, pinning my arms above my head while looking down at me with a curious expression. “I know you are. But we need to get going,” he said, not moving off me.

I nodded my head slowly, but didn’t attempt to free myself from his grasp. “Yes,” I whispered, answering questions that weren’t asked out loud.

Brian released my wrists, but didn’t climb off me. Instead, he cupped the back of my head in his one hand, lifting my lips to him as he fanned my hair out above me with his other hand.

I moved my hands down his sides and under his shirt, slowing pulling it off. My breath hitched as my fingers caressed his torso, remembering for the first time in more than six months the thrill of being so close to him. Words weren’t needed, as we both felt the strong desire to be with each other again.

Kicking the suitcase on the floor, Brian lifted my body, laying my head on his pillow after removing his shirt from my body. I willingly gave him control, arching my body towards his, staring deeply into his blue eyes. We both wanted this too much to question whether it was the right moment. So we silently continued, quickly finding our forgotten rhythm.

“You don’t mind me wearing this, do you?” I asked as I was about to put his shirt back on.

His smile was breathtaking. “Not at all. I think I’m just about done here.”

“So much for only taking a minute,” I winked and got up from the bed, standing next to his nightstand. As Brian zipped his suitcase, I opened the drawer and pulled out my ring.

“You ready?” he asked with a satisfied grin, picking up his bag.

I looked up from the ring. “Ask me.”

His smile was replaced by confusion. “What? Oh. Now?”

I stepped towards him, holding my ring up to him and nodded.

“Ash, I don’t want this to be something in the moment. Let’s get things done in California and then decide if that’s where we should take things again.”

My eyes fell from his. “I watched two people I was close to die yesterday. But it wasn’t nearly as bad as watching you almost die today.” I looked back up at him. “I’m scared and I don’t want to go through life regretting not doing everything I could with you. I’ve never stopped wanting to be your wife. I’m just too stubborn to give into you as easily as my heart wants.”

Brian considered my words as he took the ring from my fingers. "I was stupid to ever leave you. I've lived with that regret since the night I took you to the lighthouse, but didn't want to push you away by moving things too fast. If it's really what you want, I'd be honored if you'd agree to be my wife. Will you marry me, Ashlyn Taylor?"

I slipped my finger into the ring. "More than anything, that's what I want."

Brian kissed my hand and led me out of his apartment to the Jeep.

"Steph will be thrilled, I'm sure," Brian remarked as we drove down the road. "She hasn't known what to do with herself since she didn't have the wedding to plan."

"Let's elope," I said suddenly. "No hassles, no arguments or boring meetings with a stuffy wedding planner, no waiting."

Brian turned his head quickly to look at me and almost swerved off the road. "What are you saying? You want to find a Justice of the Peace right now and tie the knot?" He laughed nervously.

"Do you need me to drive?" I asked playfully. I enjoyed seeming him thrown off like this. "Vegas is kinda on the way..."

He pulled the Jeep over on the side of the road and put it in park. "Is this really what you want or are you just trying to see how much stress I can handle in one day?"

"Marrying me is stressful?" I made a disgruntled face and sank into the seat, looking forward.

"Silly Ash. That's not what I meant." He put the vehicle back in gear and re-entered traffic. "Are we talking an Elvis drive-thru wedding or one where we actually step out of the vehicle?"

My smile reappeared and I played with the ring on my finger. "I think we could spare a few minutes to get out. Besides, I think I need to see if you're the fainting type."

Brian scoffed as he exited the highway and drove on the one leading to Las Vegas. "Steph's gonna kill us both, you know."

I laughed. "I think she'd understand. Kara's the one I'm worried about."

"So call her. We need a best man and maid of honor, don't we? Unless you want to pull a bum and a prostitute off the street..."

I smacked Brian's arm and called Kara.

"Hey Kar, you busy tonight?"

"Just watching movies at home. Why? Are you in town?"

"Not yet. We're driving through Vegas on our way there, though..." I hoped that if I was vague enough, she'd catch on. Brian was trying not to laugh while listening to my side of the conversation.

"Vegas. Las Vegas? But you can't gamble. Really? Vegas?"

"Yes. Brian and I are driving to Vegas and would like it if you and Michael would join us."

"Ash, there's nothing fun to do in Vegas if you're not twenty-one unless..." You could almost hear the light bulb click on. *"Oh my God! You're not. You can't! What will your mom say? Ash! I don't know if we could drive there in time. Really?"*

Her thoughts and word patterns were enough to make me giggle. "We don't have a set time, so get a flight or drive... we'll wait." I winked at Brian as she yelled at Michael to shower and find something nice to put on.

"Are you sure about this, Ash? I mean with everything you guys have been through..."

"I've never been more sure of anything," I said seriously, squeezing Brian's hand.

I watched in awe as we drove down the strip: so many lights, so many people. I smiled at the wedding party having their picture taken outside one of the casinos and felt the butterflies in my stomach. Was I really about to get married? What was I thinking? I squirmed in my seat, but felt better when Brian squeezed my leg.

"When is their plane supposed to arrive?" Brian asked as we pulled into the garage at one of the larger hotels.

“Kara’s text said they were supposed to land around ten.” I took a deep breath as he walked around the Jeep to open my door.

“Are you okay? Having second thoughts?” He offered me his hand to help me out.

I rolled my eyes at him and got out on my own accord. “I’m fine. Do you think there will be a room we can stay in tonight?” As much as we needed to get to San Francisco, I didn’t think it was in anyone’s best interest to drive all night. Besides, this was the only honeymoon I was going to get for a while, so I wanted to be able to enjoy it somewhere other than his vehicle.

“These places always have extra rooms. I’m sure we can get a nice one without much convincing,” he said nudging me and taking my hand.

I scrunched my nose, but walked close to him as we entered the noisy casino. Suddenly, I stopped, tugging on his arm as he tried walking away.

“What’s wrong?” he asked cautiously, looking around.

“We don’t have rings,” I whispered, my eyes big with worry.

He lifted my chin up with his finger, smiling warmly at me. “There are lots of places still open. We can pick out something here.” He traced the tip of his thumb across my forehead.

“Really?” I asked hopefully.

“Come on. Let’s see if we can put our stuff in a room and find a place to get rings before Kara and Michael arrive.”

I nodded and followed him to the desk.

Everyone was more than accommodating to us. I’m sure it had a lot to do with Brian paying full price for a suite on the top floor plus another suite a couple floors below it. I loved Kara, but I didn’t want her to be too close on my wedding night. After the rooms were taken care of, we got in a limo and left for a shopping center. I couldn’t believe how many wedding chapels there were along the way. It seemed to cliché to get married there, but I wasn’t backing out.

“See any you like?” Brian asked, squeezing my hand.

I shrugged. “None of these seem right. I know it’s last minute, but I really want something special.” I looked at him with desperate eyes.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it, okay?”

I threw him a questioning look. “You’ll take care of it?”

He smiled softly. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I do,” I said as I climbed in his lap, caressed his cheek with my hand and kissed him softly.

Buying rings was easier than I’d thought. The first store we went to had matching white gold bands that were both simple and perfect. I had to surrender my engagement ring so they could solder the two together. Brian was going to pick it up while Kara and I were out looking for something a little nicer for me to wear.

At the airport, Brian got a second limo for him and Michael to take back to the hotel and out to do whatever else they were planning.

“My only request,” I began, whispering up to Brian as I ran my fingers through his hair, “is that the ceremony takes place after midnight.” Before he could ask, I answered his question. “I almost lost you today. I don’t want to have that memory be forever tied to the happiest day of my life.”

He kissed my nose. “So you don’t mind if we hit the strip clubs before then?”

I punched him in the arm and laughed. “I trust you,” I said with a serious expression.

Michael whistled from inside their limo. “Come on!”

“Thanks, Michael. I can always count on you to ruin my moments.” I stood on my toes and kissed Brian’s cheek. “Love you.”

Kara was patiently waiting for me on the sidewalk outside our limo. "You don't really think they'll go to a strip club, do you?"

I laughed and took her hand, leading her inside the car. "I think I'm the one who's supposed to be nervous."

We made small talk on the drive. Thankfully, the driver was very knowledgeable on the area and what was still open late at night. First, we grabbed some burgers and then went to a boutique where I tried to find something nice to wear.

"What kind of chapel are you guys getting wed at?" Kara asked as she flipped through some brightly colored dresses.

"I honestly don't know. Brian said he'd take care of it all and well... I guess I trust him to do something good."

"I think you're just rebelling because of all the crap you were put through the last time you were planning to get married." She suddenly stopped looking at the clothes and stared me in the eyes. "You're not backing out again, are you?"

I laughed. "No, not this time. Let's just say my perspective on life has drastically changed over the last couple of days." I continued looking through the rack, then pulled out a simple, short white, slip on dress with a light, flowing covering and spaghetti straps.

"You're not pregnant, are you?" she asked, taking the dress from my hand and holding it up to me. "Not bad, but you should try it on. I'll look for shoes."

I took the dress back from her and entered a dressing room. "No, I'm not pregnant. I haven't even been with anyone since Brian left in December. Well, aside from earlier today." I giggled at the memory.

"Ugh. Too much info, Ash. Here. Put these on." She handed me a pair of black heels over the door.

"Black? Really? Aren't I supposed to wear all white?" I slide my feet in the shoes anyway and admired my appearance in the mirror before I stepped out, twirling around.

"All white is only for virgins or something," Kara mumbled. "Besides, they didn't have anything in white in your size. So it's these or you go barefoot, which would go well with the pregnant thing."

"I'm not pregnant!" I said too loudly and turned bright red as the salesperson and two other people in the boutique turned and looked at me. I closed my mouth tightly and looked around with wide eyes until I finally burst out laughing. "Sorry everyone."

After Kara stopped her giggle fit, she spun me around once more. "I think you look amazing, Ash. I've missed you more than you know." She hugged me, squeezing me tight.

With the height from my shoes, I easily rested my cheek on the top of her head. "I've missed you, too. I'm so glad you're here tonight."

I purchased the dress and the shoes and left with my best friend to get ready for the moment I'd marry my soul mate. The driver took us back to the hotel where Kara went to her room to get settled before coming up to mine to get ready.

"How long do you think we have until they call us?" Kara asked mysteriously.

I looked at the time and saw it was approaching midnight. "I'd guess we'll be summoned any minute. Why? Did *you* want to go to a strip club?"

Kara threw her purse at me. "No, although there were some pretty interesting signs around town for male dancers." She wiggled her eyebrows at me.

"Gross," I complained, throwing her purse back as her phone rang.

"Hello," she said after she frantically fished it out. "Okay. We'll head down. Thank you."

I looked on with anxious anticipation. "Well?"

"The driver said he has instructions to get us to the airport in fifteen minutes," she relayed.

"Airport?" I asked with confusion.

"You left it up to the guys. I don't know what to tell you."

"I guess we should go then?" I asked, fidgeting with my dress.

"That's the plan, unless you're having second thoughts?" Kara walked over and touched my arm.

I took a deep breath. "No, just a lot nerves." I picked up my purse and we walked out together.

There were two flower arrangements and a wrapped gift waiting for us in the limo. Kara picked up her bouquet and inhaled deeply. "I love it when Michael buys me flowers."

I took a moment to admire mine before I opened the gift. When I opened the velvet box, a note was set on top:

I hope I'll always be able to turn your eyes as green as this.

-B

I lifted the white gold necklace from the case and stared adoringly at the Celtic knots that led to a teardrop shaped emerald. "Will you help me put this on?" I asked quietly, taken back by the gift and message.

"Sure. Turn around and hold your hair," Kara said and clasped the necklace around my neck.

I kept my hand on the necklace. "Did he ever do things like this for Jen?"

Kara was quiet for a minute. "No, I don't recall him buying her gifts, at least not that I saw. But you know Brian; he's very generous, so I can't tell you definitely. Why does it matter anyway? I don't think you ever left his mind or his heart, regardless of what he said or did. I'd occasionally catch him reading the inscription on the back of the watch you gave him."

I smiled. "I don't know if you're just telling me what I want to hear, but thank you."

The limo drove onto the airport property from a different road than I'd expected. We passed through some gates and stopped far from the terminals. There was just enough light for me to see the other limo parked. I continued to look around in confusion for Brian as the driver opened the door and Kara and I stepped out.

"What now?" I asked, smoothing out my dress as a light from above approached. The wind got so strong, I nearly dropped my flowers trying to hold down my dress.

When the helicopter touched down, the doors opened and Brian and Michael motioned for us to approach. Kara giggled and we ducked down as we neared the door.

"What are you doing?" I yelled, but Brian shook his head and pointed to the headset on his ears.

He offered me his hand and I climbed up, followed by Kara. The door closed and we were handed matching headsets.

"What is this?" I asked into the microphone.

"This is our wedding," Brian said with a smile and motioned to the man sitting next to the pilot.

I laughed loudly. Everything was perfect: my best friends at my impromptu, small wedding in the night sky over a city that looked like no other lit up in the late night. "You amaze me, Brian Turner," I said and slid my hand into his.

"Everyone ready?" the pilot asked a moment before we lifted off from the ground.

I absorbed every second of the flight, staring out the windows, then closing my eyes and taking everything in without my sight. Brian's strong hand never released mine and when my eyes were closed, his scent consumed me.

My immersion ended when the pilot's voice came back over the headphones. "Does this look good?"

I expected to see the swarms of light below us still when my eyes opened, so was surprised to see them in the far distance and mostly darkness and stars surrounding us. "It's perfect," I whispered.

The next ten minutes were like a dream to me. The other man sitting next to the pilot turned to face us and recited a poem.

“...Love sent me thither, sweet,
And brought me to your feet;
He willed that we should meet,
And so it was.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I swallowed hard, listening to his words, squeezing Brian’s hand tight the entire time, trying to hold back my emotions. The poem felt like it was written for us, the couple who struggled too often with trying to figure out if we had a say in this fateful life. *And so it was* echoed in my head, and in those moments, none of that seemed to matter.

“Do you have the rings?” the man asked.

Michael handed one ring to Kara and gave the other one to Brian, who repeated the vows into his microphone while staring in my eyes in the dim blue interior lights of the helicopter.

“I do,” I barely said as he slid the ring gently on my finger. Then I took a deep breath and recited similar vows, unable to look away from Brian’s gaze. “...’til death do us part,” I said through the emotion. This line in particular struck me hard.

“I do,” he smiled and squeezed my hand.

After I put the ring in place on his fourth finger, biting my lip as I got lost in his eyes, the minister said, “You may kiss your bride.”

Michael and Kara clapped. The pilot might have, too, but I was too lost in the powerful kiss to pay attention. All the stress we were under, all the tragedy I’d been witness to, all the future left to discover, all melted away in those moments.

Chapter Twenty-Five – Inner Light

If the hours following our wedding would've been our last, I would've died completely happy and without regrets. Our honeymoon was short-lived, though, and soon we were dropping our best friends off at the airport and driving to San Francisco.

It was a long drive and Brian tried convincing me that I had to call and tell my parents our news. "We could just send them a card from our honeymoon," I suggested, biting my lip.

"What? One from the gift shop at the hotel back in Vegas or one from the trip we still haven't decided on yet?"

"That one," I said.

Two hours and a million of excuses later, I finally called Mom. She took the news better than I'd expected, but you could hear the disappointment in her voice. After assuring her more than fifty times that I wasn't making her a grandmother, I finally got off the phone.

"Phew," I sighed and threw my phone in my purse. "That sucked, but not as bad as the phone call you have to make will," I grinned.

Brian grumbled something and made no motion to grab his phone.

"Don't look at me to do it, Mister. I'm too young to die."

"That's not helping," he said as he pulled off the highway and into a small gas station. "I'll be back in a few," he said as he stepped out and stretched.

I rolled down my window and waited for him to come around after he'd started fueling the Jeep. "Hey," I called to him as he walked towards the building.

He walked back towards me and leaned into my window. "Sorry. This is the only part of our getting married that I've worried about. Well, this and that you'd change your mind."

I brushed my hand along his face and smiled up at his deep blue eyes. "Is that why you chose the helicopter?"

The muscles in his face relaxed and a sideways grin appeared on his lips. "Maybe." He winked and kissed my forehead. "You can unhook the pump and pull into a spot if I'm not back. This might take a few minutes."

"I love you!" I yelled as he walked away.

I moved to the driver's seat and basked in the warmth that was from Brian. The numbers from the antiquated pump were moving slowly, so I connected with Brian's mind, curious about how the conversation was going.

"You're making this into too big of a deal, Steph. For once, take yourself out of the equation and just be happy for me... for us."

Brian kicked the tip of his foot against the brick wall as he listened to the other side of the conversation.

"So I'm selfish for marrying the woman I was engaged to for over seven months? This wasn't a conspiracy against you. It just sorta... happened."

I didn't like seeing him fight with Stephanie, especially if it was my fault. I remembered back to when Brian and I first started dating – their arguments, his defending me, his underlying stress that didn't go away until they had worked through it. I jumped back into my mind when I heard a car honking in the background.

"I'm moving," I complained, waving my arms at the driver behind me. "Stupid, impatient people," I mumbled to myself as I unhooked the pump and moved the Jeep into a parking spot. I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, trying to decide what to do. I could call Stephanie and try to free Brian from the burden of her frustration, I could connect with him again and tell him it would be okay, or I could sit there and wait like a normal person would do. Normal? I scoffed at myself for suggesting I could be anything that would be considered "normal" as I quickly got out of the Jeep. I

walked to where Brian was still isolated, his head leaning against the wall, trying to remain calm. I rubbed his arm to let him know I was there and then wrapped my arms around him from behind, peppering his back with silent, loving kisses.

"I've gotta go, Steph. I have a long ways to drive still and I just can't do this with you right now." He paused to listen to her last attempts to keep him on the line. "No, I don't know when I'll be home, but as soon as I know, I'll let you know." He sighed deeply, forcing me to loosen my grip around his chest. "I will. Love you, too. Bye."

I didn't know what to say to make things better, so I remained silent.

Brian pushed the phone back into his pocket and turned around in my arms, wrapping his around me. "How's my wife holding up?"

I could feel my smile throughout my body when he called me his wife. "Much better than my husband," I teased, burying my face in his chest. "You want to tell me what she said?"

His body shook slightly with his humorless laugh. "Probably exactly what you expected her to say... exactly what I knew she'd say. She's mostly just disappointed, though, that we didn't call her to come. She's always thought of you as a sister and just expected us to want her there for it." He shrugged out of our embrace and took my hand. "But what's done is done and I have no regrets." He pulled my left hand to his lips and kissed it.

"None?" I looked at him curiously.

"I know I can't change the past or erase those mistakes completely, but where it has led me... I can't possibly have regrets for everything that has brought me into your life and with you again."

"Forever," I said, smiling at him, kissing his fingers. "I have an idea," I said suddenly. "Let's get back on the road and I'll run it by you, okay?"

"Right, so you know I don't want you to make a big deal of this. Please?" I begged of Stephanie as we reached the outskirts of the city.

"*But I... fine,*" she pouted. "*How long do I have?*"

Brian squeezed my leg after downshifting, his mood improved as soon as I shared with him my idea of letting Stephanie plan our post-wedding celebration. "I don't know how long we're going to be away... maybe a week or two?"

I had to move the phone from my ear when she squealed. "*That's not a lot of time, Ash. Oh! I can't wait! I've gotta make a few calls before it gets too late. Email me the list of people you'd like there.*"

"I'll send it..." My words were cut off when the phone was disconnected. "...tonight," I finished as I put my phone away.

"I take it she liked your idea?" Brian asked, amused.

"Yes. Consider this my wedding gift to you, though. I'd much rather skip the cake cutting and garter toss who-ha."

"Thank you," he said sincerely as we wended through the midtown streets towards the hotel. "I'll need to call Ken when we get in our room. I was pretty vague when I told him we were making a stop in Vegas and would be running about a day behind schedule."

"He's going to be pissed that we did this now," I realized.

"No, he won't care either way, I'm sure."

"But Audrey will be pissed, so he'll at least be grumpy because of it. Maybe I should call Audrey," I suggested, reaching for my phone.

"No," Brian said strongly, grabbing hold of my arm. "We are supposed to be keeping contact to a minimum."

"Right. CES. Almost forgot about them." I brought my hand back to my lap. "But I have to contact... oh what's her name... the one who took you around at Tri-Om?"

“Mary Decker?” Brian parked, but didn’t move to get out.

“Yeah, that sounds about right. I’m not banned from calling her to make arrangements to be in the office tomorrow, am I?” I asked, a little more sourly than I’d intended.

He threw me an annoyed look then got out of the vehicle. After opening my door, he explained, “We’re just trying to keep everyone safe. It’s the best plan we could come up with.”

I sighed and took his hand. “I know. I’m sorry.”

We retreated from each other once we were in our room and made our separate calls. Mary was pleased to hear from me and agreed to meet with me the following morning. Brian’s call took considerably longer. While I waited for him to finish, I used his laptop to email Stephanie a list of people I’d like invited to the party. As I checked my email, I drifted to sleep, not waking until Brian came to bed.

“Everything okay, I hope?” I asked sleepily, wiping the drool from my cheek.

Brian helped me onto the pillow after he closed the laptop and set it on the floor. “Were you able to make plans to meet with Mary tomorrow?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Mary. Tomorrow. Can I ride with you to the office?” I asked through a yawn.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” he said through a quiet chuckle while brushing hair from my face. “Good night, Mrs. Turner,” he said, softly kissing my lips.

I was asleep again and happily dreaming of him before I could respond.

“You can use Cowan’s office, Miss Taylor. Mary will be with you shortly.” The pleasant receptionist handed me an envelope and motioned towards the elevators.

“Thank you,” I said and took the large package from her and smiled. “Oh,” I added as I pressed the button on the elevator, a flutter of joy reverberating in me. “It’s Mrs. Turner now.”

She nodded and smiled as the elevator door closed. But it didn’t compare with the huge grin on my face as I accelerated to the top floor. As soon as I stepped out, my smile faded. I sighed with the memory of Cowan as I entered his office.

I placed the envelope on his desk and walked to the window, looking out at the city that had been my torment. It would have suited me much better if Cowan had died in this office, in this city. Then there could be no reason for me not to loathe it. I felt childish for those feelings and twirled my ring on my finger to remind myself that I had won.

I turned my attention back to the desk, to the envelope that lay in wait for me. As I slid my finger along the sealed edge, the door opened and Mary entered. I immediately stood to greet her, my hand outstretched.

“Nice to see you again, Ashlyn. I hear congratulations are due? I’m pleased that you and Brian have made amends.” She motioned for me to join her at the sofa.

I walked around the desk and sat on the one adjacent to her. “Thank you for meeting with me on short notice,” I began.

“Your visits are always welcome, especially in this delicate time. I understand you were there when Cowan passed?”

I swallowed hard and nodded.

“I’m sure he was glad that you had been there. Did he say anything that day?”

“He just told me to save her, which I assume he meant Chel. Is she here and safe, by the way?”

“Chel is safe. I will set up a meeting for you with her over lunch. Did Cowan give you anything in his office?” she reiterated.

“Yes. A jump drive, but it was destroyed to protect its contents from CES,” I admitted.

Mary leaned back and crossed her legs, looking off in the distance with a thoughtful expression. “I have to admit, Ashlyn, we weren’t completely prepared for this. Cowan had plans to be in the office today. It isn’t like him to make plans that he couldn’t keep.”

"I saw a plane ticket in his file, like he was prepared to keep his itinerary," I said quietly, trying not to disturb her train of thought. "Also, according to a few notes I'd been able to view on the drive before it was destroyed, Ken was supposed to contact Chel, not me. I don't think he knew he was going to die. I don't think it was known to anyone in his future," I commented.

"Hmmm? You don't think they knew? That doesn't seem likely. Cowan told me of a couple of situations that didn't go as planned, but everything major played out as he anticipated. He trusted the people he worked with... they wouldn't have kept this from him, so he had to have known."

"The way he died, though. It was like he was being attacked by someone invisible. Do you know of anyone at CES who can do that?" I shook my head. "They'd have to be able to walk through walls, too, though." I frowned and rubbed my hands nervously, and then recalled the conversation where Cowan had told me that if something happened to his other self, it happened to him, too. I sat upright with my idea. "What if his future self was killed?"

"That makes sense, but he was well protected and cared for. I can't imagine he'd be targeted." I sighed and slumped back into the couch. "What do you know about Edric?"

"Eve and Ethan's son? Not too much. I know he is in the care of CES doctors since his mother is incapacitated. Why?"

"Did Cowan ever mention his future self?"

Mary thought silently for a moment. "No, I don't recall much being said about him." Her brows came together and she looked at me closely. "You're not planning on going after him, are you? I don't agree that now is that time for that. We have things we need to do... things Cowan was overseeing... things that are now in the charge of several people, including yourself. This needs to be our focus, not some pointless rescue mission."

"No," I started and then decided not to discuss my theory with her further. "I mean, of course. Another file I viewed on that drive said something about overseeing Brian's project to make sure it progresses towards a discovery. What is that?"

She shook her head. "I don't know the details. Cowan was careful not to share too much of the future with anyone, no matter how much we harassed him about it." She laughed softly and then stopped suddenly, taking in a shaky breath. "Well, I guess that's up to us to continue. I'm sure that's the plan."

"The plan," I echoed. "Right. What do you need me to do?"

"From what we've been able to piece together, you and your group are supposed to work closely with Chel to ultimately bring down CES. Unfortunately, we can't find specific instructions on how this is to be accomplished. It just doesn't make sense," she trailed off.

"I've noticed that over the past two years, most things don't make sense. I'll do what I can to decipher what that entails. Maybe my meeting with Chel today will help me understand what to do next. Does she know?"

"That she'll be dining with you? I didn't give specific instructions to share that with her, but I'd be more than happy..."

I cut her off. "That her future self is a co-founder of Tri-Om."

"No, it wasn't in our instructions to relay that information. She's struggling enough with paranoia and exhaustion to deal with that at the moment anyway," Mary explained. "It will be revealed to her at a time that seems more situational right."

I stood up. "Thank you for meeting with me. I have a few phone calls to make before my lunch date. Am I free to stay in this office while I'm here?"

"Of course. This office is unoccupied, so you are welcome to use it as you see fit. It was nice seeing you again, Ashlyn. Feel free to contact me if you have any other questions."

I smiled and shook her hand. "Thank you. And the same goes for you. I know I don't technically work here, but I feel a sense of duty and loyalty to this place."

As Mary left, I took a seat back at Cowan's desk, dumping the contents of the envelope onto the desk: a white envelope with Ken's name on it, a few keys, and three stacks of hundred dollar bills. I turned the envelope over in confusion, making sure my name was written on the outside of it. After verifying it three times, I called Mary who explained it was compensation for the contract work I'd done for Tri-Om.

"But I don't have a contract," I tried to explain.

"You and Cowan had a verbal contract, that if he needed you, you'd be willing to assist. This is a portion of what is owed to you."

"I really can't..." I started, but was cut off.

"It was Cowan's wish that you would see your value and join us. It's your money, Ashlyn. You are free to do with it what you'd like."

I thanked her again for her time and hung up, mindlessly thumbing through the bills. Finally, I placed them back in the envelope with the other items, resolved to mull over them after I'd met with Chel.

Since I still had a few minutes before I had to leave for my lunch date, I decided to contact Ken, since Brian hadn't been forthcoming on details of their conversation. Picking up the office phone, I dialed his number.

"Hello?" he asked hesitantly.

"Ken. It's Ash. Do you have a few minutes to talk?"

"Listen, I told Brian last night, I could care less what you guys go off and do, but now really wasn't the best time. My opinion hasn't changed."

"Oh," I breathed. "He didn't tell me."

"We're working hard here and in fact have been contacted by Edric," he continued, ignoring my shock.

"What? He contacted you? Why? To gloat about his killing spree?" I asked venomously.

"Actually, to ask us for help. He wants to free Eve and her son from CES."

"Ken, you can't trust him. He killed Cowan," I asserted.

"Most of us can't blame him too much for what he did to Deven. I know you feel differently, but from where most of us stand, he got what he deserved. Besides, we can use someone like him on our side. We all want to see an end to CES."

I shook my head, even though no one could see my physical protest. "No. Please, Ken. Don't side with him, not without knowing more about him. I think he killed Cowan to get here in our time." I sighed, feeling helpless without evidence. "I have a meeting with Chel now. I'm going to try to get proof somehow, so wait for me to call you back before you decide anything, OK?"

"Call me back when you can. We're still working things out on this end, too."

It wasn't the promise I was looking for, but it would have to do because another woman was at the office door, motioning that my ride to lunch was waiting for me. "I'll call you as soon as I can."

I hung up the phone and grabbed my purse, rushing out of the office to the awaiting town car.

Chel sat across from me, watching me as I watched her, both of us only picking at the salad that was served to us.

"How are things on the outside?" I started. "I'm assuming you're being treated better by Tri-Om?"

"Mmm," Chel responded vaguely and took a drink of her water, her eyes still fixed on mine, with the occasional glance at the entrance to our private dining room when a staff member walked by.

Another few moments passed silently before I attempted another inquiry. "What's your impression of Tri-Om?" I began.

She shrugged. "Just another company that wants to be as great as CES."

"You admit you admire the company that wants you dead?"

"It's just business, right?" She stared blankly at me while unconsciously touching the necklace she was wearing.

"You don't trust me, do you?" I inferred.

Chel's eyes closed slightly, narrowing at me. "I don't trust anyone."

"I'm not inclined to trust you, either," I added, looking at her gloved hand touching her necklace, then back up to her eyes. "Fortunate for you, there have been people promoting your positive side, or else you'd been left to fend for yourself in your fight for freedom."

Her features tensed and she released her necklace, banging her fist on the table. "It's because of *you* that I've been abused and shunned by the only family I've ever known. I don't want or need any more of *your* help, Ashlyn." She pushed herself away from the table and stood to leave.

Sit down, I commanded of her.

She hesitated for a moment and then resumed her place at the table. "This is absurd. Why are you forcing me to stay when you apparently dislike this arrangement as much as I do?"

"Because it's necessary that I put aside everything that repels me from you for a greater reason," I began.

"What? Brian?" Chel scoffed and folded her arms stubbornly across her chest. "Don't think that you're the only one in this world that's been in love."

I refused to be baited into this pointless argument. She was obviously angry and hurt by many things. "Tell me about that necklace," I began, motioning with my left hand to her neck.

She took the opportunity of my motion to grab my hand. "Tell me about your ring," she insisted, holding tightly to my hand.

My eyes widened, fearful of her intentions, but she soon released my hand. "Mine is self-explanatory. But yours is obviously very special, to risk everything that was important to you."

"It was an evil trick planned to throw me off," she practically snarled at me. In a slightly softer voice, she added, "How'd you come wear it?"

"A mutual friend gave it to me earlier in the night. I didn't and still don't know the significance of it. Why did it affect you so much?"

Chel sank back in her chair, picking up an unused spoon and staring into it as she twisted it in the lights. "It was a gift from Tom. Our first Christmas together, we were parked outside the hospital - it was the first time the small group had thought to do anything like that and I had my doubts about being there and using my gift in its original capacity..." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "He handed me a box without a word. We'd already exchanged gifts, so I was genuinely surprised by this one. The necklace was extraordinary, better than any of his other presents, more special than all the gifts CES had lavished upon me. *'You are good, despite everything you're forced to do. This is to remind you of your inner light that is infallibly worthy.'*" Her eyes opened again, a kinder, more peaceful expression dressed her features. "I knew the things CES had me do, what they'd changed me into was evil. I felt it in my core despite their attempted material diversions. That night at the hospital was the first time I'd felt good about myself and my gift since I could remember."

"What happened to the necklace? How'd you lose it?"

"The last night at the farmhouse with Tom... after I'd said goodbye to him, I threw the necklace in the field, feeling like everything good in me was gone, my inner light was extinguished."

"But you continued helping Ken and Alex and the group. I don't believe you'd lost that light completely," I explained.

She shrugged. "One act of good can't begin to make up for thousands of bad ones. I let that part of me die with Tom, because the good in me belonged to him. Maybe it was easier for me to deal with it when I didn't feel I was worthy of him anymore. I'm not sure. But seeing you wearing it was the

biggest shock of my entire life. Although I'd lamented the loss of it and what it stood for several times over the years, I felt the weight of that loss strike me down that night."

"It was never explained to me why it was given to me to wear. I can't lie that I'm grateful it had its intended effect on you, although I'm sorry you suffered for it."

Her demeanor changed abruptly. "Who gave it to you? How'd they come upon it and know its significance?" She threw the spoon across the table, hitting my salad plate.

"My friend Cowan gave it to me." I stopped there, unsure of whether or not to discuss any more details with her.

"I want to speak with him. I've got half a mind to let him suffer what was intended for you and your friends that night," she demanded.

"He's dead," I said quietly.

Her outrage turned to confusion and then relaxed. "Oh," she said. "I suppose he woke someone else's ghosts and they weren't so eager to embrace them."

I bit the inside of my cheek to put my emotions in check. "His dying words to me were to save you," I stated flatly.

Instead of putting her in her place, my words only angered her further. "Who is this Cowan guy and why did he have a sick fascination with me. I've never heard of him. Was he a weird stalker?"

"Don't," I started through gritted teeth, "talk bad about Cowan. He saved your life because he knew it was worth it. I, however, still question how this person you are now could ever amount to anything beyond the evil bitch CES turned you into."

Chel pulled at her glove with her other hand, standing up as to be more threatening. "You have NO idea how much I've suffered these past months because of you and your dead friend. I lost my family, my favor, and nearly my life thanks to you. I don't know how you could ever consider yourself a good person with the pain you so willingly cause others." She regloved her hand before I had to force her to do so.

Her threats didn't alarm me. I had already proven to both of us that my gift was stronger and capable of stopping her at my discretion. "My virtues are not on trial here. I have helped bring you to a place where your natural abilities and the person you are supposed to be are valued more than that other company could even pretend to with all their junk they threw at you to cover up your misery. If you want to walk away and allow them to hunt you down and end your miserable existence, then I'm wasting my time here and will leave you to your last meal." I stood up, placing my napkin on my nearly full plate and walked past Chel, not looking back. Outside, I motioned for the town car driver to come forward and as I was about to step inside, a silky hand grabbed my arm.

"Wait," she insisted, releasing my arm. "I don't know how to do this; I'm not used to not getting what I want."

Sounds like someone else I know... or rather knew, I thought. "Try asking," I said coldly.

"I want to understand why you were told to save me. Why won't everyone just leave me to die so I can join Tom in whatever afterlife is meant for me?"

Her words were sad and I could vaguely relate to her hopeless feeling. I looked around at the people pretending not to be interested in the scene we'd created. "Come back inside. We can finish our lunch and talk more privately in there."

We walked silently back to the private dining room where our next course had just been placed at the table. After the servers had left, I began. "I'm going to ask you again what you know about Tri-Omega Metaphysics."

Chel shook her head. "I think I saw some paperwork at some point with a mention of the company, but nothing specific. The name indicates three ends, but otherwise, I have to claim ignorance."

Her insight on the meaning of the company's name took me by surprise. I hadn't considered its meaning before, but I pushed my mounting thoughts aside to maintain focus on the current conversation. "I truthfully don't know much about the company, either, except they have a great interest in seeing good prevail, CES fall, and you make it through it all intact."

"That's ridiculous. I'm as insignificant as the waitress who keeps walking by, trying to see who of importance is occupying this room today."

I chuckled at her observation and then inhaled deeply, ready to tell her more of the story, since she was apparently more receptive. "Cowan was a mysterious man from the moment I was introduced to him. He seemed to have too much knowledge of things, yet when it came down to acting on that knowledge, he opted to stand back and watch. He was infuriating until he finally revealed to me the source of his knowledge." I paused to sample the soup that was rapidly getting cold in front of me. "Mmm... that's pretty good."

Chel looked at me with hopeful eyes, but remained silent and tasted the soup that was in front of her.

"I had made a trip here to beg Brian not to shut me out of his life when Cowan appeared at his apartment and kidnapped us. While Brian enjoyed a tour of the company, I was treated to the story of Cowan and how he'd come into his employment. He possessed the gift of creating an exact, functioning copy of himself. For that reason, he was chosen to come back to our time and oversee the creation of Tri-Om." I paused again for Chel to grasp the gravity of what I had said.

"Our time?" she repeated slowly.

I nodded. "He was from a future, one where he knew some of us well enough to have knowledge of dates of important events."

"And giving you the necklace for me was one of those important events?"

"I presume, since he thanked me numerous times for giving that to you. You were very important in his time and thus a main source of concern in ours."

"Why was I important?" she demanded.

"Most of the outcomes of our future he left for us to discover in his infuriatingly arrogant way. 'It's for you to discover your path,'" I added, trying to mimic his voice, rolling my eyes.

"Oh," she said quietly, taking another bite of her soup.

"I do know your importance, but I'm not sure it's my place to tell you," I confessed. I enjoyed (maybe a little too much) her being at my mercy.

"And if you didn't know why, would you have been there to stop Dev that night?"

I thought about it for a moment before I answered. "Cowan was a trusted friend. It was important to him that you be freed from CES and protected from their retribution, so on his word, I would've been there."

"If it was up to you only... no one else asked you to save me, but you knew Dev was going to be there that night to kill me... would you have still shown up?"

I waited for my soup to be removed and the main course to be placed on the table. "I don't think you deserve to die because you left a company. They are wrong. Dev was wrong to be willing to work for them and accept that assignment. Given that alone, I think I would've gone there and done the same thing even without Cowan's advice."

Chel appeared satisfied with that answer and began eating her pasta. After several minutes of uninterrupted eating, she set her fork down and spoke in a different tone. "I don't know why or how you can say those things after I was on the verge of killing you and your friends." Before I could make a rebuttal, she held up her hand and continued. "I would like to start our relationship over and hope you would consider me indebted to you for my life, one that I'm not sure I deserve still."

"Does this mean you'll agree to stay in the protection of Tri-Om?"

She nodded. "I will do whatever is asked of me if, in return, I can spend more time with you trying to understand my place in all this and eventually be told why I even matter." Her eyebrow arched, waiting for my acceptance of her terms.

While I wasn't excited to be her mentor, since I wasn't even employed by Tri-Om, I agreed to her terms and we finished our lunches with little more conversing.

Chapter Twenty-Six – Three Ends

Three ends, I continued to repeat in my head as I returned to Cowan's old office. How'd I never see that in the company's name and what three ends were so important that influenced the name of the company. One was obvious: Tom's death, but what about the others? So many people of importance, at least to me, had died. Which were the links? Ethan? Cowan? Deven? Maybe they were ends still to come? Me? Brian? I gulped and steadied myself on the desk. "No, please don't let one be Brian," I allowed myself to whisper out loud.

"Please don't let one what be Brian?"

His voice startled me out of my obsessing and my soul breathed a sigh of relief. "Lunch break?" I said with a smile, forgetting my internal tormenting, and walking towards him, snaking my arms around his body when I finally arrived.

"Mmhm. Even us evil scientists need breaks to find our insanity again," he joked.

"So you came here to find it?" I teased.

Brian leaned back and cupped my face in his hand. "You have no idea how insane you drive me, Mrs. Turner."

I stood on my tiptoes, bringing my lips to his while my fingers combed through his hair. We lingered there for some time until someone cleared their throat behind us.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Turner. I'm sorry to interrupt," the woman said politely.

Brian's fingers laced together with mine and he gave a small squeeze at the mention of my new name.

I turned around to address the intruder. "How can I help you?" I asked politely while considering making her leave without wasting any more of the probably limited time I'd have with Brian before he had to get back to work.

"We had the contents of Cowan's other offices sent here for you to go through. Where would be a good place to have them delivered?"

"On the desk or the table over there is fine," I said, motioning around the room before turning to face Brian again.

"Very well, ma'am," she said, causing me to involuntary shudder at being called "ma'am".
"Sorry to have bothered you."

"No worries," I said, already getting lost again in Brian's eyes.

As I was reaching up to re-engage his lips, we were interrupted again by several people carrying boxes parading around the room.

"How much longer until you're expected back?" I asked wistfully.

"Ten minutes ago," he said with an amused grin.

I sighed deeply, relaxing my hold on his hand. "I'm sorry I was gone so long."

"How'd things go?" He was still holding my hand despite the fact that mine had gone limp.

"We came to an understanding," I said, nodding. "And I've agreed to work with her to help her find where she fits in to all of this," I added more quietly.

"That's very cute. My wife: supernatural tutor," he said in an announcer-like voice.

I rolled my eyes and grumbled, "Yeah, something like that."

"She's lucky to have you, as am I," he whispered sincerely, brushing against my lips as he spoke.

I allowed the thrill of his closeness to dissipate everything else for those moments. It didn't matter that he was about to return to work, nor that I had people still parading around the office behind me, nor that I was soon to be overwhelmed by going through the belongings of a dead man, nor that Chel would probably be stopping in soon, expecting me to help her make sense of it all... no, nothing but his strong lips caressing mine, his warm hands forcing my body closer to his, and his energy that mixed so perfectly with mine were all I cared about for those brief minutes.

Another box full of receipts, inventories, and cash flow reports gone through and still nothing that seemed to be important. All this nonsense had to have been on a computer somewhere. Why was I being tortured to go through these page by page?

"I think I might have something."

I unfolded my legs and walked over to the desk where Chel was set up, working on hacking files and restoring deleted data, something she'd learned as a hobby while at CES. The desk suited her, too. I could imagine her in the future coming into this office and running the company from that very spot. I took a moment to smile at the idea before focusing on what she'd found.

"It's not a lot, but with the limited resources I have here, I can identify some partial files that were deleted. I'll need more time to see if I can piece together more of them, but look at this," she said, typing some commands into a prompt and pulling up a garble of letters, numbers, and characters. "See this?" she asked, pointing at the monitor.

I squinted, trying to identify a real word through the mess on the screen. "Ummm..."

"It looks like a personal letter to someone... 'I miss you... hoping it goes smoothly... just a few months.'"

"How does that help us?" I asked, still trying to read the words between all the code.

Chel sighed and threw herself back into the chair. "I don't know. This would be a lot easier if I had the lab at CES and I knew what I was supposed to be looking for," she complained.

"Sorry we can't be as technically savvy as CES," I shot back. "I don't know what the hell we're looking for, either. Something to tell us what the next steps were supposed to be." Traces of the sun had long ago faded from the horizon and the tension between Chel and me was palpable. It was enough that we had to try to work together when neither of us was comfortable with the new level of trust we were operating under. But to add to that the fact that what we were looking for was completely unknown to anyone... well, the frustration we both felt was natural.

"I need a break," she snapped and stood up, practically hitting me with the chair as she pushed it out from under herself. She grabbed her cigarettes and walked out of the office, leaving me to my headache and piles of uncooperative files.

I picked up one of the fifteen or so drives that had been recovered from Cowan's various computers across the country. The physical damage was evident: black marks on the case and circuitry. I looked at the notes that were attached to it to see which location it had come from. My brows furrowed as I read the address where Cowan had perished. "What happened after I left there?"

I pulled out my phone and called Ken, hoping it wasn't too late to be calling him and he'd be able to tell me if anything had happened in the aftermath of Cowan's death while he was there that would explain the damage.

"No, nothing that I know of. I left the office exactly how it was when I arrived as you were leaving," he explained.

I mindlessly paced the room, trying to figure out how they had gotten so damaged when Ken added, "*Oh, and just so you know, Logan and I met with Edric today. He's very guarded with the information he's willing to provide, but really wants our help to free Eve. Have you figured anything else out about bringing down CES? I think it would be beneficial for everyone if we could make the two goals work together. Edric agrees.*"

"I'm sure he does," I said sourly. "I can't believe you met with him after I asked you to wait."

"*Your objections have been noted, Ash. Don't think we're disregarding it. We're being cautious, but with lack of any other direction, we need to continue to take what we have and move forward with the plans.*"

"Give us a few days here, please? Chel is working on recovering old computer files and I'm going through the physical ones. We'll come up with something."

"I don't know how much time we actually have, so just try to get through it as quickly as possible."

"We're working as fast as we can," I said, finally resting my head against the window, looking out at the city glimmering with artificial light in the dark. I took a deep breath, about to get off the depressing phone call, when I thought to ask Ken about the company's name. "Oh, hey. Did Cowan ever discuss with you how they came up with the company's name?"

"Hmm... no, I can't say that he did. Do you think it means something?"

"I'm not sure," I sighed. "I didn't think about it until Chel mentioned it means three ends. It has to mean something. I mean, I'm guessing that the first one is for Tom, but the other two 'ends' have got me curious and worried. Maybe if we can figure that out, we would have a direction?" I stated it as a question because I couldn't claim it as a fact.

"I'll think it over and let you know if we can conclude anything. I'm expecting to hear from Alex in a day or two, so I'll ask him, too."

"Okay. Thanks, Ken. And sorry for putting up so many resistances. I know you are doing what you see as in the best interest for all of us, but I can't help feel like Edric shouldn't be part of the solution."

"I know you don't and that never left my mind when I met with him. Let's just figure this out soon so we can enjoy that post wedding party," he said with a laugh.

"Wow, I didn't know she'd have the invites out for that already. How long do I have?"

"The email said it's happening a week from tomorrow, so I guess we'll expect you back around then, right?"

"Right," I said flatly. "Okay, I've got a lot of work ahead of me tonight, then. Talk to you later. And tell everyone hi for me."

"Will do," Ken said and hung up.

Brian arrived with dinner a while later and helped go through some of the physical files with me. He was also key in providing some technical solutions for Chel before I sent him back to the hotel around eleven.

"You need to sleep. You have a team counting on you to be awake tomorrow," I said while softly brushing my fingertips across his forehead and down his cheeks.

He sighed and grabbed my hand, kissing each tip that had just been caressing him. "You need to sleep, too," he said tenderly.

I glanced across the room at Chel who was fighting to keep her eyes open, trying hard to ignore our affectionate display. "I know, but I can sleep later."

"Don't be too much longer, okay? I expect to see you sleeping soundly next to me when my alarm goes off," he playfully warned. "I'll leave a light on for you," he added, and then kissed me with a tired, gentle passion.

"I'll be at the hotel soon. Good night," I whispered, releasing the hand that I'd been glued to since we walked to the door.

Twenty minutes after Brian left, Chel's head hit the desk for the third time. "I'm done," she declared, standing up.

"Okay," I said passively, my eyes moving quickly through the papers. "See you tomorrow."

She scoffed. "I think I'd rather take my chances on CES finding me then come back here again," she complained.

My eyes narrowed on her and I was about to make her change her mind when she added, "Kidding. Sheesh. See you later. Promise."

I threw her an annoyed look, then nodded. "Alright. I'm hoping to be in around ten, depending on how much later I'm here tonight. See you around then?"

"Sure. I guess so," she said noncommittally and left with her belongings after watching the computer shut down.

I was alone in the office and sorted through hundreds of useless papers before I finally looked at the time: two in the morning. Just the knowledge of how long I'd been at it made me feel more exhausted and I finally conceded to call it a night.

As I stood in the lobby waiting for the taxi to arrive, I perused the artwork, pictures, and plaques that adorned the walls: interesting modern art pieces, employee of the month awards, certificates, and miscellaneous other awards decorated an entire wall of the entrance. Behind the reception area, there was a larger, brass hued panel with what looked like a company motto inscribed: We stand for the hopes of the first, the innocence of the second, and forever warding off the evils of the third.

"First, second, third," I repeated out loud, reading the words in my head again. "This is it," I whispered, pulling out my phone and entering the words in a note, finishing just as the taxi pulled up outside. I walked backwards out the front doors, reading the slogan again and again until I was seated in the cab.

"Now what does this mean?" I whispered, staring at my phone.

"Excuse me?" the driver asked.

"Nothing. Sorry, just talking to myself," I mumbled.

"It's pretty late for someone as young as you to be working. So either you have a deadline you're trying to make or you're having an affair with your boss," he inferred with a laugh.

I looked up from my phone into the driver's eyes through the rearview mirror. "I assure you, while it's none of your business, the only person in that company who holds my attention is my husband that you're returning me to."

"Okay, okay," he said, taking both hands from the wheel. "I was only joking. You'd be surprised the stories I'm privy to, especially this late on a Friday night."

It hadn't even occurred to me that it was Friday and most normal people wouldn't be working tomorrow. I guess the couple of days Brian was off getting married to me accounted for his having to work on a Saturday. Hopefully less people would be in the office and I would find the courage to venture down and see what he was up to.

"Yeah, well deadlines are deadlines," I remarked, figuring he'd be pleased if one of his guesses were right.

"See? I knew it had to be one of the two. You really should take some time off and enjoy your youth. You never know when the day will come that you wake up and find all the familiar joys long gone and you're left with what? A plush office and a secretary?"

I shrug. "I'm sure life will slow down eventually." I think to my future and what it holds: a mountain of papers to sort through for a clue as to how to bring down the most powerfully evil company in the history of the world, a confrontation with a man that no one else but me sees as being bad, a wedding celebration, and happily ever after with my husband. I sigh and focus on the last part as the cab pulls up to the hotel.

I tip the man generously from the "paycheck" I'd earned and hurried upstairs to the warm bed awaiting me.

Chapter Twenty-Seven – Secret’s Out

I awoke the following morning in an empty bed, except for a single fiery orange rose laid perfectly on the pillow next to me. I casually showered and dressed and made it into the office just after ten. A large bouquet of similar orange, red, and white roses greeted me as I entered the office where I was also surprised to see Chel already hard at work.

“Those smell nice,” she commented, barely looking up as I entered.

“Yeah, a nice change to the dusty papers I’ve been sniffing,” I joked, making my way to the vase and inhaling deeply. “I didn’t expect to see you here already. Come up with anything good?”

“I’ve been in since seven.” She groaned as she looked at the time on her phone. “I was able to decode a little more of that file from yesterday, piecing together a few more fragments from the drive that hadn’t been overwritten yet. It looks like Cowan was communicating with someone in the future by saving the files on the system. It couldn’t have been a two-way communication and I don’t know why the files were deleted.”

“Probably his fiancée,” I suggested. “I think I got closer to figuring out the three ends mystery, although it’s still mostly unknown.”

“Do you really think that’s important? Wouldn’t it be better to figure out how to stop CES from hunting me down?”

“Maybe it’s all connected,” I said, resuming my seat on the couch. “We know from the information that Cowan gave us that we were supposed to ‘save’ you and you’d help us bring an end to CES.”

“That’s a pretty big leap,” she said, crossing her arms. “You might be forgetting that despite their threats against my life, those people are the closest thing I have to family. Well, a lot of them, anyway. I’d no sooner help you destroy them than I would help you plan my funeral.”

I shrugged, opening the lid on a new box. “I’m sharing with you the information I have. And you’re here somewhat enthusiastically for someone who has so much loyalty to that other company. What can you tell me about Edric?”

The red flash in her eyes was noticeable. “Nothing that I’m sure you don’t already know,” she said through gritted teeth, tossing the file from the desk to me. “Unnatural growth, thanks to their experiments, remarkable control and strength in his gift, and apparently has the ability, although I believe it was a result to something in the experiments they were doing, to command admiration and trust of anyone around him.”

That was new information that I hadn’t read in his file and it would explain the willingness of Ken to easily dismiss my warnings. I hadn’t been duped by him, though. In those few moments when we shared the same air, there was only loathing and spite. “He doesn’t seem to affect you that way,” I commented.

Chel threw me an angry look. “I have no good feelings towards that child. He, along with you, of course, destroyed my place in my family. I was no longer the one they were so proud of, the one who pleased and was adorned with gifts and praise. Thanks to you, they saw me as a traitor and thanks to him, they were never willing to forgive me.”

“He was there because of your action, Chel. I didn’t kill his father,” I reminded her.

“Do you think I did that out of my own free will? Or perhaps you think Dev had that power over me?” She laughed maniacally. “Hardly. I told you I was their property and did as I was commanded. My orders only came from the top. They apparently saw a benefit to having that amp dead and I was the weapon of choice.”

“He was completely innocent in it all. He was terrified to be in that building, but his connection to Eve forced him there. He didn’t deserve to die.”

“And I didn’t deserve to be tortured and written out of the family,” she struck back.

"Maybe it's time you stop thinking of them as your family and you as their property and join us in trying to bring an end to their cruelty," I said softly.

"I'll never agree to that. I have no loyalty to this place and I'm only here because I'm being protected until I can find a way to make amends." She abruptly turned her chair back to the computer and began typing angrily.

"Tom was the first of the three ends this company was named for," I announced casually as I grabbed a handful of papers from the box.

Chel was instantly in front of me, swatting the papers from my hand, making them scatter throughout the room as she grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled me to my feet. "Don't you *dare* try to pull me in with those lies. Everyone here is jealous that they don't get to work for CES. This is a pathetic, second rate company who was run by a dead guy. The company will soon follow him to the grave, from what I can tell."

I stared coolly in her eyes, not displaying any emotions to her words or actions. I tisked at her, shaking my head as I spoke. "I was starting to see how you'd fit in here. Guess I was mistaken," I lamented, connecting with her and commanding her to release me.

She growled as she released her hold on me, turning unwillingly back towards the desk, grabbing her purse and exiting the office, knocking my flowers to the floor in a deafening crash as she departed.

"*Get out of my way!*" she yelled at some unsuspecting person as she smacked the elevator button.

"Didn't realize I was providing ammunition," Brian said as he knelt next to me, picking up the flowers. "Guess I don't need to ask how things are going..."

I shrugged and placed the last mangled flower back in the vase. "They were beautiful," I commented, looking sadly at the now thrown together arrangement. "I should get some more water for them."

We walked together to the drinking fountain. Brian held the button down while I held the vase in place, the water slowly filling the glass container. "What's the occasion?"

He shook his head. "I didn't think I needed an occasion to spoil my wife."

"Well, no, I guess not. But it does make someone whose mind is forced to go through dull papers all day wonder about what her husband did wrong to have to send his wife such gorgeous flowers for no reason." I grinned sideways, eyeing him playfully.

"That husband may have felt slightly guilty for abandoning his wife in a strange office late on a Friday night and then leaving again in the morning without saying goodbye."

"Ah ha. I guilted you without even trying. This married thing is really working out well for me," I laughed, hooking my arm through his, and walking back into the office.

"Glad to see you've adapted so well," he teased, closing the door with his foot after we'd entered. His eyes sparkled brightly as he set the flowers onto a shelf away from the boxes and returned instantly in front of me. He twisted a strand of my hair between his fingers before tucking behind my ear.

"How's work going today?" I asked, longing to feel his breath as we were drawn closer.

"Not very good, I'm afraid," he breathed into my ear, our cheeks so close to touching. "You see, my mind has been elsewhere."

"That's terrible," I whispered back, letting my fingertips lightly stroke his arm. "Maybe you should take care of whatever's distracting you." I closed my eyes as his strong lips gently kissed my neck just below my ear, my whole body instantly surrendering to him.

Brian cradled me in his arms, carrying me to the couch, clearing it off as he lowered me down on it, his kisses along my collarbone igniting an uncontrollable passion for him, far surpassing the intensity

of the flowers positioned high above us. As usual when he was so near me, the rest of the world faded from existence as our bodies eagerly found unity.

Our perfect world was devoid of everything else until Chel crashed it around us. As shocked as I was by the interruption, lying under Brian's heaving chest I was unwilling to let go and struggled to get lost in his eyes again until she spoke.

"I don't know why I thought this would be different," she said, her hurt and anger lingered in the air after she'd grabbed her belongings and stormed away.

"I... we... oh no," I stammered, unsure what I was most upset about.

Brian looked as lost as I felt and quickly got off me and started redressing. "I didn't mean... I didn't think she would..." He was unable to complete a sentence.

I pulled my shirt over my head and pressed my lips against his. "I'll find you as soon as I can," I whispered against his skin, still finding it difficult to move away from him.

Finally clearing my head enough, I ran out the office door, hitting the elevator button repeatedly in with the hope that it would encourage it to come quicker if it sensed my urgency. Two minutes later, I entered and pressed the main floor's button with the same vigor and waited impatiently for the slow ride down to end.

Smoothing my hair and clothes, making sure my shorts were buttoned and zipped, I dashed out into the lobby and out the front door, searching for signs of Chel. I spotted her half a block away, waving her arm at the taxi that was changing lanes to pull alongside her.

Ignore the woman and keep driving, I instructed the driver, who immediately turned off his blinker and sped away.

Chel flipped him off and desperately searched for another when her eyes narrowed on mine. "Go to hell," she yelled at me, the distance between us quickly closing.

"Don't make me force you to stop," I warned, not having to yell as loudly as she did.

She glowered at me as I stopped in front of her. "Are you going to make me to stay? Even if you try, I assure you I'll be gone as soon as you let down your guard."

"And go where? You know better than I do that you'd be dead before you got to the airport," I warned, not really knowing if CES operatives were nearby or not. I suddenly felt paranoid about the idea, but kept that hidden deep.

"Says you. Fine, I'll just go talk to Mr. Jorgansen directly and beg for forgiveness. He always had a soft spot for me, which is why I'm not already dead." She paused for a moment, recollecting something, and then continued. "I don't trust you, Ashlyn. Everything you say is manipulative and to suit yourself. I can't even trust the deep rooted feeling I had to flee the office earlier was of my own doing and not something you contrived so you could have a quick nooner with your husband."

I rolled my eyes. "That was your own doing. In case you haven't noticed, I don't make a habit of forcing people to do things for my benefit."

"Oh, you mean like making that taxi drive away so I wouldn't get it? Or telling me back at the farmhouse to come here? I didn't... no, I don't want to be here, so if you'll kindly get out of my business, I'm sure your husband wasn't quite finished with you."

As much as I didn't want to react, an unwilling growl erupted from deep in my chest. "You think any of that was for me? How can you possibly think I benefit from spending my honeymoon sorting through papers and babysitting you? Hell, I don't even work for Tri-Om!" I argued, throwing my hands up in the air.

"Neither do I," she said through gritted teeth, staring me down before turning to walk away.

I grabbed her arm and turned her back around. "You can't go," I insisted, holding her gaze.

She looked down at my grip on her bare arm and then back to my eyes. "Why should I stay? To be a witness to more of your private moments? To be taunted by endless displays of your happiness

while I sit miserably by and watch, trying to find a way to get my life back?" She scoffed and shook herself free.

I hadn't realized that by grabbing her like I did, she could've killed me in an instant with only a thought. Either she was still programmed to only follow orders to kill or she was simply curious about the outcome of our encounter. I wasn't sure, but I knew I had to do something to convince her to stay or we'd lose her forever. "You have to stay," I whispered, pleading with my eyes.

"Why? What's so important that I have to stay and slave away for this pathetic shell of a company?"

I frowned darkly, knowing it wasn't intended for me to deliver this to her. "Because this," I began, motioning to the building down the street from us, "is your vision. You helped found it in the future and sent Cowan to the past to assure its success. We're all here doing what we're doing because of you. So I can't let you give up now and walk away to your death."

Chel stood shaking her head the whole time I spoke, continuing after my words had stopped. "No," she said in hushed tones.

"You said it's a second rate, wanna-be company. So fix it. Rise above your past and make it how it's destined to be," I challenged, studying her features closely.

"The hope of the first..." she muttered with confusion shrouding her features as she looked up at the large structure.

"I wasn't supposed to be the one to tell you. I'm not even supposed to be here. Ken was supposed to be here with Cowan to gently ease you into your position of power." I sighed helplessly as I watched her retreated farther inside herself, unable to take her eyes off the building.

"I give up," I said, throwing my arms up in defeat. "There's nothing more I can tell you. It's up to you to decide what your fate it." I turned and walked back to the building, appreciating the slow ascent to the top floor, feeling a pang of sadness when I notice Brian wasn't waiting for me in the office.

The rest of the day I worked in solitude, sifting through the papers thrown around the office, and then continued through several more boxes without any progress before walking to the stairwell, slowly spiraling downwards. I stopped on Brian's floor and made myself as comfortable as I could on the vinyl covered sofas in the waiting room outside his restricted office area.

Around six, he came out the double doors and pressed the elevator button before noticing me hunched over on the couch.

"Hey stranger," he said softly, trying to feel out my mood.

I looked up sadly at him and tried to smile, but end up shrugging my shoulders and sighing dramatically.

He wrapped one arm around my lower back, pressing me against his body while his other hand gently caressed the back of my neck. "I'm so sorry, Ash. I didn't even consider that she could walk in..." He stopped there and kissed the top of my head.

I looked up in his eyes with compassion. "Please don't ever apologize for being with me. I don't care that she walked in or she saw us like that." I reached up and stroked along his jaw line, feeling closer to him than I'd ever thought possible. "I'm only sorry that I wasn't strong enough to keep her from leaving. I wasn't the one meant to do this for a reason. I don't know why I ever thought I belonged here." I smiled sadly at him, not wanting his sympathy.

"Your gift was never meant to bind someone to a place they didn't want to be. It has nothing to do with how strong or talented you are."

"How'd I ever get so lucky to have you in my life?" My lips formed a genuine smile. "I didn't try to force her to stay. As she eloquently put it, as soon as I let my guard down, she'd run." I shrugged and snuggled back against his chest, feeling better than I had since I left him in the office.

"We can do this without her. You know the inside of CES better than anyone. We'll find its weakness on our own." He kissed the top of my head again.

I felt him nodding as I closed my eyes tightly, letting all my senses be consumed by only him. I didn't want to think about Chel or CES or Tri-Om or anything else. The only thing I needed in that moment was him so completely and selfishly to myself.

We spent Sunday far away from Tri-Om and thoughts of Chel and CES. After a cozy breakfast in our room, we met up with Kara and Michael and took a tour of Alcatraz. I felt like I held my breath on the boat ride over; the waters in the bay were darker and more ominous than the ocean in Hawaii. Once off the boat, I was strangely fascinated with the place. All the history of bad people and I knew in my bones that some of them had been gifted in the same way Rick Thompson was gifted, not like me or my friends. I wondered especially about the five unaccounted for prisoners who escaped and were assumed to have drown. Of course, I had no way of proving whether or not they possessed powers, but something in my gut knew the answer.

Back on solid ground, we had lunch together and then parted, with Brian and Michael going to a ball game while Kara and I decided to shop.

"Are you going to make it to the party next weekend?" I asked from over the dressing room wall.

We both emerged from the rooms at the same time, twirling in turn for the other. "I wish we could. We're meeting my parents in New York on Friday before we fly to Amsterdam on Saturday," she said and truly appeared to be sad about it.

"Oh," I said, feeling a little wounded. "I guess you can't help it if you already had plans."

"If there was any way..." she began, but I quickly cut her off.

"Hey, it's not a big deal. You were there when it counted. Just promise me I will get to be there when it's your time," I said, eyeing the delicate band on her third finger that she'd been trying to conceal the entire morning.

"Don't worry about that. We're not running off to Europe to elope. Trust me. It's going to be a *long* engagement," she said seriously.

I laughed. "Whatever works for you. I'm just glad you're happy." I hugged her tightly before we retreated to our separate dressing rooms.

I dreaded returning to Tri-Om despite Brian's constant assurance that I'd done everything I could. When I called in and spoke with Mary, she told me she hadn't heard anything positive or negative regarding Chel's whereabouts, but they were still hopeful that she'd be found safe.

I had my doubts and instead of sitting in that uncomfortable office for another day, I requested a computer and several boxes be delivered to my hotel room. Brian didn't have that luxury and sooner than I would've liked, he left for the office for the day.

Within the hour, a courier delivered what I'd asked for and I delve into the work with a new intensity, driven to prove everyone wrong, that we could do this by ourselves and that I was capable of fixing problems, not just causing new ones. This batch of documents proved to have more promise and I paced around the living area of our suite reading one while sipping my coffee when there was a knock at the door.

I peered through the peephole, but didn't move to unlock it. "What do you want," I said, trying not to sound as hostile as I felt.

"Can I come in?" Chel asked, looking over her shoulder.

"Depends. Have you made contact with anyone from CES?"

"Not successfully. Please open the door?" She grabbed the doorknob, jiggling it.

I debated for several more moments before I finally unlatched the door and opened it just enough for her to squeeze through. After glancing in the hallway, I closed and locked it, then stared at Chel as she paced nervously around the room.

"He wouldn't take my call," she finally said, looking at me with pleading eyes.

I shrugged, not commenting.

"None of them would. Except Sonya, who only said that I shouldn't be calling unless I was 'trying to signal the death squad.'" Chel sat on the couch ignoring the piles of papers, propping her head on the palms of her head, looking down.

My eyes went big and I looked out my peep hole again. "You brought mercenaries to my hotel room?!"

She looked up at me. "I... I don't *think* so. I called from a payphone in Sacramento. I can't believe they're doing this to me."

I scowled at her and started picking up papers that had fallen to the floor. "I can't believe you're doing this to me. In case you haven't noticed, I have a lot of stuff to do all by myself. You made your choice, so why don't you go somewhere nice and enjoy your last hours."

She got on the floor with me and started helping pick up the papers. "I believe what you told me," she said quietly.

I snatched the papers from her hand and put them on the coffee table, only grunting in response.

Chel stood and grabbed my arm with her gloved hand. "I had to know if you were wrong, if they would be happy to have me back. I know it was foolish, but if I could ever accept this future you've presented me with, I couldn't have any doubts." Her eyes pleaded with me to not turn her away.

I looked down at her hand clutching my forearm, then back at her watery eyes. "What makes me think I can trust you, that you didn't make contact with CES and are back working for them?" My eyes narrowed at hers suspiciously.

She released my arm and pulled a jump drive from her purse. "Because I have this," she said, walking towards the laptop, requesting permission with her eyes.

I nodded for her to proceed and waited stoically as she typed quickly. When she stopped and looked at me, I leaned in and studied the screen. Skeptical at first, but then I realized what she had. "How'd you get this?"

"I have my ways," she shrugged, a pleased grin on her face.

I rolled my eyes and sat down, scrolling through the list of names, logins, and passwords for the upper management of CES. "Why would they be so stupid to keep this stuff in a file?" I mused out loud to myself.

"They have Sonya guarding all this stuff. It's practically impenetrable... practically." Chel's smile grew.

I jumped up and grabbed the paper I had been studying before Chel knocked. "Do you think it could help us access this?" I asked, handing the document to her.

Nodding as she skimmed through it. "It's very likely we could. If we can make their assets vanish..."

"... we have a good chance of crippling them enough for us to be successful at a physical attack." I finished her thought.

The two of us smiled at each other, our minds united with similar thoughts and a common goal. Chel had stepped up. We had a chance to succeed.

Chapter Twenty-Eight – I Got a Feeling

“Are you sure you won’t come back with us? I’d like you to be at our post wedding party.” I sat in front of the desk in Cowan’s old office as Chel pushed aside the work she was doing for a moment to meet with me before Brian and I started our drive home.

“I think I’ve seen more than enough of the two of you dancing,” she said with a smile. “Besides, I have too much to do here.”

Since her visit to the hotel and our shared revelation, we’d spent the week formulating a multi-layered plan with the ultimate goal of bringing down CES. She moved into Cowan’s old office and had spent most of her spare time with Mary learning everything about Tri-Om. While she wasn’t ready to assume complete leadership, she was on her way to becoming a very successful CEO.

“You could work out of the office there,” I suggested. “I mean, I’m sure those people would love to have a chance to work with the company’s founder, too,” I said with a wink.

Her laugh was genuine. “I’m sure they’ll have their chance very soon. But I don’t want to draw the attention of CES. They *are* still looking for me, you know.”

I playfully rolled my eyes at her. “I know. You are very sought after these days.”

We stood up in unison and she walked around the desk and embraced me. “Thank you for everything, Ash.”

“I had a lot of help,” I whispered, seeing Brian enter the office.

Chel released me and gave Brian a similar hug, whispering something to him before stepping back towards her desk.

He nodded slightly as he laced his fingers with mine.

I looked curiously between the two of them, but held my tongue as Brian squeezed my hand. “We’ll save you a piece of cake,” I said to Chel as Brian led me towards the door.

Chel laughed and sat back in her chair. “Enjoy yourself. We’ll talk soon.”

It was almost midnight when we finally arrived at Brian’s apartment. Too exhausted to do anything, we both collapsed in bed, still fully clothed.

At seven the following morning, I was pulled out of bed. Literally.

“We have too much to do today for you to sleep in,” Stephanie explained as she yanked me into the bathroom and started the shower.

Squinting at the bright lights, I attempted to swat her away, but only managed to swipe the air. “What are you talking about?”

“Your party... ring a bell? It starts at three, which leaves us seven hours and fifty-three, no fifty-two minutes. You have five minutes to shower and then we have to go.”

Brian made his way to the bathroom, running his fingers sleepily through his slightly tasseled hair. “What’s all the commotion?”

A sly grin formed on my lips, his energy unintentionally beckoning me towards him. “Steph thinks I was too smelly to sleep anymore or something,” I said jokingly, walking towards him.

Stephanie grabbed my arm, yanking me back hard as I was about to comb my fingers through the hair he’d just ruffled. “Oh no you don’t. Brian, get out. You may have seen her on your wedding day before you were supposed to, but you don’t get to see her again today until the party. So why don’t you go for a run or out for coffee and a paper or something,” she said, shooing him out.

I stuck my bottom lip out, pouting like a child as she ushered Brian out of my sight, closing the bathroom door with a last stern look at me. In defiance, I took a ten minute shower, frequently connecting with Brian, whispering declarations of my eternal love and occasionally directing his driving when he was momentarily too distracted by my suggestive words.

When I stepped out of the shower, there was a pair of white shorts and a blue cotton t-shirt waiting for me. "I guess I have *no* choices today?" I asked loudly through the closed door.

Stephanie popped her head in. "No. Get dressed. You've already made us late."

After getting dressed and grabbing my phone and purse, Stephanie dragged me out of the apartment to her car.

"First, we're going to the spa. You look like you haven't slept in days," she added unnecessarily, wiping her middle finger underneath my eyes.

"Hey," I protested, smacking her hand away. I wanted to tell her all the crap I've been doing instead of being on a honeymoon with her brother, but Brian and I decided long ago to keep her knowledge of the world we live in to a minimum.

"At least it looks like you guys had an active honeymoon," she said, then cringed as she realized how suggestive that sounded. "What I meant was..."

I cut her off before either of us felt more awkward. "It's been a busy week," I said evenly. "We didn't get home until midnight," I explained as I yawned.

"That was poor planning on your part. I'm not going to have this party ruined by dark circles under your eyes or yawning."

I quickly suppressed the yawn that surfaced only because she said the word. "I hope this spa has caffeine IVs then."

I caught Stephanie thinking about it for a moment before she rolled her eyes at me as she parked outside the spa. "Do exactly as you're told in there. They know what they're doing."

"Which is exactly what you want them to be doing, correct?" I said as I stepped out of my car.

"I love you, Ash, but if I left this up to you, you'd show up in a pair of shorts and a Hello Kitty shirt."

"I don't own a Hello Kitty shirt," I protested, and then smiled. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"Which is why you get to wear that all day *until* the party," she said, motioning to my clothes.

"Point taken. I'll be good and try not to complain too much," I said, winking at her as we linked arms and walked into the grand entrance to the high end spa.

Stephanie greeted the woman behind the desk with kisses on both her cheeks. They looked like old friends.

"Enjoying your trust money?" I said with a grin as we were led back towards a private room for our day of pampering.

"Much more than Brian, it seems. Why's he living in such a trashy apartment?"

I shrug. "Probably the closest one he could find to my house."

"He should've just stayed at your house, then," she said in an annoyed tone.

"It wasn't what I wanted then," I said softly. "Besides, it isn't my house. I have roommates, you know?"

"Wow, you guys break up and end up slumming it. I hope that now that you're married, you'll get a proper place or two." She nudged me with her elbow and we sat in separate chairs.

"Who knows," I said distantly, finding it hard to imagine settling down anywhere permanent with CES breathing down our necks.

I closed my eyes and let the professional take over, making it a point to not look in the mirrors or connect with anyone in the room, afraid that I'd be tempted to make changes if I knew what was happening. It didn't stop me from connecting with Brian, though, but he was spending the day with his parents, which made it not so fun to surprise him.

The day went smoothly except for when I was moving from the massage room to the tanning area and ran into a couple of girls I'd gone to high school with, including Abigail Waters, my school days nemesis.

"Still trying to fit in, I see," she said snidely, creating a ripple of giggles among her followers.

I was prepared to ignore her completely; I'd already proven to her by breaking her nose before prom that I wasn't intimidated by her anymore.

But Stephanie wasn't going to let things end so quickly. "At least Ashlyn hasn't had to purchase a whole new wardrobe to try to fit in," she said, looking Abigail up and down, noticing her slight weight gain.

"I've been working out!" she insisted, her voice high pitched and offended.

I sealed my lips closed, trying not to laugh as my hostess ushered me towards my awaiting tanning appointment.

"I can't believe you're making me wear baby pink," I complained for the fifth time as I slipped into the perfectly sized silky dress Stephanie had chosen for me to wear.

"Hush and put it on. It's going to look amazing against your newly tanned skin and your green eyes. They are green today, aren't they?"

She was looking for signs that everything she'd done was making me happy. While I tried to not draw attention to my ever-changing eye color, Stephanie, like her brother, almost seemed to be tuned in to them. "I'm very happy with everything but the dress color. But..." I continued on before she could explain again. "I am willing to trust you, as long as you can zip it up for me," I said, stepping out of the room backwards. My hair had been styled up so my neck and upper back that were normally hidden beneath my dark hair were exposed.

After securing my dress to my body, she took my hand and spun me to face her, the bottom of the dress flaring out at my knees. "You look incredible."

I couldn't contain my smile with her obviously sincere compliment. "I knew I could trust you with all the details." I carefully wrapped my arms around her and gave her a gentle hug, trying not to wrinkle either of our ensembles.

"You haven't even seen the best part yet," she smiled, smoothing out my dress. "Wait until you walk into the ballroom I booked and see all the decorations and people there to celebrate with you."

I suppressed my groan, hating to be the center of all this attention, but not wanting to put a damper on anything that Stephanie had obviously put so much effort into making just right. "You know I would've been happy with a small get together at our apartment."

"Psh," she said, dismissing the idea. "When are you going to start enjoying the rich life, Ash? You have the world at your fingertips. No more apartments or used cars..." she said, tapping her foot suggestively at me.

"Hey, I like my used car. Brian happens to like driving it, too. But I get your point. I'll try to talk to Brian about finding a new place to live after his lease is up."

"After his lease is up? I don't think so. I'll talk to him tonight. I already started putting together a list of houses I'd like, so maybe I'll send the ones I've decided against to you."

I gave her a disapproving look. "Brian's right. You're gonna be broke and living with us before you're thirty."

She stuck her tongue out at me and then we both laughed.

Stephanie was right: the ballroom was awe inspiring. Every last detail was perfectly planned and the guests were all enjoying the food, alcohol, and dancing when we arrived twenty minutes late. Despite how perfect everything was, it didn't feel right until my eyes fell on Brian.

I could feel Stephanie tugging on my hand, telling me all the details of everything that she'd planned, but her words sounded muted. My only focus was on the man walking towards me, taking me in with his eyes. I squeezed Stephanie's arm and walked toward Brian, meeting him in the middle of the dance floor.

"Hey there, stranger," I said with a smile I could feel throughout my pampered body.

He responded with a tender kiss, but we could both feel the careful restraint in it. As he was about to say something, the DJ came on the intercom and announced my arrival. With all eyes on us, the DJ asked everyone to clear the floor so we could have our first dance as husband and wife.

With our eyes locked on each other, Brian wrapped his arm around my waist and softly caressed my cheek before wrapping his other one around, too. I hooked my hands behind his neck, gently playing with the hair at the base of his neck as we swayed together to the music. If I'd taken time to consider all the eyes watching us, I might've been embarrassed. But he was the only thing in the world that commanded my attention; the way his deodorant and cologne perfectly complimented each other, making my nose want to continually inhale; the perfection of his dark hair, how even when it was a mess, it still beckoned my fingers to comb through it. Then there were his blue eyes... those piercing globes to his soul. I could spend endless hours getting lost in them and had. I bit my lip as my eyes fell on his lips, imagining all the different ways those had sent me reeling to a different plane of existence. I shivered slightly, then laughed as Brian twirled me quickly, obviously sensing the same "we should be alone" tension building.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Brian said with a wink as the crowd whistled and cheered when the song came to an end.

"We'll have to try that again when we don't have so many people watching us," I said as I stared longingly in his eyes.

His soft laugh made my heart flutter, but I managed to pull myself together as we made our way to the tables where we spent the next half an hour visiting with our family and friends. I was happy to see my parents came; it was the first I'd seen them since I'd become Mrs. Turner. After promising a dance to Dad, we continued to the cake table.

You will not shove cake in Ashlyn's face, I commanded of Brian as we stood on the raised platform, ready to feed each other.

His eyebrow quirked and a sly grin crossed his face; I knew he was considering suffering the head splitting pain to go against me. So before he had a chance to make the decision, I went for it and covered his nose and mouth in white, whipped topping and cake.

"It's on," he said in a low voice, narrowing his eyes at me.

I laughed and jumped off the platform, running away from him. Of course, he was much faster than me since he wasn't wearing four inch heels. Grabbing my arm, he spun me around so fast, his hand collided with the top of my chest. Probably not where he intended, he smashed the cake all over me anyway while rubbing his messy face all over mine, kissing me playfully.

I had tears in my eyes from laughing so hard and everyone erupted in cheers and claps. I quickly searched the crowd for Stephanie, figuring she'd be mad about my dress and hair being ruined, but couldn't find her with all the flashes from all the cameras going off.

As we were walking back towards the cake table, she found me. "Oh my God, you two. Your dress... it's ruined!" She sighed, but could tell she wasn't that upset. "Oh. I forgot to give you this," she said, shoving a garter in my hand. "Quick. Go put it on."

No sooner had she said that, the DJ called for the single men to gather in the center of the room.

"I'm going to kill you, Steph," I said through gritted teeth, knowing she didn't forget to give it to me, but rather waited until I couldn't refuse to put it on.

She smiled coyly and walked towards the DJ.

I balanced against Brian and slid the satin band up my leg, adjusting it through my dress. "Remember, both our parents are here," I warned as he led me towards the chair in the middle of the floor.

Of course, that made Brian laugh and he scooped me up in his arms and carried me the rest of the way, whispering in my ear before releasing me, "That never stopped me before." He knelt on the floor in front of me, winking as he walked his fingers up my leg to the cheers of the crowd.

I felt the blood rush to my cheeks as I sat embarrassed at the mercy of my husband. Looking around the room to see the reaction of our relatives, my eyes stopped on the man entering the ballroom wearing a pair of jeans and a bowling shirt.

Brian lightly smacked my leg as he felt me tense. "I'm behaving," he whispered from under my skirt, inching the garter down.

The embarrassment was gone, though, and replaced by anger. Why would Edric show up here of all places? I know I didn't ask him to be invited. My internal dialogue was cut short as everyone cheered at the sight of Brian emerging with the garter between his teeth, his arms raised high in the air in triumph.

"Who wants it?" he shouted at the crowd of guys.

I was irritated to see Edric making his way over to the crowd and even less thrilled when he managed to step in at the last moment and catch the garter.

"You have to throw your bouquet now," Stephanie urged in my ear, shoving some flowers in my hand as the DJ called for the single women to approach.

Brian helped me out of the chair and then lifted me up on top of it.

"Now close your eyes, Ash. No fair playing favorites," Stephanie said from next to me.

I took a deep breath and threw the flowers backwards over my head, turning around just in time to see Khari catch the bouquet and Lani throw her a slightly irritated look before retreated to the table with Logan.

Brian lifted me down, getting more remnants of cake on his shirt. "Would you like to go somewhere to get cleaned up?" he whispered with a playful spark in his eyes. "With me..."

I couldn't keep from smiling at him. No matter how the world around me brought me down, all it took was him to make it all melt away.

Stephanie interrupted our moment, smacking Brian on the arm. "Not yet. You have to dance with the lucky singles that caught the garter and flowers."

"What?" I said abruptly. "I thought they were supposed to dance with each other?" *Poor Khari*, I thought.

"That's boring. We want them to enjoy the experience of dancing with the newlyweds... like a good luck and here's what's in store for you type thing."

I rolled my eyes, feeling dread at the thought of dancing with Edric. *Maybe he gave it away to someone else when he realized he'd have to dance with me*, I thought closing my eyes as Stephanie and Brian led me back to the middle of the dance floor.

I smiled at Khari as she stepped up to dance with Brian. "Don't think about trying to win him away from me," I joked as I waited for my dance partner.

Brian nodded and Khari smiled at Edric as he stepped forward to claim his prize. They continued dancing away from us as Edric took one of my hands and placed his other on my hip. I kept a straight face as I stiffly followed his lead.

"You might want to smile. You're going to make people think I'm not a good dancer," he said.

"Why are you here?"

"I was invited. And since I didn't have anything else to do, I thought it'd be nice to score a free meal." He spun me around, returning his hand to my hip.

I stumbled slightly at the abruptness of the turn. "I know I didn't invite you."

He shrugged, apparently not phased by how rude I was being to him. "Ken and Audrey invited me the other night when I was over. You have a nice room there, by the way. Mind if I stay there since you obviously won't be living there anymore?"

"Don't touch my stuff," I warned. I glanced over at Brian and Khari, who were talking and laughing a lot.

Edric chuckled, but it was more condescending than pleasant. "Feisty as always. Good to see some things don't change. Although, I have to admit I'm surprised by all this happening so soon," he commented, looking around at the ballroom.

"What's that supposed to mean," I said, recovering from another spin.

"It seems like my appearance here has forced things to happen before their time," he said casually. "I hope other things aren't affected too much."

As furious as I was with him, I was relieved to finally hear that Brian and I were married in Cowan's version of the future.

"Oh, he didn't tell you, did he," Edric mused, seeing the moment of realization flash across my features.

I quickly reformed my scowl, unamused by his taunts. "I know everything I need to know about my future," I insisted.

"You bought into that crap about not knowing your future?" He threw his head back and laughed, forcing Brian and Khari's eyes over. "Don't worry, Ashlyn. You get less naïve as you age."

"Did you catch the garter so you'd have an opportunity to mock me?"

He shrugged and dipped me backwards. "Actually, I wanted to commend you on how well you and Chel have done in crippling CES."

I gasped. *How'd he...* "How'd you know about that?"

He rolled his eyes in annoyance. "This time is old news to me. Besides..." he stopped and looked around the room, then continued in a whisper, like he didn't want anyone to hear what he was revealing. "It's all over the television and newspapers, how CES is in financial trouble."

"You're an ass," I said, not lowering my voice. I tried to push him away, but he held on tighter until the song was over.

Finally, Edric released my hip, but drew my hand to his lips. As he kissed my skin, he sent a sharp, shocking pain throughout my hand. "Enjoy your night," he said as I pulled my hand quickly from his grasp as he walked over to Khari.

Brian walked in front of me as I stood rubbing my hand, staring at Edric and Khari clearly enjoying their dance together.

"Hey," Brian said, waving his hand in front of my face. "Everything okay?"

"Just dance with me, please?" I begged, quickly latching myself around his torso and burying my head into his chest.

Brian chuckled softly and held me back, swaying gently to the music. "It looked like you were enjoying your dance with Edric."

I growled. "Not remotely."

"Why? What happened?" he asked, halting our dance.

"Nothing. Nevermind," I said, swaying slightly to urge him to continue.

"Will you tell me about it later?" he asked as he kissed the top of my head and turned us around so I wasn't facing Edric and Khari dancing.

I chose to ignore his question because I wasn't sure I wanted to talk about it. I didn't want to waste my time talking, thinking, or worrying about Edric. I just wanted him to return to his future and face the consequences for his actions. I wasn't sure if he was able to return, though, which made my inner eye roll dramatically as I considered that possible conversation. "How much longer until we can leave?" I didn't know how Edric had the power to upset me to my core, yet everyone else seemed to enjoy his company.

"Soon, Ash. People are eating cake now, so they'll probably start leaving shortly."

"Good," I whispered and tried to get lost again in Brian's energy.

When the song ended, my eyes followed Edric as he walked with Khari to Ken's table, whispering something to Ken and laughing. He bowed his head slightly to the table and then walked towards the door, tipping an imaginary hat in Brian's and my direction.

"Good riddance," I muttered as we rejoined the party where I allowed all those thoughts and worries to disappear and enjoyed the rest of the night with my husband, family, and friends.

"So are you going to tell me what happened in there?" Brian asked as he scraped a sliver of leftover frosting off my chest in the elevator on the way up to our suite, a gift from Stephanie.

I felt exhausted and laughed quietly. "Maybe I'm wrong, but I think Steph just successfully threw her first wedding party. She has quite a gift. You should encourage her to make a career out of it."

Brian sighed and pulled me into his chest. "That's not what I was talking about."

I started unbuttoning his shirt and lightly kissed his chest. "Not tonight. I don't want to think about Edric or Ken or our parents expecting grandkids or anything else but you tonight." I looked up at him with pleading eyes, batting my eyelashes. "Please?"

Brian smiled warmly. "I think we can manage that."

Chapter Twenty-Nine – Back to Business

One night of marital bliss and then it was back to business. Sunday afternoon, Ken called a meeting.

“They are going to recoup their losses if we don’t act soon,” Audrey insisted.

“We can’t just rush in there again. We have to know what our goal is and exactly how we’ll accomplish it, not this vague ‘bring them down’ scheme we keep talking about,” Alex insisted.

I looked sadly at him as he combed his fingers through his hair in frustration. When his eyes settled on me at the end of his rant, I quickly looked away feeling ashamed. While I was glad Morgan wasn’t there to be affected by all this stress, I felt bad that he was forced to return. Morgan stayed with her father and sister in Montreal.

“Chel and I are trying to work through more specifics,” I began, “but it’s been difficult with everything else going on.”

As I was talking, Edric walked in and leaned against the wall next to the door.

“We know you both have been busy, but Alex is right. We need to get a solid plan in place now and I think Ric has some great insight,” Ken said, motioning for Edric to take over.

I shuddered as Ken so casually referred to him as “Ric”. My disdain for Edric grew, first because he was friendly enough with my friends to have a nickname and second because it was the same name as my former nemesis.

The glint in Edric’s eyes as they briefly connected with mine told me he was very aware of the effect that name had on me.

Before he could speak, I quickly interjected. “Cowan didn’t think it was a good idea to share with us his specific knowledge of the future. I know that you *think* Edric’s knowledge is invaluable, but I believe it would be better for us to do this without his help.”

Ken was about to speak, but Edric held up his hand to stop him. “Duly noted, but since Cowan isn’t here to provide his well-timed clues, perhaps you could reconsider. It’s not like I have intimate knowledge of how everything went down; I was only a small child and have only read up on the accounts. I do know, however, that many of the company leaders will plan a retreat to figure out how to combat their little financial difficulties.”

“When is this ‘retreat’ supposedly going to happen? We don’t have any information about something like that in the works,” I interrupted, my eyes narrowing as I stared down Edric.

He just laughed. “So does this mean you’re willing to accept my help now, Ashlyn?”

Ken stepped in to intervene, as usual. “We wouldn’t have invited you here if we didn’t want your help, Ric. Please continue. How long do we have until this point of vulnerability?”

Brian squeezed my shoulder and urged me to sit down next to him.

I surrendered, but only for Brian’s sake, folding my arms across my chest, listening with suspicious ears as Edric continued.

“Their leaving coincided with my return from my first official outing, so it should be-” He paused to look at his phone. “-within the next three weeks.”

“You know the date of your first time outside CES?” I scoffed.

Brian squeezed my knee as if begging me not to make more of an issue out of Edric being there.

Edric shrugged indifferently. “It’s not like you can forget the first time you killed someone. Isn’t that right, Ashlyn?”

I flinched as he said that, remembering the innocent people I failed to protect from Rick and then the final moments when I set Rick up to be shot, each bullet shocking his entire body as it hit while I lay on the ground holding onto consciousness so I could witness the moment when his life ended. Even though I didn’t technically pull the trigger, it was only because of me that the police were able to bring him down.

I didn't have a chance to contrive a clever response because Alex quickly stood up and took over. "So this gives us a small window to lay down the specifics so we can take full advantage of their vulnerability."

I continued staring at Edric, my jaw and hands clenched tight.

"Ash? Will you be able to get Chel here so we can all work this out together instead of just the two of you over the phone?" Ken asked.

Brian nudged me into answering. "Yeah. I have to talk to her later today. I'll see what I can set up and let you know," I said as my eyes slowly left Edric to address Ken and then scanned the rest of the faces in the room. All looked at me with a saddened expression as if my unwillingness to trust Edric was a betrayal to them.

"Good," Ken said with a nod to the rest of the group. "I'll be in contact with each team as soon as we have a time and place nailed down to meet with Chel. Thank you all for coming."

Edric threw a sideways grin at me and dipped his head slightly before leaving. The others filed out after him, but I refused to get up until I knew Edric was long gone.

"Real smooth there, Ash," Audrey said as she passed by with Ken.

While it looked like the rest of them shared Audrey's sentiment, Khari delivered it a little nicer on her way out. "You should lighten up on him a little, Ash. He's really only looking to help." She smiled softly, but I remained seated, unwilling to remove the scowl from my face, still not able to believe how easily they accepted the man who killed two of our friends.

When I was alone with Brian, I looked to him for reassurance that I was in the right.

"What do you mean 'they have a point'?" I asked in horror after Brian tried to nicely tell me that I was making more of it than I should.

His voice was soft and loving, his eyes pleaded with me to understand. "I'm not saying what you said is wrong, but for now, you have to put all that aside and work with the team if you want to succeed."

"Fine," I said quietly, angry with Brian for not taking my side.

Eventually, I cooled off a little after Brian made me lunch and rubbed my shoulders until I let go of most of my forced tension, which was just in time for him to firm up his plans with Logan and Ken to go to the bar to watch a game.

"You're going over to the house to be with the girls, right?" Brian asked for the fifth time as he stood in the doorway ready to leave.

"I told you I would," I said, playfully kissing his tense lips. "I need to start packing up my room there, anyway." I bit the inside of my cheek to stop the shudder I felt as I remembered that Edric had been in there.

"Okay. You're going over soon, right?"

"As soon as I get off the phone with Chel, I promise I'll head straight over. And yes, I'll keep you up to date on my whereabouts." I winked at him as I pushed on his chest, indicating he should go.

"Please be careful and let me know when you get there. I'm not the only one going to be by myself and vulnerable to attacks, you know."

His face was still far too serious as he nodded. "I promise."

I kept my eyes on him as he got in his Jeep and drove away. Then I silently connected with him and watched until he was inside the bar, sitting with Ken. I was causing everyone enough grief; I didn't need to add to his stress by letting him in on how paranoid I was about his safety. The fact that he was moments away from being executed right in front of me and there wasn't anything I could've safely done to stop it really humbled me. With him seated comfortably with our gifted friend, I was able to make the call I'd been anxious to make since I left the meeting.

"How're things at the top?" I tried to joke as Chel answered the phone.

“Probably twice as stressful as things on your end sound. How was the party?”

I could hear her typing quickly on her computer, but decided to jump right into the important stuff. “Edric showed up.”

“Really? That sounds like fun,” she said, her attention obviously still focused elsewhere.

“Chel. This is serious. Can you stop and listen to me? Edric showed up at the party for the soul reason to taunt me.”

“What do you mean?” Chel asked, her focus finally shifting towards me.

“He forced a dance with me and gloated about how he knew what we were doing... specifically you and me. You haven’t shared our plan with anyone, have you?”

“Seriously, Ash. Why would I do that? You and I both know the risk in all of this.”

I nodded as I walked around the apartment picking up clothing and dishes. “I know. I’m sorry, it was just weird having him know it was us doing it. Regardless of what’s been in the news, for it to come back to us still bugs me. Also, he basically challenged me to try to do something about his involvement. When the dance was over, he kissed my hand and shocked me, telling me to enjoy my night. I hate him, Chel. But no one else seems to get how dangerous he is.”

“I get it. I really do. I warned you about how charming he was. What about Brian? What does he think about Edric after he shocked you?”

My shoulders slumped. “I didn’t tell him about that. But he seems to be on everyone else’s side when it comes to Edric.” I sighed and fell back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

“Don’t hold it against him, Ash. It’s not his fault. Just try to keep an eye on Edric and if he does anything out of line, let me know and you and I will deal with it alone.”

“Thanks. I never imagined that you’d be the one I’d trust more than anyone else. It’s killing me to not be able to confide in Brian.” I closed my eyes and forced a single tear to fall down my face, tunneling into my ear.

Chel laughed. “You and me, both. Oh, hey, I wanted to let you know that I think I will be out there in ten days. There are a few things I need to deal with in person at that office and have been able to secure my travel for then.”

“Umm... about that... is there any chance of you making that trip a little sooner? Ken’s adamant on everyone being involved in making the final plans and get this, according to Edric, the big wigs are going to go on some kind of retreat to deal with their little money crisis. Supposedly that’s going to be our opportunity to strike.” I rolled my eyes as I considered the source of the information.

Chel’s fingers drumming on the desk was the only indication I had that she was still on the other end of the line. Finally, after a few minutes of silence, she said, “I’ll see what I can do. I was hoping to have a month or two before we’d have to move. I’ll call you back as soon as I have made new arrangements.”

“Okay. I guess we’ll talk more when you get here,” I said, sitting up.

“Yeah. Oh, and Ash? Be careful around Edric. I don’t know how I know this, but he’s not so gallant as everyone else sees him. But you can’t trust anyone else to see him that way. So be cool around him and just take notice of the small things he doesn’t want people to see.”

“Got it. You be careful, too. And thanks. Thanks for trusting me.”

I didn’t plan to reveal the specifics of the phone call with anyone, not even Brian. After I got off the phone with Chel, I connected with Brian and told him I was going to the house. When I arrived, Lani, Khari, and Audrey were watching a movie.

“Hey guys,” I said, stopping in the doorway of the living room.

Khari smiled and motioned for me to join them, making room for me on the couch.

“Naa,” I said. “I have to get some work done in my old room. I’m sure you guys will want to find someone else to rent it since you’re down two roommates now,” I smiled, looking to Lani.

Audrey mumbled something incoherent and got hit with a pillow from Khari.

I shrugged and left them to their movie, closing the door to my old room as I entered.

I'm safe at the house, I whispered to Brian after taking a quick look around his surroundings at the bar when I connected with him. I stayed with him while he nodded and traced a heart in the sweat on his glass and then I returned to my own mind. I rubbed my head as I looked around the room, trying to find a logical place to start packing.

I finally decided my clothes were the most important thing to move, so I set up a box and carefully folded clothes from my closet, setting them neatly in the box. After a few minutes, I gave up on trying to preserve their state and began tossing shirts and dresses carelessly over my head, making a game out of seeing how close to the box I could get them.

Several minutes later, there was a soft knock at my door. "You okay in there?" Lani asked, cautiously opening my door.

Still giggling, I tossed a shirt at her. "Yes. Just a long overdue stress reliever at the expense of my clothes."

Lani folded my shirt and set it gently in the box before sitting on my bed and busying herself with folding the other clothes that were in piles. "Yeah, looks like it. I wanted to talk to you about that. What's up between you and Ric?"

I flinched internally when she said his name, but continued pulling clothes from the hangers. "Edric doesn't belong here. In fact, he murdered someone to be here. And no one else seems to have a problem with that," I blurted out. I hadn't intended to unload on her like that, but apparently I did need a stress relief.

"I know it had to have been rough to have been there when Deven died..." she began.

"When he *killed* Deven you mean? That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about how he killed Cowan to have the opportunity to come back to this time and meddle with things. Aside from the obvious horror of his actions, did you ever stop to consider *why* he chose to come back? Do you think it's for some noble reason to help us bring down CES?" I didn't give her an opportunity to answer. "No, it's for something far more selfish. We just happen to be able to provide him with the means to get what he wants."

There was clapping from the hallway before Edric rounded the corner. "Bravo. Nice speech. Really. You should consider going into some kind of public speaking or something."

Lani looked nervously between Edric and me, but remained silent.

"Get out," I demanded through my clenched teeth.

"Ash," Lani whispered, but he held up his hand to her and she immediately close her mouth.

"It's okay, Lani. Ash is just struggling with the loss of her friends. It's natural for her to lash out like this," he said like he was speaking to a small child. "Could you give us a couple of minutes to work this out?"

Lani nodded to him without looking at me and walked back out to join the others in the living room.

I walked closer to him, blocking his entry into the room and repeated, "Get out."

"You realize that you're not going to win, so you might as well settle back and accept that I'm going to be working with you." He pushed his way past me, picking up random pieces of clothing off the comforter and dropping them into the box, nodding. "You have good taste in clothing," he commented as he settled down on the bed.

"And another thing," I continued, ripping a silk blouse from his hands. "It's Ashlyn to you. Only my friends get to call me Ash."

"And what makes you think we aren't friends?" he asked with a laugh.

"You are what CES made you to be. I could never be friends with someone like you," I said in low, angry tones.

“Ouch, *Ashlyn*,” he said, emphasizing my entire name. “How could you ever accuse me of being something as atrocious as a CES goon? Does this have something to do with things Chel has told you? Because I assure you, she only hates me because she’s jealous of things that happened before I had any control.”

I scoffed. “I find that hard to believe. I think you’ve always known what you were and relished every manipulated treatment that CES gave you because it made you more than what you ever would’ve been alone. You hated Dev for what he did to your dad, but without that, you wouldn’t be who you are.”

Edric jumped up and pinned me to the wall, the first I’d seen him lose his composure. “Don’t talk about my dad like that. You are not worthy to speak of what happened because you are as much to blame as Deven and Chel are. You *will* get what’s coming to you, just like Deven did. Just like Chel will.” His eyes narrowed on mine, and then his expression suddenly changed and he released me, resuming his seat on my bed like that scene didn’t happen.

After straightening my shirt, I walked over to the bed and pulled him up by his. “Your threats don’t scare me, but you should take mine to heart. If you even *try* to hurt anyone else I care about, you’ll find yourself chin deep in water, shocking the crap out of yourself.”

While he stood there with an amused grin on his face, I connected with his mind and commanded him to shock his own hand, quickly departing so I could lay witness.

Bewildered, he obeyed, but remained defiantly silent. His eyes told a different story, though, and I could see that it was both physically painful and mentally shocking for me to surprise him with that attack. Unlike our first encounter when he was prepared for me to try to stop him and blocked it, despite the pain, this time he was helpless to defy me.

I did well to hide my own pain that was a result of me using my gift for the wrong reason. “Don’t mess with me,” I said slow enough for him to comprehend.

Finally, he’d recovered enough to resume his previous, arrogant demeanor. “Nice show, *Ashlyn*. Very nice. You certainly proved your point to me,” he said sarcastically.

“I think we’re done here. You know your way out,” I said while holding my door open.

He paused for a moment then walked past me out the door, stopping a few steps into the hallway. “So Chel will be here tomorrow afternoon then? I’m looking forward to our next meeting.” He winked at me with a snide grin then left after saying goodbye to the others.

“Chel will be here tomorrow?” Khari called from the couch.

I shrugged. “Haven’t heard.” I walked back into my former room and continued packing alone.

I tried following Chel’s advice and put aside my animosity for Edric, but when Brian showed up after the game, he knew immediately that something was wrong.

“What? Did the girls say something to you?” I fired back harshly. Realizing quickly that I couldn’t be upset with him for Edric’s actions, I softened my tone and asked, “How was the game?”

Brian was already frowning and answered half-heartedly. “Fine. We lost. What happened here tonight?”

I circled my head, stretching out my neck and closed my door. “Just had a minor disagreement with Edric. Nothing for you to worry about, though.” I ran my fingers across his brow, trying to smooth away his concern.

He took my hand away from his face and continued looking at me with a serious expression. “This has to stop, Ash. You can’t keep fighting with him. Everyone else is at least willing to bite their tongues to get through this. Why can’t you do the same?”

“Is that what you’re doing? Biting your tongue about him or biting it right now in order to not tell me what you’re really thinking?” I pulled my hand out of his grasp and backed up, glaring at him. “I’m a big girl. Tell me how great *Ric* is and how I’m making a problem when there isn’t one.”

Brian threw his hands up in frustration and then settled them in his pockets. "Honestly? I think it's possible you're letting your feelings you still have for Deven cloud your judgment of this situation. I hate to tell you this, but Deven was the one who was there to do the killing. He had no remorse for what he was about to do, about what he'd already done however many times. In fact," he continued, walking towards me, pulling his hands from his pockets, "he plotted and executed the death sentence of a completely innocent person, someone who was just along for the ride, like me. So in my book, Ric did everyone a favor by offing Deven. He got what he had coming."

My jaw dropped slightly, partially because of the harshness of his accusations of me and partially because there was a truth in what he said. "I...", I started, but didn't know where to go. My shoulders fell in defeat. I knew at that moment, regardless of how I felt and what I knew about Edric, I had to bury it deep, like Chel suggested. I sighed and looked down. "I'm sorry. I didn't think about it like that. It's true that I care about Dev, but only as a friend," I added quickly, pleading for him to not misunderstand. "He lost himself and I held onto hope that he'd find his way back to the group and do good again."

We stood there in strained silence, staring into each other's eyes. I was searching for a way to make things better and hoped he was doing the same.

Finally, I said, "What do I need to do?"

He shook his head. "What does that mean?"

"I can see this hurt you, the idea that I had lingering feelings for Dev. But it's not how you think. You are the only one I've ever wanted to be with. I wouldn't have married you if there was even a sliver of a doubt," I added, holding up my wedding ring.

"Even in death, that guy still has the ability to piss me off," Brian said, his voice mirroring his softened features as he approached me and wrapped his arms around me. "I'm sorry for not telling you sooner how upset it's made me to think about why you held such a grudge against Ric."

There's a bigger reason, I said in my head, but allowed the thought to go unspoken and squeezed my arms tightly around his chest. "I'm sorry, too."

Edric was correct about one thing... Chel arrived the following afternoon and came immediately to Brian's apartment from the airport. It worried me that he could be right about more things, too, specifically getting revenge against Chel and me. I did my best to put it aside as a hollow threat and tried to remain focused on the real reason for Chel's visit: nailing down a plan and putting it into action.

"I know there are a few holes in this," Chel said, "but I think with everyone else's input on how they can use their specialties better than this, it will be a strong plan. I think we can really do this."

Brian reached around me and pointed to a spot on the blueprints. "So this is where I'm going to be the whole time while Ash is here?" His finger drew a line across the paper to the far side of the building where I'd be completing my assigned tasks. I didn't have to see his face to know how much he disapproved of this.

"Yes, after the situation with Ethan, we don't want anyone in there..."

Brian cut her off midsentence. "...that can't use some mystical gift to get them out of a situation. Yeah, I got it."

"I need you safe," I whispered, squeezing his inner thigh.

"But I need you safe, too. I can't keep you safe if I'm on the other side of the universe." He maneuvered around me and stood up, running his fingers through his hair as he walked towards the kitchen.

I felt his frustration and looked at Chel with pleading eyes.

She shook her head. "How are you going to pay attention to everything you have to do when you're worried about his safety? We're going in during business hours. It's going to take every ounce of

your concentration and quick thinking to get to where you need to be. I'm sorry guys. He's got to be in a safe zone for this one."

"But I...", I started, but was quickly cut off.

"Don't even pretend that you can't benefit from him at this small distance. Yeah, if CES's defenses weren't going to be knocked down, I might reconsider. But if everyone does their jobs right, our gifts will be able to penetrate through. And that includes your gift being Ash's amp, Brian."

I watched Brian carefully, hoping he would find some truth in her explanation.

He closed the fridge and leaned against the counter as he popped off the top of his beer. "There has to be another way I can help other than just standing there and waiting for the building to topple," he said before taking a long swig from the bottle.

"I couldn't do this without you there," I said gently.

He shrugged and half smiled before taking another drink. "I'll be there doing whatever you need me to do. I might not like this, but I'm part of this team. I won't let you down." You could almost hear the word "again" as he brought the bottle back to his lips. "So, I guess we need to get over to the house and meet with the rest of the group now?"

I exhaled the tension that had been mounting in my body and looked to Chel who was gathering the plans and closing her laptop. "Yeah," I said. "They're expecting us in an hour. So let's grab some pizzas to take over with us. It might be a long night."

Chapter Thirty – Kill Shot

Everything about this time felt different: different time of year, different group make up, different time of day, and Brian was with me. I held his hand tightly the entire ride to the rendezvous point. The bond between us outshone the obvious tension and fear that hung in the air. His presence filled me with a calm, focused energy.

“Australia,” I said as he parked his Jeep next to Logan and Lani’s car.

“Excuse me?” he asked, startled by the sound of my voice.

“Our honeymoon. I want to go to Australia,” I said, adjusting in my seat to face him.

“Umm... okay? Maybe we can talk about this more later,” he suggested as he pulled the keys from the ignition and reached for his door handle.

“No,” I insisted and tugged his arm towards me. “I want to decide this now.”

“Ash. Baby. You need to focus on what you’re supposed to be doing in there, not a far off vacation,” he said carefully.

I shook my head adamantly. “I need you to know that there will be a honeymoon and that I will be fine in there. And likewise you will be fine with Ken in your spot. And I need to have something outside this mess to look forward to with you and only you.”

He nodded and was silent for a moment. “Let’s see... I don’t know when I’d be able to get time off work...”

I put my finger to his lips to quiet him. “Don’t think practically. Tell me what you want this trip to be.” I bit my lip as he closed his eyes.

“A week... no, a month down under, hiking, boating, surfing, with a stopover in Hawaii,” he said and opened his eyes with a genuine smile on his face. “It will be perfect.”

I returned his smile and nodded. “I have no doubts about that.” It didn’t matter that I was trying to avoid another trip to Hawaii; I didn’t want to remember Valentine’s Day when I was there alone. It only mattered that I succeeded in pulling Brian closer to me in those moments before we would be separated by what would feel like a million miles. I knew Chel was right and I would still feel him giving me strength, but there was nothing that compared to when I was touching him.

We were startled out of our world when Simon tapped on Brian’s window. “Hey guys, it’s just about time. Let’s go.”

I could see Simon smile as he felt our happiness, but didn’t completely understand why until I stepped out of the vehicle; the tension in the group was palpable, even to someone who wasn’t an empath.

As we joined the rest of the group that had already gathered, Ken arrived in a delivery truck.

“Nice wheels,” Logan said with a laugh.

Ken shrugged and stepped out, handing him and me brown clothing. “It’s your ride now. Get changed quickly. We’re meeting Chel in ten minutes.”

I took the uniform around to the far side of the Jeep and started dressing. Brian came over and helped steady me, keeping a very watchful eye on me.

“What? I never said brown was my best color.” I grinned and stood on my toes to give him a quick kiss on his lips before pulling my hair up and tucking it under the hat.

“You look incredible regardless,” he said sincerely.

I wasn’t quite ready to be serious yet, so I added playfully, “I have a special delivery for you later.” I winked and took his hand, rejoining the group.

“Okay, Logan will be driving with Ash in the passenger seat. Everyone else pile in the back. Logan, you know where we’re meeting Chel, right?” Ken was opening the side of the van for everyone to climb in.

“Yeah, it’s our base camp, right?”

“Right,” Ken said, looking around at the faces. “Wait. Where’s Ric?”

I felt my eye twitch at the mention of his name, but kept the rest of myself composed. He had been surprisingly helpful at the planning meeting, working well with everyone, including Chel. The two of them talked in depth about who was in what office and who would be gone for breaks, lunches, and on the company “retreat”, which helped us plan in detail where to place the devices to provide for maximum exposure and success.

As Ken started dialing his phone, Edric drove into the garage and parked next to the Jeep.

“You weren’t going in without me, I hope,” he said as he swung himself into the back and closed the door.

“Nope. Ken was just about to call you, though,” Khari said.

“Nothing like cutting it close,” Audrey said snidely, and was relieved to see she had a little animosity for Edric, too. But then she smiled and everyone laughed.

I didn’t get the joke, so I sat quietly in the front, twisting my wedding ring on my finger, focusing on Australia.

Brian kneeled behind me and rubbed my shoulders as Logan drove us to the meeting point.

Everyone filed out of the van except Logan, Lani, and me. I rolled down my window, saying hi to Chel as the group converged on the driver’s side, hidden from the view of the distant CES building by the van.

“So this is our main camp,” Chel began. “Ash, Lani, and Logan will get the packages inside. Once the shield has been taken out, Audrey will teleport in.”

“I will need to move in closer to get in there. I’ve never made a jump this far,” Audrey interrupted.

“That’s fine. The rest of us will be moving towards the delivery entrance. You can port whenever you feel comfortable. The first goal is to get all the employees out. I don’t think I need to remind you that most of those people are just earning a living. We don’t want any casualties today.”

I nodded with everyone else, but felt a knot form in my stomach.

“Ash, keep in contact with me so we can coordinate our moving in.”

“Won’t security be alerted to the two of them so far in the building?” Edric asked.

“We have someone on the inside that’ll help with that,” she said mysteriously, although I knew who she was referring to.

In the two weeks since Chel arrived, we’d had a lot of time to talk since Brian was working most of the time. She agreed to do her work from the apartment and assigned three people in the office to watch over Brian when we weren’t driving him to and from there. In our discussions, she’d mentioned her continued contact with Sonya. The two of them bonded over their shared assault following our rescue of Simon. While Chel certainly got the worst of it, Sonya was made to suffer for her role in our escape. Sonya sought out Chel in her darkest hours, when she was left beaten and broken in a room and helped her recover. I think it was during the time that they were hunting Chel down that Sonya experienced firsthand that the company she had so much faith in was purely evil. That’s when she started looking for her own way out. I wasn’t sure of the specifics that Sonya would be doing for us, but knew that she was our “inside guy”.

“Once we’re all inside, we’re depending on you, Ash, to be our communicator. You’ll be connecting with Ken and Brian at camp here, with Audrey as she moves around, with myself, Alex, and Simon as we work our way to the upper offices, and with Khari and Edric as they attempt to rescue Eve in the labs. When your assignment is complete, you’ll come back here unless Ash tells you otherwise. We set?”

Everyone murmured their affirmatives, nodding their heads.

After looking at me for a moment, Chel added, “Take a couple of minutes to do whatever you have to. Then we’ll roll.”

I smiled to her in appreciation and then watched as Brian walked in front of the van and opened my door.

Taking my hand and helping me out, he said, "Come here for a minute."

I felt my throat tighten and the tears start to form, but I took deep breaths to try to control my emotions. I had to be strong. I couldn't let him know how nervous I was.

We stopped about fifty yards from the rest of the group, under a tree. "I know you know how much I hate this plan and that I am going against every fiber of my existence letting you do this alone."

I started to say I wasn't alone, that I was staying in a group and would be connecting with him frequently, but he held up his hand and I complied by closing my mouth and hearing him out.

"I want you to hold onto this for me," he said, twisting his wedding band off his finger. "It hasn't left this hand since you placed it there, so I'll need you to return to me and put it back in its place." He placed the white gold band in the palm of my hand and closed my fingers around it.

"I...", my eyebrows scrunched together, not knowing what to say or do.

"Promise me you'll bring it back," he said, staring into my eyes.

I bit my lip hard, fighting back the tears, and nodded to him. "I promise," I whispered and slipped the ring on the thumb of my left hand.

"You're gonna do great and then tonight we'll celebrate, okay?"

My head continued to move in agreement to everything he was saying, but my voice was hard to come by. Finally, after Ken called for everyone to regroup, I took a deep breath and brushed my fingers through his hair on his forehead. "I couldn't do this without you. I love you. Always."

Our lips met for an electrifying moment and then we walked back to rejoin the group.

I couldn't stop playing with Brian's ring or bouncing my legs as we drove towards the rear delivery entrance of CES.

"You're making me more nervous, Ash. Calm down or we won't make it inside, even with your coercion techniques," Lani said softly over my shoulder, already stealthed.

I stopped my legs, but continued twisting the ring in circles around my thumb. "Sorry," I whispered back.

Logan pulled into an empty parking spot designated for deliveries. I was relieved to see there weren't any other trucks parked – less people we'd have to worry about.

I got out of the van and walked around to where Logan was already loading up the hand cart with our packages. I mentally counted the boxes, going over where each was to be placed, and whispered to Lani, "You have the remote, right?"

She startled me by answering in my ear; I hadn't realized she was that close to me. "Of course. It's ready to go on your word."

When she kissed my cheek and breezed away from me, I let out a quiet, stress-relieving laugh. With a deep breath, I grabbed the door of the van, closing it and nodded to Logan that I was ready.

There was a security guard lazily watching the service door. Before we were in his sight, I connected with his mind and told him to take a long lunch. It was obviously something he was considering anyway, so he complied without any consideration.

The door was locked by a keypad, but Chel had provided us with an active code that would gain us access. I believe this was also the way we were communicating with Sonya that we'd arrived, but Chel wouldn't confirm or deny that assumption.

I felt Lani's hand on my shoulder as we entered into the well-lit building, then let go as she went to get in position, waiting to activate the packages.

Logan and I meticulously went from office to office, floor to floor delivering the packages at the assigned locations until we were left with the largest one, entering into the main control room where

Lani was already working on disabling the hardware that assisted the individuals responsible for keep up the company's shield.

When Lani was satisfied with her work, she nodded. Another minute after Lani was ready, Logan, who had taken the device from the box and made the connections to the environmental systems, nodded that he was ready, too.

"Let's do this," I whispered, gripping onto Brian's ring as Logan commenced the countdown.

On *one*, Lani pressed the remote and we could immediately hear the confusion in the hallways as they filled with clouds of smoke. The gas in some of the packages we delivered was specially altered by Chel to mentally manipulate people's symptoms. While they were perfectly safe, they would feel an urgent desire to escape the exaggerated danger, causing them to flee more quickly. Chel had also given everyone in the party immunity to the effects of the gas.

A moment later, the fire alarms sounded and we inserted plugs into our ears. Going forward, the only way for us to communicate would be through me.

The building alarms going off was enough for the outside team to know when it was safe to move, so by the time I tested to see if the shield was down and updated Chel, Audrey was already close enough to teleport inside.

I connected with Lani first and then Logan, repeating their floor assignments. Their only remaining task was to usher everyone from eight of the thirteen floors to safety. After they'd left the room, I took a moment to connect with Brian.

Everything's going as planned. Please let Ken know that we're on track to detonate within thirty minutes.

Brian nodded and whispered, "Be careful," before he turned to Ken to relay the information.

I lingered for another second before breaking the connection with him and connecting with Audrey, who was already busy helping people towards the stairwells. *You're doing great, Audrey,* I said and then broke the connection with her.

After checking in on Logan and Lani's progress, I connected with Chel. *Everyone's exiting the building. We're on track.* I noticed her, Khari, Alex, Simon, and Edric entering in the same door we'd passed through, squeezing past the coughing people. Khari and Edric broke off from them and went downstairs while Chel calmly walked with her team to the elevators, which had returned to the bottom floor as soon as the alarms went off. Entering in, she nodded to the camera. The alarms quieted and the door closed, taking the occupants up to the top floor.

I broke my connection with Chel and leaned against the wall, staring at the device that was going to bring the building to the ground. I said a silent prayer, wanting everyone to make it out safely, then started my round of communications again.

Lani and Logan were done escorting people out around the same time as Audrey; only the top floors, which were Simon and Alex's responsibilities, Sonya, which was Chel's, and the lab personnel that Edric and Khari were retrieving, including Eve and the child version of Edric, remained.

"Tell Lani, Logan, and Audrey to get out and then activate the machine. The timer's set for fifteen minutes, which should be enough time for the rest of us to finish and get out. I want you to get to the door and wait for me to come out; I will be the last out," Chel told me when I connected with her again with the updates.

I did as she asked, noticing the smoke starting to clear a little on some of the lower levels that Lani and Logan were combing again. After seeing the three make it safely outside and begin ushering people further away from the building, I connected with Khari to assess their progress.

"She doesn't know, Ric. Let her get out," Khari insisted.

What's going on? I asked, concerned with the urgency in her voice.

"We can't find the boy," Khari explained.

"I'm not going to die in this damn building," I heard Edric bark.

Let me see if anyone else has him. You just work on finding Eve now, I commanded.

As soon as Khari nodded and told Edric to look for Eve, I connected with Chel again. *They can't locate little Edric. I told them to concentrate on finding Eve. I'm going to start searching for him.*

"No, the child is safe," Chel explained and turned to face Sonya, who was picking up a few things from her desk while holding a young child. I was startled by how old he was, since it had only been a few months since his birth.

Okay, I'll let them know. Are you on your way out now?

"I have something to get from upstairs and will be leaving within five minutes. Make sure Alex and Simon are on their way out and then check back in with Khari."

I did as she instructed. As soon as I confirmed Alex and Simon got out safely, I connected with Brian again, letting him know who was left inside and that I'd be leaving the building within five minutes, as soon as Chel had made it out.

I assumed Khari and Edric wouldn't have any problems rescuing Eve and getting out in that timeframe, but I was wrong. I waited by the door, but when Chel arrived and the others were still inside trying to save Eve, the knot in my stomach returned.

"They're still in, trying to convince Eve to come," I said urgently to Chel.

"I was afraid of this. Her mind is so deteriorated..." Chel rubbed her forehead and sighed. "Okay, I'm going down there. You connect with them and tell them they have until I show up to get Eve out. If not..."

She didn't need to finish the sentence. I gulped and grabbed her arm. "No, I should go. Maybe I can force her to come. I have to try. I owe it to her."

Chel hesitated for a moment and then nodded. "You need to be out in five minutes, with or without her. Do whatever you have to. I'm going to wait here as long as I can. Contact me if you need me there."

I nodded and ran to the stairs, connecting with Khari to tell her I was on my way to help.

When I entered the lab, Eve was backing up, holding a metal pole defensively.

"I promise I'll keep you safe," Edric said with a quiet, urgent voice. "But you're not safe here, you've never been." He held out one hand, stepping closer to her.

She swung at Edric. "Stay away from me. I need to find Dev. Where is he? What did you do to him?" Her voice was as crazed sounding as her eyes suggested.

Her accusation caught Edric off guard. "I... I did what I had to do. But you're safe with me. Please?" His voice was filled with emotion.

"Edric. She doesn't even know where she is. Her mind isn't her own anymore," Khari tried explaining.

"I told you to shut up!" he barked, glaring at me before turning back to Eve.

Acting irrationally, Edric lunged at Eve. She was surprisingly quick to respond, even with her altered mind. She swung hard, connecting the metal with Edric's right shoulder, sending him flying into a desk. Glass beakers and vials crashed to the ground as he struggled to regain his balance, rubbing his arm.

Eve took advantage of the distance and ran into an office, locking the door and grabbing the phone, only to throw it against the glass window a moment later when she discovered the phone lines had been severed.

I looked urgently at Khari, who nodded and was immediately at the door, trying to pick the lock. "I can't break this one," she said frantically, trying several other tools in succession along with her gift. "It's a completely different lock. I can't get it open."

Edric had recovered and shoved Khari away from the door, trying all the same tools that Khari had just used.

“Get out,” I whispered to her, looking down at the watch I’d put on to keep track of the time. “I have one last thing I can try and then we’ll have to leave her.”

Khari squeezed my arm and ran out of the room, looking back on us with a worried expression.

I took a deep breath and moved closer to the office. Eve was inside screaming, begging Deven to help her. When I squeezed Edric’s unhurt shoulder, he smacked my hand away.

“I can’t get this open. Make her come out,” he growled angrily.

I nodded and tried to connect with Eve. Her brain fought against the connection and I had to break off as a sharp pain shot through my head. “I can’t. Her brain...”

“I don’t care. Force your way in there and make her come out,” Edric said, electric charges pulsing between his fingers. He discharged on the lock, but the door remained closed.

I held onto Brian’s ring and closed my eyes, fighting through Eve’s defenses. *Unlock the door and leave with them.*

An ear piercing shriek caused me to break the connection. I looked in with my own eyes as she thrashed around, holding her head. I noticed a trickle of blood coming from her nose and another from her ear; she was fighting against us so hard that she was literally killing herself.

“Dev! Save me, please?” she wailed.

“Your son needs you,” Edric yelled, banging on the glass. He turned and grabbed a chair, throwing it at the door, but it was deflected by the security glass, nearly missing both of us.

“You lie!” she yelled. “I don’t have a son! I only have Dev! Dev! Where are you?”

“Edric, she doesn’t know,” I said softly while gently taking hold of his forearm. “I’ve read her file. Her brain is too damaged. She can’t be fixed.”

“That’s a bunch of crap,” he snapped and freed himself of my grasp by sending an electric current along his arm.

“We have to go,” I said angrily, looking at the seconds ticking away. “I can’t make her come and neither can you.”

“You’re pathetic,” he said and grabbed another chair, throwing it at another window with the same result as before.

Eve screamed again inside and then balled herself up on the floor, sobbing in her hands as the blood ran down her forearm.

We had just under two minutes to get away from the building before the explosion. *Forget about Eve and get out of here now,* I commanded, connecting with Edric.

He’d been too focused on Eve to be able to block me. His gaze immediately left Eve’s dying body and focused on the exit.

I took a last look at the shell of my friend, feeling my throat tighten and tears start streaming down my face. *Find peace,* I said as I connected with her one last time. I watched her breathing slow for a moment and then turned and ran in the same direction that Edric had just exited.

I’m running out. Get to safety, I commanded Chel as my feet landed on every other step up to the main floor.

The building was eerily quiet. I had nothing to focus on by the loud thumping of my heart as I ran as fast as I could towards the nearest exit. Out the glass doors, past the fountains, and into the parking lot was as far as I got before the deafening explosions sounded and the building began imploding like I’d seen on TV so many times, just like we’d planned.

I was propelled forward by the shock wave and smashed into a parked car. I slid across the hood and hid behind the front wheel, covering my head until the debris stopped raining down, the whole time my tears not slowing.

I’d failed Eve... again. And this time, it’d cost her everything, although arguably, she’d lost everything when Deven had her memories erased. All I could do was hope she’d found true peace before her end and that she’d forgive me.

Khari found me and helped me back to the group. When I arrived, my eyes caught Chel escorting Sonya away. Then I quickly scanned the rest of the crowd, counting the numbers. Only Edric was missing.

“He made it out fine,” Khari said as if she was reading my mind.

With that concern taken care of, I focused everything I had on Brian, who was running towards me. I yielded completely to him as he grabbed me and held me tight, kissing me desperately. I was easily able to ignore all the injuries from Edric and the blast and let myself get lost in the only world I ever wanted to exist in.

Chel was long gone by the time we returned to the apartment after a short debriefing with the group at the coffee shop. Edric wasn't with us, but no one else placed any blame on me for Eve's fate.

“You did everything you could,” Brian insisted again as I stared blankly into the bathroom mirror, wiping the remaining blood and dirt from my skin.

“I know,” I whispered and turned to face him, seeking comfort in his eyes. “Too little, too late, I guess.” I shrugged.

Brian shook his head. “No guessing. This guilt isn't yours. Besides, I thought we were going to celebrate tonight?”

“Maybe another night,” I said sadly. “I just want you to hold me tonight.”

Brian smiled and lifted me into his arms, carrying me to our bed where he held me close until I fell asleep.

Chapter Thirty-One – Memories Fade

A week passed before the group gathered again, this time at a bar to celebrate Lani and Logan getting married. Following our lead, they caught a flight to Las Vegas after our debriefing at the coffee shop on the day CES fell. They spent the rest of the week in Hawaii with her family.

We were chatting happily with each other when a news story came on that caught our attention.

“We’re live at the scene of what appears to be a mass suicide by the heads of the failed company CES. This comes as no surprise to some close to the company that has been struggling financially for over a month. The heads of the company were supposedly meeting at this location to discuss the future of the company, but it appears that instead they planned the collapse of their building and then killed themselves. A sad end to a company that had positively impacted the community for over forty years.”

We all stared in shock at the television long after the story was over, each of us trying to find an explanation for this odd turn of events. I had my suspicions, especially since Chel had been unavailable to return any of my calls.

“I don’t know how,” Logan began, “but I see this as a wedding gift. So thank you whoever is responsible.” He lifted his glass and toasted an imaginary entity.

The rest of us raised our glasses and joined in the toast. While it was a huge relief to not have to worry about CES anymore, a part of me was troubled that Chel had taken that burden upon herself.

I didn’t have much time to dwell on it, though, because soon after we’d tipped back our drinks in celebration, Edric showed up. I stared sadly at his worn face; overgrown stubble, dark circles and frown lines etched his features. I wanted to apologize to him, but he started speaking before I had a chance.

“Hey guys. I guess you’ve been wondering where I’ve been...” he began, throwing his phone on the table. I assumed Ken and some of the others had tried contacting him. “I just needed some time to figure things out. Any word on how young me is doing?”

Ken was quick to jump in and offer Edric his seat while he explained. “Little E is doing good. We’ve been told he’s safe and being well cared for.”

“I don’t suppose I’ll get to see him?” Edric asked, shaking his head at the waitress who set down a napkin in front of him.

“You’ll just have to trust us on this, Ric. He needs to grow up as normally as possible. It’ll be a different life for him than you had,” Simon explained.

Edric nodded and played with a ring of water on the table. “That’s good, at least. So I was hoping...” he said. “Well, I was kinda thinking that it would be for the best... since I’m stuck in this time and all now... that maybe...” He trailed off and looked up at Logan.

Logan nodded. “I wondered if you would want that.”

My brows furrowed in confusion and then it hit me. “So you’re just going to wipe away everything you know about the past and the future? What about your gift?” I was shocked by what he was suggesting, especially since that very thing ultimately resulted in his mother’s death.

Edric looked defeated and shrugged. “I’m not going to be happy knowing everything I know. And I don’t want to screw up things for my other self any more than I already have.” He sighed deeply.

I felt an ache deep inside for him. I pushed aside the part of my brain that kept reminding me that he killed two important people to me and let myself experience pity for him. I nodded solemnly and took another sip from my drink.

We stayed a while longer, discussing details of how and when Edric’s mind would be erased. Not only did we have to have a safe place to do it, but we had to have a way to give him an identity and direction. With all of us assigned tasks, we agreed to meet in a few days at Khari and Audrey’s house.

"Yeah, I know. Weird, right?" I told Chel of everything that happened at the bar, both the news story and Edric showing up.

"Yeah, that's weird. And he just wants his memory wiped? Seems a bit extreme."

"I guess I can understand it. I mean, it's not like he had anything left," I said, feeling the pang of guilt hit me again.

"You've been told a thousand times, Ash. You did everything you could. She never recovered from when Dev had her memories erased."

I sighed. "I know you're right, but it doesn't help it hurt less." I shrugged even though no one could see me. Brian was still at work and I was relaxing in the bath, mentally preparing myself to be able to help Edric as soon as Logan had finished removing his memories. "Any word from Sonya?"

"I've been in contact with her. All is well," Chel said cryptically. I knew Sonya was taking care of the child and I was sure Chel knew that I knew, but she never admitted it to me or gave me any more details than that.

"I see. Glad that she got out okay. Thank goodness she didn't have to go on that retreat. You heard about that, right? The mass suicide thing?" I was prodding her.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, I think I heard something about that. It's a shame, really," she answered non-committally.

"How'd you do it?" I asked outright, sitting up straighter in the tub.

"Oh, Ash. Just because I may have taken some experimental vials from a few senior officers' offices and might have known where their retreat was, doesn't mean I was responsible for their fate."

I could hear the triumph in her words, but that was the closest thing to a confession I got from her. "Well, thank you for, you know, everything that you did. I'm glad you were on our side."

"Me, too. Thanks for not giving up on me. I've got a dinner to attend, but I'll call you in a couple of days. Good luck tonight with the Edric thing."

"Thanks. Good luck with the dinner," I added, knowing she hated attending the formal meetings.

Brian made it home in enough time for us to enjoy the dinner I'd prepared and dessert I hadn't planned on. After a much needed shower, we drove to the house, arriving only ten minutes later than we'd expected.

"Bout time," Khari said with a knowing wink.

"We're not the last ones here," I playfully defended, seeing Logan and Lani were still MIA.

"Yeah, well what do you expect from newlyweds?" Ken joked.

I pointed to Ken and nodded, "See? He gets it."

Everyone but Edric laughed. He was facing away from us on the couch with his head resting in his hands.

"Is he okay?" I asked quietly.

Audrey shrugged. "He'll be better when it's done." She walked away and sat down next to him, rubbing his back.

Ken, Khari, Brian, and I went into the kitchen to go over more specifics.

"Hey, where's Simon tonight?" I asked Khari as we sat down at the table.

"He had to work. Something about his boss getting pissed about all the time off he's been taking lately because of his 'migraines'," she said, rolling her eyes.

I frowned slightly, nodding. He still hadn't been able to master control of his gift since the changes CES did to him came out. Being in a confined, emotionally charged area for extended periods of time was throwing him into a depression. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Chel said something about getting him a job at Tri-Om. We're just waiting for that to be finalized."

I nodded, but didn't know what else to say. I was still sitting on the stacks of money they'd given me for payment for work I'd done. I offered it to Simon, to help him out for a while, but he refused to take any of mine or Brian's money.

"So I called my friend in Montana. It's been set up for Edric to live and work there as a ranch hand," Ken explained and handed me a packet of papers. "This is the details you'll need to convey to him as soon as his memories are wiped. So when he regains consciousness, and we assume this will knock him out for at least a minute, we want him calmly getting in his car and driving away. We don't want him to know our faces or names, so no one but Ash will get to talk to him after Logan's done."

"We're going to be in here for the whole thing, right?" Khari asked.

Brian threw a deck of cards onto the table. "We'll have time for a few hands, if you're up for it," he challenged.

Khari turned her seat around backwards and narrowed her eyes at him. "Bring it," she said.

Lani and Logan entered shortly after Brian dealt the first hand.

"Hey guys," Khari said, not looking away from Brian. The last time they played poker, Brian humiliated her. I knew she'd practiced, though, and was looking more determined than ever to win.

"You two are looking happy," I noted and gave Lani a hug.

"*Can we get going with this?*" Audrey yelled from the other room.

"Are you ready, Logan?" Ken asked.

He nodded and they both looked at me.

"As long as I can keep these notes close by so I can give specific addresses and stuff, I'm good to go whenever," I responded.

Lani joined in the poker game after giving Logan a kiss. "Good luck, baby," she said.

Logan rolled his eyes. "Luck's got nothing to do with it. It's all skill." He winked at Lani and went to explain the process to Edric.

Audrey joined the others in the kitchen, sitting at the table, but watching Ken as he watched Edric closely from the doorway.

I waited until the hand was over and Brian was raking in his winnings to kiss his neck, right below his ear. "Go easy on them," I whispered.

He laughed and tossed me his lucky chip. "Fine. Take that and maybe luck will be on their side."

Khari rolled her eyes and laughed, then quickly put her serious game face back on, looking over her newly dealt cards.

I patted her shoulder and glanced at her cards as I walked away, shaking my head at her terrible hand. I heard Brian laugh as I walked to the couch with my cheat sheet.

"Do you want to tell him briefly what you'll be doing?" Logan asked as I knelt on the floor in front of the couch, setting my papers on the coffee table.

"Umm... sure. So I'm sure Logan explained that this is going to shut you down briefly. Your brain will kinda go into shock as it tries to hold onto memories. During that time, I'm going to connect with you and give your brain new things to grab on."

"So you'll feed me my identity and all that before I'm conscious?" Edric asked suspiciously.

I nod. "It's going to be hard, but I can do this. All you have to do is relax and concentrate on not blocking me, okay?" I rested my hand on his knee and squeezed, smiling, hoping to encourage him to relax.

He held the back of my hand and nodded, lying back on the couch.

I moved closer, allowing him to hold my hand; I accepted that this had to have been a hard decision for him to make. He wasn't much older than me and I know I'd be terrified to do something as serious as this.

"Take a few deep breaths, closing your eyes," Logan said calmly. "That's good. Now just open your mind and see yourself letting go of your memories."

I watched Edric closely, noticing how the frown lines on his face relaxed away when his breathing slowed down.

Logan moved into position next to me, touching Edric's forehead and closing his eyes.

As Logan took a deep, cleansing breath before beginning, I saw Edric's jaw clench. Before I had time to react, I'd been shocked so hard, I was thrown twenty feet through the air, stopping only because the wall was in my path.

Dizzy and confused, I scrambled to my feet, but quickly fell down again, smelling the salty scent of blood in the air.

Within moments, people were rushing upon me, talking so fast I couldn't understand any of them. I looked desperately from face to face and got terrified when I didn't recognize anyone. Panicked, I scrambled backwards, trying to find my balance and the door out of where ever I was.

"Ash! Stop!"

I heard them yelling, but I didn't know who they were talking to. I only knew I had to get away from there. I reached up to my head as I stumbled away and when I felt and saw the red liquid coating my fingers, I lost consciousness, falling limp to the asphalt.

"There has to be something more you can do," I heard a voice protesting. I barely opened my eyes, trying to get a bearing on my location, but only saw the blurry outline of two people standing in front of a light green wall.

"This isn't her first head injury and the scans just aren't normal. Until she wakes, we won't know what her prognosis is. I'm sorry, but the human brain just isn't made to take this kind of abuse." The blurry man in the white coat stepped out and the other moved back towards my bed.

I quickly closed my eyes, but my breathing was rapid and shallow. I felt sweaty and scared.

"Ash? Are you awake yet?" He spoke gently and touched my hand.

I needed answers, so I decided to not fake my unconsciousness any longer, not that my heart rate machine would let me. I forced my eyes to open fully, blinking several times before they could focus on the man sitting next to me.

"Can you understand me?" he asked.

"Yes," I whispered, startled by how unfamiliar my own voice was to me.

"Oh, Ash," he said and started kissing my face.

I sank back into the pillow, scared by his affection.

He must've felt my rejection because he quickly backed away, staring at me with the saddest blue eyes I'd ever seen. "They told me this might happen," he sighed.

I shook my head, not wanting to hear my voice again.

"You've got amnesia or some strange version of it."

I nodded slowly, understanding his words. "Who am I? Who are you?" I asked, my voice shaky and uneven.

"Your name is Ashlyn, Ashlyn Turner. I'm Brian, your husband." His voice was kind, but was riddled with sorrow.

"I don't know you," I confessed.

He nodded. "I know. We just have to be patient. Your memories will return. And I'll be with you to help, if you want."

I stared at him blankly, trying to find anything familiar about him. I honestly didn't know what I wanted. I didn't know if I could trust him. I felt so lost.

He nodded. "It's okay. I know you'll need time." He set down a journal on my table. "This is the journal I kept when we first met. Read through this and see if anything is familiar. I'll leave you alone to go through it. No pressure, alright?"

I swallowed hard and nodded. "Thank you," I said as he took another step towards the door.

He smiled sadly at me and left me alone to read through his memories.

Aside from doctors and nurses, I didn't have any other visitors, so I decided to read the journal Brian had left for me. It seemed like a happy story from the little I'd read, but it was just words on a page to me. I didn't know who these people were and as hard as I tried, I couldn't feel myself being this girl he wrote about.

Around eleven o'clock that night, I'd finally read all I could. I was frustrated and my head hurt despite the IV fed pain meds I'd been given. I sighed and closed my eyes, knowing I was far from sleep. As I attempted to meditate on the flood of information, I heard my door open and close again. My eyes opened, expecting to see a nurse standing at my bedside, but was startled to see another unfamiliar man staring down at me.

"Come with me," he said, retrieving clothes from a bag under my bed.

I shook my head. "Who are you? And where do you want me to go?"

"Shhh...," he insisted. "I'm here to rescue you. Come on. We don't have a lot of time."

"Rescue me?" I asked confused, but sat on the edge of my bed, letting him put my legs in my pants. There was something about him... not familiar, but something that told me I should trust him.

He nodded and helped my feet into my shoes. "I'll explain it all, but you have to take a leap of faith that I'm here to help you get away from the life you've chosen to block."

I stood up, pulling my pants up and buttoning them. I didn't understand why I was trusting him, but as soon as he silenced the machine I removed the nodes and tubes that were connected to me.

"Where are we going?" I whispered, taking the gown off and pulling a shirt over my head.

"Not far. I just want you safe before I tell you what no one else will tell you... how you got here."

Biting my lip, I allowed him to lead me into the hallway as I looked back at the journal I'd been reading, still wondering who I was.

The blonde-haired man led me down the stairs and across the lawn to a car he started as we approached it. "I'll tell you everything you want to know, but we have to get you away from here," he said in response to my hesitation about getting into the car.

I took a deep breath and decided to trust my gut, since I couldn't trust my mind to tell me what to do. There was something about him that made me believe him. So I climbed into the car, folding my hands in my lap, waiting for the explanation I desperately needed.

We drove for about fifteen minutes before he pulled into a shopping center, parking in a well-lit spot.

After he turned off the engine, he turned and looked me in the eyes. "My name is Edric, but you call me Ed or Eddy," he began. "We've been good friends for a long time, despite your husband's objections."

"My husband's objections?" I asked confused.

Ed's teeth gnashed together. "We're close, Ash, and he felt threatened. He always felt threatened by me."

My eyes grew big. "Did we...? Were we...? I mean, was I ever unfaithful?"

Ed shook his head. "No, although I always wished for more, you were always faithful to him despite the abuse."

I touched the back of my head, frowning. "This?"

"Yes. You were late coming home. I tried to talk you out of going home; he was drunk when you called him. But you insisted that it'd be okay." Ed looked down sadly.

I shook my head. "No. That man that was there with me today? Brian? There's no way he did this. I could see in his eyes how much he cared about me." I felt a pain in my stomach as I recalled how I couldn't return his love.

“Of course he was the perfect husband today. There were people around and he was sober, or so I presume.” He reached for my left hand, but hesitated until I nodded. “See this?” he asked, showing me the scar on going up my forearm. “This was his Christmas present to you.”

The proof was almost undeniable. “But why?”

“Because he’s a controlling, alcoholic bastard. And you’re just too good for him, so I saw my chance and took it, not knowing if you’d remember me enough to come with me or not.”

I sighed. His story made sense and again, I felt like I could trust what he said. “I don’t remember you. I’m sorry,” I said and looked down, paying attention to the deep scar on my arm.

He touched my chin and forced my eyes to his. “It’s okay now. If you want, we can run away... be in California in a few hours. We’ll change your name and your hair and can start over fresh.”

I felt tears pool in my eyes, overwhelmed by his devotion to me, but also feeling like I was leaving something important behind. “Alright,” I finally whispered.

Ed started the car and got back on the interstate, driving fast towards the border and my new life.

Epilogue

I looked into the distance took in the last rays of the sun as it set across the distant ocean, combing my fingers through my short, bleached hair. The air was salty and cool as the boat filled with the last of the tourists maneuvered back towards the dock. My fingers fumbled with removing the name tag: Alcatraz Visitor Center: Amber. I didn't know who Amber was any more than I knew who I was... still, but I continued to go to the same job every day, the one Ed had been fortunate enough to land for me despite my lack of previous work history, education, or residence.

My eyes closed and I felt the waves rocking the boat. I was just like that boat, being tossed around by unknown forces. But unlike it, I didn't have a heading yet. Ed's words replayed in my mind on an almost constant loop.

"That life wasn't meant for you."

"You were abused and suffered."

"I'll keep you safe. You can trust me."

I sighed and opened my eyes. Ed was the only one I could trust, but despite the fact that he said he loved me and wanted to give me time to remember all we had, I couldn't help but feel that that part of me would never be found, that there was another purpose I had in life. If I could just remember something... anything.

My eyes focused on the waves crashing against the giant pillars that held up the bridge.

"I know you," a man said, stepping next to me.

Reactively, I grabbed my hair, shaking my head. But a part of me wanted him to be right.

He laughed and looked out at the bridge I was just staring at. "You have a look in your eyes I've seen before. Your world has just come crashing down around you and you feel lost. But you see those waves crashing against the pillars? They get it a little wet, but look at all that's left untouched. You, my dear, are a pillar. You're much more than the little part being bombarded by waves. You'll dry soon enough."

The boat docked and he walked away quickly before I could respond. I felt a tingle of familiarity from his words, but they were like a dream I couldn't quite remember. Was I really going to dry soon? Was I strong enough to break free of this memory loss? Would things ever be the way they were supposed to be between Ed and me?

As usual, I didn't know the answers. I said goodbye to the captain and stepped onto the dock, the same I'd done every day for the past two months, pausing only for a moment as another wave of nausea swept through me.

"Stupid boats," I muttered and walked to my car, driving back to my apartment.

ⁱ Nickname for city of San Francisco coined by Doug Landauer, <http://got.net/~landauer/lists/CityOf.html>

ⁱⁱ Shakespeare, William, *Merchant of Venice*

ⁱⁱⁱ Nichols, J.B.B., *Amoret*