



EMI GAYLE

His life is no longer  
the stuff of *fiction*

# DAY AFTER

Book Two of the 19th Year

*To The Boy,*

*The Girl who loves you more than herself is The One.*

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# 1

Sitting in front of the twelve most powerful non-humans on the earth would have shaken a lesser guy. In my case, I'd almost thrown up. Twice.

'Don't worry', Mackenzie Thorne, my girlfriend, had said. '*It's just a formality.*'

She hadn't known I'd have to go alone.

Only the intake and exhalation of air in the room made any sound. Eerie light flickered from the tips of candles mounted along dark, oak-paneled walls.

I refused to focus anywhere but ahead of me—to the long, wooden, medieval-length table.

Waiting.

Watching.

Holding my own breath.

For a moment, it seemed the walls began to close in on me.

At midnight on the first day of the year, I prepared to accept a fate no other human had ever taken on, been given or even offered. In response, sweat pooled under my armpits as alternating cold and hot ran through me.

The scratch of wood against wood had heads turning. Mine included.

Nahir, the oldest of the twelve, rose from his chair. "Winford Richmond Thomas, please rise." His voice had a gravelly, hoarse sound.

I did as requested, my knees pressing against each other.

Nahir moved closer to me, his grandfatherly, human form disappearing under protruding scales of deep green. His arms lengthened into dinosaur-like paws and hit the rock floor, making the room around us shake. Thick wings extended from his body, and a tail lashed out against the wall behind him, rattling the candles.

A dragon, in the color of tropical ocean water, stood before me, huffing air from horse-sized nostrils.

*Oh. God. I'm going to die.*

*Not going to die. It's part of the test. Remember, you have to see them all.* Mac's words flowed through my mind.

*Keep breathing.*

“Master Thomas.” Josie, a siren and one of the most beautiful women I’d ever met, rose, her long flowing gown matching the color of her reddish-gold hair. I couldn’t help but stare at her. “You’ve been asked by our current changeling, Miss Maya Mackenzie Thorne, to be her teacher. Have you willingly agreed to take on this duty?” As Josie talked, she stalked forward, shimmering, shifting, the already-pretty woman becoming deadly man-hunting female—according to the legends I’d read.

Vibes ebbed from her like the rocking tide. If she sang, throwing up would be the least of my worries. I’d be dead by sexual self-implosion.

With a rough cough, I gathered my wits. “Yes. I have accepted. Willingly.” Every nerve ending in my body urged me to go to Josie, to let her take me and do with me whatever she wanted. A groan built in my throat, tension straining my limbs, most particularly, my crotch. *Not now!* The need to shift what grew sent heat to my cheeks even as Mac’s words played through again. *Force yourself not to react to any of them. They’ll think you’re stronger than you are since you’re only human.*

Only human. Problem number one.

“You understand ...” Felix, dressed all in black, long strands of superfine black hair barely moving with each step, replaced Josie. He walked around the table, again, toward me. “... that your role is to teach Mackenzie such that she will be fully educated in the ways of *our* kind?” His fangs lengthened.

A shiver zinged through me as my overwhelming desire for Josie faded into pure, unadulterated fear. The trembling began in my knees and hit my shoulders before I could stop them.

“Not the human race,” Felix added.

He glided toward me, reaching my side in a single breath.

*Please don’t make me a vampire. Please don’t make me a vampire. Please don’t make me a vampire.*

“You understand ...” His hiss of words hit my ear along with hot coppery tinged air. “... this requires you to interact ... with the likes of us?”

My gaze directed toward Felix, Mac’s words again came to mind. *Try to picture ’em like twelve harmless kittens with big fluffy fur and pink ribbons.*

I tried. It didn’t work.

“And ...” On a blink, the voice had changed. Nomas, with shoulders spanning twice my width, his face a solid foot above mine, stood right at

me.

*Remember, Nomas is a teddy bear Neanderthal with Einstein's brain.* I had to disagree with my girlfriend's assessment.

"You will take the time necessary to learn about us—" Nomas transformed to a seven-foot-tall, hairless devil with red skin and horns. "—and impart that information to Mackenzie?"

My stomach lurched. A bubble of vomit launched its way up my throat.

His eyes flamed red. "And will you?"

"Y-Yes." I cringed at my stutter, but standing inches from a demon sent me over fear's cliff.

"How do you intend to perform this duty ... since you are ... but a mere human?" Air rushed around me as Raven—an angel—joined in, her voice holding an ethereal quality.

"I ... will interview each of you and ... refer to the book—"

"A text you no longer have?" She wound her way around me, raising goose bumps on my arms with the cold.

Still facing the near-empty half-circle, I said, "I have a copy."

A small laugh took my attention. A Sphinx stalked my way—a stone lion with wings as wide as Nahir's and the face of an Egyptian man. Equatino, Tino to Mac, moved with the speed of a slug, but I expected, if I even shivered, he could swallow me whole in one second flat.

*How did I get myself into this?* Three months before, I'd only imagined mythological creatures existed. If the parade of them in front of me didn't convince me, the fact my girlfriend could be any one of them should have.

"Do you not ... fear death?" Tino said it slow as if I needed time to understand.

"I don't ..." I gulped. "... fear death."

A flash of light blinded me. I covered my eyes with my forearm, peeking through near-closed lids as I staggered backward. I hit something hard and fell onto it.

"Open your eyes, Master Thomas," Magwa, the wizard said.

I blinked, my eyes readjusting to the candlelit room.

Not to just Magwa though.

Saroya the elf, Robin the griffin, Gerard the gnome, Moira the goblin and Cleo the shapeshifter all stood in front of me.

"Hold out your hand, Master Thomas," Magwa said.

"It's okay, Winn," Cleo said.

*Friend, not foe*, Mac had said. I did as asked.

“Master Thomas, you’ve shown us that you are wise beyond your years.” With his left hand, he looped a ribbon around my wrist. “You are honest and unselfish. You accept what most cannot.” The string continued around, binding my wrists one to the other.

The confinement sent a wave of anxiety through me.

“You will act as Mackenzie’s teacher, then?” Robin the griffin asked.

“Yes.” I managed my answer without a catch in my throat.

She looped another ribbon around my hands, tying it beneath.

“And you will ensure Mackenzie’s focus remains on her future with the Council?” Moira the goblin asked.

With my gaze stuck on her, I nodded. “Yes.” That didn’t come out as strong as I’d hoped.

She sent another string around my wrists.

“And you vow to teach her as one of our kind would?” Gerard held out a ribbon as red as blood.

*Oh, god, what does that mean?* With my eyes shut, I said, “Yes.”

“Should you fail in your endeavors ...” Saroya the elf began tying as Gerard the gnome did, “... you will accept the just rewards?”

Mac had made me promise to agree to all of it, so I said, “Yes.”

“You have shown favor to those who may disagree with you.” Tightening constricted the blood flow as Magwa pulled at what had become a braided pattern around my arms. “And for that, we, the Council, offer our knowledge and shared history such that you may mold and fashion Mackenzie into our newest member, following all the rules and decrees appointed our kind.”

“Or perish in your efforts.” Nahir’s words flowed quiet but deep.

With a tap of Magwa’s finger to the top of my bound hands, the restraints disappeared.

## 2

*The Day After ...*

The back of my head hit the locker—a ricochet of pain jarring my skull. Ridge’s forearm rammed against my throat. “Why’d you tell your dad I smashed in his car, Winn?”

I jerked from him as he grabbed my shoulders and slammed me against the metal again. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The car thing had happened months before, and I’d never said anything.

Ridge released his grip for a second but threw me against number 302 for a third time. Joe and John, players on our championship-winning baseball team, stood behind him.

If I’d been expecting to be cornered by a fifth of the team, I’d have left earlier.

“You’re gettin’ loud, Ridge,” Joe said.

Ridge shot a glare toward Joe. “Shut the hell up.” His McDonald’s lunch-breath passed across my face.

*Gross.*

“The car, Thomas. What the hell made you—”

“As I said ... *I* didn’t.”

Ridge shoved at my shoulders, jarring me back into the lockers, and stalked away. He ran a hand through his hair, storming around in a circle like a deranged dog. “Why does my dad *think* I trashed the car then? What did you tell them?”

Feet set, prepped to give back if he pushed me again, I straightened my jacket. “The police said you were there. Not me. You had a bat. A bat did the damage. They put two and two together.” I tapped the side of my temple. “Or is that too much for you to process?”

His right hook came at me fast.

I ducked.

He hit the locker door, a metallic clang reverberating down the empty hallway. A growl resonated from his chest as he threw another jab at me.

I slipped sideways.



He broke the air with an upper cut.

Back to the left.

“He ain’t gonna fight you, Ridge,” Joe said. “He’s too much a p—” John stopped his twin brother with a hand to his mouth.

Ridge bounced on his feet and tugged down his letter jacket. His chest and cheeks puffed out like a fish. “I want answers!”

“Shhh,” John said. “You’re gonna bring out the teachers.”

*At least one of them isn’t dumb.* “You should listen to him.” I pointed to Joe. “If you’d quit trying to hit me, maybe we could—”

Ridge swung again.

For a pitcher, he needed to work on his short throw.

One grab of his wrist, one spin and a nudge to his knee, put Ridge up against the locker wall—face first. I held both his hands behind his back. “Now ... you have no choice but to listen to me. And it really is my turn to talk. Seriously, man, this isn’t middle school. We’re seniors—almost done. Picking a fight with me over a car isn’t worth it.”

Shuffling behind me faded as Ridge bucked against the wall. I hoped that meant his reinforcements walked away.

“Let me go.” He panted against the metal, straining against my hold, breath condensing upon the surface.

I refused to give Ridge any space. “No.”

“What do you want, Winford?”

“For you to listen. I never suggested you had anything to do with the car. Nothing about you came from me because I don’t want you anywhere near me.”

“I’ll bust your ass, Thomas.”

Laughter sprung up from the idiots behind me.

“No. Don’t think so.” I tightened my hold.

Ridge seethed.

“Now ... a question for you. Why do you keep coming after my girlfriend?” Every week of the last four, Ridge had asked Mac out. Almost to the day, hour, minute and second of each Friday, he broke in between us as if she and I weren’t together.

“Like you said ... I don’t know what you’re talking about—”

My elbow to his kidney had him sucking in air.

“Mackenzie’s free to date me if—” He hissed as I pressed harder.



“You’re not her type,” I whispered into his ear. *Humans and non-humans don’t mix. Except for me.*

“Like hell I’m not.”

Mac would have been the perfect eye candy for Ridge. Even I could see that. She’d also barf at the idea I’d thought of her that way.

“Winn?”

*Speak of the devil herself. Well, not devil. Can she be a devil? The devil? Might have to ask her to try that.*

Mackenzie stalked toward us. Dressed all in black, with skin-tight jeans, leather jacket and boots—her usual attire—with one finger pointed in my direction. “You.” She stopped a few feet from where I stood with Ridge up against the lockers. “Come with me.” Eyes of dark chocolate that shifted color across the entire brown spectrum called to me. Her dark hair—the same strands I’d let run through my fingers—swung around with her movements.

“Summoned by the she-witch?” Joe asked.

I jerked around to him. “You don’t really want to mess with me right now. Or her.” I nodded toward Mac. “And internal bruising is way more valuable than giving someone a black eye.”

I gave Ridge a sharp jab into the ribs. He doubled over, clutching his side, and slid down the wall, though he tilted up as if to watch. As if he had a plan and I should be keeping an eye out over my shoulder for the remainder of the school year. As if he still didn’t believe the smartest guy at West High could get the hottest girl, and I, Winn Thomas, didn’t deserve Mackenzie Thorne for the sole reason that she’d dated nobody before me and to choose me would go against the moral compass of every high school jock.

In all honesty, I didn’t believe it myself.

One long stride got me away from the idiots and to Mac’s side.

We rounded the corner of the hallway and walked into the frigid January air. Despite the sun, ice crystals coated the grass and chain link fence.

“Why the hell were you fighting with Ridge?” Mac asked.

“He started it,” I mumbled. “And I thought you were taking Caroline’s advice on the swearing hiatus.”

Mac stopped and turned toward me, her hands on her hips, pursed lips and narrowed eyes facing my direction.

“What?” I asked.

She stepped closer.

“If you’re gonna kiss me, you should do it right here.” I wagged a finger near my neck—the part where Ridge hit first. “This is the spot that hurts the most.”

Mac tilted her head down. Back up. To the left. Back up. “I’m not going to kiss you. Not with those fools watching from the door.”

A glance over my shoulder gave me the picture: Ridge, Joe and John with their matching flap of hair across their foreheads, staring like morons.

“You’re no fun,” I said.

She hiked up an eyebrow. “Really? Is that what you think?” Mackenzie stood still, nearly impervious to the cold—a gift from her stubbornness, not her genetics—at least not during daylight hours.

Despite our one-foot separation, she made everything inside me warm. The need to shift my jeans overcame me. *Distract yourself! Think about Mom and Dad having sex. Yes. There. So gross. Yeah, okay, that’s over.*

Mackenzie angled her head the other way, and all my attempts to stop thinking about her froze. Her lips hit mine as her hands slid to my cheeks. I pulled her as close as possible, expecting steam to rise from between us.

She slid her lips to the side of my mouth. “That do it for ya?” she asked.

*No. Never enough.*

I retreated by an inch and stared down into her eyes. “You can do better.” Hiding my smile took immense effort.

She dropped her hands, the cold seeping back to my cheeks. “Enough of that. You have a long, boring task ahead of you, starting with one really old, cranky dragon.”

“Who said it would be boring?”

Her response came with a roll of her eyes.

• • •

I mentally cringed any time I thought of meeting with the Council members, especially since Nahir would be my first. Before the ceremony, he’d wanted to kill me, so meeting with him didn’t fill me with a lot of fluffy excitement.

That a dragon lived within the modest two-story home I drove up to should have surprised me. Then again, every supernatural race had its own

method of disguising itself to humans. A normal house, in a normal neighborhood would seem necessary.

With a deep breath, I knocked on the blue door.

Silent upon its hinges, it opened. Nahir, dressed in dark navy robes like ones I'd expect on an evangelical, pulpit preacher, stood in the frame with Scholls on socked feet.

"Master Thomas. You have arrived." Beady eyes blinked back at me from a wrinkled, old man's face. Nothing about his appearance would make me think him anything but a grandfather.

"May I ... come in, please?"

Nahir held out an arm and motioned me inside.

Pictures of kids and families graced the walls—Nahir in some of them and not in others. I hadn't realized the Council had families—should have guessed, of course. He ambled his way toward couches in a room painted a deep blue that matched the robe he wore.

I lowered to a chair across from where he sat.

"You have questions for me." He clasped his hands in front of him, resting them on his knees.

"Yes. May I?" I pointed to my laptop. "I prefer to take notes this way."

Nahir circled a hand.

I took that as a positive and opened my computer. Pages and pages and pages of my translation and notes needed to be reviewed. "I hope an interview style conversation is okay?"

Nahir nodded as solemn and quiet as before.

A cough into my fist and a deep breath steeled my spine. My dad had suggested, when interviewing an adult, that I get the person to talk about himself first. 'To get on his good side', he'd said. "I was hoping we could start with you a little and then move on to Mac?"

Nahir nodded.

Of course, my dad didn't know I would be talking to a dragon, so I could only hope the same advice applied. "Can you tell me more about your kind ... like ... what kind of dragon are you?"

"Bheithir."

I'd translated that page in the book. "Celtic Dragon? Doesn't the myth hold that the Celtic dragon was tricked into walking along a bridge with spikes, so it would fall to its death? When you have every possible type of supernatural to pick from, why would you go with *that* ... forever?"

“Strength. Courage. Magic.” He gave me nothing more.

“In the New Testament of the human bible, the devil takes the form of a drag—”

“With seven heads and ten horns to battle the Archangel Michael, yes.”

“So, since Raven is an angel, does that mean you and she are inherent enemies?” That would be an interesting twist to the Council—and could explain their differing views on certain topics.

“Those on the Council may be opposed to one another, but none are enemies. We swear an oath of allegiance in order to ensure our own peace. Much like the ceremony in which you participated to become Miss Thorne’s teacher. I opposed it. Others did not. That does not mean we fight to the death. Some battles are meant to be left to the end.”

By ‘end’, I figured he meant the decision Mac would make when she turned nineteen. “In the binding ceremony, Gerard said I would teach Mac the way you all do. But no one explained what that means. Can you help me with that?”

Nahir draped a hand on his knee. “It means, Master Thomas, that you are to allow Miss Thorne to lead the learning. That you are to champion *her* efforts.”

“You mean not tell her anything?” I couldn’t believe it.

“That would be another way to put it.”

“But doesn’t that defeat the purpose of a teacher?” My tone and pace sped up. “My physics teacher doesn’t stand at the front of the class and tell us to ask questions, hoping we’ll figure it out. He teaches us what he knows and tests us on our knowledge and application. We ask questions when we don’t understand. Don’t you think ... given it hasn’t worked so far for Mac ... that your method is just plain wrong?”

His human-sized nostrils flared.

*Dad, your plan did not work.* “Life isn’t a game of twenty-question, so how—”

“There are many schools of thought on the education of *our* young. Since you aren’t one of us, I don’t expect you to understand. But let me say, spoon feeding is not our way. We learn by example. As you have no example to share for Miss Thorne, I do believe you’ll have to rely on that which you learn from those of us on the Council.”

*And the book. More the book, probably.* “Without telling her exactly what I learn, you mean.”

“Correct.”

On a huff, I firmed my resolve. “Can I go on record and say that’s dumb?”

Nahir said nothing.

*Fine. Whatever. To use a Mac line, ‘crazy old bird’.* “Let’s agree to disagree on that. Anyway ... for the record, and to ensure I know the objectives of this ... circumstance ... would you confirm what Mac’s supposed to do on the Council?”

Nahir narrowed his eyes for a moment. “She is to take over for one of the twelve ruling factions.”

“And Mac chooses which one of the factions to rule by whatever form she takes on the eve of her nineteen birthday?”

“Yes.”

“And is there an alternative?”

Nahir jerked back but righted himself. “There is no alternative.”

“What about—”

“I shall repeat. There is no alternative.”

“But—”

“Master Thomas, this line of questioning is complete.”

*And this is exactly why she hates you.*

“The ways of the Council have been enacted for thousands of years. We are the go-between, on this earth, between the gods and those we are to care for within our midst. To continue to survive, we must adhere to the rules. Miss Thorne must choose a form, or her future will be chosen for her.”

“You don’t think it’s antiquated logic to follow rules even others have questioned.”

I’d have sworn smoke escaped his nostrils. “How would you know others have questioned it?”

“The book.”

His lips pursed. “There would be no such information within our text. It is a travesty to our kind that such history has been lost. Despite that, the book does not contain anything more than a record as written by Council members. It would not serve to teach, simply to ignite curiosity.”

*So, did you take it, Nahir?* I didn’t want to get eaten, so I opted to keep that question to myself. “And you don’t think it’s awfully convenient that the book’s been lost just when this Changeling doesn’t follow the regimented protocol?”

“I believe Miss Thorne has shown her true colors. She has not shown an interest in the Council.”

“She’s eighteen!”

“Age is not a measure of maturity. Miss Thorne has not shown interest —”

“You’re wrong. If you took the time to know her—”

The way his nose flared, I expected steam to puff out. “It is not our way.”

“That’s so ...” Stupid came to mind.

“Our rules allow us the freedom to choose. The freedom not to be manipulated into our choices. Miss Thorne has made her alliance with the likes of you. You should prepare yourself for the eventuality of that decision. She’ll fail in her duties if she chooses a human over her own kind.”

“No offense, but you don’t know anything about her.” I shut the laptop with a slap. Nahir sat silent as I stood. “Mac likes being everything *except* human. It’s not that she isn’t dedicated. You’re just not giving her a chance to make decisions *her* way.” Frustration ebbed from me.

Nahir’s gaze met mine. “You know nothing of our kind and will do nothing but help her fail and have her future torn away from her.”

“I—” I stopped myself before I swore at him.

“You may exit the premises.” One wrinkled hand stretched out toward the door. “Mark my words—”

“No. You mark mine.” I’d never spoken to an older person the way I did just then. “Mac will choose. On her nineteenth birthday. And she’ll be the best ruler any of you ever saw.”

### 3

*Four weeks later ...*

“Winn, wait!” Zoe, my sister, called out as I dropped into the driver’s seat of my car .

Unfolding myself from within, I held open the door, and Zoe jumped in dressed in bright neon pink tights and black boots, her black and white plaid skirt going way too high up her leg. For a second, I did a double-take. As Zoe’s dark hair bounced, I would have sworn I saw Mac’s features in her face, but the shape of her green eyes, bright with some sort of inner excitement, took away that thought.

“You were about to leave without me, weren’t you?”

“No, of course not.” Though I had forgotten Zoe needed me to drive her home after school. I slammed the door shut. “It was cold. We were just going to get warm.”

“You’re really not a good liar,” Mac said. “But I remembered, Zoe, so no biggie.”

“So can I go then?” Zoe asked.

“Go where?” Mac and I asked together.

Any night I didn’t have to work at the library, Mac and I had gone to Suze’s crypt to continue translating the book together. I agreed with her that keeping our activity a secret would be a good idea, and Suze, the biggest, weirdest and most unique demon I’d ever met, had offered up his place to us. We’d been heading there when I’d forgotten about my sister.

Zoe giggled—that typical fourteen-year-old girl sound. “With you. Wherever you said you were going.”

“Home,” I said.

“But ... Dad’s not gonna be home until tomorrow, and I don’t want to be there all by myself again. Why can’t I come with you?”

“Because—“

“Dad said I had to either be with you, at home or at Clara’s.” Zoe’s tone came out a plea.

“So I’ll drop you at Clara’s,” I said.



She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Why not take her?” Mac leaned against the interior of the door.

“What?” I jerked back. “You want me to bring my little sister ...” *to a demon’s crypt* “... just because my dad’s not home?”

“Might give her the little boost she needs to stay out of our business. Especially if Suze has eaten anything lately.”

One could only hope. A demon’s dinner didn’t have to be alive. Or fresh.

I maneuvered us out of the parking lot and onto the road.

“So you’ll take me? I can go?”

I didn’t have anything to lose, except patience since she asked question after question anytime Mac and I were together with her. “On one condition,” I said.

“Anything. Seriously, Winn. Anything.” Big green eyes stared back at me from my rear-view mirror.

“You can’t ask Suze any questions. Or Mac and me. We have a lot of stuff to do. So just do your homework and leave it be. Got it?”

“Boo on you.” She thumped against the back seat. Through the rearview mirror, I watched as she crossed her arms again and puffed out her bottom lip.

“That’s just mean, Winn,” Mac said on a chuckle. “The queen of questions can’t ask even one?”

I shot Mac a glance. “No.” If Zoe started, she’d never stop. Mac hadn’t had the full-on Zoe experience for long enough to understand. “So no questions and you can go to Suze’s place, or it’s back home for you. Which do you want?”

“Fine. Whatever. No questions.” Zoe brightened a second later. “So, Mac ... I heard Ridge Shaw asked you out like every day this month. You thinking about going out with him?”

My hands clenched on the steering wheel. “Uh ... Zoe? Do you think she’s going to go out with him if she’s my girlfriend?”

“Well, no, but I figured I should ask. Better to know than not to, right?”

For once, her question had a point.

Mac, though, didn’t answer.

• • •

In the waning light of a late winter afternoon, Primrose Cemetery held a peace to it that, for some reason, Mackenzie loved. I found it downright creepy, but in favor of making my girlfriend happy, off we went. Day or night.

Mac stayed silent as we exited the car. She stood in front of the gates, head tilted back, drawing in air as if she hadn't breathed in a few hours. Given she'd used that analogy to describe her time with humans, her action seemed applicable.

I stopped her with a hand to her arm. "Why didn't you answer back there?"

She rolled her eyes with her usual flair and stepped into the cemetery.

I caught up with her, Zoe trailing behind. "This silent thing you're doing ... does it mean you're interested?"

Mac stopped and whirled. "Are you—what the—" Anger stirred in her eyes. I wondered if I'd accidentally, and figuratively, pushed the red do-not-touch button she had hidden somewhere. "I want nothing to do with Ridge, Winn. Nothing. I shouldn't have to answer the question every single time it gets asked ... which ... is way, way, way too often."

I held up my hands. "I'm sorry. Seriously."

She blew out a breath. "Can we keep going then?" She turned and continued on without waiting for an answer.

"You know ... I only ask because if I don't know what's going on, I don't know how to ... deal with stuff."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, oh master of the immortal." She fake-bowed with her hands in front of her face.

Zoe caught up to us as Mac opened the door to the grey mausoleum. She motioned us in, circling her hand like a coach at a baseball game, with a runner rounding third. Zoe stepped in first; I followed; and Mac pulled the door shut before we opened the second door, throwing us into complete darkness.

Zoe screeched in one short burst.

"Open Suze's door, Winn," Mac said.

"I can't. Remember? It takes your touch. In or out."

"Oh, fine." Her hand landed on my chest and slid lower as feet shuffled along the floor.

"It's too bad you don't like shifting into animals. You could get cat's eyes and see in the dark." I got a jab to the ribs as the door opened.

Beyond it, Suze's hallway shone bright with the flicker of candlelight—his preferred method of illumination—spilling into the area we'd stood.

"Down here, Zoe." Mac pushed Zoe toward the opening.

"Oh no, I'm not going first." She backed up into me. Given she hadn't ever been to Suze's place, I didn't blame her hesitation. She'd come, though, so she'd have to suck it up.

"Okay, onward ho." Mac inched her way past Zoe and me, taking the lead. "Suze?"

Nothing but an echo of emptiness greeted us.

"Was he ... he supposed to meet you here?" Zoe asked.

"No," I said. "But it is his place, so we don't want to disturb him."

"That would be rude," Mac said. "And ... as for Suze ... well, he's usually sleeping during the day." Mac traipsed down the remaining steps, calling out, "Suze! We're here."

Zoe shivered next to me. "I am *not* going down there."

"You asked to come, remember?"

"Huh-unh." She shook her head at me like she had when she was four and something kept her from moving.

"Come on, chicken-girl." Mac rounded the final corner and disappeared from view.

"Suze is a good guy. A little odd, but he's Mac's protector. He's not going to hurt her, and he won't you either. If he's even here."

Zoe stood still.

I tugged on her wrist, but she didn't budge. "Seriously? Now you don't want to get all up in my personal stuff?"

With her lips pursed she gave me a short head shake.

"Fine. Stay on the stairs for all I care. Or go back up into the dark."

"Oh, Suze!" Mac called out as I reached the bottom. "Dude, Suze, what did you eat?"

"Something garlicky," I said.

"It smells like an Italian restaurant without the tomato." Mac roamed the entry area to the kitchen. She moved to the center of the room, standing on a giant purple rug.

Every time we entered Suze's crypt, as he called it, the place changed. The couch we'd spent most of a night on together had disappeared. In its place a giant beanbag-looking chair, in bright red, faced a wall-sized television. One time, the wall had been covered by a bookshelf where Mac

found paints and charcoal pencils, and the last time, there had been a big table with comfortable office-like chairs where we worked for hours.

“Think he gets cable, Mac?” I laughed, staring at the gigantic TV.

“Yeah, and he probably watches HGTV all day long, too.” She chuckled as she walked toward the only other room we knew about—Suze’s bedroom.

At the entry, she knocked on the adjoining wall.

No sound.

She pushed the fabric that separated the main area from the bedroom to the side.

Zoe’s scream reverberated through the room.

• • •

From behind us, another scream started.

Sound echoed through the room.

The volume increased.

Mac and I shook our heads. She walked over and punched Suze in the arm as I went to Zoe and covered her open mouth with my hand. I hadn’t even realized she’d joined us. With her screech fading, Zoe started shaking.

“Bejesus, Suze!” Mac traced his body with a finger in the air. “You’re not wearing any clothes!”

He’d chosen a chef’s hat, white apron and a giant smile to go along with his seven-foot tall frame. Nothing else. His head tilted down. A hand covered his lips as he crossed his legs. “Oops. Be right back.” His body began to spin around.

“No!” Mac and I yelled out at the same time.

Suze froze.

“Back up like a truck, Suze.” Mac pushed at his chest until he disappeared inside his room.

“I’m going to uncover your mouth, Zoe, but no more yelling,” I said. “Okay?”

She nodded within my grip.

“Now you see why I didn’t want you to come,” I whispered to her.

“That, my friend, is Suze.” Mac started toward us, dropping onto the purple bean bag instead. “Come on in. Stay awhile. He doesn’t bite.

Humans. I don't think." She patted the coffee table where she propped her feet.

I dragged Zoe closer as Suze stepped out, ducking his small horns under the doorway and straightening. He'd opted for a multicolored robe in reds, blues and greens.

"Well at least it covers your ass, Suze," Mac said. "Why didn't you answer when we called out?"

"I was napping. Thought you were going to be here at four."

"It's four thirty," I said.

He turned his wrist toward himself. "I should get a watch." A giant grin split his face. "So why are you late?"

Mac gave Suze the same eye roll she often gave me. "Zoe decided she just *had* to tag along."

"No one ... following you, today?" He scrunched his lips and directed his gaze away from Mac.

"I'm sorry ... what?" Mac asked. By opening his mouth and repeating those words, Suze had stirred the hornet's nest—the Mac one in his case. She stood, narrowing her eyes. "Spill it, demon boy."

Suze eyed me as if I could change the path of Mac's questions, but he'd let whatever he meant to keep secret out. Even as he pled with his eyes, I shook my head.

"You started it. Sorry." I pulled Zoe toward the kitchen table, preparing to watch the show.

Mac grabbed Suze's green, somewhat pointy ear and tugged him down toward her.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!"

"Tell me what's going on," she said.

"Nothing!"

She yanked on his lobe.

"Okay! Uncle Ben! Uncle Ben!"

I held back my laugh at Suze's version of 'uncle'.

"I was just makin' sure. Promise! Scouts honor," he said.

"You were a boy scout?" Mac asked. "No, never mind. Why? Why would you ask if anyone was following me?" She didn't let go of his ear.

Half-hunched over, Suze said, "Because ... I was napping and not watching. Sometimes, a demon needs a good nap, don'tcha know."

Mac let go. “Next time, don’t ask me a question and make it sound like there’s something going on.”

Suze rubbed at his ear. “Can we have some cake?”

*Change of subject. Typical Suze.*

He walked toward Zoe, her eyes growing wide as he passed by and opened his fridge. “Would you like blueberry pie, Miss Thomas?”

Her jaw dropped open.

“Everything he has is supremely delish and totally edible.” Mac moved to the fridge with Suze. “Chocolate mousse. My fave.” She pulled out a giant bowl and set it on the table. “Oh! And marshmallow flumps.”

Suze returned with a flaky-looking, golden-brown topped pie and slid it toward Zoe. “You know you want some.”

Zoe shook her head. “But ... uh ... what are marshmallow—”

Mac tilted the bowl toward Zoe but didn’t explain. Who knew what she meant? She’d taken to making up words as often as Zoe did.

“Trust me,” I said. “It’s always good stuff here for us.” *Except for what Suze eats.*

“So, Mac,” Suze said between bites. “How’s the training coming?”

She shrugged. “Same as always.”

“But ... how you gonna know what to do if he don’t know either?”

“I’ll figure it out,” she said.

“You figure nothin’ out, though. That’s why you’re in your squishy place.”

“My what?” she asked.

I stared at Suze, shocked into silence by the truth of his words and that *he’d* said them, but also by his description as he pinched his fingers together. He’d meant ‘pinch’. One never knew with Suze.

“So, Zoe. You’re Winn’s little sister?” Suze asked.

Zoe nodded.

“You have a good scream.”

A smile crept into her lips

Suze licked the bowl where he’d spooned dessert. “You got any questions? I’m an open book. Happy to answer to someone who’s friends with these two.”

Zoe mumbled something.

“Huh?” I asked as Mac tipped her head up, and Suze said, “I’m an Abbaddon demon.” He waved at the pie she hadn’t touched. “You gonna eat

that?”

She shook her head.

Suze took the dish and scooped straight from it. “I was Mac’s Mom’s protector, and now I’m hers, but I pretend I’m not around. I leave Winn-boy here to keep her on her toes during the day.” Suze’s lips curved up, revealing randomly shaped teeth—as if he’d pulled them all out and reinserted them in different places.

Mac opened her mouth but closed it before she said anything. She waved her hands in front of her. “What do you mean you *pretend* not to be around? When *are* you around? Don’t you run the guard house?”

“Not anymore. I have full-time Mac duty.” He spread his lips in a wide grin.

“No, no. Oh, no, no, no!” She jumped up from her seat and strode to the other side of the room. “I said no one is to follow me around. You got that, Suze? All’s been quiet for weeks now. No lackeys!”

He nodded with his bottom lip puffed out.

I rose and met her in the middle as she circled and paced. “Mac.”

She stopped. Her eyes narrowed. “What?”

“If he’s suppos—”

“No.” Stubborn didn’t begin to describe Mac Thorne. “I don’t want someone watching over me all the time.”

“They do it anyway, you know.” Suze flicked his fingernails as if passing the time.

Mac spun toward him. “I know you can zap yourself in and out of here and anywhere else for that matter. So, I’ll call you if I need you.”

“Will you say the magic words?” Suze asked.

“Say what?” Mac and I asked.

“You know ... like bibbity-bobbity-boo.” In no way, shape or form did Suze remotely resemble a fairy godmother, despite his often-changing attire.

Mac twirled a finger in the air. “No. I’ll call your cell.”

Suze joined us in the center of the room, towering over the both of us. “Only Winn uses that thing since he ain’t like the three of us.” One pudgy finger pointed to Mac, himself and over to Zoe.

*He knows about Zoe? I should have known that information was more widespread than with Mac and me.*

Suze tapped a finger against his chin. “For you, Maaaaaaya ...”



Mackenzie threw up her hands. “Enough with using my first name.”

The big pouty lip emerged again. “You’re such a meanie.” A gleam of faked sadness lit Suze’s eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Mac said.

Suze bellowed a laugh. “I got Mackenzie Thorne to apologize to me! You think that hurt my feelings? Ain’t nothing can hurt my feelings.” He banged on his chest like a gorilla. “Please, please, please can we have a code word?” He held his hands up in prayer-position.

“Can’t I just yell out ‘Hey, Suze, help?’”

He scrunched his forehead and out came the lip, bigger and puffier than before. “But ... but ... that’s so ... *obvious*. I want a code word.” He jumped up and down like a three year old.

One of Mac’s lids twitched shut before she pressed fingers against them both. “Okay, okay, okay.”

Suze clapped three times. “How about ‘Mayday, mayday, mayday Obi-One’.” Suze’s giant smile filled his face.

“No. No Star Trek.”

My laugh burst out. “Obi-Wan is from Star Wars.”

Mac glared at me. “Whatever.” She switched back to Suze.

He placed his hands on his hips. “But mayday said three times is the distress call.”

“For what?” Mac asked.

“Boats and air-o-planes.”

I stepped between the two of them seeing as their conversation could go on endlessly. “How about ‘mayday’—one time—for you Suze.”

He crossed his arms over his massive chest. “But I like three.”

*This conversation is never going to end.* “How are you going to hear her, though?” I asked, hoping to push them to new topics.

Up went that eyebrow. “We demons have our ways. Since I was your Mom’s protector, I’m kinda tied to yooooooooou.” He stretched his neck toward Mac as he said it.

She stepped closer to his face. “Tied how, exactly?”

He tapped his ear.

“You can hear me? Like ... what ... wait ... all the time, or just if I say those words?”

“Um ...”

“*How much, Suze?*” Mac’s question came out insistent.

Risking my own life for Suze, I positioned myself between him and Mac and pushed against each of their shoulders to keep them separate. “Are we good then? Mac has a signal and—”

“I want to know how much he can hear.” Her body stiffened under my touch.

“I can hear whatever you want me to hear.” Suze turned around. “So if you don’t want me to hear or help you, just say the word.” His big shoulders drooped.

“Can you only listen for your name?” I asked. His head bobbed up and down as he sniffled. “Okay, how about this?” *Mediation between Changeling and Demon—I sense a new role for myself.* “You only listen for ... ‘Mayday, Suze’. Will that work?” I turned from Mac to Suze’s back.

“Fine,” they said together.

“Since you’re staying here to do your ... *research* ...” He quoted with his fingers. “... and you don’t want me around ... I’ll just ... go do something else.” He sulked on his way toward his bedroom.

Thirty seconds later he emerged, dressed in the gear worn by firefighters when *in* a fire—complete with mask and oxygen tank. It seemed, to me, that Suze hadn’t figured out what to be when he grew up either.

“I think I need a spot of tea before I go calling on my chums.” Suze stopped and faced Zoe. “Snively, would you prepare my transportation for departure?”

Zoe’s lips separated.

From Shakespeare to punk, Suze’s speech changed with his attitude and attire. With his back to me, I couldn’t tell what expression he’d given my sister, but her face relaxed into a smile a second later. He had that effect, too. Pure and absolute kindness.

It made me like him even more.

## 4

With Suze's departure, Mac and I took over the double bean bag, and Zoe slunk down against the wall across from us. As she pulled homework out of her bag, Mac and I opened my laptop to the scanned pages from Mac's stolen book—the only record anyone had documenting all the supernatural races or explaining her life as a changeling.

In front of us, Greek and Latin told the story of the Grindyflow, a fish-based gremlin who frightened children by grabbing their feet in ponds and lakes. It, along with the hundred or so other pages we'd translated, only succeeded in making Mac yawn. Despite her entire life's purpose to choose a supernatural form, she had no clear interest in any of them.

Unlike Google or Wikipedia, the pages of text in front of us held information no human knew about vampires, fairies, gargoyles, werewolves, griffins, dragons—hundreds of beings I'd only hoped could be real half a year ago. Life went from wishing to a little freaked at that point.

Beside me, Mac leaned back and closed her eyes.

"You know," I began, "You could pay a little attention, and maybe we'd get through all these pages faster and help find the one you *think* you might like for the rest of your life. That is, unless you want to quit now and forget you only have five months."

Mac flapped her hand in front of me. "I thought you were just looking for the words between the words. You know, the stuff that might tell me more about my mom and maybe my dad ... and what I have to do before I hit nineteen?" Ever since she'd found out her real mom died, Mac had been on a mission to find out more. A small one, but one all the same.

Or, rather, to have me find more—which did slow the task down.

I nudged her knee. "I told you we had to translate all the pages first, and then I'll go back through the letters and words that stand out. We only have thirty-ish more pages."

Her head lolled around. "But it's taking forever."

"And I am totally not helping do more of that," Zoe said. "Last time, she didn't do any of the work."

“She never does,” I said.

Mac popped up as I expected she would. She knuckled my shoulder. “I help in other ways. I make your life supremely interesting. Remember? Me, who can change into ... *anything*.” She leaned in close. “Me, who has ratcheted up your popularity at school.”

“You? The girl who almost gotten me eaten by demons, bitten by vampires and made to drink disgusting potions to ensure I keep my lips zipped like some five-year-old kindergartener.” I pushed the laptop away and turned to her. “Yes. I remember.”

Despite my jabs, she did bring excitement to my life. The research, the discovery, the conversations with supernatural creatures.

I loved it all.

Before Mac could move, I wrapped my hands around her shoulders and pulled her in for a kiss.

“Gross,” Zoe said.

“I thought you were busy,” Mac said against my lips.

“And I thought you two were more grown up than to constantly kiss in front of other people.”

“Nope.” Mac laughed as she puckered my lips and touched hers to them. “Okay, back to the book. You only have five months to go.”

I knew, to her, that meant five long months, but to me, it would never be enough time to study her life. We managed another five pages of translation before Zoe’s head tilted forward, the book in her hands fell to her lap, and she jerked upright. A check of the time showed it had reached nine-thirty. Having gotten up at five in the morning, even my eyes burned from overuse.

“So, humans ... you need to sleep?” Mac’s lips drew close to my ear. “Or you want to join me in my favorite spot?”

“I’m exhausted,” Zoe said. “Normal people would be.”

“You’re not normal, Zoe. You talk to dead people,” Mac said.

“I talk to *your* dead mom. No one else’s. Not even mine, you know.” The underlying hint of hurt sent a pang to my heart.

“Maybe yours isn’t dead,” Mac said.

Zoe snapped her pencil in half. “Well ... then why hasn’t she come to get me?” She pointed her book at Mac, voice ratcheting up.

Neither of us said anything. While I called Zoe my sister, she and I actually had no biological relation at all. Her mom had been married to my

dad for a whole six months before she disappeared.

After a way too long pause, Zoe said, “I can’t believe you have the energy to be awake twenty-four hours a day,” as if she hadn’t just had a mini temper-tantrum—one I understood, but a tantrum anyway.

“I can’t go *all* day, remember?” Mac asked.

I bumped her, hoping to lower her snide factor.

“From nine to five I’m as plain as you.” Mac rolled her shoulders back as if prepping for a fight.

I shook my head, wanting to say, *that’s not going to help*.

“Well, it’s like almost ten now. Why don’t you turn into some creepy crawly and go out into the cemetery up there.” Zoe angled a finger toward the rock ceiling.

“Because I have to have a babysitter.” Mac whined her answer.

“That why the Suze guy—who is totally weird, by the way—is following you or something?”

“Yeah, sorta. Long story. Let’s just say, I have no choice in keeping Suze because otherwise, I’d have Alina or Lucas around all the time.”

“Lucas?” Zoe asked.

“My ... dad. He’s a vampire,” Mac said. “Let’s not get courageous and try to meet him, okay?”

Zoe trembled. “No problem. And you know, *I* translated both those pages.” She smirked at Mac. “So I know all about the vampires. Blech.” Zoe had learned only a few months after me that she had one foot in both the human and in-human worlds. That left her with as much to learn as Mac.

“He’s actually a decent guy.” Mac’s lips curved.

“You know, Zoe ... it might be a good idea for you to spend more time on this book with us. You know, so you really do learn more.”

Both Mac and Zoe turned toward me, mirror-image expressions of shock on their face. “Yes!” Zoe said as Mac said, “What the hell?”

*What else have I gotten myself into?*

• • •

Zoe shivered as we walked up the stairs to exit Suze’s place an hour later. “I thought only humans were dumb for venturing out into the dark. Alone. Without a bodyguard. Aren’t you supposed to make Mac not be stupid?”

“The cemetery is *my* place,” Mac said. “Mine. Dead people don’t sneak up and try to kill me.”

“Yet,” I said.

“If anyone’s waiting, I’ll kick their ass. I need a good fight.”

“Or we could just call that big dude back. He was kinda nice,” Zoe said. “And he said we could—“

“We don’t need him.” Mac pushed through the outer mausoleum door. “C’mon, scaredy cats. There’s no one here.”

I’d thought ahead and pulled out my flashlight as I encouraged Zoe to go through the opening. While I’d been to Suze’s at night before, and to the cemetery with Mac to sit under ‘Mac’s Oak’ as she liked to call it, Zoe hadn’t. Worse, Zoe hated the dark. Being tired and having a vivid imagination probably wouldn’t help; she clung to my backpack as we stepped into the moonlit night.

“Man, this is beautiful,” Mac said.

Zoe froze; even my tugs couldn’t break her grip from the door.

“We only have to walk back to the car,” I said.

She shook her head. “Through a graveyard.” Terror tinged her tone.

“I told you, you shouldn’t have come.” Mac spun around, her arms extended as if soaking up the moon’s rays. She switched to jumping up and down—a boxer preparing for a fight and to taking deep breaths of the frigid winter air.

Leaving Zoe, I walked to Mac. “You really are itchy.” I slipped a hand behind her neck and pulled her in toward me. “You’re not a vampire right now are you?”

She shook her head and smiled. “Too risky with you and Zoe around.”

“Good.” Ever since our first kiss, I’d wanted more of her. More of her lips. More of her mind. More of her body. I took, a simple touch, because I could. “We’re *not* bringing my sister here again. We’ll teach her separately.”

“I heard that,” Zoe said. “Can we *please* go?”

“Yeah, whatever.” Mac took my hand, and with Zoe clinging to my pack, we started back toward my car.

Mac seemed more at home among the unmoving, non-speaking dead of the world than anywhere else. Her shoulders relaxed. She breathed in deep. She became the Mackenzie Thorne I’d come to love in a few short months.

We crossed back through the headstones from the 1800s, passed through the bigger ones marked 1900s until we reached the newest area with more ornate markers. Small lights lit up a few of the headstones. Overhead bulbs bathed some of the area in light while other sections lay in darkness.

With the end of January cold, the crickets hibernated. Sound came only from the adjoining road. As Mac led the way, we passed the last of the headstones, reaching the gates without interruption.

“See, Zoe? Nothing to be afraid of.” I pushed at the iron gate.

“Winn?” The seriousness of Mac’s tone had me spinning.

No one but Mac stared back at me.

“Where’s my sister?” *How had I lost her in a walk of a hundred yards?*

Mac inhaled deep and exhaled—an action I knew meant she’d just changed from human to some creature—though because most of her selections held a human likeness, I didn’t always know what she’d picked. She held up a finger, lifting her nose into the air.

*Sniffing?*

“This way!” Mac raced forward.

I ran after her, zigging as she zagged, navigating my way around the stones she jumped. Whatever she’d chosen gave her considerable speed. By the time I reached the second row of stones, she’d disappeared into the dark.

“Mac!” My lungs burned as I ran past Suze’s entry, trying to keep up with her. “Mac!” Rather than keep going into the black with only my single beam of light, I leaned against the wall of the mausoleum, straining to listen to the sounds around me.

A crack had my head whipping around.

“Winn?” Mac’s dad, Lucas, *at night*, would not make good company to my puny humanness.

I pointed the still burning flashlight straight out from me. “Hi.”

“Where is Mackenzie?” The one element Hollywood got right about vampires came in their ability to lure people from anywhere.

“She’s just getting ... something from inside.”

Lucas tilted his head. “Is she now?”

“Uh ...” *Shoot. Don’t stutter! He’ll know you’re alone.* “Yeah.” I peeled open the outer door. “Mac, hurry up. Your dad’s here.”

“You and I both know she’s not here, Winn.”

*Don’t say it. Don’t say it. Don’t say it.*



“And you should know that I mean you no harm.”

*Right. And I have a bridge to sell you over Arizona.*

Lucas stepped closer as I pressed myself into the wall, hoping Mac would show up—with my sister.

*I really don't want to be bitten by a vampire.*

“I'm not going to hurt you, Winn. I've made a promise to Mackenzie and as her ... father-figure, I am duty bound to honor her wishes.”

*Whatever you say. Please, don't bite me.*

The crunch of leaves made us both turn. From within the shadows, another figure appeared.

Not Mackenzie.

Not my sister.

*Another of Lucas' friends? The ones Mac had told me to avoid at all costs?* I had no shot at surviving if either of them chose to feast upon me. Only Mac could turn into a vampire and go back to normal.

“Winford Thomas. Nice to meet you under better circumstances.” *Felix.* A member of the twelve-person Council. The only member willing to give up his seat for Mackenzie if she'd choose to become a vampire.

*Friend. Not foe.*

*Sorta.*

“What are you doing here ... alone?” he asked.

The tension in my shoulders loosened but not by much.

“Where is Mackenzie?” Felix asked. “Neither of you should be in here alone. Have we not told you—”

“Yes, but try telling that to Mac,” I said.

Lucas laughed as Felix smiled and said, “If you have not learned one thing about our dear, dear Mackenzie, Master Thomas, it is that she will do that which she pleases. You now see what we have been dealing with for eighteen years.”

*Could I possibly become friends with vampires? No, no. Don't go there.* “Right,” I said.

“Are you finding her training effective?” Felix asked.

“We haven't really started.” We hadn't either, focused almost exclusively on the book.

“Tsk, tsk, Master Thomas. It is your duty now that she has called upon you.”

“I know—”

Felix held up a hand. “We know you know. We are not, however, certain that you understand the ramifications. Mackenzie needs a regimen. She needs to be taught the physical aspects of each potential role as well as the history. She must understand each of the races as well as the cultures. Not just the one she selects.”

“All of them?”

“Yes. We rule our own kind, but we are part of the twelve. We are therefore responsible for all the rest as well.”

“Why are you telling me all this? Why not just tell her?”

“Because, my dear boy, this is *your* job.” Felix stepped into the beam from my light. His lips curved, revealing two very, *very* pointy fangs. “You know ... should Mackenzie choose to become vampire and rule in my place, she will be free to take you as her mate. The best of both worlds, I do believe? Or, we could give her a reason to choose right now.” He jumped forward, mouth open.

“You do that and you’ll be sorrier than a monster without a swamp.” Mac appeared from within the night at my right.

Felix backed off laughing. “Only teasing, Mackenzie. I knew you had already arrived.”

“Yeah, right,” she said.

“What is that stench?” Lucas asked.

Only the slight intonation of voices allowed me to tell him apart from Felix. It made me wonder just how close in age the two were when they were turned.

“Did you shift into an animal Mackenzie?” Felix asked. “You reek.”

“And you are winded. Have you been running?” Lucas asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “To both.”

“Are you kidding?” I grabbed her bicep. “You said you hate animal forms.”

“I do. It was ... *necessary*.”

## 5

The slight incline of Mac's head directed my gaze. Zoe stood at the edge of the concrete building, soaked and shivering. I moved to her and wrapped my arms around her. She stayed mute the whole walk toward the car and trembled often, probably from both cold and terror. Mac trailed us to the car, and as soon as we slipped into our respective seats, I set the heat to full blast.

Without looking back for Felix or Lucas, I pressed the gas and drove away. "Who took her? How? How did they take her in complete silence? I didn't hear or feel anything. Why is she soaking wet? What did you turn into?" My questions spilled out as fast as my worry faded. With Zoe in the car, just behind me, the pace of my heartbeat relaxed, and I could think again.

"One at a time there, sport." Mac angled her body until she faced both me and Zoe without turning around completely. "First off, if I'd been in any form except human when we left Suze's, I would have smelled them."

"Them who?"

"I'd get there faster if you'd stop interrupting." Mac twisted her hair up and reclipped it. "We probably ought to stay at my house tonight since your dad's on a business trip. Lucas can keep watch 'til morning, and Alina can make a nice drink to help Zoe do a little forgetting."

"Fine, but I want answers." I turned down a side street in order to head toward Mac's. "*What happened to my sister?*"

"You know what a Wendigo is?"

*Of course I know.* "Yes. A demon spirit that possesses humans and turns them into cannibals. Kinda like your dear ole dad as you like to call him."

She chuckled. "Lucas is way nicer. But yeah, not sure whose human body it took, but dude's not gonna get his body back. Anyway, this thing snatched Zoe, dragged her toward the lake and had her half-way under water before I got there."

"Why the water?"

"Hell if I know."

“How’d you know it was that?”

“Smell. They reek of rotting human flesh—you know, ‘cause they pretty much are. Kinda like you after a long run.” She mock-punched my arm.

No matter the situation, Mackenzie always found a way to lighten my mood. “I didn’t smell that.”

“You wouldn’t have. It’s subtle because they take over so quietly. They’re gangly evilness, but because they were once people ... and they only eat people, they can be pretty stealth. They have to be able to sneak up and take ya.”

“How’re you supposed to fight that?” I asked as I turned onto Mac’s road.

“You don’t. There aren’t many of them. Never met one before. But the only way to kill them is to eat them as animal. You bite or get bit by them as human, and you’ll become one until all your skin falls off and you can’t cannibalize anyone new and the spirit flies away to find someone else.”

“So they’re vampires.”

“They’re like zombie vampires, dude.” Three houses ahead, Mac’s front lights burned. “There’s no way it meant to take Zoe since she’s a no one, though.”

“You think it meant to take you and got the wrong girl?”

“Yup. But then ... it didn’t *do* anything to Zoe, and those guys don’t usually wait to have their snacks. So who the hell knows?”

If Mac thought that would make me feel better about Zoe’s safety, or Mac’s, it didn’t. “You need a round-the-clock bodyguard. Suze could work on his glamour so he can just follow along with you all the time. And maybe now that we know Zoe’s not just human ... she needs one?”

“Enh.” Her dismissal of my concerns didn’t surprise me one bit. “I have you,” she said. “Zoe can have Suze.”

“You have me when I’m not working, sleeping or in class, and you don’t do a very good job of staying out of trouble.” On a deep sigh I forced myself to slow down. “So you turned into what in order to kill this thing?”

“I kinda did a half and half thing.”

“Which was?”

“Satyr. And no, I won’t be picking that either.”

*So even a half-goat, half-human doesn’t cut it for her.* “And you did what to get rid of it?”

“Used my woo-woo with Suze. He poofed right next to me and is taking care of it.”

“Which means he’s going to eat it.” A gag hit the back of my throat.

“Probably.” Mac didn’t seem the least bit concerned.

“Where’d you learn about this thing?”

“It was one of the other pages Zoe and I translated over Christmas break.”

“Now I know why she’s freaked into a silent stupor. Yet another of her nightmares has come to life. And they say the boogeyman isn’t real.”

“Who says that?” Mac asked.

• • •

We marched up the front steps and into Mac’s house. The smell of flowers and herbs greeted me from whatever concoction Alina conjured. Or brewed. Or cooked.

“Oh, my!” Alina herself hustled from the back of the house, as beautiful as the last couple times I’d seen her.

Given the hour, I’d thought she’d have been asleep. As a creature of the night, Lucas dealt with Mac’s nighttime prowling and Alina her daytimes.

“Lucas called me when you all started on your way back.” She took Zoe by the arms. “Come, darling. Let’s get you comfortable.” Her long, blue, flowing gown swished along the hardwood floors.

“She can have my bed, Alina,” Mac said.

Alina nodded, murmuring soft words I expected only Zoe, and potentially Mac, could hear as they made their way toward the kitchen.

Mac’s fingers snapped in front of me. “Stop staring.”

“I’m not staring.” *How does she always catch me?* Alina contrasted with Mac in color and radiance and presence, though Alina stood at least a foot shorter, and pale, blonde hair floated around her as if supported by a bed of clouds.

“Earth to Winn; come in Winn,” Mac said at my side.

I shook off the ethereal sensations. “Think my sister is going to be okay?” Being nearly drowned by a revolting creature would have shocked the life out of most non-suspecting humans. I imagined it would prevent Zoe from showing any curiosity about her kind as well.

“She’ll be fine. But ... that thing *was* disgusting.”

My stomach curdled again at the thought of Suze eating it.

Mac pointed up the stairs. “I need a couple things. Want to join me?”

“I’ll wait in the guest room,” I said as we reached the top of the stairs and turned into the bedroom.

“Kay.”

“We’ll need to stop by my house before school in the morning—to get clothes.”

Mac rolled her entire head instead of just her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Whatever. I’ll be there in a sec. Need to ask you something else, but I really want out of these wet things.”

Sitting on the bed, I opened my laptop, preparing to make notes about our evening. While I couldn’t talk to anyone about my experiences with Mac, I didn’t have any problems writing them down or saving them. Documenting them had helped me organize what I knew, what I understood as well as the questions I needed to ask of the Council members.

*Soon.*

Sooner than later if what had happened hours before meant anything.

Fifteen minutes later, as my eyelids drooped and my typing slowed to a trickle of sound, Mac walked in.

“You need some jammies?” She’d changed into red silk sleep pants and a matching tank. The color, combined with her hair up in yet another clip, and the bare feet with painted toenails forced me to press down on my laptop to hide my involuntary reaction. Energy bubbled from her as she threw a T-shirt my way. “Or you going to strip down to your skivvies?”

*Oh, god, why’d she do that now?*

She slid onto the bed next to me, stretching out like a languid cat and leaned back on one elbow, the length of her body reaching from my side to my foot. Her toes winked at me as she wiggled them.

*Distraction. I really need distraction.* “So ...” A cough cleared the buildup of saliva in my throat. “What did you want to ask me?” I folded the laptop closed, prepared to listen, and kept it tucked against me.

One finger twirled around a fallen hair as Mac kept her head bent. That she didn’t look at me made me wonder, but Mac asked questions on her own time.

“So ...” she said after a long silence, “that thing. I wouldn’t have known what it was if Z and I hadn’t happened to translate that page.”

Rather than respond, I waited.

“I’m thinking it might be a good idea to speed up this training gig.” She still hadn’t looked up, so I stayed quiet. “And, I’m thinking since you’re my teacher and all, you should ... like ... well ... maybe we should ...” She’d never hedged in her questions. The Mac most people knew wouldn’t care one bit if she’d insult someone or surprised them with whatever thought passed through her mind.

I moved the laptop off to the side and slid down so we faced each other on the bed. “Just ask.” Ideas floated around my head, but to suggest them to Mac rarely worked.

“What if you quit your job, and I paid you so we could go faster?”

“Why?”

Big chocolate brown eyes blinked up at me. Emotion passed through them right up until she jumped off the bed and paced to the window and back. “God, I hate this!”

Rather than wait for her to return, I flipped to my back, clasped my hands on my stomach and closed my eyes. Our conversation had dulled my human-male involuntary reaction. Thankfully.

Soft footfalls went back and forth.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

On the fourth pass, I said, “I’m in the inner circle, Mac. You can ask me.”

“Can and *can* are two different things.”

A small laugh escaped me. “Actually, they’re exactly the same, but whatever.”

The bed bounced again. I peeked through one cracked lid.

She’d sat, her back to me. “I was scared for Zoe, Winn. I don’t have a sister, and she’s kinda like a little one to me.” Mac had never expressed so much emotion in so few words; I even thought she hadn’t been scared when it all happened.

“She likes you. It’s the real reason she wanted to go with us tonight. I think.”

“I know,” she said. “And look what happened.” Her head tilted down, hair falling around the side of her face. “That won’t be the last someone-comes-after-me night.”

“I know.” *But there is a way we could make it stop.* Rising, I scooted down to her and laid my head in her lap, looking up from the cradle of her thighs. “This is nice,” I said. Her hand stroked my forehead sending shivers

of pleasure through me. “What if I told you we could be together after your birthday?”

Her eyes bulged. “What did you find out? Tell me. Now.” The fierce expression of interest had my heart beating faster as her fingers pressed into my skull.

“Nothing. That’s not what I meant. I just wanted to know ... *if* you could. Be with me that is ... would you?”

The hand across my brow relaxed again. “Oh. Yeah. Well.”

A yawn escaped without my control. Footsteps on the stairs made me lift up even as Mac pushed me back down. She didn’t care what Alina saw, but I did. I snuck out of her hold and sat up against the headboard.

Alina lifted a finger to her lips as she walked across the hall to Mac’s room with Zoe. No more than five minutes passed, and she returned to our doorway.

“She’s a bit shell shocked, I do believe.” Her soft voice carried despite the near whisper. “I’ve given her a memory reducing aid, though it may not work. If she wakes during the night, I’ll come to her. You two should get some sleep.” One long finger extended toward us.

“Thanks, Alina,” I said.

“You are most welcome, Winn.” Her smile warmed me all the way to my toes.

Mac slapped my shoulder the moment she disappeared. “You really do get all goggly eyed when she’s around. You weren’t like that the first time.”

I’d been mostly shell-shocked then, just as Alina described Zoe.

“She’s my mother, idiot.” Another punch came to my side.

“Hey. Hands off! I didn’t say anything.”

“Exactly my point.”

“You better be nice to me, or I won’t agree to quit working at the library.”

Her eyes widened. “So you will then? You’ll do it? You know I have money.”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t want it.” I bumped her shoulder with mine. “But you have to agree ... no ... you have to *promise* to answer me if I ask you any questions you think are stupid.”

“Like if I want to date Ridge?”

She would bring that one up. I sighed. “Yes. Exactly.”

“Fine. Okay.” She stared straight ahead. “You’re awesome, you know that?”



“I do.”

Her body jiggled with a laugh. “You’re really good to me.” Her words came out softer than usual.

“I know that, too.”

Mac sat up, turned and met my gaze. Her eyes reflected an intensity that sent every nerve ending in my body into a frenzy as she inched her way toward me on hands and knees. The bed squeaking with her movement didn’t help.

She inhaled a deep rush of air.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

Her breath caught as she exhaled and straddled my lap, her face so close to mine I could no longer focus.

“What did you just change into?”

“What do you want me to be?”

*Oh, god, don’t ask me that.*

“Josie taught me a lot about her kind. And I’ve been a nymph a couple times. You know what they can do.”

With her over me, there would be no way to adjust the strain on my jeans.

She moved closer. “Winn?” Her tongue licked across her lips. “Do you want me?”

My hands slipped up her arms, trailing fingertips against her neck and into her hair. “You know I do,” I said against her lips. “But when we do. If we do.” My chest heaved with each breath. “I want you to be you.” With another deep kiss, with our tongues tangled, I nudged her off me.

The mattress jostled as she landed at my side. “What was that for?” Her expression held only frustration.

I kept my own hidden. “I told you. Me and you have to be just *me* and *you*.”

“But I can change into anything. That *is* me.”

My fists clenched, blood pumping through unused muscles. “I know. And when you know who you are, then we can.”

She flopped onto her back, an arm over her closed eyes. “You suck, Winn.”

I chuckled. “I thought I was awesome.”

“Yeah, well, I can change my mind, too.”

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## 6

“Knock, knock.” Mac leaned against my doorway as I typed the last of the notes from my conversation with Tino the Sphinx.

The interview had been mostly one-sided since, Tino, it turned out, had been the wall flower of the Council and despite his massive size when a Sphinx, he barely had a word to share without trembling arms or legs. It didn’t help that Mac had once told him being a Sphinx ‘was the stupidest thing anyone could choose’. I took his sad eyes to be hurt more than anger and opted to end what I’d planned for an hour in fifteen minutes. Who knew a Sphinx could be so introverted and shy?

“You ready to go?” she asked.

“Yeah. One sec.”

“Get any answers this time?”

I held up a finger and kept typing.

“Anything you can share? Any revelations? Any—”

Spinning to her, I stared hard at her. “You know I’m going as fast as I can. Not everyone wants to meet soon and not everyone is willing to share, and I do have school. And I’m only human.”

For a moment, she stood frozen, mouth open.

I turned, hit save in my document, closed the laptop and went back to her. “Now, I’m done. For tonight.” I grabbed my coat from the back of my chair. “You’re actually looking forward to dinner with *my* friends?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course not. But I’m getting used to you day-timers. A little. Just not going to make a habit of it.”

• • •

Mac drove us to Tony’s Pizza in her Cobra under the pretense that her car had become sad since she rode in my Jeep so much.

“Crapulence.” Mac slammed her door shut as she got out in the parking lot, her gaze directed toward the building.

“What?” I asked but understood when I turned.

At one table, Maddie, Pete and Caroline—the three we should have been eating with—sat with Ridge.

“Why’d he have to come?” Mac asked.

Ridge must have crashed the party before we arrived, and my friends decided to humor him. No other reason existed for them to be together.

“Maybe we should go somewhere else,” I said. “We can call—”

“No. He’s not going to screw up my life more than all you humans do already. We’ll live.” Mac headed around to me, threaded her arm through mine, and pulled. “Eventually, Maddie or Caroline will get sick of him and come find us.”

The ding over the door came right before a, “Welcome to Tony’s!” song from the wait staff, though no one even turned in our direction. Voices and laughter rang out, the place as busy as if on a Friday night after a football game.

I pushed Mac toward one of the open corner tables.

Caroline, with her blue hair streaks, green eyes and red glasses gave us a small wave. As soon as she did, Ridge turned toward us, and Maddie scowled behind blonde curls tumbling around her face.

Ridge’s lips contorted into a menace-filled grin aimed right at me.

Mac slid onto the booth seat with me, leaving the bench across from us for our friends. “I think Maddie’s ready to literally pull out her hair,” Mac said.

“What do you mean?” I glanced over my shoulder at the foursome. Maddie’s normal bubbly self seemed to have turned inward with her head either in her hand or with fingers running through her hair.

“She told Caroline she was going to go see Mr. C again about getting a new partner for her Senior project.”

“But that’s impossible,” I said. “We’ve already been on the project for months. Assignments were permanent and everyone kne—”

“Yes, Mister goody-two-shoes. You know that. I know that. Desperate times call for desperate measures ... or whatever that saying is.” Mac slipped a straw from the bin, ripped off the wrapper and started flicking it. “And ... Ridge is making her do all the work.”

“Sounds like someone I know.” I tried not to meet her gaze as I said it—mostly as a joke.

She pointed the straw at me and threw it.

Our waitress appeared at the side of the table, chomping on her gum. “Can I get your drinks?”

“Water,” I said.

“Chocolate milkshake,” Mac said.

No sooner had she left than Ridge stood in the same spot she had, wearing his black leather baseball jacket and jeans. “Hey, Mackenzie,” he said.

She lifted her chin.

“You doing anything Friday night?”

“Dude ... are you asking me out?” Mac’s squished face made it look like she’d bitten into a lemon—a whole one without the rind.

“I’m just asking if you’re doing anything Friday.”

“Um ... I’m sitting right here, man,” I said.

“I’m busy. Washing my hair. Or napping.” Mac leaned into my shoulder, her hands laying along my right one.

“You gotta eat right?” Ridge asked.

I blinked over and over. The guy stood right there, at our table, asking my girlfriend out.

“No. I don’t eat.” Mac sat back against the bench and chewed on another straw.

Our waitress—Shell according to her nametag—came back with our drinks and handed them out. “Food order?”

“Double pepperoni, double cheese,” Mac said.

“Thought you didn’t eat,” Ridge said.

Mac turned toward the window. “Not with you.”

“You’re sounding desperate, Ridge.” I sipped at my drink wishing he’d leave; I hadn’t anticipated his boldness.

“You’re not a part of this conversation, *Winford*.”

Mac spun back, rage taking hold of her eyes. “You sound ... *desperate*, Ridge. This conversation. This request. This game is over.”

“I’ll catch back up with you later, then.” He sauntered off toward his table.

Mac sucked down her entire milkshake. If she took a breath, I didn’t hear it. I found her hand under the table. She nodded while noisily finishing off the remnants in the bottom of the silver carafe.

I kept Mac in my periphery, expecting her to comment or say something. Even as our pizza arrived, she stayed silent, and our friends remained at the

other table.

“Don’t you think it’s weird they haven’t come over here?” I took a slice as I signaled our waitress to return for more drinks. “I mean, we had plans.”

A peek over my shoulder showed Ridge turned our way, Maddie still talking, but Caroline standing up. She headed toward us along with our waitress.

Mac ordered another shake as Caroline scooted in on the opposite side of the table.

As soon as Shell left, Caroline leaned forward. “Mother of pearl, Winn ... what did you do to Ridge?”

“What do you mean?” I said through mostly closed lips while chewing.

“He beat him up,” Mac said.

I choked on my piece before unclogging it with a deep swallow. “I did not. And that was a month ago. So what do you mean?”

“Why does he think you turned him in for busting up your dad’s car?” Caroline’s eyes narrowed before her head moved back and forth in a slow ‘no’ gesture. “He’s going on and on and on and on about it.”

“I have no idea,” I said. “He told me the same thing though.”

“Yeah, well, he’s help-bent on getting back at you for it.”

“What’s he sayin’?” Mac asked.

“He’s just asking a lot of questions about Winn. To me, Pete and Maddie. Normally, I’d say that’s a good thing given how smart you are and all. But in this case, he’s asking weird stuff about your dad, about Zoe, about when you hooked up with Mac. Stuff like that. It’s really personal. I thought you should know. Figure he’s digging for dirt or to find a way to do something. He also says you, Mac, spend a lot of time out in Primrose, and your dad is always going out at night. See? Personal shizzy.” Caroline, the queen of made up swear words, stole one of our slices of pizza.

“My dad works third shift,” Mac said, the lie slipping through her lips like air. She’d used it a number of times when people asked about Lucas.

“He thinks something hokey’s going on.” Caroline sat back and shrugged. “It’s like we’re in middle school or something.”

“He’s a jackass who likes to strut his power,” Mac said.

Like a certain dragon I knew. Didn’t mean either of them were stupid. *Both could be planning something, and we’d never know.*

“I’d have to kick him in the rubber balloons if he messed with me like that.” Caroline lifted and let fall one shoulder. “Just wanted you guys to

know about it in case it mattered. Personally, I think Maddie should go out with him, get it over with and maybe then he'd get it out of his system and leave *her* alone to focus on the damnation of a project. The dude shows up just about everywhere she goes these days. She might as well either make use of it or get him off her back."

"They say if you take away temptation, interest will die, too, right?" Mac asked.

Caroline nodded.

"Maybe that will work for me?"

"What the hellions?" Caroline's eyes bugged. "You mean go out on a date with him? Give him what he wants even though he's a total donkey's bum?"

"Yeah, sorta," Mac said.

Just as when Ridge stood at our table, I sat mute, blinking.

"No," Caroline said. "You do that, and he'll think he's won. He'll be a gloating idiot forever and ever."

"I didn't say *I* was going to do it, I was just thinking how to get *him* to quit," Mac said.

"Which we've already established will probably work for Maddie. But giving him an alternative, as in you, isn't going to work," Caroline said.

"Why not?" Mac asked.

My stomach flip-flopped. *She'd go out with him to make him stop?* I had to agree with Caroline. That plan would backfire.

Mac spun my watch on my wrist. "We better go."

"You're in charge of the chocolate Friday night." Caroline pointed to Mac.

"I'm on it."

"See you at school," Caroline said. "Stay safe. Don't do anything I wouldn't do. And don't go out with him!"

We slid out of the booth. As we passed Ridge, Mac stopped. She pulled me against her, our lips merging with a kiss, tilting left, right and bringing herself back to center, insinuating her tongue between my lips even as mine darted to play with hers.

The restaurant erupted into cat calls.

I stopped her before someone took a video and posted it.

We'd already become a main topic of gossip; I didn't need more.

With a wink, she took my hand, thumbed her nose at Ridge with the other, and dragged me through the exit.

*Something's up with Ridge.* Not only Caroline's input, but Ridge's attack and his incessant and obsessive interest in Mac bothered me.

"You're still meeting with Felix Friday night?" Mac asked as we piled into her car.

"What? Yeah." Death by vampire didn't sound nearly as appealing as Mac made it sound, though Felix's idea of using it to stay with Mac long-term niggled at the back of my brain—as annoying as Ridge.

"And you're sure you don't want me to go?"

"I can handle it." *I think.* "You, Maddie and Caroline go do ... whatever it is girls do at one of your sleepovers." *If I survive, maybe I'll do some research into Ridge's family. Find out what he's digging into and get him off Mac.*

"Painting toe-nails is way scarier than fighting vampires," Mac said.

*It wouldn't be for normal people.* Rather than comment, I entwined my fingers with hers. "So are you really going to go out with Ridge?" I couldn't believe I'd asked.

"Hell, no. If he won't let it drop on his own—"

*Like that will ever happen. Who'd ever want to give up Mac Thorne?*

"—I'll find a way to make him."



## 7

As night moved closer to morning on Friday, and darkness covered our piece of earth, I walked into Felix's house—yet another normal, everyday-looking place. Interview number three could be my last if my interviewee had anything to do with it.

Lucas accompanied me, vowing to keep me safe. I didn't believe two vampires against one human played in my favor, but he'd promised both Mac and Alina that I wouldn't be bitten, nor would I even be tasted, so I put my trust in him and off we went.

"Come in, come in, our fair friend." Felix held out a hand in my direction.

I gripped him with a handshake, expecting his hand to be cold thanks to too many Hollywood movies, but really, it had a lukewarm, almost-as-soft-as-Mac touch. "Thank you for seeing me."

"Thank you for agreeing to come so late." Eleven o'clock had been his preferred time, he'd said.

"No problem."

"Our Master Thomas here tends to enjoy late nights with young Mackenzie," Lucas said from behind me as the door closed and the room pitched into darkness.

At least the streetlights had lit it well enough before, giving me some sense of security. Without sight, I had no idea where to go, let alone how to stay alive in the presence of two predators.

*What have you gotten yourself into, Winn?*

Before I could ask for some light, three small table lamps illuminated the room. Painted a deep red, with black, light-blocking curtains, dark leather couches and a wide hearth, the room couldn't have looked more different than I imagined a vampire's crypt would.

*Just goes to show you can't judge a book by a cover or a house, or a vampire by their shell.*

"Come in. Make yourself at home. What can I get for you?" Felix asked.

“Nothing. I’m good.” Though I hadn’t been ‘good’ since Wednesday night when Ridge decided to ask out my girlfriend right in front of me.

“You seem troubled.” Felix took the couch, his long legs crossed one over the other, hands around his knees.

I sat across from them both as Lucas took a side chair, and pulled my laptop from my bag. Not wanting to get into my issues, I said, “Do you mind if I take notes?”

“Not at all,” they both said.

For a second, I wondered if they’d been brothers once or if spending time together had simply brought them closer. “So someone once said humans had to exist for you to exist, and I don’t mean you-you—” I pointed to Felix and Lucas. “—but the general you.”

Felix chuckled. “Yes, that would be true. We are symbiotic upon this land, one requiring the other much like prey and predator in the wild. Even the tiniest of honey bees is a vital component to the world’s ecosystem.”

“Humans are like honey bees?” I asked.

“They are sweet,” Felix said.

*Yuck. Move on.* “So ... according to some, Mac’s having a hard time choosing a form. Do you think that’s because she doesn’t know all the rules, or is it something else?” I wanted to ask that question since Lucas had spent eighteen years with her and might answer.

The two of them turned their heads toward one another.

“I believe it is because Mackenzie is a headstrong young woman. She always has been,” Lucas said.

“I would concur,” Felix said.

“And you’d really give up your seat for her?” That, Felix had said before, and it still made me wonder.

“Yes, I would.”

“Why?”

“That is a very personal question, which, at the present, I am not at liberty to divulge.”

“Okay. Sorry.”

“No apology necessary.” He inclined his head toward me.

“What happened to the last changelings? I know the two just before Raven aren’t with the Council. Can you tell me more about what happened before they were ... you know ...”

Felix leaned forward. "I shall tell you, Master Thomas, but you are not allowed to expound upon to Mackenzie."

*Not this again.* "No offense, but I'm supposed to be teaching her, and your ways just don't make that possible."

Felix held up a hand. "If you wish to learn the truth, you may ask the questions. If you wish to simply have the answers you seek, I shall give you the answers not to the questions you ask."

*Say what?* "I want the real answers. Please."

"Then you will ensure she is not privy to this without her questioning such?"

*They aren't going to give up on this.* At least I'd have the answer and could find a way to show her. I nodded.

"The last two changelings chose a human form," he said with such a flat monotone that I didn't know if he joked or told the truth.

Like at the pizza restaurant, I sat mute, blinking.

*Human?*

Mac had told me, and the Council had said, it had been repeated so many times: she could not choose human. *Ever.*

"And thus were removed from our world and from their place on the Council," Felix said.

"You're joking, right?" He had to be kidding.

"'Tis not possible if one wishes to serve on the Council."

"But ... no. Wait." I held up a hand and faced Lucas. "Mac said the other two were killed. That people were after them, and they weren't protected enough, so they died."

"I believe what I told her was 'The two before her were lost to us in their human forms'," Lucas said.

"So you lied?"

"The interpretation of words, Master Thomas, is an individual activity," Felix said. "If you will recall ... at the time ... our goal was to motivate Mackenzie into action. We believed that a small threat to her life and future would be of service to that cause."

I had understood that, but didn't realize their lies went so far back. "Why would they pick human if their entire destiny is to choose a supernatural form?"

Felix's lips curved. "Why else, Master Thomas, but for love?"

“But that’s stupid, right? She has to rule. It’s her birthright, and it’s what she wants.”

“Is it?” Lucas asked.

*Good question.* I ran a hand through my hair. “Why wouldn’t she want that?”

Felix steepled his fingers. “Ask yourself that question.”

Our conversation paused for a moment. I couldn’t believe they’d quit only for love.

“If you wish to see her succeed, you should distance yourself from her,” Felix said.

“But I’m her teacher. I can’t just—”

“You take your role seriously?” he asked.

“Of course. I said I would. Did you think I wouldn’t?” I turned from one to the other of them as I asked.

Both vampires turned toward each other.

Felix made his way around to me. “We are a race that will not be lost long-term.” He drummed his fingers on his knee. “Another rift, forcing yet another Changeling away, would be far too great for our world.”

“I said I’m serious.”

He gave me a nod. “It seems you humans are quite the catches. You are aware Mackenzie’s father is human?”

“Yes.”

“And unlike all other Changelings ...” He chuckled a little. “... a goddess-born Changeling can also produce a Changeling.”

Based on what I’d read, a goddess-born Changeling happened once in a millennia and under some strange set of circumstances no one understood. Rarer than the rarest of supernatural beings.

“Who’s her dad?” That had been one of Mac’s ongoing questions. Since Felix brought it up, I figured I’d go back to it.

“He is unknown to me.”

Not the answer I’d hoped for. Words from the book filled my mind and made me think, somewhere inside, the name of her father could be found. “Her mom died, yet she’s a goddess. How’s that possible?”

“Who is to say what death is?” Felix leaned into his couch, arms spread along the back. “Have I exhibited signs of a demise?”

Lucas chuckled.

“You’re a vampire. By definition, you’re the undead,” I said.

“To most, that would be true. To one who is of our kind, I am very much alive. Look beyond the wall which separates humans from the supernatural, my friend.” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees again. “What you understand in human terms about death is nothing to what is actually true.”

“Are you implying Mac’s mom isn’t ... *dead*?” Almost everything Mac had shared with me contradicted what Felix said.

“You should speak with Josie, or perhaps Raven, for the answers you seek.”

Felix had given me a lot to consider. As my dad always said, being a part of a situation and looking at it from the outside often brought about varying perspectives.

I started to close my laptop as Felix said, “One more item,” and my hand stilled.

“The purpose of the Council is to ensure we remain strong in the eyes of the gods. We protect and serve much like the pitiful excuse for government you call Congress. However, we are, by far, more in tune with our people than you yours. Some of us, as you know, want to see change. Mackenzie was *expected* to bring that about.” He paused for a few beats. “Her lack of passion with regard to our roles is a driving force behind why *some* oppose her. They believe she has aligned herself with ... *humans* for too long.”

“Where are the others? The other Changelings who chose human?”

“For that you must speak with Magwa. Know this, though, Master Thomas. Were you to find them, they will remember none of their past. ’Tis the effect of the choice to select humans over our own kind. The one to whom you want to speak is Mackenzie’s mother.”

“But she’s—”

Felix beat a finger back and forth like a metronome. “Remember, dear boy. Death to a human and death to an immortal are two very different concepts.”

“Okay.” It dawned on me that my sister could talk to Mac’s Mom. I’d have to take advantage of that if she’d even consider opening up after what happened in the cemetery.

“I’ll see you out, Winn.” Lucas rose and opened my bag for me to slide my laptop inside.

The idea Mac’s mom hadn’t died gave her presence in Zoe’s life some explanation, but then why didn’t she just talk with Mac?

• • •

Back in my room, I sat at my desk, pondering my conversation with Felix and Lucas. The facts didn't line up. What the Council told Mac, and what they said to me, contradicted each other. If I looked at it upside down, from a different angle or mixed it all up, none of it fell into place as I expected it would.

More answers had to be in the book, and I still had twenty-ish pages to translate.

A glance at the clock showed it to be almost one in the morning.

With my dad in his room, Mac out with Caroline and Maddie, and Zoe at a friend's, I had all night to work.

Opening the book, I began.

After so many pages, the Greek and Latin letter combinations had become easier to sort out—to remember. I flew through the words about two types of dragons. At two a.m., I hit a snag and slowed, recording the details about Kelpie. By three, my eyes drooped, so I ran down into the kitchen, grabbed a bag of Oreos and a can of Pepsi.

Reaper came to life.

Sphinx filled another page.

Yeti finished off a third.

Page after page, I focused on the translation, putting Greek and Latin into English. Any time a word stood out in a different font, or even anything resembling handwriting, I wrote it in a separate document. I had at least three, single-spaced, twelve point font pages full of those 'extras', grouped by the page where I'd found them.

Unicorns existed.

Selkies, too.

Tiamats took over my image of the sea as griffins exploded in my mind as birds for the sky. That one, at least, I'd seen for myself.

From Greek mythology to Norse, biblical to Irish and Japanese—the pages before me spread out like an ancient encyclopedia explaining the kind, the race, which line they fit into of the twelve, their predators, their strengths and weaknesses.

Every one, down to the last little detail about colors, power, history.

Information a Changeling could definitely use to learn.

The sun rose, sending orange light through my window.

I reached the last page. The very, very last page. It didn't have a picture on it. Just a bunch of text. I'd assumed it to be an appendix, addendum or index, or something that would summarize everything.

Instead, I found one more page of information.

*For humans.*

If only I'd translated it first.

*Human. The frailest of our kind. They are not ruled by any of the twelve. Despised by many, we must live amongst them. Male and female, they are not immortal. They are the epitome of prey for all within our world.*

*Humans are not to be trusted with our knowledge, yet some may be bound for eternity with it.*

*Their lives are short, living just one-half to one-one thousandth of our time.*

*Should one take a human as a consort or mate, do not expect to live with him long, for illness and death overcome their forms far too often.*

*Selection of human will banish a Changeling from the Council as the ruling twelve may never be human. The choice is considered a decision to withdraw from immortal life.*

The page ended with a line, written in a different penmanship—same color as the rest of the text but more script-like.

I picked out each letter, typing them in one by one until the full line appeared on my screen.

*Choose human for one and only one reason.*

No other words followed.

I scrolled down farther. Had I forgotten to scan a page? Had something been deleted? I'd expected to see a word. An answer. The reason. Something scrawled or scribbled to translate.

On a huff, I moved from my computer to my bed and lay down. My meeting with Josie had been scheduled for ten a.m. As the clock blinked eight, I stared up at the ceiling, my eyes as wide open as ever.

“How can they leave it like that?”

## 8

Knowing Mac, she'd have stayed up late after her night with Caroline and Maddie and crashed. Since she wouldn't even be awake to tell her what I'd found in the book, and I hadn't slept all night, I jumped in my car and drove straight to Josie's. Her house sat on the bank of a lake on the farthest edge of our county—the perfect fit for a siren.

I pulled into the driveway exactly on time, an hour and a half after I started out.

Josie, in a robe one shade lighter than her red hair, sat on the front porch in a traditional white rocking chair, sipping something from a long fluted glass. “Good morning,” she said. “Welcome to my home.”

Like her glowing house, Josie radiated sexuality. I found it hard to look away from her face—so perfect and flawless.

“Good morning, Miss... .” I didn't know her last name.

As I stepped up the outer, wooden stairs, she said, “Just call me Josie. Would you prefer Master Thomas, Winn or Winford?”

“Winn is fine.”

One long, slender hand reached out and tapped my wrist. “You look exhausted. May I make you a drink?”

The idea of downing anything made by any of the immortal crowd made my stomach churn. A drink Alina once made me swallow fizzed and bubbled and gave me gas like nobody's business.

“How about some breakfast? Waffles perhaps? I have fresh blueberries. Picked them myself in South America just last night.” Mac had explained that Josie traveled through the waterways and could go from one part of the world to the next in an instant using them.

Josie showed me through her front screen door. Like at Nahir's, picture frames dotted the walls, colorful lamps and throw-blankets added color. Even though I hadn't, I should have expected their homes to all be normal. Like a human's.

Remembering I still hadn't answered her about the drink or breakfast, not knowing what would be rude or not to ask of a Council member, I said, “I'll



eat whatever you have ready, but don't make anything just because I'm here." My dad would be so proud.

"Nonsense. You are my guest, and as such, it would be my honor to provide what is obviously much needed sustenance. Mackenzie will need you ... well fed."

"For what?"

"This and that."

Given how cryptic the Council could be, I opted to pretend I understood and followed her into the bright blue kitchen. Sun rays warmed through the wide windows. "This is ..." *Normal. Like a real home.* "... nice."

"Thank you." As if by magic, pancakes sizzled on the stove and blueberries waited in a strainer in the stainless steel sink.

Either she'd prepared for my visit or she had magic like Alina.

We sat at her table, both of us with a plateful of breakfast along with something pink and steamy for her and a glass of what looked like orange juice for me.

"So, Winn." With her fingers linked, she dropped her chin to them, propped up by her elbows. "What would you like to know about our dear, dear, Mackenzie?"

"I'd like to know more about her mom, actually. I have some information that leads me to believe she may not be dead."

"Oh?" Josie sipped at her drink.

I waited to see if she'd elaborate.

"What would you like to know about her then?"

"*Is she dead?*" I figured the direct approach might work best.

Josie leaned her head back, waves of hair cascading behind her and laughed. As she returned, she said, "Maya is, to the human eye, gone from this world. She will never be to the immortal."

"Why didn't she get to be Mac's mom?"

"It isn't our way, Winn. You know that. Ask a different question."

"Why didn't she—"

Josie shook her head.

"Why—"

Josie shook her head again.

"Is she—" I got a nod that time. "Is she ..." What to put on the end of the question eluded me. "Can you just tell me what you think I want to know?"

“That ... I cannot.” She rose and moved back to the griddle, bringing back two more pancakes for me and some blueberry puree.

“Why do you guys make it so hard?”

She sat again. “You are of the curious sort are you not?”

“I guess.” I dug into the additional helping of food.

“Would you say Mackenzie is?”

A big fat ‘no’ sprang to my lips. “Depends on the topic.”

Josie smiled wide. “A very politically correct answer. I knew she chose you for a reason.”

“Okay, let me try this. Can Mac and her mother ever meet again?”

“Yes.”

My fork clattered to the ceramic plate. “What? How? Let her do that now, so she can get over this and start focusing!” I stopped myself and calmed my breathing. “I’m sorry. Can we do that? Have them meet, I mean?”

Josie’s head moved side to side very, very slowly. “Not in a way that would suit her human side.”

*There should be a rule book for these immortals.* For a moment I could understand why Mac didn’t like to ask questions. The answers always came out in riddles.

“Who’s her dad?”

“That, I cannot answer.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

Red-painted lips curved. “You are such an astute young man. Will not.”

“But you told Mac you don’t know who he is.”

Braceleted arms laid on the table’s surface. “When you want something so bad that you can’t focus on anything else because of it, what do you do?”

“Focus ... on it?” I wasn’t sure of her question.

“But if you are told, in undeniable terms, an answer, does it satisfy even if it is not the answer you wish to hear?”

“Maybe.”

“If Mackenzie knew that she need only ask the questions, she would not have asked the right ones. If she knew her mother watched over her in a way not possible for a human, Mackenzie would have sought her out. Perhaps incessantly.”

That did make sense.

“Changelings have a place in this world far different than any other creature. In order to rule, we must be willing to make the sacrifice with our life.”

“And you made that. Why?”

“I have an affinity for control.” She gave me a wink with lashes so long they touched her cheek.

“What happens if Mac chooses human?”

Josie straightened in her chair. “She will be mortalized and her memories stripped. She will no longer remember the Council, that any of us exist. Nor you.”

The ‘nor me’ part made me shiver.

“What if she chooses a place *and* wants ... to ... *date* a human?” I couldn’t believe how whiny my question came out as if I’d had to ask permission to find out my own future. I’d gone from thinking I’d die at the hands of the Council to knowing Mac could turn human and somehow managed to sneak in my own wishes into my questions. “You know what? Never mind.”

“No, let me tell you. There is no law that prevents any inter-species, if you will, connections. In fact, we cannot exist without you all for a variety of reasons. However, can you imagine the problems if humans and non-humans took relationships beyond the basic need phase?”

“More Changelings?”

A small laugh broke through. “There is that, but it is not to which I refer. For a Changeling, there can only be one at a time. Ever.”

“I guess I don’t see the problem, then.”

“Humans cannot know of us, Winn. The laws, the safeties, the precautions alone prevent those in my world from embarking upon long-term relationships with mortals. We do not age. You do. For you to be a part of this, you have had to undertake quite the refreshments, I believe.”

I had.

“So as you see, our kind chooses to maintain the F-rule, as Mackenzie calls it, when it comes to your kind.”

“Right. Food. Frolic. Fraternization. Yeah, Mac told me.”

“Exactly. So you see—”

“No, actually, I don’t really understand. I’m trying to, though. Do you ... have a ... husband ... or whatever you call it?” Even asking it in that

manner made me cringe. It seemed such a personal question and about the wrong person, but I wanted to get off the human topic.

Josie extended her left hand toward me. On her ring finger, a giant turquoise ring sparkled. “There is but one on the Council who does not currently have a mate.”

I turned around as if a second person might appear. “Is yours ... here?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Does Mac know?”

“Mackenzie only knows what Mackenzie wishes to know.” Josie’s head tilted to the left. “In this case, she has never asked. I never speak of it. Some questions need not be answered simply due to their relevance.”

*How could Mac not be curious about this stuff?* I’d have been sitting at the feet of every one of the nice Council members, asking for information—even if half of them used humans for dinner or play toys.

“May I ask a question of you, Winn?”

“Uh ... sure.”

“How is your sister doing?”

Why would she ask about my sister? “She’s ... fine?”

“Zoe is her name, I believe Mackenzie said?”

“Yes.”

“And she and Mackenzie get along well?”

“Yeah. Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity. Carry on with your questions.”

We kept going for a while, me asking much of the same questions I had to Nahir, planned to with Tino and had with Felix just to get a fourth opinion.

After another hour, she asked, “Who have you on your list to speak with next?”

“Robin.”

“You’ll like your conversation with her. She has news she has been dying to share.”

• • •

I’d spent three hours with Josie. It took another hour and a half to get home, and the kinks in my neck and arms from having been up all night didn’t even bother me. I didn’t believe for even a second that I’d somehow

worked them out myself. Josie had to have given me something. Couldn't prove it, just believed it.

With a couple hours left before my date with Mac, I had just enough time to record my notes before I dressed.

Everything Mac had told me about her life and about her future contrasted with what the Council members had explained.

Drawn back to the three pages of extra notes I had—of words hidden between words—I began sorting through them. Would they show me truths? Would they enlighten me so I could share with Mac? Would they give away answers that the Council didn't want her to know? Or would they be a never ending path like a treasure hunt with no 'X' on the spot and no solution?

Mac didn't have the time to waste, which meant I didn't either, but something needed to happen. Something needed to jump out at me before frustration killed my interest even before a vampire got to me.

"Don't think like that. This is for Mac. You'll figure it out."

Rather than focus on my growing distress, I turned to my jumble of random words and letters.

At first, I organized the words based on the order of the pages they'd been on, but they came out in a heap of nothingness. Realizing that none of the creatures we'd read about or translated had been in any sort of alphabetical order, I rearranged the groupings based on a more standard orientation—straight from the ABCs song.

That netted me another pile of words that formed no meaningful sentences or any remotely interesting phrases. The decoder kit must have gotten lost in the box of cereal.

Pounding my fist on my desk did nothing to bring clarity.

"Why can't I figure this out?"

A knock had me jumping from my seat.

"Winn?" My dad's voice carried through.

I closed the laptop and opened the door. "Hey, Dad, what's up?"

"Can I come in?"

Most people said I resembled my dad, and since I only knew my mom from photos, I agreed. Had I known Mac and I were kindred spirits when it came to the missing pieces in our lives, I might have done something, said something, tried something, before we'd both reached our final year in school.

“Winn?”

“Oh, sorry. Yeah, come in.” I’d stood there like a dolt. Even as I walked back to my chair, Mac’s story took over my mind.

The bed squeaked a little as my dad sat on the edge. “I wanted to talk with you about Mac.”

“What about her?” For some reason, my body stiffened as if my dad had said something bad about her, yet he hadn’t.

“You spend a lot of time together, don’t you?”

“Yeah. With me. And with Zoe.” Perhaps he wouldn’t think it bad if he understood how much she cared about Zoe.

“Actually, it’s Zoe I wanted to ask about.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Zoe seems to have taken quite a liking to Mac. In fact, they went out shopping together at lunch while you were gone.” His tone turned solemn as if he had something bad to say.

“Are you worried about her, Dad? I mean, Mac’s not going to hurt her. They’re friends. It’s good for both of them, I think.”

His head bobbed up and down. “Yes, I know you think that, but there are things about Zoe you don’t understand.”

*And you do?* I wanted to ask but bit my tongue to stop myself. I could have said the same about Mac. “Like what?”

“Zoe’s ... special, Winn.”

I hadn’t told my dad about our finding out Zoe could talk to Mac’s dead, or undead, whatever the case, mom. We both had already escorted her to regular therapy sessions for years before Mac came along, I didn’t need to add to his paranoia. “I know she has issues, Dad, but she’s doing great with Mac around.”

“I know, Winn, but—” He drew in a deep breath. “Mac’s going to leave at some point in the future, and I fear it’s going to hurt your sister.”

*But not me?*

“Zoe’s only fourteen. She needs permanence in her life. She needs to know what happened as a child with her mother disappearing her isn’t going to happen again. That it’s not her fault. Mac will do that. If she’s too close to her ... I don’t know what will happen.”

“Are you asking me not to spend time with Mac? Are you asking me not to let her come over here? What exactly are you asking?” The questions came out rapid-fire.

He shook his head. “None of the above. Just ... well ... keep it in mind for when she does leave. Like I said ... Zoe’s special, and we need to embrace that. That’s all.”

“Okay.” I didn’t know what else to do. I wouldn’t dare tell Zoe she couldn’t spend time with Mac, and they both understood, or so I thought, that Mac had a choice to make. Dad, being on the outside, didn’t know what I knew.

“Now that that’s been said. One more thing.” He punched my shoulder more guy-to-guy than father-son. “You and Mac are getting pretty close.”

I smiled at the thought. “Yeah.”

“You’re taking precautions?”

If my cheeks flushed with the heat that coursed through me, I had to be as red as a beet. “Uh ...”

“Because you know, Winn, a child at your age—”

“Oh. God. No. Dad. Seriously. Not this talk.”

“It’s important—”

I nudged at him to stand and leave. “Been there. Done that. In seventh grade.”

He tried to turn, but I kept pushing toward my door. “Think about it Winn. We men ... we can’t always control ourselves.”

“No, Dad, you’re right, but I got this covered.” I’d managed to get him to the door, facing the hallway.

“Sex is an expression of beauty, but it’s not to be taken lightly.”

“Got it!”

With one final push, I shut the door and leaned my back against it. My breath came fast to the point I worried about hyperventilating.

Silence came from the other side. I suspected my dad waited beyond the barrier. “Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” His footsteps echoed through the hall as he disappeared.

Tucking away his advice, I went back to my work, intent on finding the answers that hid within the book.

## 9

Tires screeched outside. The clock flipped to eight minutes after six. “Oh, my god.” I’d worked straight through without realizing it.

Not only had Mackenzie arrived eight minutes *after* she’d told me to be ready, I hadn’t even gotten dressed.

Or showered.

Or anything.

After saving, I shut down my laptop and raced to the bathroom. A flick of the knob sent the water running. Back to my closet, I picked out a black button down and slacks.

She’d said to wear something nice; I interpreted that to mean more than jeans.

The front door opened, Mac and Zoe’s voices carrying up the stairs. I threw the clothes on the bed and raced back to the shower.

It hadn’t even warmed up, but I jumped in anyway.

The cold woke everything inside me that had fallen asleep, and two minutes later, I jumped out, dried off and stared in the mirror at myself.

Mussed, damp and straggly brown hair along with the brown of my eyes didn’t do much for me. I wondered, sometimes, what Mac saw in me. Ridge had the blue-blond combination, and the muscles, not me. I’d done martial arts for many years, so my moves came with ease and the simplicity of defense—though I’d rarely had to use them before I met Mac.

The rap on my door stopped my self scrutiny.

I finger-combed my hair, threw on my boxers and slacks and slid my arms into my shirt as the knocking grew louder.

Any second and Mac would likely walk in without my okay.

I opened the door.

Caroline stood in front of me. “Whoa, Winn.” She poked me in my stomach where my unbuttoned shirt showed off my skin.

“Where’s Mac?”

“Downstairs.”



“Why are you in a dress, and why do you have flowers on your wrist?” Nothing about her attire made sense to me. Saturday, February seventh held no meaning as far as I knew.

“Mac said you’d ask that.”

“And the answer is?” I finished buttoning and turned to tuck in without showing off my boxers.

“You’ll see.”

“You know surprises and Mac don’t really go together well, right?”

“This one will,” Caroline said. “Be downstairs in thirty seconds, or she’s sending Zoe up.”

*Not herself?* I could deal with my own sister. “I’ll be down.”

Back in the bathroom, my reflection and I stared at each other. Whatever Mac had planned, she’d told me nothing. Then again, I hadn’t paid much attention in the last week given school, my investigation into Mac’s own life and my obsession with the book—a never ending cycle to my life. I hadn’t realized our date included more than just me and Mac, either. “Okay ... into the den of wolves.”

Taking the steps two at a time, I reached the bottom landing exactly on time for Caroline’s curfew.

Mac turned from the edge of my counter, her hair down around her shoulders in thick waves. Rather than her usual black, she wore bright red. Her entire body had been wrapped in it—had to have been to fit in the skin-tight, low-cut, incredibly hot body suit.

Every nerve in my body went on alert. “Wow.”

“I knew it!” Zoe held out her hand as Caroline did the same.

“What?” I turned to both of them.

Mac pulled out dollar bills from the small clutch she held in her hand and passed them to each of Caroline and Zoe. “They bet me the first thing out of your mouth would be ‘wow’ but I said ‘oh no, you’ll say ‘hi, Mac’ like you always do. And now you owe me twenty bucks because I don’t lose, and you made me lose.”

I stalked up to her, keeping my gaze on her the entire ten-foot-long journey. “So it’s my fault?”

She smiled red-painted lips. “Yes.” Her answer came out a sultry, extended ‘s’.

“Red? Do you know how hot you are in red?” I’d never seen her in any color other than black and definitely not like that.

Caroline and Zoe giggled. As I eyed both of them, I realized they'd dressed up, too.

Mac played with the top button of my shirt. "So ... *Winford*. It seems to me that we kinda missed New Years on account of my little unexpected delay and illness ..." Euphemism for the night I became her teacher. "... so I thought we could ... celebrate—" She licked her lips. "—for Valentine's Day."

"So we're doing the party part now!" Caroline's eyes lit with excitement. "Tonight! Mac booked the Plaza Hotel downtown. Her mom and dad set it all up, and they invited the entire senior class."

"They did not," I said.

Mac's half-smile grew. "They didn't. Just a few ... people. It was a gift. To you." She pulled me close and laid her lips against mine. "Want to have some fun?" Her hips dug into me.

She'd know exactly how much fun I wanted to have if she paid even one speck of attention to what separated us.

"Well?" Mac asked. "I have a limo waiting."

"You're totally serious."

"I owe you one," she said. "Or two or three hundred, so yes. It's a pre-Valentine's post-New Year's party."

I held out my elbow and Mac slid her arm into it. "Let's go. Wait, Zoe, you're not a senior."

She bounced, her excitement evident in every action she made. "I know, but I've been helping Mac set it up all week, so I get to come, too!" Given she'd barely left the house since the cemetery experience, getting out would do her 'a world of good', as my dad liked to say, and with me there, I could keep an eye on her.

I held out my other arm. Zoe slipped hers through it. "Ladies ..."

"You're not going to grow a third arm and put Caroline on it?" Pete's voice came from behind me. I hadn't even seen him.

"You have two, man."

He mirrored my stance and the five of us walked out and into the cold moonlit night.

• • •

Mac had gone all out. Streamers in red and ink-blue and purple, as well as gold and silver, glittered from one end of the room to the other. A disco ball spun in the center to the beat produced by the DJ at the far wall. Tables draped in similar colors displayed all sorts of foods I'd need to get closer to identify.

At least two dozen people danced in the center of the room, their bodies gyrating against each other—the bumping and grinding far less controlled than any school dance I'd been to.

The lack of supervision could have been the reason.

The fact the school didn't sponsor the event would have been another.

No one turned to us or even acknowledged our presence as we stood in the doorway. A bump from behind and more of our class joined in the fun.

Across the way, Alina emerged from behind a closed door.

“So we do have adult supervision?” I whispered to Mac.

“Yeah. The hotel wouldn't let me rent it without a clause to have at least one person over twenty-one for every twenty-five people here.”

“And how many *are* here?”

“One hundred and thirteen were invited.” Caroline's little squeal came as she and Pete snuck by us and danced their way into the mix.

Zoe raced off behind them, in Alina's direction.

I hadn't expected Caroline to be so into the crowd given neither she, nor I, went to our Junior prom or any of the other school-supported dances.

“Who else is here other than Alina?” I spun to Mac. “Please tell me Lucas isn't?”

“Nah,” Mac said. “Alina, Josie and Cleo are here.”

*Fairy, siren and shapeshifter.*

“Oh, and Magwa. He's got a handle on the food ... you know ... just in case we run out or someone decides to spike the punch.”

*Which someone will do, I'm sure.*

In the center of the room, Maddie danced with Mark, a guy in my tenth grade chemistry class who'd gone off to the School of Science and Math for the rest of high school.

“You don't want to dance, do you?” I asked.

“Uh ...” She opened her mouth, but I pressed a finger to her lips.

“Your party. Your rules”

“Right. Which I made for you.” One finger poked into my shoulder. “So I guess if *you* want to ...”

“With all these people? I’d rather watch.”

A cringe took over her otherwise happy face. “I tried to keep it small. I planned to keep it just us.”

“Why didn’t you then?”

“I swear I tried, but Maddie and Caroline—actually more Maddie than Caroline—kept saying we should make this a whole thing, and then they needed to invite certain other people, and I opened my big mouth and it became fifty. *Couples*. Plus others.”

Scanning the room brought lots of faces I recognized and a few I didn’t. “Who exactly did they invite?”

Mac shrugged. “The Chess Club, the Junior ROTC, the Math Club to name a few.”

Focusing in made me realize the group didn’t consist of the popular crowd but of the ones like me. The ones who usually lived against the walls, never making waves, and doing what we were told, not what we wanted.

The only person in the group that I saw, who didn’t fit that model, stood next to me, her hand in mine.

She’d setup it up for me. For all the times she’d somewhat badmouthed us puny humans, especially my more mature, geekier kind.

I could do something just as nice.

• • •

Mac and I headed to a table to sit and watch. Friends stopped by and said their thanks for the invitation and that a ‘geeks only’ party had been just what they needed. Of course, the ‘geeks’ part I’d interpreted.

Mac handed me a glass of red punch that fizzed.

“Alina’s work?” Unless they infused the drink with dry ice, the special effect had to have come from her.

Mac raised her glass in Alina’s direction. “Yep. She thought a few extra magical touches would do for some fun.”

Given the line at the table for the drink, I figured Alina had guessed right. I kicked one foot up onto my knee. “What are you tonight, Mac?” Music thumped around us forcing me to pitch up my voice.

“Just me.”

‘Just me’ could mean so many different beings. “Human, then?”

“Mostly.”

*Aha!* “And what does mostly mean?”

“You’ll see.”

*Oh, boy.*

“I’m starved though. You want to get some chocolate covered strawberries?” Mac pulled me from my comfortable spot.

“You get the strawberries because of me?” I asked.

“Of course. Since you’re such the healthy eater, and all.” The wink and grin that followed brought out my own smile.

Hand in hand, we walked to the food table. At the end, a fountain poured melted chocolate down three tiers of bowls. Around the base, an entire pallet of strawberries lay in wait. I grabbed the fruit. Mac indulged in the chocolate.

The single-eyebrow raise prompted me to tempt her with the sweetness of the berries. I dipped one in the molten sugar-lava and held it out to her.

She shook her head and raised the bar of chocolate still in her hand.

“Oh, come on,” I said. “It’s covered in chocolate. Your favorite kind.”

“Yeah, but it’s been tainted by the fruit.”

“For me?” I batted my lashes at her, the way she and Zoe both did to me to get their way.

Mac rolled her eyes, a sure sign, if I knew one, that she’d win and I’d lose.

I bit into the strawberry myself and licked my lips, keeping my eyes on her.

Before I could swallow, she moved to my lips and licked the excess chocolate from the center. The sensations headed straight south.

“You want another?” she asked.

“You gonna do that again?” I talked with my lips against hers.

“I will if you will,” she said.

“How about we swap who does what?” I suggested.

“But—”

I held up the strawberry. “Too much for you to handle?”

She bit.

I covered her lips with mine, teasing and separating with my tongue. The desire I sensed and took from Mac filled me. If my crotch strained any further, it would burst through my slacks. After a moment, I pulled away and dropped my forehead against hers.

“You want to get out of here?” Mac asked.

I popped up, breath backing up in my lungs. “What? Where? Isn’t this your party?” *We can’t just leave, can we?*

“It’s mine, and since it is, I can do what I want.” Her tongue ran along the edge of my lips. “My party. My rules. This was supposed to be our New Year’s celebration, you know.”

My head and groin did not agree on the path we should take. “Where do you want to go?”

With a smile, her hand slid to mine, and she navigated us to a panel door, pushing right through it as if she’d known it existed in the first place. As soon as it enclosed us in darkness, she pushed me against the wall, her lips pressing against mine, hands around my neck.

I clung to her waist, pulling her against me.

She lifted a leg.

I held on to it.

Our bodies tangled against each other, breaths coming fast.

Mac undid a few of the buttons on my shirt as I slid my hands under hers, caressing her mid section and tugging her against my straining center.

Her lips played.

Her hands toyed.

My head spun with want and need, desire and urges no one had ever elicited from me in the same way.

She slid her leg down as her hands moved south.

*Oh, god.*

Fingertips at my belt, she moved lower.

The simple desire to have her touch me made me groan.

A soft chuckle came from her as the belt and button loosened and the click of my zipper had me sucking in air. One hand slid against my bare skin. Another inch and her hand and I would meet in such a way I’d wanted ever since the moment she and I kissed the first time.

“Mac ...”

The door from where we’d entered swung open with a bang, and I grabbed for my zipper as Alina appeared in the frame.

“Mackenzie!” Her voice couldn’t have held more worry if she’d tried.

“What?” Mac asked, righting her top as if nothing had happened between us.

“Zoe is missing.”

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## 10

“What?” I retucked my shirt, stuffing it into my belt as fast as I could. “Zoe’s missing?”

“I’m sure she’s just with some of her friends,” Mac said.

Zoe wouldn’t have left the building in the dark without an escort of armed guards.

Alina stood backlit by the lights from the dance room. “I’ve checked with your friends. She’s not in this hotel, Mackenzie. Please, come with me. And, Winn, you missed a button.”

My cheeks flamed as I followed through another door, one I hadn’t seen thanks to my useless human eyes and the near pitch dark of the room.

Light streamed in the hallways where Alina led us, burning my retinas and forcing me to run with one eye shut as I adjusted. Mac’s shirt hadn’t come all the way down in back. I tugged at it just as we rounded a corner and were ushered into a room.

Alina, Josie, Magwa, Cleo, Robin, Felix and Nomas all waited for us. Six of the twelve Council members. Half of the entire governing body. Siren. Wizard. Shapeshifter. Griffin. Vampire. Demon. All stood in a half-circle. Each regarded me as if I’d done something wrong, their brows furrowed, eyes sharp and serious.

The shiver that raced up my spine couldn’t have been coincidental.

“What’s going on?” Mac asked. “Why are there seven of you here? We only needed four, five at the most to meet the hotel rules.”

“Bigger question ... where’s my sister?” I crossed my arms over my chest. As my pants adjusted to my new posture, I had the sinking suspicion that my fly gaped, but I refused to check it out.

Magwa stepped forward. “You may want to sit down, Master Thomas.”

Irritation at the formal use of my last name pricked like it never had before. “Just Winn, please. Did you look at home? Did you call my dad? Did—”

“Yes, we have been in communication with your father. It will not help,” Magwa said.



“What?” Fear and anger rushed through me. Zoe alone, scared or terrified—the possibilities grew endless.

“Let me explain.” Both of Magwa’s hands reached toward me, palms up. “Are you familiar with locator spells?”

“A little.” *Not really.*

“A locator spell works to find the physical form of an object. Consider it like one of your GPS units. Perform the spell and I will be given coordinates to a location, and that location is a place for which I can then scry.”

“And?” I waved him along. The sooner they found Zoe, the better chance she wouldn’t be eaten. Or killed. Or worse.

“She is unable to be found.”

“So do it again,” Mac said as I asked, “You’re supernatural! How can you not find my sister?”

Josie stepped forward. “If she cannot be found, there is only one reason why.”

“Why then?” I asked. “Tell me why you can’t find my sister!”

Magwa bowed toward me as he stepped back. “For all intents and purposes, Miss Zoe does not ... exist.”

“What the hell?” Mac’s exclamation mirrored the one I couldn’t say as my throat constricted. “How can she be here at this party and then disappear and you not find her? That’s ... that’s just ... stupid!” Her outrage, her support, made me want to smile though no way could I because Mac had been wrong.

She’d never been the target.

Frustration sent a slice of pain to my head. “How are we going to find her?”

The Council members turned toward each other.

Mac’s hands flew up, landing on her thighs with a thud. She whirled around and pointed to the door “That would be the way out!” She stormed toward the exit.

“We should get the police involved,” I said.

“This is not a matter for the human authorities. In that, I can assure you, Winn.” Felix’s resonating tone made me spin toward him.

I glared at him. “She’s my sister. She’s ...” *mostly human.* I didn’t know how much the Council knew about Zoe’s abilities. “We have rules when one of us goes missing.” I reached for my cell phone when no one moved.

“If you involve the human authorities, they’ll never understand how to reach her, nor be able to do so in time.” Josie aligned herself next to Felix as Mac stomped against the carpeted floor, her hand on the knob. “When one of our own kind cannot be found, there is only one place she can be.”

“Oh, my, holy hell, where?” Mac yelled all the words I wanted to say.

“In the in-between,” Josie said.

“The what?” Mac and I asked, our voices harmonizing.

• • •

Robin stood from her chair, sporting a defined middle bump I hadn’t seen months before when she’d sent Mac and I off to Suze’s the first time. “The in-between is a state of being. A level of consciousness ... a type of immersive Zen.”

*Immersive Zen?* I didn’t want to ask and show my ignorance. I expected another ‘what the hell?’ from Mac, but it didn’t come.

“I know this is all coming as quite a shock.” For as large as a Griffin grew, Robin in her human persona kept a very small stature, though the big eyes reflected those of her bird form.

“What *doesn’t* come as a shock anymore?” Mac returned to my side.

I agreed with her and said a silent ‘thank you’ that she’d come back. “I’d like some answers now, please, or I don’t care if our police can’t technically do something. I’m sure they can help.”

“Perhaps a visual?” Magwa held out his hands, a sphere of translucent color building in the center. “While we say the in-between is a place for the mind, it acts as a physical space as well. It’s hard to conceptualize for a hum—for most people.” He swirled the planet-like orb until it took on another ball inside itself. “Body, mind and soul enter. One becomes, shall we say, in tune with the world surrounding only himself. But by doing so, he connects with others.” He waved one hand over the circle and a third sphere appeared within the smaller second one, their edges touching, bouncing and spinning off one another.

I jammed my fist against my forehead. “You’re telling me that your entire body somehow goes in there, but it’s not ... real?”

“In essence, yes.”

“It’s a freakish alternative universe?” Mac palmed the side of her face. “Cause that’s about the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

It had to be a ‘seeing is believing’ kind of venue. “Why is it called the in-between?” I asked. “If you’re alive—or are you saying this is something like heaven? Wait ... is she ... *dead*?”

“No, no!” Cleo jumped up and stood next to Robin, towering over her. “Not dead. Between alive and dead.”

My eyes widened.

Cleo waved her hands as if to wipe away her words. “No, I’m sorry. This is so hard to explain to a human.” Robin took Cleo’s arm and calmed her. “Purgatory is a word some of your religions use. Think of it that way, but for our kind, it’s different. Life and death can be synonymous for immortals. Yes, there are the dead there. But there is also life. It is a place of dreams, Winn. Of memories. At night, you sleep, yet your mind continues to function. Yes?”

I nodded.

“Your dreams feel real. Your body reacts to it. As a result, you can wake exhausted. Even as you struggle to maintain the beauty of your dreams, they can turn on you. Correct?”

“I guess,” I said.

“But your dreams and your reality never mix. In the in between, they do just that.”

“Well, if you know where she is and you know what it does, why can’t you go get her?”

Heads turned toward one another.

Josie held out her clasped hands. “There are rules preventing unnecessary entrance.”

Magwa flattened the ball he’d held in his hand until it resembled nothing more than a pancake.

“Why’d you do that?” I asked.

“Because there is also a deadline. When reached, if still within, that moment is much like death in *your* world ... He separated his hands, revealing nothing between them. “A point of no return.”

“Rules and a time limit?” My heartbeat picked up speed. “Then why are you waiting? How can you sit here explaining this to me when my sister could be dying?”

At that moment, I realized I knew too little about Mac’s life.

I’d gotten my sister into trouble.

I’d be her death.

Mac had been an idiot to pick me as her teacher. All my weeks of research were worthless.

I dropped to the chair just behind me. “I can’t do this. I—I just can’t.” Head in hands, I focused on my breathing, on calming the growing anxiety and pressure in my chest. I stood again. I had to find my dad. If Zoe would die in some make believe location, he should know. “I gotta go.”

“There is one who can enter and return.” Josie’s statement stopped me from leaving.

“What? Who? Why didn’t you say that?”

The Council members present all faced Mac, but Felix said, “An undecided Changeling risks her very essence if she enters.”

“She’ll die?” I asked.

Felix shook his head. “She will lose her freedom to choose a form.”

I clenched my fists. To save my sister, Mac would have to give up herself. *I don’t know what to do.*

Mac sighed. “I’ll go. Just tell me what to do.”

“The Council will not allow it,” Josie said.

“I’m done with this. You’ll have to deal with human police, now.” I pressed speed dial to call my dad and put the phone to my ear as I pulled open the door to leave.

The phone rang once.

“Winn.” Josie’s soft voice reached me as I stepped through.

Twice.

“Remember when I told you that not all is as it seems?”

Three times.

*You mean, that you lie at every opportunity for reasons no one understands?*

On the fourth ring, a response echoed in the hallway.

The fifth did the same as I froze.

“Winn,” my dad said.

I hung up. He hadn’t called my name from the phone.

# 11

My own dad greeted me, took my shoulders and guided me back into the room. “Dad, we have to—“

“I know.” He walked to Josie, took her hand and kissed the back of it. “I’m sorry it took so long for me to arrive.” He offered a slight bow to the rest and backed away.

Dad moved off without another touch, but the look they shared—something unsaid—struck me odd; his greeting seemed awfully relaxed.

*Do they know each other?*

Confusion and unanswered questions sent my already pounding head into a full-on throb, the beat marching along the base of my skull.

Josie had told me Council members couldn’t form relationships with humans. That either meant my dad had some sort of supernatural gift, or she’d lied.

I voted for lies over truth.

Dad, the spitting image of me, as my Grandma—his mom—often said, held out his hands. “Winn.”

I didn’t take them or shake them, just hung on to Mac, who’d moved to my side, her eyes wide, lips thinned.

“I’m sorry about this. I didn’t want to have to tell you ... ever. Your life was supposed to be normal and easy. Zoe’s, too. I’d been so careful to ensure that until—No. Let me stop that train of thought. Normalcy means you’re free to choose your path in life. That’s all I ever wanted.” He drew in a breath and released it. “I simply never anticipated a connection between you and Mac. All those years passed, and I thought I’d gotten lucky. As a matter of fact, the day you brought her home, I was so shocked, I nearly choked on my drink. I had to hide in the fridge for a few minutes to make the blush go away.”

Anger flared and mixed with the growing tension. “Who are you? Are you even my dad?”

“I *am* your dad, Winn. There’s no question there.”

“Then why aren’t you surprised by all this? How did you know Mac? Why were you trying to give me a normal life? What would it have been otherwise? And ... mom? Was she ... Did you ... You couldn’t hear me when I talked about Mac through the intercom.” Had my own dad lied to me more than just not told me? How many untruths, of the non-standard kind, had passed through his lips on the way to my ears? Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy had always been simple stories. Though as I thought of it, I considered maybe they, too, had been stories used to hide the real deals. “No, no, no, no!” I hit my forehead with my palm. “You’re confusing me.”

“That must be quite the feat,” Felix said.

My dad chuckled—that awkward sound people use when they aren’t sure how to feel and their emotions are all over the place. “You, of all people, to believe, to accept and to be a part of a world few understand. It truly amazes me.” He gave me a slight punch in the arm before closing his eyes for a moment. “Let me say first that the decision not to tell Zoe about this life came in that old form called ‘her best interest’.”

I’d heard that one before from teachers, my dad, my bus driver. *Don’t stand in front of the yellow line. It’s in your best interest ... otherwise you might fall out the door.* No one ever said not to date a Changeling because it could get my sister kidnapped. Or that I’d learn my dad knew about it all before me.

“Please ... Dad ... we have to help Zoe.”

“She’s not in any harm .... If the Council is right about her location, I mean.”

“But what if they aren’t? And what about the timing, deadline thing? We should send in the military ... the guards ... the Navy Seals. Something! Do something! Don’t just leave her.”

“Your conviction is outstanding, Winn.” Dad’s smile filled his face. “I’ve never been more proud of you.”

*And I’ve never been more disappointed.* I kept that to myself.

“Suffice it to say, Winn ... we can’t do anything ... yet. You just have to trust me,” he said.

At that point, I didn’t know who to trust.

Mac’s lack of faith in her Council had always been an outside feeling to me. In some cases, I could see their perspective as well as hers. Having my own father lie to me? That threw everything I ever knew into a blender of

disambiguated facts, hit the frappe button and held it until they all turned to mush. I didn't know what to say, how to feel or even how to react.

"Why should we trust you, Bernie?" Mac asked.

*Yes, thank you for asking.*

"Because I'm a Guardian."

"A what?" Mac squeezed my hand.

Dad wrung his hands together at his waist. "I'm a human, neutral party, who works the line between our kind and Mac's. Between humans and non-humans. To ensure ... the secret stays secret."

Mac's grip tightened. "So you've known all along about me—before we ever met? You've been able to track me, too, haven't you? You and the Council! It probably means you knew about the book, too."

At that mention, my dad's head tilted just a bit.

"He probably bashed in his own car thinking that would get you to leave me alone. Probably didn't want us to have anything to do with each other, either." Mac huffed a breath.

"No. I didn't do that," Dad said. "It didn't surprise me given the relationship you two had begun to build, but I would never sabotage anything or deliberately try to mar it. Like I said, my goal is to make sure Winn and Zoe have a long fulfilling life. Like any parent."

It didn't fit. None of it. My dad wouldn't be some liaison—some go-to person that understood about vampires and wizards and goblins outside of fairy tales. We were all just one, small-but-happy, human family. He'd traveled the world and had always come back with stories and souvenirs that he gave to Zoe and I about the lands and the people. Real people. Normal people.

*Right? What did he really do out of town?*

He'd negotiated contracts. Lobbied.

*Had he lied the whole time?*

*Oh, god.*

"Winn. Look at me," Dad said.

I didn't realize I hadn't been—or that I'd stared into open space for too long.

"Before now there was never a reason for me to tell you. You have to believe me. I couldn't have, anyway. You yourself know that, otherwise you wouldn't have questioned whether I could hear Mackenzie before."

He had a point.

“You assimilate information and move from disbelief to acceptance faster than anyone I know. I’m so proud of you. Truly.”

He needed me to do the same for him.

I couldn’t.

• • •

Mac and I turned toward each other, our eyes searching for an answer. “Let’s just go, Winn. None of them likes to tell the truth. There’s no point in staying.”

“Please ... Mac ... Winn ... will you sit? I need to explain a few ... things. To you both.” My dad sounded remorseful as if he really had failed somehow. “Give me fifteen minutes, and if I haven’t convinced you to trust me, I promise to let you leave and do your own search.”

“You can have five,” Mac said while dragging me along toward the table.

Dad took a seat on one side of the table as the rest of the Council flanked him. That they hovered and protected him seemed weird given the Council had all the power. They seemed to step back with my dad in the room.

Mac and I sat across from him, our hands entwined—our own wall of solidarity against the growing list of adults in our lives who’d racked up a bunch of failures in the ‘explain life category to Mac and me’.

“Guardians cross between both worlds,” Dad said, facing me. “We are the keepers of information as well as maintain what information is to be disseminated to the general public. To the human side.”

“Like the Men in Black from the movie? Are you kidding?” Why I could believe in vampires and not Will Smith come to life working with aliens, I didn’t know.

“You can think of it like that. But not quite. We work exclusively with and for the supernatural.”

“As if there’s a difference.” I hadn’t realized I said it out loud until Mac clenched my hand.

Dad leaned in closer to me but didn’t initiate any contact. “My role means I am privileged to know about Mac’s world. Since I know you like analogies, let me give you one I think you’ll get. I’m like the lobbyists in Congress—”

“Which is why you told me that was your job?”



He nodded. “They don’t have any real power. They can’t make laws. They can’t sit in on the meetings. They just try to represent certain factions and mediate needs. They work for certain groups, within another place of power.”

“You’re a lobbyist ... for humans ... to the Council?” I waved my free hand from Felix on down to Cleo and back.

Dad chuckled, a small but definitive sound. “Ah ... not exactly. The reverse. I work on behalf of the Council in the human world. And I do so all over the world with the other human Guardians.”

“How many others?” I asked.

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Why not just tell me who you are?” Even as I asked I knew the answer: he never could have.

It still burned.

“Before you met Mackenzie, would you have believed me if I told you I worked for a group of twelve people who aren’t human? In the preservation of immortal life no less?”

He had an even greater point. Mac had given me the opportunity to believe, though even before I’d met her, I’d found the book. I’d understood it to be special. I hadn’t been as surprised to learn she could change forms as she had been to learn I liked her.

“And you guard secrets?” I asked.

“Like all Guardians, we have multiple facets to our role. Yes, one is the preservation of the secret. We are authorized to take whatever means necessary to ensure humans do not know about non-humans. “And ...” His head dipped down.

I cocked my head and leaned forward as if to push him to reveal all.

“I have one charge.”

*Me? Could I somehow be guarded?*

“Zoe,” he said, breaking my thoughts.

“Zoe?” It didn’t seem reasonable to be protecting my sister. “Why? Why would Zoe be guarded? Why isn’t Mac being—” Even as I said it, I remembered Mac did have guards. Everywhere. Even Suze. They’d just all been told to work in some sort of undercover capacity or she’d pitch her own version of a tantrum. Zoe, though, had no reason to be guarded.

*You know nothing, Winn. Remember?*

“May I?” Cleo’s sultry tone masked an underlying worry I picked up in the vibrations.

Dad waved her forward.

“There is a two-fold aspect to this answer. First, Zoe has an ability that is far reaching and as valuable ... to humans or anyone ... as gold. No ... platinum. Titanium. The most precious metal you can think of.”

*She can talk to dead people.*

“Second, Zoe’s mother has the same gift.”

*Okay, so they know Zoe’s mom. I could have guessed that.*

“This is the part we should have told you a long time ago.” She directed her statement to Mac. “When Zoe’s mother didn’t pass her gift down to her first daughter, we knew her second child could receive it because the second could not receive the same gift as the first.”

“Huh?” Mac asked. “And how is this relevant to finding Zoe?”

Genetics and hereditary science of the otherworldly did not rank up there on my ‘learn this’ scale at that moment, either.

Cleo bit at her lip, turned to the Council, received nods and came back to me. “Zoe is not your sister, but in a sense, she is.”

“Stating the obvious,” Mac said as I said, “I know she’s not my biological sister.” I squeezed Mac’s hand. “In the human world at least, family is family. We take care of each other.” One well aimed glare went in my dad’s direction.

“That applies to us, too.” Alina’s soft voice pulled me from my growing anger. She and Lucas had been Mac’s parents like any human adoptive families—just different. “But in Zoe’s case, her real family, part of them at least, are the reason she’s been under your father’s guard.”

“So why has she been under watched?” I asked.

Josie, Robin, Cleo and Raven all pointed to Mac as Alina said, “Because, Zoe is the second born. And the first is Mackenzie.”

*What? “What? What?”* I jumped up from my chair, tipping it over with a crash. “Are you telling me Zoe is *Mac’s* sister?” I must have misheard.

Cleo’s lips thinned. “By your standards, she’s both your sisters, but—”

“No ...” I stopped Cleo. “Alina said ‘Mackenzie is the first’. How can she be both of our sisters?” *Oh, god, please don’t tell me I hit second base with an actual sister of mine.*

Alina held tight to her wrists. “Zoe is Mackenzie’s sister ... *biologically*. She is your sister in spirit. Both can be counted equally, as you’ve said.”

*Mac and Zoe are sisters.*

*Mac and Zoe are sisters.*

*Mac and Zoe are sisters.*

All the faces in the room swam in my vision. *How can this be true?* The math itself didn't add up. *Mac's almost four years older than Zoe.* Her mom had died before Zoe was born.

I shook my head, trying to organize the information inside, and closed my eyes, letting the new details process.

That type of bond would have made sense as to why and how Mac and Zoe had become such good friends, in a little and big-sister kind of way.

Josie leaned forward on her side of the table. "I see you're pondering, and I'll guess it's about ages and dates."

I blinked and stared into her bright blue eyes, trying to realign my thoughts with my reality.

"Don't think of what you've learned in linear terms. Mackenzie's mother fought for her until her sixth birthday. Until Zoe almost reached two years old. That's when the argument over Mac reached its pinnacle, and Maya, whom you'd know as Mary, if you remember her at all—"

I presumed the old story that her father died in the war and her mother abandoned her no longer applied.

"—took her leave of this world. Even before, and especially after, Zoe and Mackenzie had to be kept separate to ensure Mackenzie's safety."

I brought them together. I got my sister kidnapped. Sent to the in-between. Taken from me.

Mac stood, arms across her chest, lips closed. "Took her leave?" The twitch at her eye suggested emotion brewed. "You said my mom died." Her tone could be described as nothing but bubbling fury. "Everyone said Raven's lightning bolt killed her. Are you now telling me you lied to me ... *again?* That she willingly left?"

No one said anything.

"So where did she go?" Mac's hands landed on the table, shaking it with her down-force. "Tell me ... all of you ... where in the hell is my mother?"

It dawned on me that in what seemed like two seconds, Mac had already gone down the path Josie suggested she would at the mere idea her real mom existed.

Cleo reached out a hand. "We admit to a few mistruths, here and there. However, the lightning bolt did hit your mother, yet it was not death that

took her.”

What Josie had said before popped into my head. “Because death to the immortal doesn’t have the same meaning to a human.”

A nod came from Cleo.

“So Mac’s mom is ...” I almost couldn’t bear to say my thoughts out loud. A glance at Mac, at the war in her eyes. “... in the in-between?”

Mac stormed toward the door, yelling, “How could you not tell me? Eighteen years and you know where she is!”

I sat still.

Thinking.

*Mac and Zoe are sisters.*

‘Distilling’ as my dad would say.

*Mac’s mom is in the in-between.*

“Winn.” Alina’s sweetness brought me out of my own thoughts. “Are you all right?”

“Is *he* all right?” Mac pounded her way back to the table. “You’re asking *him* and not me? She was *my* mother. Mine!”

*Zoe is there, too.*

Trying to reconcile my thoughts, to put context and logic, facts and realities together.

*My dad knows about all this.*

The door opened and closed. The words, “Let her go,” whispered through the room.

In the thirteen years I’d known or known of Mac, I’d never seen her react with so much emotion. In the three months we’d gotten close, she’d fought vampires and demons and exhausted herself, but hadn’t yelled except when in a moment of battle. Sarcastic, without a doubt, but not angry to the point of exploding.

The door swished a second time. “You know why I haven’t picked a form?” Mac’s fury raced ahead of her as she returned. “You know why I’ve taken so long?” Her pitch ratcheted up. “Because you hide information. You *tell* me what to do versus *showing* me how to live. And now this. Now that someone who’s close to me has been kidnapped, you finally decide ‘oh yeah, maybe we should have opened up a little to Mackenzie’ and the dam just breaks.”

With that, I had to agree. The Council kept too much to themselves.

“Screw you all,” Mac said. “Eighteen years and the one person who I can trust is *human*, which means in another few months I won’t even be able to ask him for help.” Her extended finger shook as she spoke. “This is exactly why the Council is having so many problems. Forget you. Forget it all. Don’t any of you do anything for me ever again. I can’t trust any of you.” She pointed at the six Council members in front of us and to my dad. “C’mon, Winn. Your Dad’s time is up. Let’s go and actually find Zoe.”

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## 12

Mac hauled me across the room and out the door before I could get another question asked. We raced back down the hallway, through the room where we'd been making out and into the dance as the clock hands reached midnight.

"Mac, stop." I planted my feet at the side of the buffet nearest the punch, the music thumping out a beat as those around us partied on.

She halted and twisted back to me, though if I'd had to guess, I'd have said her body prepped to run with or without her decision to do so.

"We know where Zoe is, supposedly, but we have no idea how to get there. How are we going to find this out?"

Her lips squished together as if she had to think for an answer. "I'll—" Again and again she started and stopped.

"I know you're mad at the Council, but—"

Fire-burning eyes glared at me as she started my way. "Don't 'but' me, Winn." Within my reach, she jabbed a finger into my chest. "They've screwed you over just as much as they have me. Do you want to get Zoe out of that place or not? Do you really trust your dad to tell you that she's safe? Do you?"

"Are you going for her, or because you think you might be able to find your Mom?"

Her eyes darkened. A trembling took hold of her upper body. "I can't believe you just asked me that."

"Then answer it."

"Hey, peeps. What's up?" Caroline broke our stare-down, and both of us turned to her, anger vanishing in a well-controlled mask of fake happiness. "Where you been? Haven't seen you for at least an hour." She held a plate of chocolate covered strawberries in her hand. "Someone said we got an extension, too. 'Til one. Did you know that, Mac?"

"Uh ... yeah. You and—" Mac waved a hand as if to signal the entire group. "—can stay but I have a little issue to take care of."

"Oh, no! Something happen?"

“Yes.”

“Well that sucks abdabs.” Caroline’s made up swear words would normally bring out a real smile, so I faked one. “Can I help?”

Mac and I stayed still, neither looking at the other.

“No, it’ll be fine,” I said after a long silence.

“You know ... I still can’t believe you two hooked up.” Caroline broke the widening silence. “I love it. It rocks ball ... ooons.” When neither of us commented, she dipped her chin down and stuck out her bottom lip. “You guys okay?”

“Fine,” we both said.

Caroline’s eyes widened. “Yeah. Right. And I’m a monkey’s uncle ... which I could never be you know ... since I’m a girl.” She picked up another of the strawberries. “Oooookay. Well then, I will be joining the real party again.”

As she moved away, the main entrance darkened as Ridge, Joe and John crashed.

“Shit!” Mac said.

Caroline raced back to our side. “What are you going to do? Kick ‘em in the assbestos?”

“Really?” Mac turned to Caroline. “You used asbestos in place of ass?”

Caroline raised her eyebrows. “Yeah. So?”

With a shake of her head, Mac proceeded toward Ridge. As his head turned, in what I expected to be a scan of the crowd, he smiled.

“You better follow her,” Caroline said to me.

As much as I didn’t want to, I had no idea what kind of scene Ridge would create, so I did—tight on her heels like a trained puppy.

“There she is.” Ridge held out his arms as if Mac should walk right into them and hug him.

“What are you doing here?” Mac’s question came out more a ‘get out’ command.

“My invitation must have gotten lost in the mail.” His gaze tracked up and down her body. “Lookin’ good there, Mackenzie.” He drew closer. I fought the urge to push her out of the way and slug him.

The music stopped as the DJ announced a slow song. When it restarted, Ridge reached for Mac, pulled her against him and draped his arms around her.

She inhaled and exhaled right before she grabbed his right arm, twisted and spun his entire body until his back hit the ground. “Don’t ever, ever, *ever* try to touch me again.” She held on to Ridge’s arms, twisted behind him, her foot on his back.

“Mac, we gotta go,” I said.

Ridge’s smile widened while he lay on the ground. He reached for her ankle with his free hand, tracing a line up the side.

She jumped from his grasp and let go of his arm. “What the hell?”

On a whoosh of air, his arm straightened. Something smacked into me, throwing me across the floor. I skidded until my back hit the concrete wall, knocking my head into it a millisecond later.

As I tore open my eyes, head wobbling, skull throbbing, Mac shot a fireball from her palm right into Ridge’s gut. His jacket went up in flames.

Alina raced through the door, waving her hands through the air.

*What just happened?*

*Did Ridge just throw wind at me?*

A check through the room had all faces staring in our direction. Most mouths hung open—witnesses to something far more interesting than the latest dance number.

Mac threw her jacket to the ground, approaching Ridge with the pace of a stalking lioness. “Rule number one of magic, Ridge. You don’t use it on innocent bystanders.” Fangs dropped from her gums. I wouldn’t be the only one who saw her two incisors drop.

*Oh, man, oh, man.* Stopping her became a non issue. For me.

Someone else would have to do it.

Ridge stepped backward, hands raised with each of her movements forward.

“Rule number two. You don’t mess with me or my people.” She took a step closer.

He continued in reverse.

The Council and my dad entered, one-by-one through the side door.

“And number three—” She held up three fingers. “Never, ever, *ever* touch me.”

Ridge raised his arm again as if gearing up for another pitch of air.

I crouched, my preemptive and totally chicken way to avoid bearing the brunt of whatever he would throw.

Mac jumped toward him.



“Enough!” Dad’s voice bellowed.

Mac stopped.

Ridge stopped.

“I thought you all were more mature than this,” he said in a whispered undertone. “You ... go. Over there.” Dad pointed to a seat by the door. “Mac. There.” He moved his finger toward another. “Winn ... next to her.”

No sooner had I stood, Mac turned on my dad. With her fangs bared, she said, “No.” She spun back to Ridge and jumped him.

Before I could even breathe, Felix leapt over three tables as girls screamed and guys ducked. Felix, without his fangs showing, pulled Mac from Ridge, her legs kicking out and her teeth gnashing.

At that moment, Mac, in vampire form, became my number one ‘please don’t ever do it again’ request.

“Let go!” she yelled.

“No,” Felix said. “This is not your way, Mackenzie.”

*He’s right.* I knew it. She knew it. Whether she’d acknowledge it would be another story.

She’d totally screwed up and outed herself to everyone in the room.

Her chest heaved as she deflated against him and breathed in and out once, retracting her teeth. “I hate you all.”

Moans and gasps ran through our friends. My friends. The people Mac had invited for me.

“Mayday, Suze!”

With a blast of firework-like sound, and more screams from our onlookers, Suze appeared. At some point in the night, he’d dressed as a police man. Suze pulled out a weapon, held it up, bent his knees and aimed as if assessing the situation before choosing which one of us to shoot.

I only hoped the gun didn’t have bullets.

“Take me somewhere private, Suze,” Mac said.

I knew exactly where she’d go.

“That’s all you need?” he asked. “Got too many idiotsyncraticies going on or something?”

“Or something.” Her gaze fell to mine but without a request to join her.

“Mackenzie, don’t—” Josie started.

Suze wrapped his arms around Mac as I raced forward and grabbed Suze’s arm, hoping my action wouldn’t leave me holding air or blasted in some way into tiny bits.

Or eaten.

“The prisoners need to be taken into custody.” Suze’s arm slipped around me, pressing me into Mac. She narrowed her eyes as he squeezed, and as my entire insides prepared to explode through all of my orifices, I heard my dad say, “We need to do some damage control.”

• • •

A millisecond later, I stood in Suze’s living room, his arms around me.

“Welcome back.”

Mac jerked away.

I dropped to my hands and knees, breathing in and out, hoping my stomach would settle from the near-instantaneous ride.

“Give it a minute,” Suze said. “It’s kinda like being on a boat and you get used to the rocking and once on land you still feel it. You’re still feelin’ it right now.” He patted my back. “If you need to throw up though, you get to clean the floor since I just washed them.”

Air bubbled up in my throat and popped, sending acrid fumes through my nose.

Mac paced from one end of the room to the other. On her third pass, she stopped and beat her fists against her wall. “You weren’t supposed to come with me.”

“You weren’t ... supposed ... to show everyone ... what you can do.”

Her walking sped up. “The Council will take care of the memories. When did Ridge learn magic?” Each word punctuated the air with anger.

If I could have lifted up to see, I expected her hand would have been punching the air with everything she said.

“You two having a little spat?” Suze asked. “Do I need to intervene?”

I managed to turn my head toward Mac and gave Suze a small head shake. “I don’t ... think ... that was Ridge.”

She froze. “Another doppelganger. That makes sense.” One finger, hand and arm extended toward my preparing-to-wretch-but-holding-back form. “You still weren’t supposed to come. I wanted to do this on my own. To prove to all of you that I’m not stupid, and I can deal with whatever ... *happens.*”

The words ‘you mean find your mom’ rested on the tip of my tongue. I managed to swallow them and sit up, butt on the floor, back against the cool

rock wall.

“Why do they do that to me? To you. To us. To everyone?” She spun and did another round of circles. At her abrupt stop again, she wagged a finger in my direction. “Why? If they won’t let me go, how are they going to get Zoe out? Why won’t they give me the right answers so I can get her?”

I breathed in deep as the nausea lessened a little. “Don’t know. They want you to ask questions. They want you to learn on your own, yet you don’t.” *I shouldn’t have said that.*

“She is willfully stubborn,” Suze said from my right.

Mac’s eyes went to slits.

Suze, even in his policeman uniform, slunk back. “But, that’s good, right?”

“Ahh!” Her exclamation came with another back and forth of foot stomping.

Rather than continue to watch her, I chanced a look and whiff of the room. One never knew what Suze would be brewing, or what he might have done to his place.

The scent of garlic and tomato sauce filled the air. Despite the time reaching nearly one in the morning, my stomach grumbled. “Please tell me you’re cooking Italian and not something ... off.” My stomach did a flip-flop, though I couldn’t tell if it meant I needed to eat or really should throw up.

“Yes, sir. Spaghetti. Help yourself if you’d like. I’m going to change while she burns off some of her energy. Though, she might need to go break a few headstones to really get it out of her system.”

“Pick something normal, okay, Suze?” Mac asked.

His head hung, and his shoulders drooped as he shuffled his way through the living area, which, to my surprise, looked the same as it did the last time we’d entered. Couch. Table. TV. Nothing out of the ordinary or new. He disappeared into his room with a long sigh.

“I think you hurt his feelings.”

“He’ll get over it.” She flapped a hand behind herself as she walked again.

“You should apologize. He’s nice and you need him. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have called for him.” I managed to prop my elbows on my knees. “You can’t ditch me, either, Mac. You need me.”

She kept going. Right. Left. Forward. Backward. She stopped and reached for something in a box on top of the fridge. No sooner had her hand reappeared than half a Snickers bar wrapper fell to the floor. “You trust Suze?” She bent down and retrieved it.

I nodded, my answer a hundred percent truthful.

Suze had never deliberately let either Mac or me down. He’d always been there in a literal, ‘moment’s notice’ sense and had always seemed to be on Mac’s side.

“Me, too. He’s about the only one. ‘Cept you. That I trust, I mean.” She plopped into the chair across from me and stomped a foot under the table. “What’s with Ridge? Really? Are you boys’ total dicks on the inside? Is he insane, maybe? Is the Council, for that matter? And your dad being a Guardian?”

She bit into the candy, and silence ensued.

From my still somewhat cowering spot, I said, “I almost thought you might have a thing for Ridge, like deep down inside.”

Mac straightened in her seat. “It makes my tongue swell to even mention his name.” She stuck her tongue out as if to prove it to me. “Why wasn’t *Suze* protecting Zoe if he already protects me and protected my mom?” she continued, changing topics before I could respond. Doesn’t it seem logical to have him do it and not your dad, if he was Mom’s protector, too?”

“I can answer that question.” Suze had taken on a country-southern voice as he returned in a pair of jeans, bare green feet with bulbous toes and a T-shirt that said, ‘Once you go Mac, you never go back.’ I choked on a laugh.

Suze stood with his hands on his hips. “Do I need to do that hemlick thing?”

I waved Suze off, tearing my gaze from the words on his shirt, as Mac laughed, the first one of the night and a sound I loved to hear. That also meant she’d calmed some.

“So back to this Guardian, protector thingymabob job.” Mac directed with her Snickers as if she conducted a band. “What do you know about it?”

## 13

“You’re a protector, right Suze?” He’d called himself that before, and it dawned on me it might be a title.

Suze thumped his chest with a closed fist. “Yes.”

“How is that different, or the same, from a Guardian?”

He scratched the side of his head. “So ... you know how there is more than one level of demon?”

“Yeah,” Mac and I both said.

“Protectors are like one level *down* from Guardians. We’re muscle.” Suze flexed his bicep, pinching with his stubby fingers. “Guardians, though, they guard information and objects. People even. They’re like those intellectual property lawyers on the TV. They got fancy big words and lots of muscle *around* them, but really, they’re just squeaky wheels. And you know what they say about squeaky wheels.” He tilted his head to the side.

“They get heard,” Mac said. “Why would an unknown girl have a Guardian and I have none?”

“What do you mean ‘you have none’?” Suze’s massive eyes went to complete circles. “You got two!”

Mac’s expression reminded me of Suze without the green tint. When she finally broke from her own spell, she said, “I have *two* that I’ve never known about?” She tossed the wadded up Snickers wrapper into the trash from her seat. “Did *you* know?” That question came to me.

I’d been just as surprised. “No.”

“Who are they?” she asked.

“Guardians are never revealed.” His head whipped back and forth. “Nope. Never. It’s in the rules. But you make following the rules hard, so they have different rules for you.”

I raised a hand as if we sat in class and I needed the teacher’s permission to ask a question. “My dad is apparently a Guardian. We just learned this tonight.”

One of Suze’s eyebrows reached the edge of his scalp as he raised it up. “Hmmm.” His hand moved to his chin, and he rubbed at it.

“So why can he tell us but you can’t tell us who Mac’s are?”

“I guess, if they want to reveal, fine, but I cain’t. Unh-unh.” Suze’s voice warbled with emotion as a tremble took hold of his hands. “No sirree.”

My glance to Mac should have told her to stop asking as I went on, saying, “Can you tell us why she has two Guardians without telling us who they are?”

“Cause when her mama went poof ...” He wiggled his fingers as he traced air rainbows. “... the powers-that-be decided doubling up was necessary.”

“So you’re muscle, and they’re brains.”

“Yarp.” His word choices baffled me as much as Zoe’s and Mac’s. “That’s why I’ve been working with my thesaurus.” Suze smiled, showing off browned teeth. “I want to get picked as a Guardian some time.”

“Who picks them?” Mac asked.

“The Council. Gods. Other Guardian’s. Protectors, too. Like me. I was handpicked to protect Maya and now ... you.” Suze’s eyebrows squished to the center. “What’s with the twenty question salute tonight? You do something, lady-Mac?”

“Zoe is missing, and Magwa believes she’s been taken to the in-between,” I said.

Suze cringed, mimed a knife to his heart and fell off his chair to the floor.

When he didn’t rise, Mac and I both did, hovering over him.

“Is he dead?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Would he just keel over? He’s immortal ... not that that means anything apparently.”

I poked him in the bicep. Mac did the same to his side. “Suze?” We both asked.

He didn’t respond.

“Do you know how to do CPR on a demon?” Mac asked. “I’m not giving him mouth to mouth.”

“How would you even check for a pulse?” I asked.

“Suze?” We both tried again.

He popped up, took a seat at the table and folded his hands on the surface as if nothing happened.

An incessant blinking took over my eyes. “What just—”

“I get faint when people talk about ... the ...” His shoulders drooped.

“Just the mention of the in-between sends you into shock?” Mac took a seat next to Suze, and I sat across from her, my stomach grumbling.

Suze’s bottom lip puffed out as he covered his ears. “I’m sensitive that way.” For a destroyer demon, Suze had a milder manner than a declawed kitten, and the brains of a toddler. “You can eat some of my psssgehti if you want.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Your what?”

“Pssssgehti.”

The smells had grown stronger as time had passed, but I still didn’t know if my stomach could handle it. “Maybe in a bit.”

“Okay. Your mama—” A true southern accent painted his tone. “She liked going in ... in ... in ... *there*. Said it relaxed her.” A tremble started in his shoulders, moving down his arms until the entire foundation of the room shook.

I held my hands out, balancing myself as Mac said, “Calm down, Suze. You’re going to wreck the whole place. Deep breaths. Or something.”

After a few more seconds, he relaxed.

“What did my mom tell you about the in—place?”

Suze scratched at the back of his head. “She made me promise not to say because she didn’t want nobody ever finding her there.”

Since digging for details had become my specialty, I figured I’d do the same with Suze as I did for Mac: ask loads of questions. “Did she say it was pretty? Did she say why she went there?”

“To get away from this world. Kinda like you use my shack here to get away from all those humans up there.” Suze pointed to the ceiling even as he covered his face with the palm of one hand. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Is the in—other place—like here, Suze? Where no one can get in if Mac’s inside. Or can anyone find us?”

“They can find you here, but they can’t get in. No one can do that except moi.” He patted his chest. “Demons have special abilities that let us do stuff you humans and your standard immortal can’t.”

“Like what?” Mac asked.

Suze narrowed his long-lashed eyes.

“Okay, back to the important stuff,” I said. “How do you really know about ... that place?”

He mimed zipping his lips and throwing away the key.

“Suze.” Mac accentuated his name with a long ‘u’.

He shook his head.

“What did my mother *really* tell you?”

His head whipped from the left to the right.

Mac leaned in, elbows on the table. “What. Happened. With. My. Mom?”

Suze threw up his hands. “Okay, okay, okay, okay! I confess!” He dropped his still massive-despite-looking-somewhat-normal head into his hands. Mumbled, unrecognizable sounds came from within his self-imposed cover.

Mac and I met gazes and shrugged. Suze often gave up the stories without any trouble, but that seemed a little too easy.

“I can’t hear you, Suze.” Mac peeled his fingers back. “Why doesn’t my mom want me to know about her secret location?”

He peered up, his eyes darting left and right as if someone might pop out of the walls and attack. One chubby finger motioned us both forward.

When I didn’t move, Suze waved his entire hand at me.

Once we both scooted closer to him, he said, “She didn’t want you to know because then you might learn her story—and about your daddy—before you’re supposed—”

Mac jolted backward.

“—to, and you’d fall in love with someone you couldn’t have, and that would be like mother like daughter, and she didn’t want that, and then she’d have to tell you that you couldn’t be with them, and then she’d be unhappy and—”

Mac stood.

“—and she always said she just wanted you to have a happy, normal life, and she couldn’t give that to you because you were a Changeling, and her life wasn’t one she’d wish on you, and being a Changeling was a terrible fate for any baby, and your daddy didn’t want to give you up either, and—”

His non-stop ramble kept on as I walked to Mac and turned her to face me.

“My dad? He didn’t want to give me up either?”

• • •

While Mac had focused on her father, I picked up on what I thought her mom’s bigger issue would have been. She’d fallen in love with someone



she couldn't have. *Like mother like daughter. Mom and Dad. Mac and me. The impossible relationship.*

While Felix told me Changelings *could* choose human, I hadn't told Mac. We could be 'the same'. I just didn't think she would choose that. No matter how much I wanted it. *Do I want that?*

"I said too much, didn't I?"

We turned to Suze as he pinched his lips shut.

"No ... no, you didn't." I could only hope to restart the word vomit in a way that would give me useful information. Or answers.

"My questions first," Mac said. "Where is my dad?"

Suze shrugged, his head going every which way.

"Is he in ... there with her?"

*If is he, and Zoe is, Mac's going to want to go right now.*

Suze shook his head. "I don't know nothing."

*Liar.* I reached up and peeled his fingers from his mouth just like Mac had before.

Another series of head shakes began from Suze.

"How did Mac's mom get in there?"

Suze held up both hands and stepped backward. "You're trying to trick me."

"We're not, Suze. We're just trying to understand. It's not ... normal for humans." I figured I'd pin my lack of knowledge on my species for some sympathy.

"I can't tell you that. Nuh-huh. I promised. Scouts honor." He held up two fingers.

"But if you don't, we can't save my sister!" Mac said as I said, "But you've been sharing everything."

"Who?" Suze asked, following with, "But you keep forcing it out of me!"

"Zoe. My sister," Mac started as I said, "If you're going to tell her, just tell her it all."

Suze's head went back and forth and back and forth. I wondered, for a moment, if he might make it spin all the way around.

I held up both hands, one toward Mac, the other toward Suze. "No more overlapping conversations."

Suze slunk into himself.

"But—" Mac began, and I wagged my hand at her.

"It's not your fault, Suze. Let's start with Zoe."

“That pretty little girl who was with you a while ago? I thought she was Winn’s sister.”

“She is. Sorta,” I said. “Adopted. Kinda. She’s really Mac’s.” *And that feels very weird to say.*

“Why do you think Zoe’s ... your sister?” His head tilted left.

“Because the Council told me, tonight,” Mac said.

“And why do you think she’s ... in *there*?” His head went the other way.

“Because no one can find her, and Magwa did a locator spell that came up blank.” Mac rapped her knuckles on the table. “I need to know how to get in there so I can get her out.”

*And find your mom and dad.*

Suze bounced up and down. “No, no, no, no, no, no, no ... how would *she* even know how to get ... in there?”

“Someone kidnapped her,” I said.

“This is not good. Not, not, not good. Does she know how to get out?” Suze’s extra long eyelashes hit his cheeks, his gaze moving from Mac to me as they lifted back up. “Are you sure *Miss Zoe* is your sister? As in Maya’s second pink, squiggly, slimey, oozy, gooey, baby?”

“Yes,” Mac and I both said. “You didn’t know?” Mac asked.

For a so-called protector, Suze didn’t seem to know much about what went on around him.

“How do you not know everything about my mom if you were her protector?” Frustration ebbed from Mac. She faced me as if I would have the answer before twisting back to Suze. “You have to help me.”

He tapped Mac’s nose. “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.”

*And we’re back to the will he won’t he tell us charade.*

Mac firmed her stance and crossed her arms again. “My sister is missing, and we think she’s in the same place. If my mom and da—mom is in there, maybe she can find her. So tell me.”

*Yup, she wants to find her family.*

Suze said nothing.

Mac threw her arms up. “Forget you, Suze.” She stormed away. “Leave her to rot, then.”

Suze sucked his lips into his mouth before saying, “She won’t rot. It doesn’t work that way.”

Mac stalked back toward him. “Tell. Me!” Her finger dug into his shoulder. “Please!”

Even I could hear the desperation.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No!”

“Yes!” Her fists balled.

“Nooooo!” Suze leaned forward addressing her from above her head. “I can’t!”

“Let’s go, Winn.” Mac started for the door. “Suze isn’t any better than any of the Council.”

His shoulders sagged, I expected at Mac’s jab.

“When it’s for something so important, Suze, why can’t you help us?” I asked.

“I told you. Scouts honor. And, they bind me. They make me promise.”

*Because he has a big mouth and a big heart.*

“Who does?” I asked as a yawn hit me.

Suze put a finger to his lips. “Maya. And no one can break a promise to a goddess.”

“Sure you can,” Mac said.

Suze shook his head, and Mac’s groan induced a spasm in my chest. “I can’t, Mac. I really, really, really, really, really, can’t. But you could ask Raven.”

“What?” Mac and I said together. Curiosity kicked up my energy level even though another yawn took hold.

Raven ranked right up there with Nahir on Mac’s top ten list of enemies. Maybe even with Ridge. Or perhaps, Ridge took the highest position on *my* list.

“Shhhhh! I do not tell. But Raven can.”

The look on Mac’s face would have killed a lesser man.

“I’m glad I have you to protect me, Winn.” Suze moved behind me and took my shoulders. “Though you look like you’re gonna fall over, so I better find another hidey place.” He moved off to the side.

“Raven? Really?” I asked as yet another yawn escaped.

Suze yawned too, adding a dramatic hand wave over his lips. “She was the last one to go in, you know.”

# 14

“Let’s go,” Mac said and grabbed my hand.

Suze tugged the other one, turning me into their human rubber band. “It’s two in the morning. You go now and Raven will eat you for an early breakfast, or make me eat you for a late dinner.”

“I can deal with that.” Mac pulled a little harder.

As I yawned for a fourth or fifth or sixth time—I’d stopped counting—Suze said, “He can’t.”

My brain had already stopped processing fast enough to keep up with all the details and Suze’s misinterpretations. Grandpa’s old saying ‘clear as mud’ seemed to apply.

“I’ll be fine—”

“No. And I won’t take you until the human gets human rest.” Suze let go of my arm.

Mac released me, too. “Fine. Take a nap. One hou—”

“Eight,” Suze said.

“An hour—” I started and earned an uncharacteristic Suze glare. I had to admit, unless I got some rest, I’d be useless in the search for my sister because I’d understand less than I already did. Raven, though, wouldn’t give Mac the time of day—that, I knew, too. Luckily for us, I’d setup an interview with her for Sunday morning.

• • •

I woke on the kitchen floor, a down blanket around me, a soft pillow under my head, and the smell of frying bacon all around me.

“I magically gave you a bed.” Suze stirred something on the stove. “I could have conjured a real one for you, but she’s kinda gettin’ mean as she learns stuff, and I didn’t want to risk it.”

“Thanks, Suze.” Straightening, I brought my covers with me, my stomach grumbling.

Mac eyed me from the couch where she lay. "I'm not liking you a lot right now, you know."

"Well, that's honest," I said.

"You know how I like to sleep?" Suze asked.

With a snap back and forth of my neck and a loud crack from both sides, the tension in my shoulders lessened. A little. "No, and I'm afraid to ask."

"Hanging upside down from a tree like an opossum."

"Interesting." Not what I'd imagined he'd say. "What time is it?"

"Nine," he said.

"What are you making?" As I rose, I noted Suze wore a chef's hat and apron. All by themselves. "You forgot clothes again, Suze."

Way too much showed with his quick spin. "Oops. Be right back."

Luckily for me, he covered his butt with a rag as he snuck back into his room.

I turned to Mac. "You plan on staying mad at me all day?"

"Yes."

"You know we need to get more information about this ... place before you try to go in. I mean ... what happens if you go in there and can't find a way out? How do you get in? Why won't the Council authorize you to go? All those things."

She shrugged from her laying-down position.

I walked over and knelt in front of her. "There's stuff we don't understand, Mac. And we have to do some research, no matter how impatient you are, before you do whatever you're going to do."

"I can figure it out. And time is wasting. Remember?"

I did, but we'd left so quickly, I hadn't gotten all the details. Rather than throw that little fact back at her, I said, "If you've got your whole life as a Changeling figured out, then go. Without me." I stood again and walked to the table, hoping she'd buy into my evil plan of reverse psychology.

Suze returned as I sat. "Pancakes, sir?" He still had his hat and apron on but had added some sort of long johns underneath—covering his entire body. *Thankfully.*

"Sure." A plate, fork, knife and glass of orange juice materialized on the table in front of me. Suze and his abilities surprised me all the time. Especially with his *inability* to dress like anyone normal.

He took the spot across from me as Mac pouted on the couch. At least she didn't leave.

“So, Winn. When looking at size ... if wider is wider than wide, does that mean that girther is girther than girth?”

*Oh, boy.*

“Can I just say ‘no’ and be done with it?”

“Okay.” Suze bobbed his head.

*Thank goodness.*

We ate in companionable silence though Mac’s brooding stare stayed fixed on me. After three of the best pancakes I’d ever eaten, I turned to her. “I’ll go to Raven’s in an hour and see if she’ll talk to me. You want to come, or you want to pout all day?”

Suze leaned forward. “I got ten says she’ll stay there until the moon rises at five-oh-four this evening.”

I wouldn’t take that bet since I agreed.

Rather than let her attitude bother me, I went back to Suze. “So ... where’d you get your name? Is it a family thing?”

He wiped at his mouth with a napkin like some diner in a fancy French restaurant. “It’s short for Suzanne.”

Juice spurted out my nose even as I tried to hold it back. My dad often listened to oldies, and *A Boy Named Sue* had been played many times at home. Or in the car. He had a fascination with seriously old music. “Sorry, Suze. Breathed that in.” I coughed into my hand to clear my throat, hoping he wouldn’t take offense.

“No problem. I took on the name when I first came here.”

*Why does that not surprise me?* “When was that?”

“Oh, about the same time as Maya was born. Got called up. Hung around. Stayed after she ... you know ....” He dabbed at misty eyes.

“Gotcha,” I said.

From a pitcher, Suze poured brown gravy-looking sauce over another set of pancakes. For a second I wanted to be grossed out until I realized he held the magic ingredient to getting Mac out of her funk.

“Pour some of that here.” I pointed to another pile of warm pancakes, and Suze topped it with Mac’s favorite food.

*Chocolate.*

Before she could argue or complain, her nose twitched. “That’s just wrong.” Even as she said it, she rose and joined us.

Suze gave me a wink.

He may not have been the brightest crayon in the box, but he knew Mac.

“So, Mackenzie. Since you’re going to tick off Raven, and she might throw lightning bolts at you, can I come and watch?”

“If she throws a bolt at me, I’ll make sure it hits her first.” She smirked even as she stuffed half a pancake, covered in chocolate, in her mouth. “And yeah, sure, come watch the show.”

• • •

Like the previous Council members I’d interviewed, Raven’s house wouldn’t have stood out any more than anyone else’s. For immortal, mythological creatures, they surprised me at the wealth they didn’t show. I’d have bet my entire college fund they all had more money than god.

Which meant my father probably did, too.

On the front porch, Raven scrunched up her nose. Mac passed inside, she pinched hers shut. Suze walked through the door, smiling as I followed.

“Welcome to my home, Winn. I was only expecting you.” Her voice had a sweetness that differed from Josie and Alina; Raven’s tone didn’t include an inherent sexual innuendo.

“I’m sorry, but the plan to talk to you about ... *other stuff* ... has changed. A little.”

Raising an eyebrow, she turned and led us farther inside.

Despite the black of her hair and white robes, I figured her home would be colorful and full of angelic happiness. Instead, it didn’t have a speck of color in it. White walls, white furniture and white floors. Everything ... white.

“Would you all care for something to drink?”

“No.” Mac’s clipped answer came as she plopped onto a chair.

Suze stood against the frame of the door, and I walked to a second chair.

“No, thank you,” I said.

Raven glided to the couch and sat, her hands wrapping around her knees as she leaned forward. Body language said ‘hurry up’ even as Mac’s slouch suggested she’d stay as long as she had to or until she received the information she’d come for.

“What can I assist you with, Winn?”

We’d agreed, in the car drive over, that I would do the talking, knowing Mac would incite a riot with the first words from her mouth.

“We need more information about a place called the in-between.”

Raven's knuckles blanched. "What? Why?"

I explained what we'd learned about Zoe and Mac's mom and our belief that one or both were in the in-between. Together or not.

"My colleagues told me about Zoe. I'm surprised you would think to ask me anything, though."

"Suze mentioned you were the last one to go there."

Raven turned toward him and narrowed her gaze. He lifted his chin until facing the ceiling.

"So ... do you know about the in-between?" I asked.

Raven returned to me, her expression flat and unreadable. "Yes."

"And ... you've been there?"

"Yes."

Mac hissed. With the sun shining, it meant she couldn't change form, but she could still get angry, and that could turn just as deadly.

"Can you tell us about it?" I infused my voice with sincerity and pleading.

Raven's gaze landed on Mac before coming back to me. "I went in search of Mackenzie's moth—"

Mac jumped up.

I took her by the arm and tugged her back down. "Mac's Mom? Why?"

Raven clutched her hands over her stomach. "Maya had entered the in-between—freely—as she was apt to do, and I'd been asked to retrieve her."

"Before or after you killed her?" Mac seethed through the question.

"Once again, Mackenzie, I did *not* kill your mother. And this was before that ... *situation* occurred."

"Did you bring her back?" I asked. "Did you find her? How, what—"

Raven shook her head. "I did not."

"Well, that's convenient." Mac snorted. "You send Raven to do a job and you only get Raven in return. They put the wrong person on the right job, Winn. The very, very, very wrong person." Mac huffed air. "Not this time, though. I'm going and will find a way to get in."

Raven only blinked.

As I started to speak, Mac said, "My mom's arch nemesis goes in after her and one convenient zap later my mom's in Lala Land permanently." She stood as if to leave, and I, once again, forced her still.

The firm set of Raven's lips suggested, to me, she bit back whatever she wanted to say. She drew in a deep breath, and said, "We weren't always



enemies, you know,” in the softest tone I’d ever heard from her.

“That’s bullshit, and you know it.” Mac turned away from me.

I squeezed her thigh in the hopes it would calm her down. “Please, Raven. Go on.”

With a sigh, she said, “Your mother and I were the very best of friends at one time, Mackenzie. We ... grew up together. Somewhat.”

“Right. And I have a bridge to sell you to the clouds. Ten bucks and it’s yours.” Mac kept her face from my sight. “Oh, wait, you can get your own bridge. I have one to he—“

“Why’d you go in after her?” I jumped in to stop Mac from pissing off the only person we knew who might give us answers.

“I was asked to.”

“By?”

“The Council, of course.”

“Why?”

Raven straightened her white gown. “One day, she disappeared. Through a series of events, I learned of her location and was sent to retrieve her. Unfortunately, Maya did not rejoin me.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Who am I to say? She did emerge, shortly afterward. Just not with me.”

Mac spun back around. “So maybe you’re wrong, and she wasn’t there. If you didn’t get her, maybe you made it up that you even saw her.”

Raven raised a hand. “Maya did admit to the Council that I’d met with her.”

Before Mac could jump in and ruin what had become a good conversation, I said, “Since you’ve been there, can you tell us how to go back? We need to get Zoe out.”

Raven said nothing.

“Or would you go back and retrieve?” I asked.

“No.” She gave a firm shake of her head.

“But ... we—“

“Would you like to live within others’ dreams? Within their memories?” Raven leaned forward and clasped her hands together.

Mac stood again. “This is bogus. No one can live in a memory.”

I held her back with a palm up in the air. “I thought, when they talked about dreams, it was figurative.”

Raven shook her head. “The ... in-between taps into your memories, your past, your essence, your soul. It’s what’s in your mind that matters. What’s in your heart. The questions you want answered most, but also the trials, and pain. Not of just yourself. Of anyone connected to you, within and outside the in-between. If you’re not dead, you’ll probably want to be because souls in the in-between aren’t there because they’ve accepted death, but because they haven’t. Would you like to feel someone’s torture, whether physical or psychological, should you connect with them?”

“But you’re an Angel. Doesn’t that imply your memories are of the pearly gates and clouds and crap?” Mac had obviously forgotten our agreement again.

“I also had eighteen years of life before I took on this form if you’ll recall.” Raven adjusted back to me.

“So when you all die, you don’t really die. I got that from ... other conversations. So ... if you can go to this ... place, wouldn’t that be an opportunity for one last goodbye? One more connection? Who *wouldn’t* want that?” I’d have taken it with my mom just for a chance to meet her.

“Saying goodbye once is often hard enough. Why would I want to do it twice or three times? Or more?” Raven asked.

“Okay, but we *humans* can’t do that at all. We don’t have that kind of chance. Maybe it would make a difference to ... some ... of us.” For a second, I sounded desperate, like I wanted to be able to use the in-between. “I’m just thinking out loud.” Playing it off as if the place held no big interest to me would be harder than I thought.

“But it has made a difference to humans, Winn. You’re aware that humans have created a cryogenic solution to the preservation of a human body?”

I knew just enough about the theory of cryogenics to follow. “Yes.”

“They did so to maintain the body until death could be undone. In the testing of this product, of this solution to death, they accidentally found ... us.” Her hands lay across one another at the top of her chest.

“What?” Mac, Suze and I all asked. My finger went from pointing to myself to Raven, Mac, and ended on Suze. “You mean humans know about ... but I thought that’s what my dad was supposed to stop ... to preserve the secrecy ...”

“Cryogenically frozen humans can enter the in-between. Unfortunately, what awaits them is not pleasant, they are unprepared, and we must force

them to pass on. All because your kind cannot let go. Humans have destroyed the sanctity of the in-between.”

“Shit.” Other than Mac’s breathing, she hadn’t said a word until that one exclamation.

“But why should you be the only kind who gets a second chance?” I asked.

Raven’s paleness changed to a bright glow. “You humans will never understand.”

“Can’t you find a way to stop the humans ... us?” I should have been pushing to get access, not take it away.

“We have. Many times in fact. The in-between was once a place of solitude where our kind took their next steps in the conclusion of their lives and where we could still communicate with one another. With human interruption, we no longer have separation. Not all of us believe this is wrong. I do. So I won’t return.” She eyed Mac. “This lack of separation between humans and our kind is why the Council established multiple levels of protection.”

“My sister is in there,” I said. “If you won’t go in and get her, will you tell Mac how? Or me?”

“*You* don’t.” She pointed right at me. “Unless you wish to die today. Which I could make happen—”

Mac jerked forward, but I held her back.

“And Mackenzie, well ... the Council forbids a Changeling from entering.”

“Then *how* and *who* can get my sister out?” I couldn’t believe I’d had to ask that question so much and gotten nowhere with answers.

“Quite a number of demons can pass from here to hell and back.” She turned and faced Suze dead on. Not that we’d get far with him unless he broke a few more promises.

“Okay. Raven, please ... if I can find someone to go, *how* do they? How? Please tell me.”

“In and Out are the same. There is a short incantation that must be said before the Ides.”

“The Ides?” I ran a calculation in my head. “The fifteenth of March? That’s it? That’s not so bad.”

Raven shook her head. “You would think. For those who wish to remain conscious in this life, they must exit the in-between on the eve of *every*

Ide.”

*Monthly. In the middle of the month. That means eight days from now. That must be why Dad said she'd be safe. “Why the Ide?”*

A smirk overtook Raven's lips. “Why else but to honor the god of war? Mars himself?”

“Is he important in this?”

Raven shook her head. “No more important than any of the others. But to you ... the Ides is symbolic. Your Brutus killed Julius Caesar upon the Ides. War. Strife. Peace. On every calendar month, the in-between must be free of all ... self-initiated conflict, shall we say. If it is not, it will take what it needs to be as such on its own. On the Ides.”

My mind whirred with possibilities. If I could find someone to go, we just needed the incantation. “What do we say?”

Raven shook her head. “They cannot just be said. To do so would induce oneself inside. You must read them directly from the tome.”

“Tome?”

“Yes.” Raven turned toward Mac. “Should you deem yourself worthy, despite the Council's mandate, you should know that if *you* go in ... you'll never return, Mackenzie.” Raven crossed her arms over her chest. “I know you. You'll find your mother and give up all of this life. It'll be the best choice you ever made, but—”

Mac lunged.

I grabbed her arms.

She slipped from me with a single breath.

Suze jumped in and wrapped one beefy arm around Mac's waist, walking backward with her.

“Let me go! I want to kill her now instead of later!” She squirmed and wiggled.

Suze's hold didn't budge, and Mac clawed at his hand and arm.

She didn't break free, but her scowl, inhaled and exhaled repeated over and over as if she repeatedly changed forms with no success—thanks to her inability to do so during the day.

“We should go,” I said, saying our goodbyes while wishing I could ask more about the tome.

Suze kept his arm around Mac as we made our way to his Hummer. “Do I let her go?” he asked.

Mac glared at me even as she propped her elbow on his arm and dropped her chin onto her palm.

“Are you going to attack again?”

“No.” She couldn’t have sounded more deflated.

“Let her go.”

Suze fast-blinked a few times. “You’re the boss.”

He released Mac, and she stormed her way to the front of the Hummer. Her hands flew through the air until she opened the door, stepped inside and slammed it shut.

Suze’s eyes widened. “Women, right?”

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# 15

Traveling down the freeway in Suze's Hummer, I contemplated that Gerard's prediction over my failure, made when Mac had named me her teacher, could come true. I *didn't* know what questions to ask. Even when I asked the ones I thought were right, they took me down a path I didn't expect and didn't know how to get back on track.

Books. Tomes. Incantations. Places for dead and alive supernaturals.

*Because you don't know.*

*Because you're not one of them.*

*Mac never should have chosen you.*

As doubt crept in, Mac said, "What're you thinking about?"

I lifted to face her. "Everything. You know I'm going to mess up your life, right? And that the Council was right? I don't know enough about you or what you can do to teach you stuff."

"Sure you do," Suze said from the driver's seat. "Teachin' a Changeling isn't about learnin' all about our kind. It's about responsibility. Choices. Decision making. You got all that and then some."

"How do you know so much about this but not the stuff I want to know about?" Mac asked.

"Maya liked to tell me about what life would be like for Mackenzie."

"You're *just now* telling me this?" Mac flopped back against her seat. "You've been in my life all eighteen years, Suze! Why didn't you say something?"

"You didn't ask!"

Mac burst out laughing. Her sound bled into me, a frustration that couldn't be let out any other way.

He made the same statement every member of the Council had, yet his point came clear.

Mac didn't ask questions. She'd spent her entire life living without diving into her heritage, into her future.

She just needed to ask.

As we turned into my driveway, I sat back and stared at the ceiling of Suze's Hummer. Of all people to enlighten me, it would be a demon who couldn't find his own happy place, his own identity.

Like Mac.

The Hummer rolled to a stop.

"Suze?"

He swiveled around to me. "Whatcha need, boss?"

"Do you know why they picked you to be Maya's protector and then Mac's?"

He rubbed at his chin, eyes closed. "Um ..." His lids popped open. One finger drew up into the air in a point. "Because they said I was familiar with them both."

A look to Mac had her rolling her eyes.

In typical Suze fashion, I expected he'd just misinterpreted yet another word. "Did they say you *were* familiar or that you were *a* familiar?" I asked.

His head tilted. To the left. Back again. Could he not know?

Rather than wait, I asked, "You know what a familiar is, right?"

He nodded.

"Could it be because you are one? That you're connected to Maya and Mac in a way no others are? That you're *their* familiar? And that's why you're connected to them so well?"

Suze being a familiar fit, too, given the definition from the book—which I trusted exclusively for my knowledge of the otherworldly. He could change into any kind of creature, human or not. Often animal. Familiars were commonly plucked from the depths of the underworld and were known as demons. Some were mean. Some were nice. Suze had both elements and looked out for Mac's best interests, as the Council had said, but often let her make her own decisions and did what she wanted.

When he still hadn't answered, I said, "I think you're their familiar, Suze. And because of that, anything Maya told you ... you can tell Mac."

His eyes widened. "Noooooooooooooooooooo. She made me promise. I'll tell you anything she didn't make me promise not to. Deal?" He held out his hand which had reduced to four fingers.

Mac took his hand before I could stop her. "Deal."

The front door of my house opened, my dad stepping out and onto the porch. He stood with his arms over his chest. A check of my watch showed

it to be almost four in the afternoon. Looking back at my dad, I wondered just what he thought had happened the night before, where I'd gone, and if he'd be royally ticked that I hadn't even called.

"What do we do about your—my—your sis—Zoe?" Mac asked as if I'd forgotten.

"For all we know, the Council's gone after her. We did kinda run out without hearing the end of the story." I pushed to step out of Suze's truck.

"Yeah, but they never get to the plot, you know," Mac said.

"I do." I shut the door and patted the side of the Hummer.

Suze backed out with a salute to me. Mac stared without emotion. Nothing in my life lined up.

• • •

Dad walked back into the house as I entered and shut the door, enveloping us in the smell of apple pie though he never baked.

The clomp of my shoes echoed on the hardwoods as I made my way into the kitchen.

"Hello, Winn."

I froze on the spot. Josie sat at the kitchen table. A look to my dad, to Josie and back to my dad only made me more confused than I had been.

She rose, her body as lithe as a cat, and plucked a bag from the chair next to her. "I was just keeping your father company until you returned. I believe you have a lot to discuss."

*Just keeping him company?*

One of her hands ran down my arm. "We've got a plan for your sister. Don't worry. Just go on about your life. Help Mackenzie. Keep her out of trouble, if possible."

I wanted to laugh. *Keep her out of trouble? Good luck with that.* "What happened to Ridge? That can't have been—"

"It wasn't," my dad said. "The Council took care of the incident, though Mac's actions really surprised them."

"I think Ridge surprised her. She was trying to help." *I think.*

"We realize that," Josie said. "She did break a cardinal rule, though. We have opted, as she is under a lot of stress and a deadline, not to invoke punishment at this time."

"What about Ridge?"



“Nothing to worry about,” she said.

I didn’t buy it.

Josie tilted toward my dad. I tracked her gaze and twisted back as she did. “There are many who wish to do the Changeling harm. You are aware of that, of course. With Zoe out of the way, Mackenzie is an easy target. Despite her wishes, we have tripled her security. Though, we request that you do not tell her. She will have ... a Mackenzie sized hissy fit.”

She had that right. “She’s with Suze now,” I said.

Josie gave me a slow nod. “Good. Good. He’s very kind to her and always was to Maya, as well.” She walked toward the exit. “Until another time, Winn. Bernie,” she added with a head bob toward my dad, and she opened the door and disappeared through it.

“Are you okay, Winn?” My dad stood at the kitchen island. “Josie brought some pie, hoping that would help.”

When I focused on him for an extra second, I realized dark circles traced lines under his eyes, and his color appeared more sallow and grey than his normal caucasian.

“I’m fine, Dad. Maybe I should ask you?”

He closed his eyes, his head drooping toward the counter where his hands rested. “Fifteen years of this and it all explodes in front of me.”

*Again, because Mac and I connected.* I moved to the bar side of the counter and took a seat. “What’s the plan to find Zoe?” Straight to the core. We’d get nowhere in our conversation if the elephant in the room didn’t get fed first.

He took a deep breath. “I don’t know.”

“What? Why not? Why doesn’t the Council just send someone in?”

“It’s not as simple as you think.” He dropped his head forward further, leaning it onto his hands on the counter’s surface. “I’m sorry. I’m tired. And stressed. I am just a human, after all.” He lifted up and stepped backward until he hit the fridge with his back and leaned against it. “You know ... when Josie came to me to tell me you’d stood in front of the Council on Mac’s behalf, I nearly threw up.”

*Like father like son.*

“I couldn’t believe you and Mac had gotten that involved. She’s a major shift to this world, Winn. That a goddess would produce a Changeling happens once every thousand years at best. I’m told every race in their

world knows it's significant and feels the potential for change. Not all of them are happy about it, though."

"How is she so different?"

"I don't really know. I'm sorry, Winn, I just never expected to, one ... have my son dating the Changeling and, two, know who she is."

"What do you mean know who she is? Everybody knows who she is."

He blinked, his expression turning confused. "Not everyone knows Mac is the Changeling. They know the Changeling exists, but not who she is. That's done on purpose. It's part of why she and Zoe had to be separated, why Changelings are raised away from their parents. Why a human took over guardianship and why there's so much stress over the two of you."

It made sense. Then again, I had to stop trying to put reason to anything the Council did. "You tried to warn me about her ... and ... stuff. Was that you-my-dad or you-this-Guardian-thing?"

He chuckled under his breath. "A little of both."

"You know I'm Mac's teacher, right?"

"Josie told me before, which is why I'm even more stressed. You're into something you don't even understand, Winn."

"So tell me."

"If humans found out what you know, you'd be plucked from your life and sent to a psych ward. If the others find out, *you* become their target."

"Is that what happened to Zoe?"

• • •

"You know why I had her in therapy?"

I shook my head.

"Because it was easier to convince her she was a little crazy than to tell her the truth. It was safer for her because she just didn't know how to keep her mouth shut."

*Zoe did like to talk. About everything.* "So everyone made it out like her family had died or disappeared to keep her silent? You know by doing that, they did it to Mac, too. They left her without her *family*."

"Like I said, Winn. Sometimes, we adults do what we think is in your best interest for whatever the reason."

"But maybe if you'd told Zoe, she'd have been able to understand and learn to keep silent. I mean ... she has. Mac explained everything, and she

really has.” Or had she? *Is that why she was kidnapped?*

My dad held up both palms to me. “Zoe talked from the moment she turned one, apparently. She didn’t know how not to. She was just open with everyone—like her mom. So once Maya disappeared, we thought it best to try and convince Zoe what she could see and hear weren’t real. But then you got involved with Mac, and Mac got involved with Zoe, and it all blew up—no. I’m sorry—again. It’s not your fault or Mac’s.”

“So what is Zoe exactly?”

“She’s a Whisperer. It means she can communicate with the dead.”

I released the hold I had on my own fingers, the circulation returning with a tingling sensation. I hadn’t realized I’d held them so tight. “And you’ve really known all along about Zoe’s gift?” The knowledge settled on my chest like a cart of bricks. “What does a Whisperer do?”

“In Maya’s case, she could communicate with the dead in the in-between. Zoe, though, can communicate with the level after that, too.”

“The ones who’ve passed through you mean?”

My dad nodded. “Yes. It comes from being the daughter of a goddess. She’s like a goddess herself, but her mortal-based father makes her mortal, too. It’s a tricky position to be in. Mac got off easy in that case. She has a choice Zoe doesn’t.”

“So did someone take her because of what she can do? Because of her mom? Do you know?”

“Your next question is going to be ‘why?’, and I can’t tell you.”

“Can’t or won’t?” The differences were huge when it came to the Council and all non-humans.

I’d never been so formal with my dad before. He trusted Zoe and me to behave, and we did. When he’d left us with babysitters, they never had to do anything because Zoe and I just hung out together, watching movies or reading. Never before had we been such problems in his life. Our about-face, right as I hit my official adult year must have seemed pretty ironic to him.

He gave a low chuckle and ran a hand through his hair—a gesture I’d seen him do regularly since Mac and I started dating. “Who has the most to gain by using someone like Zoe?”

The fact Dad didn’t answer my original question had me narrowing my eyes. I’d play along, though, and see what he came up with. “Um ... I don’t know. Humans?”

“Exactly,” Dad said. “We do. That’s why Guardians take special precautions to ensure the grey area between us and Mac’s kind stays very, very grey.”

“Other than a second chance—what would we humans do just by knowing the supernatural exist? We can’t tap into their powers, can we?”

My dad eyed me with a tilt of his head. “Zoe is a product of a human and an immortal. You tell me if that’s not tapping into it.”

“Oh.”

“It’s not only an allure that incites interest in those with special abilities to create mixes, but it can easily become an obsession. Your grandfather was obsessed, unfortunately. I’ve spent twenty-five years trying to stop what he figured out.”

If he’d slapped me, I wouldn’t have jerked as far as I did. As such, I slipped backward but caught myself before I fell off my stool. “Grandpa? Grandpa ... did ... *what?*”

“Grandpa was like a treasure hunter—always looking for ways to find the truth. Or what he believed to be the truth.”

“He believed in ... the otherworldly?”

Dad’s head bobbed up and down. “Obsessively. And, he truly believed that everyone went to the same place when they died. Human. Animal. Immortal. His alternative theory was that they passed *through* the same place.”

“The in-between.”

“Yes.”

Raven had mentioned the cryogenics. Had my own grandfather been a part of that? “Did he ... succeed?”

My dad nodded. “When cryogenics—”

*Oh, my god.*

“—came into fashion, he believe that would allow him to test his theory. He managed to not only die but to come back with confirmation—of course it was confirmation only he believed because only he’d seen it.”

*Oh, my holy ... what the ... he went in and came back?* “Maybe he made it all up?” I rubbed my palms against my eyes.

Dad chuckled. “Given what you and I both know, Winn? Do you *think* he made it all up?”

“No.”

Dad coughed into his closed fist. “He was insanely curious. You get that from him. And his brain. Like you, Winn ... I loved to read, and I’d sneak into his study at night and read his documentation, papers, case studies. Everything. Mac was right that I knew about the book. I saw you reading it one night and wanted to take it for myself.” At my glare, he raised his hands. “I didn’t. Honestly, I don’t know where it went. But I asked Josie about it. She told me what it was and the significance with Mac’s life.” Dad took a deep breath. “In any case, your Grandfather is cryogenically frozen —”

Even the thought of it gave me the chills.

“—so we can’t know for sure, but his papers and notes and everything indicate his plan, all along, had been to return to the in-between.”

I did and didn’t believe it. To come full circle, as my dad liked to say, from Grandpa to Dad to me. He died not long after I turned five, though. “Are you worried about Zoe at all?” It seemed every time we started talking, our conversation went off on a tangent—an interesting one, but one anyway.

“Of course I am. I love her like my own daughter, but like I told you, I know she’s safe.”

“But how? You haven’t told me why you believe that. You say she’s in this in-between place where Grandpa may or may not be, where Mac’s mom apparently is, where someone kidnapped her to leave her, but no one will tell me how they know or why, nor show me that she’s safe or how to get her out. How ... Dad? How do you know?”

“Because I put her there.”

## 16

“You *put* Zoe into the in-between? You put her—you?” I stood and paced the kitchen, pulling at my hair. “What the hell, Dad?” I’d never sworn in front of him before. A twinge of guilt hit me even as anger took over. “What were you thinking? Are you two-timing the Council? Are you working for someone else?”

My dad stayed silent

“Come on. Tell me. *What is going on?*”

His hands gripped the empty coffee mug in front of him. “It’s a test, Winn.” He lowered, pushing his cup aside, until his forehead hit the counter.

“A what?”

“You heard me.” The counter and his arms muffled his voice.

I had heard him. My reaction had been simply that: reactionary. *A test? Another test of the Mac-isn’t-doing-what-the-Council-wants program? And they used my sister?*

“She has one week to find her way in, retrieve Zoe and return.”

“But—”

My dad rose. The set of his shoulders stiffened even as he yawned wide. “I’m sorry. I haven’t gotten much sleep.”

“How long have you known?”

“Three days that it would happen. Two days when it would happen. One day since it happened. Long enough for the Council to convince me Zoe would be safe, to prove it, and to show me who would put her there and how, who’ll go in and get her if Mac fails, and that they can keep her safe in the process.”

*So he didn’t physically place her there.* “What about Zoe? She’s been terrified since ...” *How much does my dad actually know?* “Does she know what’s going on?”

Dad nodded, his head bobbing up and down numerous times. “Saroya explained the whole thing to her.”

“So this is all just another trick ... another lie. Did they send that Wendingo after her, too? Was that some setup for this?”

“No. That thing ... I still don’t have an answer on that.”

I couldn’t believe what I’d heard. First, that my dad knew, and second, that Zoe hadn’t said anything. She’d been overly excited about the party, but I’d figured that came because Mac invited her.

“You know this is crazy, right?”

“What could be crazier than a vampire ruling one twelfth of the immortal population?”

“Touché, Dad.” Yet another black mark in the Winn-as-teacher column. “Why are they doing all these things and not telling me? I’m bound not to just tell Mac, and I’m bound to help her. Magwa did the spell. Why—”

“There are three things a Changeling has to do prior their nineteenth birthday. The first is choose a teacher.”

“Right, which Mac has done.”

“And should have done years and years ago. The second ...” He held up two fingers. “Choose to give herself up in order to save someone she loves. And before you say anything, we know she loves you, but that wasn’t an option.” A big, airy sigh escaped him. “Her closeness to Zoe was what convinced the Council ... and Zoe. I could see it when they interacted. *That’s* why we told her about her connection to her mother ... and to Zoe. And, the third step, as you know, is to choose a final form.”

“But, by going in, she can’t keep changing. Raven said—”

Dad shook his head. “That’s part of the test, Winn. She’ll be able to return and keep changing forms. She just can’t know it, and you have to keep that from her. She has to believe she won’t have her power. She has to believe she’s giving up herself and still go. It’s about self-sacrifice, which is a huge part of life on the Council.”

“But the Council said she was forbidden from goin—”

Dad’s stare stopped me.

“Which is another form of Mac-motivation.”

He nodded. “There’s more, Winn. Once she gets in, she has to find her way out. *On time.*”

“Before the Ides.”

“Not just that. In the in-between, time moves faster than out here. What is a week here could be a day there. Or so I’m told. She has huge obstacles

ahead of her. And afterward, she'll have to swear her allegiance to the immortal side by vowing never to return to the in-between."

*Which would steal her away from her mom but give her Zoe back.* Getting in to find Zoe would be easy if we knew the incantation. The swearing never to return would be a problem. A big one if I had to guess. If I had a chance to meet my mom, I'd want to stay with her or at least be able to go back.

"Do you wonder why you were sent to Raven today?" Dad asked.

*He knows so much more than I do.* I hadn't thought anything more about our meeting with Raven than that I had an appointment and Suze suggested it. "I'm guessing because that was the plan?"

"Yes, but it's more. Maya was Raven's best friend, and she was the pawn to Raven's test as a young Changeling."

"But she failed, and she's still around."

"She didn't fail. Maya was—is—a goddess, and chose to remain, but communicated with the Council to ensure Raven got her clearance. So you see, they pick someone with strong ties."

The Council could have left my sister out of it and told Mac about her mom and she'd have gone. The magnitude of our relationship hit me. If Mac hadn't been picked as my partner, if I hadn't fallen for her, if Zoe hadn't gotten involved—we'd have all been doing our own thing. Then again, that would have meant Zoe and I probably would have spent our Saturday night home alone watching old movies, and I wouldn't know what I knew about Mac's kind and what they could do.

One placement.

One decision.

*How do I get myself into these situations?*

After what seemed like a long time to me, but probably only lasted a second, I said, "Why ... wasn't I an option?"

My dad's gaze bored into my soul. "I wouldn't let them and—"

"What? I should be in there, not some fourteen year old kid."

Dad stood, scooting his chair behind him. "You're a kid, too, Winn, no matter what you say. You're also a hundred percent human and humans don't—let's just say the end is really, really bad. Zoe's got the benefit of being half human, having her mother inside, and with Mac now knowing she's her sister, a better-than-strong chance of being fine when she returns."



Defeat settled on my shoulders. I sat again and dropped my elbows to the counter, my head into my hands. “Eight days, right?”

“Yes. All Mac has to do is convince her to return and watch her leave.”

*And come out herself.*

Raven’s statement about Mac staying inside could easily become truth.

“You’re sure there’s a backup plan?”

His nod reassured me. A little. “Josie promised me the Council has an escape route of sorts, and Zoe will be back on time no matter what, and none the worse for wear. I have to trust them, Winn, because I can’t do anything else.”

Josie again. Every time he mentioned her name, a tinge of wistfulness entered his tone.

“How do I teach her what to do, Dad? I mean, I don’t even know, and I don’t want her to fail.”

Dad squeezed his eyes closed.

A sinking sensation overtook my stomach. “You can’t tell me, can you?”

He shook his head, lids still shut.

“Because this is as much a test of my ability to train as it’s her ability to learn, isn’t it?”

A small nod.

“Um ... okay. I—” I waved toward the stairs even though my dad hadn’t turned to me or opened his eyes. “I have some research to do then.”

• • •

Two nights of enlightenment had drained me of all my energy. I’d called Mac, but Alina had said she’d gone out with Lucas, Felix and, of course, Suze. That surprised me since Mac hated the vampire form until I remembered I’d scheduled her for a late night weapons training session with Felix. She’d probably used the time to fight out her anger and beg for answers about Zoe.

I would have.

Laying in bed Monday morning, I wished I could hear my sister singing in the shower and brushing her teeth for too long, or yelling that none of her clothes would work together, and asking why didn’t she have a personal clothes selector like her rich friend at school.

Despite my dad's belief that nothing would happen to Zoe, and no matter what the Council said, I didn't think the same, and I knew Mac wouldn't either.

My alarm clock buzzed six-thirty.

Thirty minutes later, I met my dad in the kitchen. "I'm going to school, and afterward, Mac and I will be at the library. For most of the night."

"Have you figured out how to get her inside yet?"

"No, but I've got a few Council members to talk to. One of them is going to tell me if it's the last—"

"Don't say 'last thing you do'," Dad said. "Please." He sipped at his coffee. "Not today at least."

"Okay."

"Thank you." Air rushed from him. "I'll be here all day, working from my office."

"Kay." I slipped out through the side door to the garage and jumped in my Jeep.

• • •

The drive to Mac's only added an extra five minutes to my route to school. As I pulled into the driveway, a chill raced up my spine.

No Cobra in the driveway. She never tucked it into her garage, always parked right next to the sidewalk.

"Stop worrying." I said it to myself, but a shiver had my arm shaking when I realized Suze sat on the porch.

I jerked the car to a stop and jumped from my seat. "Suze!"

He tilted up. "I'm so sorry, Winn."

"About what? Where's Mac?"

His big bottom lip trembled. "Mac disappeared last night."

"Disappeared as in was taken, or disappeared as in left you guys in the dust and ran away?"

He scrunched his nose. "Yeah. That."

• • •

"How, Suze? How? How could Mac even get away from you?"

"She just ran." Remorse bled through Suze's tone. "Like a bat outta hell, and I seen 'em. They are quick little suckers. They can fly faster than some

of those supersonic airplanes. You know how fast? Like she could have broken the sound barrier.” He clapped hard.

While Suze rambled, I stormed back and forth. *Where did she go?* “This has to be related to Zoe, right? What were you all talking about before she made her mad dash to freedom?”

“Uh ... Felix and Lucas were just chatting about how fast Mac’s gotten with her changes and how nobody’s ever been able to change with just a breath in and a breath out.”

I’d wondered about that, too. “That makes her pretty unique, huh?” Suze asked.

“Yeah, sure. What else happened?”

“Well ... then, while she was testing out a few moves for them, Felix said the last person who was even close to her timing was Salea, the Changeling just before Raven.”

None of what Suze said would have pushed Mac to run unless she already knew something, which, unless she’d had a conversation with my dad, what could she have found out? “Anything else, Suze? How about something about Zoe or ... her mom?”

“Oh!” His eyes lit up like a kid in a candy store. “No.”

I fisted my hand against my forehead.

“Wait! Yes! No.” His head slumped forward.

“Okay. I gotta go to school. If you think of anything, will you call me, please?”

He saluted.

• • •

Four people asked, “Where’s Mac?” before first period even started.

At our first break, Caroline caught up with me. “Where’s Mac?”

“Question of the day.” I spun the wheel on my locker.

“Sick?”

“I hope so.”

“You mad at her?” Caroline leaned up against the space next to me.

“A little, yeah.” I shot a glance toward her as I traded out one set of books for another.

“You guys didn’t look happy with each other on Saturday night.”

“That was a little bit of a miscommunication.”

“I’m sure you’ll work it out.” She punched me in the shoulder. “Her party totally rocked, didn’t it?”

“It did. You weren’t mad it ended early?”

“Early?” Her eyes went wide “I was there ’til almost one-thirty. Though, I can’t believe Maddie left so soon. I’d have sworn she was chasing someone as fast as she ran.”

Who’d she go after? Her date? Why did her date leave? With a slam, I closed the locker door. *Why am I even thinking about this?* Despite needing to walk to class, I stayed rooted to the floor.

Caroline and I had a long history. She’d always been a friend. Someone I could count on with both academics and the more social aspect of school.

“Oh! Do you have that recipe for the drink they made?” she asked. “I was going to suggest it to Maddie—you know, to recreate for the prom in May.”

“What drink?”

“It was this pink fizzy thing. They passed it around. The thing smoked, Winn. It was awesome. And it tasted like raspberries. Mmm-mmm.”

My grin broke through my constant scowl. “I’m sorry I missed it.”

“You know, I heard rumors Ridge was going to crash it.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, Maddie heard them, supposedly. But googly eyes, I’m so glad he didn’t. He’s such a hazmat.”

A small laugh left me. Caroline never failed to make any of us chuckle. “Yeah, I’m glad he didn’t show up either.” That drink must have been a good one.

As the first buzzer sounded to end the break, she and I pushed away from the wall. She went down one hallway; I turned down mine. I hadn’t taken a step before my shoulder jerked back to the right.

On my heel, I spun and faced Ridge. “What do you do? Appear whenever someone says your name out loud?”

“Where’s Mackenzie?”

“I don’t know. And she goes by Mac. Get it right.”

His lips curved. “You two over? Word on the street is that you are.”

*Word on the street?* “I still don’t know what you’re talking about.” Who would make that assumption just because she hadn’t showed up one morning? *Or was there more?*

“We’ll settle this eventually.”

“There’s nothing to settle, Ridge. Mac is my girlfriend. *Mine*. She hates everything about you. For that matter, a bunch of the girls do.” So what if I exaggerated a little? “If you acted like they mattered, you might have more success.” *Just not with Mac.*

He huffed a breath. “Now I know what Maddie meant.” A smirk lifted his lips, and Ridge bumped my shoulder as he walked past.

*What Maddie meant?* I wanted to ask, but talking to Ridge meant breathing in his air space for longer than I should have to.

With my last step into the room, I chanced a glance and noted Ridge’s gaze still on me and Maddie’s on him.

Why did he have to go after my girlfriend? More so, what did Maddie have to do with it?

• • •

In our fifth period Senior project class, Ridge kept peering over his shoulder as if trying to get me to look at him.

Caroline did the same but also mouthed questions to me. “Why is Ridge staring at you like he wants to punch you?” And, “Why does he keep eyeing you?” And, “Is he crazy or what?” Each time she’d either roll her eyes or fake gag.

Thinking about Mac, and Ridge’s interest in her, and his comment about Maddie made me turn toward her. She’d dropped her head into her hands, her blonde curls falling around her hands. I figured the frustrated expression came from her continued project partnership with Ridge, though she rarely spoke about it to me.

“Okay,” Mr. Clark said. “We’re now exactly three weeks out from your first major deliverable, your ten-page first draft of your report on your topic. Mark, how are you and Jaclyn doing?”

As Mark relayed their progress, I thought through connections. Maddie and Ridge worked together despite her wish not to. Maddie and I had been friends as long as Caroline and I, with Mac being the outsider they’d brought into their group. Ridge had been following Mac around way too much.

Could Maddie have said something to Ridge about Mac? Why would she do that when neither of them could stand him?

“Winn?”

*Unless something happened. Did it?* They'd had girls'-nights-out, as they liked to call them, on several Fridays, dragging Mac along for all sorts of activities they'd called fun but Mac had ranted about the whole next day—in a somewhat joking way. That couldn't be it. Could it?

“Winn?”

Usually, Maddie, like Caroline and Pete, joined us anytime Mac and I went with a group anywhere. Maddie, though, seemed to find more and more ways to keep away from us. She hadn't even come in the limo Mac rented despite being one of the party organizers.

“Mister Thomas!”

I popped out of my daydream of thoughts. “Sorry. I was ...”

The class laughed.

“Yes, we could all see. Now would you please give us an update on your progress?”

“Oh, yes. Sure. Um ... we're done and ready.”

“Done?” His questions couldn't have sounded more surprised.

Our class must have thought so too as murmurs began and circled around.

“Yes, sir. Our draft is done.”

In my peripheral vision, Maddie flopped forward.

“Well done then, Winn.” Mr. Clark returned to the front of the class. “Katie and Jeremiah?”

A small smile creased my lips. *That has to be the problem.* Maddie and I had always a healthy academic competition going, and I guessed, at that moment, Ridge held her back. She'd had to expect Mac would do the same to me, but Mac hadn't. Not at all.

Ridge must have just meant about school.

*Yeah. That's it.*

For some reason, I didn't believe it myself.

# 17

By the last class of the day, I'd been asked a least ten more times about Mac and twice about Zoe. A year ago, no one would have asked me about either of them.

Life as I knew it really had changed.

Walking into the afternoon sunshine would have been nice—if Mac were with me. Temperatures had warmed up to a balmy forty degrees. With my cell in hand, I pressed for Mac's number.

It rang once before her voice mail kicked in—one I'd made her record so I wouldn't have to hear the robotic welcome.

"Come on, Mac. Where are you?"

"Winn!" Caroline called from somewhere behind me.

I spun around.

She raced up to me. "Can you give me a ride home? My mom just called and said she and my dad didn't drop off my fudgin' car."

"Sure. Something wrong with it?" I beeped the locks on mine.

"With the engine I think. I don't know. It's all Greek to me."

Like the book about Mac. All Greek and Latin. All but the interior words I hadn't fully finished examining. "What about Pete?"

"He has chess practice, and I want to get home. I got cramps."

*I really didn't need to know that.* "Kay." I dropped into the driver's seat as Caroline slid onto the passenger's.

We followed the rest of our classmates, leaving through the back parking gate. I turned right, as I always did, but slammed on the breaks as a big yellow Hummer, Suze's favorite mode of transportation, flew by me.

"Hang on," I said to Caroline.

I floored the gas pedal and did a sharp U-turn in the middle of the road, racing through the traffic to catch up with Suze.

"Whoa! What's going on?" she asked.

Suze passed the school's entrance.

"I just need to catch up with that car."

With three vehicles between us, and no extra lane, I couldn't get around, and followed from my spot, hoping I could catch up with him.

"Who are you chasing? Is Mac in that truck? What's going on, Winn?"

"That guy in the yellow Hummer. He's ... a friend. I just need to talk to him."

"About what?"

"About Mac." I figured my answer would be safe enough, and since Caroline had already assumed, I went with it.

"Why don't you just call him?"

"I don't have his number." It dawned on me that Mac had called Suze from my cell before; the number had probably been memorized. Our speed slow and steady, I grappled with my cell for a minute while I drove.

At the stoplight, I scrolled through for a number I didn't recognize, that had been recorded at least two months before.

"Will you call out these numbers? I don't want to try to do that and drive."

"Why?"

"Long story, but I know his number is there, I just don't know what it is."

She started calling out digits and got through eight unique ones before I stopped her. "What's the date of the call on that one?"

"Uh ... November—"

"That one. Hand me the phone. And thank you."

"Sure. What's all the double-o-seven action for, though?"

"Long, long, really long story." I pressed recall on the number.

It rang once.

Twice.

Three time.

"Yellow Taxi. How may we serve you?"

He'd answered 'Joe's Pizza' the other time Mac had called with my phone. "Hey, Suze."

"Winford! Where are you? I've been driving around trying to find you and thought I'd go to your house to see if you're there. You there?"

"I'm about three cars behind you."

Suze's taillights brightened red.

"Why're you looking for me?" I asked.

"Because! I found Mac! Pull over in the next parking lot, and I'll tell you all about it."



• • •

I followed Suze to the McDonald's and drove up beside him. His Hummer would have given my Jeep a complex if it weren't an inanimate object.

"I just need to talk to this guy for one sec," I said to Caroline. "Sorry." From my car to Suze's driver's side, I walked. "What's going on?" I asked as he unfolded himself from within.

"Holy Shitake mushrooms!"

I hadn't realized Caroline followed me. Then again, I hadn't said not to.

"You like the Spy Kids movies, too?" Suze smiled.

"You got some major bubbles if you can pull off a getup like that. I'm thoroughly impressed." One bit I'd learned about Caroline years before: she always said what sat on the forefront of her mind. Yet, somehow, she managed never to offend anyone. Unlike Mac, what Caroline said came out with friendliness.

As I surveyed Suze for a moment, I saw what she'd noticed that I hadn't. He wore a neon-yellow, skintight biker's suit from head to toe. Including the shoes.

My focus on Mac must have distracted me. That or I'd gotten used to his idiosyncrasies. "Why this today?"

He leaned toward me. "I thought I'd try to exercise and lose a few pounds. This is what racers wear to be more aerodynamic."

Under my breath, I said, "But you're a demon who can transform your shape. Couldn't you just zap the fat?"

"There's never a better time to get fit, Winn."

"What's the occasion?" Caroline asked. "Costume party? Got a race? Swim meet? And where can I get one like this?"

Suze chuckled. "I call it my banana hammock."

Caroline burst into laughter as I forced mine back.

"Um ... Suze?"

"What?"

I motioned him with a finger to come closer again. I couldn't whisper into his ear without him getting lower, to explain exactly what 'banana hammock' meant. As I did, he covered his crotch.

"Oops."

"Hey, it's no big deal. Just might want to keep from calling it that."

He gave me a long nod back and forth.

With Caroline still there, I didn't know what, if anything, I could ask of Suze.

"This is a massive truck," she said after a moment of pause.

"She's my baby." Suze patted it like the favorite toy we all knew it to be. He treated all automobiles as if they were people. Human or otherwise. "You wanna see inside?"

"Can I?" Caroline's eyes lit up.

"Yeah. Check it out." Suze thumbed over his shoulder.

She jumped up into the driver's seat.

"So where's Mac?" I took the opportunity I thought I might not get.

"She's at home."

"At home? Why didn't she come to school? What happened?"

"All's I know is that she went to the Council chambers sometime between one and two in the a.m.. Apparently, she stood where we all told her Raven and her Mom fought when the lightning bolt ... you know ... did its thing."

"And?"

"Oh ... nothing happened, 'o course. She must have sat there all night or something because her car didn't disappear until seven."

"Why didn't she call me?"

Suze shrugged. "You were probably asleep."

"Why'd she go there? What did you say last night that made her think to go there?"

"I dunno. There were a bunch of sparks when she and Lucas were fighting with the staffs. Maybe that made her think about the lightning?"

*Typical human act—to return to the scene.* "Maybe." I didn't buy it, though. Mac didn't do anything human-normal. Something else had triggered her. "How did you find out?"

"Oh, the new night guard called me this morning when she drove out. She left before the golfers started to arrive." The Council's chambers sat tucked and hidden in a special room at one of the area's top country clubs.

"What else happened before Mac left?"

Suze's lips squished to the side. "Nothing. I swear. Felix and I were talking as Mac and Lucas were practicing with some spears. Mac threw a big ball of sun at Lucas, like she always does when she gets tired, and Felix said, 'Solar flares aren't always the answer.' So Mac threw one at him. He

ducked. It hit me. Kinda tickled.” Suze giggled like a school girl. “I said that sun flares were always Maya’s favorite, too.”

The simple mention of her mom could have set her off.

“That’s it. See? Nothing unusual. Of course her being a goddess-child of the sun is why there’s a giant sun dial on the top of Turner Point, where Maya loved to go and practice her spells.”

“Did you say any of that out loud last night?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Don’t you think Mac might assume that would be a place to go?”

“But she was fighting Lucas while we talked, and she was at the chamber.”

“You said her car stayed behind ... but in the middle of the night, Mac can be anything.”

“Oh. So you think she was on top of the mountain all night?”

Sun. Stars. Proximity to the heavens. “Wouldn’t you have been?”

Suze sucked in his lips, giving him the appearance of a face with only a nose and eyes.

“Suze? You need to tell me.”

Creases filled his face as if he struggled to hold back the information.

“Did Maya go to the in-between from on top of Turner Point?”

Air burst from him. “Yes!”

“Yes, what?” Caroline asked.

I hadn’t heard her get back out and didn’t know how much she’d overheard. “Oh, we were just talking about Turner Point.”

“Mac’s on a mission,” Suze said.

I sent him a glare.

“For the Senior project?” Caroline asked. “She going up there to research ... what is it again that you’re studying?”

“Changelings. I think she just wanted to get closer to nature.”

“Ha. Nature and Mac. That’s funny. You know Ridge lives up that mountain, right? I mean how cool would it be to be one of ten houses on a mountain?”

My eyes darted up to Suze and back to Caroline. “Didn’t know that.”

Did Ridge know about Mac? Had she gone to his house? Had that been him at her party? Or could the connection have been completely coincidental?

*Why does he end up in every conversation I have these days?*

“So ... you wanna get some ice cream?” Only Caroline would ask when the temperature hadn’t reached fifty degrees.

“Actually, I better get to Mac’s and help her with part two of the project.”

“Can’t believe you have your first draft done. I bet Maddie’s P.O.’d. You get a better grade and she could lose her valedictorian status.”

“I doubt that,” I said.

“She thought you’d hate working with Mac, though she once said she wanted to work with Mac, so who really knows? Guess it was cool for you.”

*I was right about Maddie’s weirdness. Good.*

Out of nowhere, Suze said, “I’ll get ice cream.”

Caroline and I both cocked our heads at him. A second or two later, she shrugged. “You’ll drive me home?”

He slapped his hands together and rubbed them. “Yes. We can talk all about the flavors. I like mint and chocolate and ...” His voice trailed off as he rounded the car. “Come on girl! Let’s go!”

Caroline gave me a smirk. “He’s safe, right?”

“Totally.” On second thought, I said, “Hey, Suze, no eating Caroline!”

He laughed.

She half-laughed.

“That was a joke.” I hoped.

“Yellow on yellow. Seriously, that guy’s got a lot of self confidence to pull that off. Where’d you meet him again?”

“He’s a friend of Mac’s.” We walked around the back and to the passenger door.

“Mac’s a super secret creature, isn’t she?” She could say that again and again and still not understand the depth of the question.

“Yeah.”

At the door, Suze offered his hand to help her up. “After you, milady.”

Caroline giggled. “I think you both work really well with each other. I’m surprised to say it, but I like you together. I hope it lasts.” She waved as Suze closed the door.

“I’ll meet you at Mac’s in half an hour,” he said. “And I promise not to eat your friend.”

His broad smile made me wonder.

• • •

Rather than worry, I drove straight to Mac's. Her car sat in the driveway, in its favorite spot. I pulled in right behind, risking bumping into the rear just to make sure she couldn't get out. I texted Suze to ask him to park behind me, too, so she couldn't get out if she tried. At least, not before I let her—or before she answered some questions.

After taking three porch steps in one leap, I rapped on the front door with my fist.

Alina opened it. "Winn. So very nice to see you." Soft and sensual, she drew me in and made me want to go all lax. It happened every time.

Shaking myself from my dreaminess, I said, "Is Mac home?"

"Of course. I didn't realize you hadn't ridden together today. Would you like to come in?"

"Yes, please."

Alina opened the door wide. "Would you like some snacks?"

"No, but Suze should be here in a few minutes. Could you ... maybe ... entertain him? I really need to talk to Mac."

"Absolutely," she said.

"I'm just going to go up." I pointed upward.

Alina gave me a nod.

Hurrying up the stairs, I reached Mac's door in five seconds and knocked. *Don't piss her off just by being here.*

The door opened without a word. Mac flopped back on her bed just as it reached its full opening angle.

"Where were you today?" Straight to the point without sugar coating it. That hadn't really been my plan, but with Mac, it seemed better not to tempt her with an ability to lie.

She waved a hand at me. "I'm tired. Be quiet."

"No." I moved to the side of her bed and sat, compressing the mattress and tumbling her toward me. "Tell me where you were. Actually, tell me where you were last night, too."

She ran a hand over her head. "Headache. Need sleep. Go away."

"Look, cavewoman ... I'm not leaving. If you stayed up all night and morning, that's not my fault. I know you went to the Council chambers early this morning. I'm pretty sure you went up Turner Point, probably to the sun dial up there." I waited a beat. "Or did you go to Ridge's?"

She stiffened but said nothing.

“We had a plan, Mac. You didn’t stick to it. By day, we act normal. By night, you don’t act normal. Or are you done with me? Is that it?”

She said nothing.

“Did you get the answers you wanted? Did you find Zoe? Did you—”

She bolted upright as if I’d zapped her with a stun gun. “No. No. No. No. *No!* Happy now?”

“To repeat *you* ... no. Did you go to Ridge’s?”

Her expressions took on a fierceness subdued only by the intense bags under her eyes. “No.”

For some odd reason, I didn’t believe her. “But you know he lives up there?”

Her lips firmed before she said, “Yes.”

“Why’d you run off then? Why didn’t you listen to me and let m—”

“Why doesn’t it seem like you care enough about your sister?” She shot the question at me. “You went to school, Winn! We should be out searching. All day, if we have to.”

“You think that’s going to work when she’s in a place I can’t even go? Everyone said she’s safe. Even my dad, and if he believes it, I have to, too. At the same time, I’m trying to find all the details. I even asked my dad about who would have taken her and why, but there he has ... nothing. And, as you already know, not everyone wants to share.

“That’s not good enough, Winn.”

“I’m trying, Mac, but it doesn’t help me when you do something on your own without letting me in.”

“This isn’t even your fight anymore. Zoe’s one of *us*. She’s not even your real sister.”

I didn’t move. Didn’t breathe. Didn’t react. For all of ten seconds. “That was a low blow.”

“It’s true. You don’t know what’s going on—”

“I know more than you do.” My fingers clenched into a fist. I wanted to tell her everything Dad told me, but I also wanted to savor the knowledge I *did* know more than her.

Mac stood. “You’ve been a part of this for a whole four months. Not even that in its entirety. You don’t know everything that happens in my world. You don’t know what it’s like knowing you can do something but not being able to because no one will give you the damn answers!” She yelled the last bit at me.

Footsteps stormed up the staircase. “Everything okay?” Suze’s voice carried before he appeared in the doorway. I hadn’t noticed he’d arrived, nor how much time had passed. “We could hear you all the way downstairs.”

Mac spun toward her open window, her hands across her chest. “Just peachy.”

“You sure?”

I turned to Suze and nodded.

“Alina thinks Mac needs some dinner. She gets cranky pants when she doesn’t eat.” Suze handed me a Milky Way.

“I don’t need food. I need answers.” Mac seethed through her response but didn’t face Suze as she said it.

With a push, I managed to get Suze out of her room, into the hallway, taking the candy bar from him as I followed him out. “You gotta give me something, Suze. Something.”

“Saroya.”

“What?” Dad had mentioned Saroya, too.

“Have you talked to him yet?”

My grip on Suze tightened “No. Why?”

“Maybe you should. You know ... have that interview with him. Like ... now?”

“Why didn’t you suggest that before?”

“Suggest what?” He blinked big eyes at me.

“Never mind.” If ever a child held the answers to the world’s biggest questions, he stood in front of me at that moment. “Okay, Suze. Saroya. I need to talk to Mac a little more, first.”

With the big demon stomping back down the stairs, I returned to Mac.

She stood, still with her arms crossed but with her body angled toward me. “What was that about?”

“You didn’t hear it? Or eavesdrop? I’m surprised.” I mirrored her body positioning.

Mac stormed right up to me. “What’s with you? I thought you were on my side.”

“I thought you were on mine.” Holding myself right in front of her, knowing she could turn into anything and eat me or kill me with one swipe of a conjured claw sent a wave of terror through me even as I trusted she wouldn’t.

She spun around once before she launched herself through her open window.

I ran from her room after her—a much slower route as I couldn't go her way.

Of course, she'd have known that.

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## 18

Waiting for Mac to calm down or go to Saroya's on her own did not fit in my plan. I raced down the stairs, taking them two at a time, yanked open the front door, and jumped down the three steps to the front yard.

Mac stood at her car. "What the hell?" Her hands flew up and landed on her thighs. She twisted toward me and pointed between the three cars—mine, Suze's and her own. "You did this, didn't you?"

*Thank goodness I did.*

Just like in her bedroom, she strode toward me, reaching me in just a few long stretches. "Why did you do this?"

"Because I anticipated you. You're being rash, Mac. This isn't how you lead a group."

"What do you know about leadership? Let's see how many positions you've held at school—" She ticked off a finger, getting to, and stopping at, one. "Oh! None!"

"Believe what you want, but I've also never run. I like being able to choose what I want to do and not have to listen to specific rules set by organizations that aren't always up to speed on what teenagers really need."

"What?" Her brows furrowed, and she raised her hands. "Never mind. Move your car."

"No."

"Move it, or I'll move it."

"Once again, no. And if you drive into your yard, you're going to piss yourself off in the morning ... once you calm down."

"You're telling me to calm down? Again, Winn ... you're ... not ... helping." Her finger stabbed me in the chest.

I peeled her index away and pointed it back at her.

"I'm going to Saroya's. I'll get the information I need, and I'll find Zoe on my own. You ... clearly ... don't care."

"Oh, my—*Mackenzie!*" I couldn't think of another time I'd called her by her full name before.

She huffed air like a mad horse.

“You have it in your head that I’m not helping because I haven’t raced to some conclusions and run off for information. I’ve been working on it. I’m trying to find a safe answer. But I’m not going to just stop life when everyone around me has said she’s safe.”

“That’s bull—”

I stopped her with a hand to her lips. “What happens when you find a way in but don’t know how to get out? Who’s going to go get *you*? What happens when you go in as, let’s say, a vampire, and don’t want to be that when you return? You’re suppose to choose in another four-ish months. Not now.” That sounded genuine, like I didn’t know she would be able to change back.

“I’ll figure something out.”

“That’s what you think. Like I said, what’s going to happen if you get stuck and no one will go in for you? Or—”

“Then it won’t matter. I’ll just stay.”

I stepped back from her. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“You’d give up on your position on the Council?” *Exactly as I feared.*  
“Your life?”

“Why not? They don’t want me. They don’t care if I make it or not.”

“But it’s your destiny.” *And what about me?*

She stomped from where she stood to the car’s hood and leaned her hands on it. “You don’t know anything about destiny, Winn. You’re human. Your life is freaking simple.”

I grabbed her arm and spun her around. Her butt landed on the hood. “Don’t tell me my life is easy. I haven’t had a mom at all in my life—not even a fake one. Even for the six months I thought I had one, she didn’t stay, and it turns out she was yours anyway. So don’t tell me my life’s been easy. I’ve lost as many people as you have, but I haven’t even had the replacements you had.”

Mac didn’t say anything.

Fury burned through me even though I understood. Mac had had a lot thrown at her in a short amount of time. Even the best would have cracked under the strain. *Which is probably what the Council wanted to happen. Strain her to the limits of her abilities and see if she succeeds.*

“So since you overheard Suze, you know I said we’d go talk with Saroya, and I’ll find out what he knows, which is probably exactly what to do.”

Her head moved a little as if in agreement before she turned and faced away until silhouetted by the street lamp.

“Mac.” I waited for her to do something, to answer or come back to me.

Time passed.

After at least another two, maybe three, minutes, I said, “You don’t trust me anymore, do you?”

That had her whipping back to me. “No ... I do. Trust you, that is.”

“Then why aren’t you letting me help? Zoe’s my sister whether she’s really one or not. I miss her even though she annoys the heck out of me.”

A light laugh broke from Mac.

I stepped closer. “Loads of people asked about you at school, today.”

Her jaw dropped. “Why would people ask about me?”

“Because, after all this time, they’re starting to get to know you, which means they’re starting to care.”

“They don’t care. They’re just curious. Rubberneckers at a wreck.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “Suze was right. You’re ridiculously stubborn. Why don’t you want to believe people could care about you?”

“Because if they care, it’s for their own benefit.”

“What about me? Do I only care because of something I gain?”

She shrugged.

“Nice, Mac. Nice. Same to you.” I whisked myself away from her and headed toward my car.

As I reached for the handle, she said, “Winn?”

“What?” I kept my back to her.

Whatever she said hadn’t been loud enough for me to hear.

I went back to her, me taking the high road as I seemed to do far too often. When I took her hands, she didn’t pull away. “What?”

Her head tilted down.

I pushed it up with a finger to her chin. “Tell me, Mac.”

Her gaze landed on mine. “Of failing. I’m scared of failing.”

*Wow. Admission of the year, right here.* “How could you fail?”

“I already have.” She broke from my hold and stuffed her hands into her front pockets before walking to the side of the car.

I moved in behind her and slipped my hands between her arms and waist. With my head dipped onto her shoulder, I breathed in deep. “You haven’t failed, Mac. Everyone has failed you.”

She stiffened in my hold.

I held her tight. “Don’t leave.”

“Why shouldn’t I? Why shouldn’t I just find my way into this place and stay there forever?”

“Because ... I don’t want you to.”

Her body relaxed against mine. Not by much, just enough for me to sense it.

My hand slipped to hers, and I entwined our fingers. “Let’s go talk to Saroya.”

• • •

Even as the four-foot tall elf ushered us into his living room with wood-paneled walls, huge rock fireplace and wood floors, he said, “No.”

Suze had forewarned us Saroya might not agree to help.

Mac and I sank onto the green couch while Suze stood at the doorway again, and Saroya sat, his short, stocky body taking up only a tiny spot on the green chair.

“Are you aware Mac’s sister has disappeared?” I figured I’d start with the facts and that he’d probably know them.

“It is with sadness that I understand her sibling has been induced inside.”

“Is it true you know about the in-between and ... how to get in?”

“Yes.” Saroya made a sound like the clearing of his throat.

“We want to help Zoe, and we need some training,” I said.

Mac gave me a roly-eyed nod. “I need training,” she said.

“You’ll need much more than *just* training.” Before any of us could comment, he added, “I realize you think that’s the best way, Master Thomas, but I—”

“I knew it, Winn. He’s one of the six who don’t like me. This is just punishment—”

I squeezed her hand to quiet her.

Saroya faced Mac. “Just because I do not agree with all your choices does not mean I do not like you, nor that I wish you harm, or injustice to your family. I am very aware of the situation and believe it’s in your best interest—”

Yet another adult using that line.

“—to remain an impartial party at this time. There are many nuances to being within the in-between. Your mother had a disdain for rules. As do you

—”

He had that right.

“—and when we fail to follow the rules, we put ourselves, and everyone else in our realm, in danger.”

“So you won’t help me because you think I’m going to put everyone in danger?” Mac asked without her usual snippiness.

Saroya gave us a curt nod.

“Well, then, you’ll have to help me because as her Teacher, I’m privileged to all requested knowledge.” That I said those words surprised me, and I forced my body not to shake. Being so up front with my elders had never really been my strength.

Saroya narrowed his eyes.

With a deep breath, and because Saroya didn’t say anything, I continued, “I am hereby and formally requesting that you share your knowledge with me.” I tried to make myself sound all official, though inside, butterflies flew in every direction.

“You play the game well, Master Thomas.”

*Game?* “Please, call me Winn.”

Saroya offered a slight bow. “Very well. Winn.”

“So you’ll help?” Mac asked.

“I shall assist. Winn. I shall not provide you with the direction as I believe it is not appropriate at this stage in your life. Let my objections be known.”

“So noted.” I couldn’t believe he’d agreed.

“Master ... Winn. If you would follow me. The remainder of you may stay here.”

I rose and followed Saroya, shrugging and holding my hands palm up as I glanced at Mac. She shoo’d me forward. He led me through a hallway, into a small kitchen, and down another hall. At a door, he stopped, his hand on the knob. “Are you sure you’re willing to risk the life of the woman you love?”

I stuck my hands on my hips, so I would worry them. “If I don’t teach her how to do it, she’s going to find a way eventually, and when she does, it’s going to be worse.”

“You risk your own life with this information as well.”

“I—” *will?* “I’ll deal with that.”

“Very well.” Saroya pushed open the door and walked into a room bejeweled in some of the most amazing color I’d ever seen.

Blues, greens, purples and gold’s cloaked every square inch. I reached out as if to touch, but the colors moved backward, away from my hand like a curtain being pulled on a rod, though it didn’t fold. “What is this?”

Saroya disappeared into the colors, stimulating a light shimmer as he stepped in and another as he returned. “This room holds many of my secrets. They are protected by a spell only I can break, a spell of my own creation.”

“I can’t see anything but colors. Bright vivid colors, and every time I try to touch, they get farther away.”

“Every object in the room is concealed. Should you step in, you will see a myriad of disarrayed tones as you’ve described. Only when I enter, do they reconnect with each other such that I can find that which I seek.”

“That’s freaky cool.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

I hoped I heard a smile in his tone.

“Follow me, please.”

We exited the room and crossed the hall into another. The new one resembled the living room, though I’d have sworn the floor looked more like grass than carpet. It sank with my steps, bending and standing again as I released my foot. “Is this grass?”

Saroya sat upon a small wooden chair. “Yes, it is. My home is a mixture of completely natural elements—as many live ones as possible. Now, Winn. Would you like to learn how to enter the in-between?”

## 19

I sat in another small chair, one that had my legs up higher than they should have been and my butt lower—like the chairs in a kindergarten class.

“Now,” Saroya said, “the first piece you must know is that entry is incredibly difficult and highly dangerous. Maya’s entrance was not indicative of most. She had a gift, which probably came from her ability to communicate to and from the in-between.”

“Did you put my sister inside?”

“No. Magwa took care of that. Now, if *you* are to perform this action, please do it upon someone else. Never yourself. As a human, the risk far outweighs the potential for success.”

“Okay.”

He opened a book, similar to Mac’s in size and age. The pages crinkled as he flipped from one to the next. “Ah. Here it is,” he said at turn number fourteen, spinning the book in my direction.

“Are you going to give this to me?”

“Certainly not.”

“May I take a picture? So I’ll remember?”

Saroya tilted his head as if considering. “I’ll admit that’s a first. And yes, you may.”

With cell phone in hand, I hovered it over the page and clicked. “Okay.”

“Now, what you must understand is that magic always has an opposite. Like energy. If you pull from one of the positives, there is a reaction in the negatives. If you use the negatives, there is a reaction in the positives.”

“Like physics,” I said. “Newton’s third law.”

“Yes. His first as well.”

“A body in motion wants to stay in motion unless something acts upon it?”

“Very good. Let’s say someone enters the in-between—someone who is not experiencing death—and has, say the intent to return. Let’s call them

the ‘positive’. You must always, then, have your negative within this realm.”

“So, the person that has gone in isn’t enough?”

Saroya shook his head. “Never. The energy from that body is no longer strong enough to contain it. You’ll need someone who can absorb tremendous energy without harm.”

“Okay.” *Who can do that? Suze?* “What if you don’t care about ... returning?”

“Then no ‘negative’ is necessary. You see, a person inside the in-between does not come to rest. Ever. He or she is in constant motion—using the energy they bring with them—moving, breathing, some even say living. Until he or she chooses to return, they cannot be stopped. It is the person within, who must have great enough reason to stay or great enough reason to return, who must again dispel the energy.”

“What about the Ides? Raven said all those who are alive must return before the Ides. Why then?”

“Yes. Thousands of years ago, we associated the return with the luteal phase of the sun and moon. When the Roman Calendar was established, it was far easier to associate the returns with dates. We now know those who do not remove themselves from within the in-between prior to each Ide risks permanency until such time as they choose to pass on to the final realm.”

“Risks? I thought it was *would* without question.”

“There are many unknowns. It is *my* belief that it is a risk.”

*Why can’t they all have the same story?* I shook it off. “Okay, so how do we—does someone get in? And how do they get out? Raven said something about an incantation.”

Saroya pointed one long-tipped fingernail toward a set of words.

“That’s Latin.”

“Yes. And it must be spoken as such. It is, of course, the language of the gods.”

“I thought Greek was.”

“One or the other.”

That made sense as to why Mac’s book had been written in Latin and Greek, especially if her mother had written part of it and she herself had been a goddess. With my translation program I could translate, read and get the proper pronunciation of each word.



“To exit, not only must there be a desire to return, there must also be these words spoken.” He pointed to the bottom of the page and another line. Shorter. Just as cryptic.

“Okay. Got it. Anything else I need to know?”

Saroya closed the book and faced me dead on. “Why have you agreed to this role? To this position in which you have nothing to gain?”

*This isn't about the in-between.* “Because Mac trusts me.”

“I would venture to guess there is more.” His eyes, such a soft green they made me think of another world, also made me want to explain.

For real. The truth.

“I've always believed you guys existed. I've always thought there had to be worlds beyond this one, that magic, in its purest form, wasn't stories of Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. I believed long before I knew, I guess, and I want to stay a part of it.”

“What will you do when Mackenzie can no longer accept you in her life?”

I'd thought about that one a lot, too. “I'll say ... goodbye.”

“It won't be that easy.”

“Nothing ever is when it comes to Mac.”

Saroya laughed more loudly and fully than I could have ever expected from such a small man. With both hands, he took mine, and mumbled words escaped his mouth, a song I didn't understand, yet it washed me in peace.

“Good luck, Winford Richmond Thomas. I wish you ... and your charge ... well.”

• • •

After Saroya escorted me back to the others, Mac, Suze and I said our goodbyes and left.

Mac all but accosted me in the car with questions on what I'd learned and how we'd go about getting to Zoe.

“I am going in.” Her final statement came without a hint of uncertainty.

“Even if you lose—” I started.

“Even if.”

Though, knowing she could return, I didn't want to send her in there in the first place. “We need to find someone who can absorb a lot of energy.

Then—”

“Me! Me! Ooh, pick me!” Suze waved his hand in the air as he drove us toward my house. “I blew up every time Maya went in.”

“Well, that’s taken care of,” Mac said. “What next?”

“I need to go home and translate a few lines of Latin for you and teach you to pronounce it. Then we just need to find a place. And then ... that’s it.”

“But what about the clothes?” Suze asked.

“Huh?” Mac sat forward. “Clothes?”

Suze nodded. “Maya always wore a silk robe. Very pretty. Very thin. She said it was the easiest material to go in with because it’s natural and didn’t bunch or give her a wedgie.”

Mac glared at me. “I’m not—”

“Do you want to do this right, *Maya*?” Suze giggled.

“Whatever.” Mac’s arms went across her chest.

“You have to go at night, too,” Suze said as he drove onto my driveway. “And from the top of Turner Point, so you can really let the magic fly.”

Mac and I shared a glance. “I guess if that was Mom’s way, I should do it, too.”

Thank goodness the weathermen hadn’t called for rain.

• • •

Mac and I spent two hours translating and running the words through pronunciation recordings and practicing parts of them with each other. Suze had left us to ‘shop’, according to him, and returned at ten-thirty to drive us up to Turner Point.

Given the late hour, we skirted around the barrier to the park and drove up the winding road to the top. We passed the four driveways to unseen houses, a few blips of orangey light coming through the forest’s trees helping pinpoint them.

Despite the clear skies and view of the stars from the top, a strong wind whipped past us. Unlike Mac and Suze, who were preternaturally accustomed to the cold, I’d worn my coat and two long-sleeved shirts—necessary with the forty-degree temperature. I shivered anyway.

“This place is kinda spooky at night, isn’t it?” Suze asked.

Mac and I both turned to him. “*You’re* saying it’s spooky?” I asked. “Are you serious?”

“No. Of course not.” He waved a hand as if he’d been joking, but the darting eyes told me otherwise. A coyote howled in the distance, and Suze jumped to the side before straightening himself and joining us again.

Mac chuckled. I really didn’t know what to think. Demons afraid of the dark seemed a bit off.

“I’m standing where my mom once stood,” Mac said from the middle of the sundial on the flat ledge.

The face of the clock pointed up, large enough that at least ten people could have waited with her. Surrounded by a whistle of wind, I tucked my hands into my pockets.

“Let’s get this going,” Mac said.

With my notes in hand, I walked up to Mac and stood facing her, our noses within an inch of each other. “You’re sure?”

Light silhouetted her from a side flood lamp. “Yes. Once and for all, I’m going.”

“And you know you have to go in, deal with the realities of what face you, search through whatever you encounter to find Zoe, and convince her to say the same exit words as you, right?”

“Yes, Winn, seriously, I got this.”

“Okay, I’m sorry.” My voice stayed steady, despite the trembling which had started when we exited the car and grown stronger the longer we stayed in the cold.

“Maya used to stand in the middle of the dial,” Suze said from my right.

Mac, still in her black trench coat, moved to the center of the face.

“No, more here.” Suze walked to her and adjusted. Right over the dial itself.

Nothing in the book had brought us to the moment where Mac would risk her existence to save a girl she barely knew.

“One more thing.” Close again, I touched her forehead with mine. “Please be careful. And please ...” So many words wanted to be said. “... come back.” I kissed her hard, lips to lips, tongue to tongue, the blood stirring and pumping in my veins as I took from her what I believed to be the last kiss I’d ever have.

“I’m coming back,” she said as we separated. “Don’t worry. We’ve gone over the rules, like, a hundred times.”

“Tell me what you’ve picked.” I’d managed to hold back on the fact she would be able to change forms when she returned, though Mac never commented any time I brought it up—as if she knew.

“The one creature no one wants me to be.” With that, she slipped off her coat.

“Which is what?” The translucent silk robe Suze bought didn’t cover much and shimmered in the little bit of light. I couldn’t help myself as I traced the contours of her body with my eyes even though I’d had her skin under my hands and already knew where her curves dipped and straightened. I’d run my fingers along her sides, arms and legs a dozen times. Yet, to stand there, staring at her wearing nothing but a sheer slip of a covering, forced me to shift my jeans.

“She’s pretty, ain’t she?” Suze said.

“You have no idea.”

The ends of Mac’s hair floated up with the gusts.

“What did you choose, Mac?” I asked again.

She held out her arms, tilted her head back and said to the sky:

*Spirit guides, I ask you, lend me focus and clarity.*

Her Latin pronunciation matched what we’d practiced perfectly, yet she hadn’t answered my question.

*Take me to the place beyond.*

Lightning cracked in the still sky.

*Where life and death know no form.*

The wind kicked up, sending Mac’s robes fluttering all about her, exposing her legs.

*Give me wisdom. Give me strength.*

A tornado of light spiraled down from the sky.

*To return to this body by the Ides morn.*

Mac’s body began to spin. A flash of light, so bright I could see nothing but white, forced my hand up in front of me as something with a forceful punch shot me backward.

I landed with a thud on the concrete sidewalk, my head whipping backward against a patch of dried out grass.

Ringings filled my ears as I stared up at the sky—as black as it had been moments before Mac began. I pushed up to sit, my balance wavering and rocking the earth in front of me.

As my vision refocused, I stared back at the place where Mac had stood.

Empty.

• • •

A sound to my left had me turning.

“You okay, human?” Suze stood tall, higher since I sat on the ground, and growing taller, or so it seemed, the farther my gaze tracked up.

“Suze?” I put pressure on my ears, blinking my eyes to get the fog to lift.

My body lifted until my feet hit the ground, hands under my arms stabilizing me.

“You okay there, boy?”

The world continued to spin and waver in front of me. “Not sure. What happened exactly?”

“That’s the aftershock.”

I shook my head in the hopes of re-righting myself. It only made it worse and added a layer of nausea, too. I breathed through the stomach churning until I could stand on my own. Sounds became clearer. My view of Suze more distinct.

“Ready to go?” he said. “We could get midnight pizza.”

Looking back at the space where Mac had stood, I had to wonder. “How will we know when she returns?”

“I’ll know.” Suze wrapped an arm around my shoulders. As awkward as it could have been, his warmth took the chill away. “I’ll have to give her her energy back.”

“Think she’ll be okay?”

“Who, Mac?”

“Who else?”

“Miss Thorne will be a-okay. I guarantee it.” He pushed me into the Hummer which he’d started with a push of a button on a key fob.

Once he entered the driver’s side, I asked, “How can you be so sure?”

“She’s Mac. It’s just how she is. She’s ... Mac.”

I wished I could have been so sure. I wished she’d answered me about her change as the worst possible selection, according to the Council, would have to have been human.

If she chose human, what would that mean to her final pick?

Would she choose to stay with me?

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## 20

Tuesday came and went with the same flurry of questions I'd gotten Monday. "Where's Mac?" "Is she sick?" "Tell her I said feel better."

As I stood at my locker between classes with Caroline, Ridge approached. I narrowed my eyes.

"Where's Mac?" he asked.

"Like I'd tell you."

Caroline pinched my arm. "She's sick, Ridge."

He jutted his chin out. "She have that flu?"

"Yeah." I kept my eyes locked in his direction. "The flu. You don't want it."

"You're not sick." His head cocked to the side. "Must mean you're not as close as you think."

Caroline moved in between us. "What's with you?" she asked Ridge.

"Can't I care?" Ridge and I maintained our eye contact.

"You can't when the person you're asking about is Mac, and you know all you're doing is piddling on Winn in the process."

Ridge's lips moved right into a smirk. "Piddling? Is that what you think I'm doing to poor Winnie?"

I stepped out from behind Caroline. "Just give it a rest, man. This ... thing you seem to have started between us? It's middle school. Grow up." I pushed away from them and walked away.

• • •

With my dad in the loop, I didn't have to hide behind a veil of secrecy. Rather than sit in my room, alone for another night, I sat across from him at the kitchen table. I could wonder what Mac picked with company, wishing she'd told me, hoping she'd chosen human and that would mean something when she did come back.

Every so often, one or the other of us would sigh.

I kept working on the word scramble that came with the interior pages of the book, and Dad did whatever Dad did.

At eight, I called Suze, who assured me there'd been no return motion from Mac.

At nine, I vowed silent war on the Greek and Latin languages.

At ten, I gave up. "I'm going to bed, Dad."

"Night, Winn. Try to get some sleep."

I closed my laptop and slid it off the table. As I pushed my chair back in, I faced my dad.

He tipped up his head. "Everything okay?"

An inner war of do and don't began. The little devil on one shoulder said ask. The little angel on the other said, don't.

"I have a question."

He laid his pen down in front of him.

"Is there anything ... you know ... going on between you and Josie?"

"Like what?"

"Uh ... you know ... like—"

"Being partners? A couple?"

"Yeah. That."

"Would it matter to you if there was?"

"No." *Yes. She's not human, and you are.* I pulled the chair back out and sat again. "I've been interviewing the Council members, and from everything I've learned, there can't be a human to non-human long-term thing." It seemed weird, asking my own dad about his dating status to get more information about Mac and me.

He interlaced his fingers.

"If you're human, she'd be breaking the rules or lying. If you're not, then you'd be lying. I'm finding it harder to believe everyone around me anymore."

He slipped his glasses off and set them with his pen. "I want to tell you that life is full of easy choices and simple solutions and rules that are broken for the good of all, but I can't."

"Can you ... be with her ... because you're a Guardian?"

"That still wouldn't get us through the human part, Winn, and you know it."

I did. I'd just hoped it would be plausible enough that he'd use it, so maybe I could. "So there *is* something going on?"



“I ...” His head dropped down before popping back up. “I like her. Have ... for a long time. We have similar values, and we enjoy each others’ company. Nothing can come of us, but I’m okay with that.”

“So you’re telling me you can’t get married, you can’t make anything formal, you can’t really even be seen together, and you still want it?”

“Yes.”

“Why, though? Isn’t the whole point of a relationship to have a future?”

Dad’s head cocked right. “I believe you already know the answer to that, too, Winn. You’re in one that has *no* future. Mac *has* to choose a supernatural form. She *has* to become something you can never be. You don’t have the future with her that you think you do. Or want. Come July fourth, you’ll have no memory of her in this period of your life. I think you even realize that or you wouldn’t be asking me about Josie.”

He’d figured me out.

“It’s good that you’re thinking to the future, though. Really. It is. That’s part of why we had our awkward little conversation the other night.”

I remembered it well.

• • •

A call into Suze the next morning brought no news. At school, Ridge eyed me as if he knew something more about Mac’s so-called illness or figured if Mac showed up, he could get to her before me. That, or I’d found myself on a conspiracy theory train and didn’t know how to get off.

As the school day ended, Caroline, Maddie and Pete caught up with me.

“So, movie tonight, Winn?” Maddie had returned to her bubbly self.

“No, I probably shouldn’t. You know, since Mac’s not feeling well and all.”

“Oh! No, her mom said that she said for us to go.”

My heart raced. “Her mom said that?”

“Yeah, when I called at break. I wanted to see if she felt well enough to go.”

“Did you talk to Mac?” Could she have come back and not told me? Would Suze have hidden her return?

“No, her mom said she was still feeling like death warmed over, I think. The flu strain this year is a bad one.” Maddie ran a hand down my arm. “So

... movies? C'mon, Winn. The last one we all went to was before New Years."

"Maybe we could go next week?" I did have six Council members to interview.

Maddie's bottom lip puffed out. "But tonight's opening night. We all want to go, and Mac's mom said she was still really sick. You don't want to miss it, do you?"

Worry or hang out with my friends—people I'd been with since preschool and virtually ignored in the first quarter of our final year of school?

"Come on, Winn," Pete said.

Who did I care more about? Them? Mac? "I really do have some stuff to do tonight." My meeting with Cleo for one. More work on the cryptic words hidden within the book for another.

Maddie rolled her eyes. "You can't give school work a break for just a night? One?" She stalked off as if I'd insulted her.

"Don't worry about her," Caroline said. "Though, you know? We kinda miss you. It's been a while since just the four of us did something."

She patted my arm and followed Maddie.

Pete nodded his head once and did the same.

• • •

Cleo and Robin had agreed to meet with me together. If I put the twelve Council members on sides, they were on Mac's, so I expected our conversation to be simple and easy, enabling me to check it off my list.

The door opened as I walked up to Cleo's home, but no one stood in the entrance.

"Hello?" I stopped on the porch, leaned forward and looked down a dark hallway. "Hello? Cleo? Robin?"

"Back here! Come on in, Winn," a female voice said.

"Uh ... okay." I walked through the open door. "You want me to close the door?"

"It'll close on its own."

That had been the first not-fully-human experience I'd had.

Two feet inside, the door creaked, starting a slow moving arc back to the frame. It clicked into place, leaving me in darkness. Before I could ask for

directions, lights in the hallway illuminated.

Pale blue walls greeted me along with maple floors and white trim.

“Straight back, Winn. We’re just having appetizers.”

I couldn’t tell if Cleo or Robin spoke to me.

As I moved closer, I noted four voices, not just the one or two who’d acknowledged my entry.

Lights popped on as I continued through the hall, passing a living room, an office and a bathroom on one side. On the left, two closed doors waited.

A turn to the left and the kitchen appeared along with four people. Two female. Two male. All looking human. I waited in the frame of the kitchen door as the four finished their chat and turned to me.

Robin stood, her belly protruding farther than I’d see it before, her short, cropped blonde hair highlighted with a mix of color and a wide smile.

*If she’s not pregnant, what could she possibly be?*

She patted her belly. “Sorry, Winn. We had to start early on account of my food needs. Or rather this little one’s, anyway.”

Cleo, dressed in jeans and a raspberry T-shirt, with her dark eyes, silky-looking hair and long fingers, chuckled. “You mean your flock?”

*Flock? As a griffin, does she produce eggs? How weird is that?* “It’s okay.” It took me longer than it should have to respond.

The man closest to me, with black hair and blue eyes, stood. He had at least a few inches more than me, but otherwise, resembled every other human man in a red flannel shirt and jeans. His bare feet suggested he lived at Cleo’s—at a guess, anyway. “I’m Mel.” He held out a hand. Five fingers. Normal skin. I didn’t know what I’d expected.

“Winn.” I shook and let go.

“Good to meet you, Winn. Come join us. We’re having birdseed sandwiches.”

*He’s kidding right? Or is that what Robin eats? Don’t griffins eat meat?*

Cleo and Robin both laughed. “He’s kidding, Winn.” Cleo smacked Mel’s shoulder. “I’m a vegan, and Mel here likes to joke about it. Even after fifty years, he still complains.” That same hand slid down his arm and to his thigh.

“I’m Roge.” The other man, with similar stature but blond hair instead of dark, rose and held out his hand, which I took.

“So, Winn.” Cleo patted the seat next to her. “Roge and Robin are married. Both are griffins. Mel and I have been partners forever—”

“Forever.” Mel’s lips curved as he said it. Cleo matched his expressions. “Can I get you a beer?”

“He’s a human boy who’s under twenty-one, Mel!”

“Oh, oops.” The beer he’d already grabbed from the fridge went into Roge’s hand. A second appeared in Mel’s.

Cleo rolled her eyes as I took my seat. “Would you like something else, Winn?”

“No, I’m okay.”

Robin touched my hand with hers. “Thanks for meeting us as a group. Friday is our regular dinner together, and we thought it would be easy enough to give you details together since we share everything anyway.”

“It’s no problem,” I said.

“So what would you like to know from us? What questions do you have?” Robin asked.

I slipped my laptop out from my bag. “Do you mind if I take notes?”

All four waved me forward.

“So, I have a question that might seem a little weird.” I took a deep breath. “There seems to be a split, about six to six actually, of Council members who support Mac and who don’t. Shouldn’t everybody support her even if they have to fake it?”

“Does everyone like the President of your country?” Robin asked.

“No, but Mac doesn’t have a choice, and neither do the people she’ll rule. She doesn’t get voted in.”

Cleo turned toward each of the others. “The real answer mostly comes because Maya was so vocal about not liking the way of a Changeling and not wanting her daughter to have to grow up that way. Added in to it, Mac’s been a little ... slow in her progress.”

“I would agree with my friend,” Robin said. “But I also agree with your assessment that we should all be supportive of her in every way possible.”

“Are either of you worried about her taking your places?”

Both of them shook their heads. “This is part of our lives. There’s no point in worrying about it,” Cleo said.

“What happens to you if you’re picked to go away ... and don’t have the Council anymore?”

Robin turned to Roge. “We go back to a life without emergency midnight meetings, stress and tension. I’d actually like it since I’m about to produce another set of offspring. I’d quite like to retire.”

Cleo sighed. "I could go either way. I think Felix is ready to retire most. He's been on the Council the third longest."

*Maybe that's why he keeps approaching Mac about taking his spot. Could it be that simple and not some ploy to get her to become a vampire?*

"I hope this next question doesn't seem too generic, but what piece of advice would you give Mac?"

The women turned toward each other. Cleo returned to me first. "That's actually a great question, Winn. And I think the answer I'd give is that Mac needs to find herself. She's still a bit of a lost little girl. She needs to find a path, and even if she deviates from it later, which we all did some over time, she'll have gotten started. Right now, she's just flitting with no foundation."

"You've heard the expression," Robin started, "that whenever a door closes, another opens, but the walk through the hall is terrible? Or something like that?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Mac keeps going through doors without taking the time to experience the life before or after it. When she does start down that lane, she backs off. She needs to let it ride. See what happens a little bit. She'll learn a lot that way." Robin picked up a miniature sandwich.

Taking my cue to ask another questions, I said, "Are there any things you'd like to see change on the Council or with the rules or anything with Mac joining?"

"I'll take this one," Roge said.

"Who said you could play?" Robin bumped him with her shoulder.

"You married me. I get a say." He waved his beer bottle my way. "Some of the Council does a good job in ruling the various lines. But some have gotten so set in their ways that they're failing to return to their roots. Changelings, and yes, everyone knows that's how our rulers get into place, need to remember that they picked a form ... for whatever reason. We in those forms expect that our rulers will listen and understand our needs."

Mel nodded his head. "I want to say something there, too." He gave his attention to Robin and Cleo. "You two fine ladies do a great job. No qualms there, but—" He took a swig from his bottle. "—the Council would do well to have someone who understood *all* the races a little more."

"What?" Cleo and Robin both asked. "We do know about all of them, we just only rule one line," Cleo added.

“I know, honey, really, I do. I just think things in our lives have changed a lot over the years, and the Council is stuck in old ways.”

“Why haven’t you said anything like this before?” Cleo asked.

Mel tilted his head toward her. “I’ll let you think about that. But doing something a little different seems like it might be worthwhile.”

“Different how?” I asked.

“We’re hoping the newest Changeling really shakes stuff up,” Mel said. “I think it’s time.”

• • •

On Saturday, I’d begged my dad to talk to the Council. Mac only had one day left to come back or she risked staying inside. Zoe, too. He’d assured me again that the Council would take care of it.

Rather than sit around moping, I opted to go to the library to hang out with Pete and Caroline, since they had work to do to finish their reports.

Maddie, too, had joined them. “Okay, Winn,” she said, “Movies. Tonight. You have to. You can be my date since Mac’s *still* sick”

“Yeah.” Caroline joined in the begging. “You keep going to Mac’s at night, you’re going to catch this bug. Zoe’s had it for what? Four days? Five? Come with us.” She all but whined her request.

“You should just go with Pete,” I said. “For Valentine’s Day.”

“We’re just friends,” Caroline said.

A glance at Pete showed his brow furrowed, suggesting his thoughts didn’t align with Caroline’s.

Caroline turned toward me. “I hope she feels better later, so you can at least see her.”

“Yeah. Me, too.” I stared at the floor as I said it. I did want her to come back and hoped my meeting with Nomas, Council member number seven, for that evening would give me some new information, like how could a demon pass through, or back and forth from the in-between, and could he somehow go get her before midnight kept her stuck inside?

“Are you sure you won’t go with us, Winn?” Maddie asked.

“Just because Mac can’t go doesn’t mean you shouldn’t,” Caroline said.

I’d never been ganged up on by my friends so much. Then again, I’d never had a reason to be until I met Mac. “Thanks, but really, I have stuff to do.”

• • •

I reached Nomas's single-story, all-stone home at nine on Friday night. As I stepped out of my car, he descended his front walk looking no different than Suze in his human form but with reddish skin and no horns.

"I'm sorry, Winn, but I won't be able to meet with you."

"Oh, okay. You want to reschedule?"

"Maybe. It may not even be necessary."

I narrowed my eyes. "What do you mean?"

Nomas took me by the arms. "It seems there is a problem within the in-between. I need to go now." He released me and moved away toward the road.

"I'm coming—"

He spun. "This is not of a human's concern."

*Human.* I wanted to scream.

Nomas continued into the dark of the street. In a single flash of light, like Suze had, Nomas disappeared.

• • •

I couldn't reach Suze by phone.

I couldn't reach any of the Council either.

I laid on my bed, my eyes wide open, my heart racing as the clock grew closer and closer to midnight.

Life, as I'd known it for the last three months, seemed to have ended.

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## 21

At the buzz of my cell phone, I sat up straight, realizing not only that I'd fallen asleep, and morning had dawned, but also that the sound came from my alarm clock I'd set just in case.

I slapped a hand on the off button and stared up at my ceiling again.

Lying still, I listened for familiar sounds in the house.

Nothing reached me.

After dressing in sweats and a T-shirt, I walked to my dad's room. His door stood open, not a soul inside.

I took the stairs two at a time and jumped the last four.

No one in the kitchen.

I ran around the corner and down to the basement.

Still no one.

As I traipsed back upstairs, the lingering fragrance from coffee hit me.

"Dad?"

Nothing.

My stomach grumbled. Rather than deny myself, I yanked open the fridge door. A piece of paper had been taped to the milk jug. I tore it off, jostling the contents of the third shelf, and flipped open the note.

*Winn—*

*Didn't want to wake you.*

*Call my cell if you need me. I'll be home later.*

*—Dad*

I threw the note on the counter, anger mixing with frustration. They'd entrusted me with information, with knowledge. They'd required that I follow their rules. Yet, they excluded me from some of the most important work I thought I had to do.

"Just like adults. If they think it's in your best interest, you get screwed over."

I stormed back up to my room. If they wanted to leave me out, I'd take the time to decipher the words between the words. The words I figured were a subliminal message to Mac. The ones I'd written down in the



margins—that had appeared out of order, out of place or otherwise didn't fit with my translation.

Not that she'd need them if she'd gotten stuck.

At least I could say I'd done part of my job.

With letters rearranged, scribbled and reordered across the page, I stared at the combinations.

Backwards.

Upside down.

Right to left.

The sun brightened in my window, suggesting afternoon arrived. If Mac hadn't exited the in-between, she never would.

If she had, why didn't she at least call?

*No, that probably means she failed.*

I fumbled through the words again, translating and retranslating, fitting them together in ways that seemed plausible, given the normal constructs of Greek and Latin communication.

Nothing fit.

"You could ask your teacher," I said to myself, running a hand through my hair. With a flick of my wrist, I flung my pencil on the table. "This is crazy. I'm sitting here working on something for a girl who isn't even going to need it." Head into hands, I closed my eyes. "Why am I doing this? What's in it for me?" I straightened and stood, pacing my way from desk to window. My head rested against the cold pane, and my breath coated the glass.

"Nothing is what there is. I tell Mac I love her, she doesn't respond. I can get her all the way to her last day as a semi-human, and she's going to leave anyway." My fists knuckled the glass. "She hates being human. It was stupid to think she'd pick me over everything else in her life."

A rumble in my stomach had me stepping back. Thanks to finding Dad's note, I hadn't eaten all morning, and staring at the mixed up jumble of words had taken hours from my day.

Back downstairs, the kitchen hadn't changed. My dad hadn't returned. Sound hadn't grown louder.

If I'd been anything but human, I could probably have pushed more.

Staring at the fridge as if it had disappointed me, I sent a punch into its door. "Ow!" My wrist zinged pain as my knuckles cracked. I shook it out,

hopping around the kitchen as if I'd kicked the surface and hurt my toe. "God, why'd I do that?" Asking myself the question came with no answers.

At the sink, I leaned back, slid down the face of the cabinets and dropped to the floor.

My hand throbbed. My head pounded.

In the silence of the empty house, I wanted to go back in time, to before I met Mac, and pretend I'd never had an interest in what hid after dark.

As my breathing regulated again and the sun no longer shone its rays through the windows, I rose to my feet. "Screw them all. I'm done with this." Shadows chased me on my ascent to my room.

One step up.

Two.

At the third, the soft buzz of the bell sent me racing to the front of the house.

I yanked open the door. "Suze!"

He stood on the stoop, his hands wringing in front of him, wearing a leather jacket, jeans and black T-shirt.

He'd never looked so normal.

"What's going on?" I peered around him, hoping, expecting, waiting to see Mac. "Where is she? Where's Zoe?"

Outside, the dark sky loomed.

"Um ..." Suze's hesitation had my worry ratcheting up a notch. "Will you come with me?"

"Yeah, of course. Let me get my coat." From door to closet and back to Suze, I prepared in no more than five seconds. As I slid my arm into my coat, I pulled the door shut. "What's happened?"

His slow gait and measured steps shot worry from a code red to flaming burgundy.

I grabbed hold of his arm and stopped him. "Suze? Man. You gotta tell me what's going on? Is Zoe okay?"

He nodded, though he didn't face me.

"Is ... Mac?"

He nodded again, though slower. "Please, just come with me."

I let go, and Suze went to the driver's side as I went to the passenger's. In silence, he reversed out of my drive and headed down the road.

"Where are we going? At least tell me that."

"Up the mountain." He said to the window.

His lack of chattiness and somber demeanor didn't help the fears that had already filled my head.

• • •

Suze pulled into the parking lot at just after ten o'clock, switched off the Hummer and turned to me. "I'll stay here. You'll probably want your privacy."

"Privacy?" I spun to the window, peering out into the blackness. Not another car parked up with us, which surprised me given the holiday. I'd half expected a dozen of my own peers to have used the top of Turner Point for some of their own Valentine's Day privacy.

"Go on. I'll wait here." He flapped his hand at me.

I slipped from the Hummer and stepped out into the frigid night air. Just like the night a week before, stars shone in the sky, and tufts of passing clouds floated by, obscuring the moonlight every so often.

As my eyes adjusted, Mac's shape appeared in the middle of the sundial. Knowing she'd returned lifted a weight from me. I loped off toward her as she circled the face of the clock. No longer dressed in the white robe, she wore her usual black—boots, jacket, everything. Like Suze.

She stopped as I stepped onto the metal. "Hey," she said.

"Hi." I wanted to move to her, to run my hands along her, to tell her how much I'd missed her and what had happened during the week. To see her get angry and want to pummel the Council for their lack of respect toward me.

I took none of those actions, simply waited.

After what seemed like ages, Mac traipsed up to me. "Hey," she said again.

"Hi." What more could I say? *How was the trip? Tell me all about it? Got any pictures?*

Another interminable amount of time passed. "So ..." she started.

"So ..." The two of us sounded like awkward five year olds trying to figure out if we should be friends.

Mac turned and paced away, her boot heels clicking on the metal below us.

By that point, I'd had enough waiting. It had been almost a week with no update. No nothing. I deserved some truths. "Okay, Mac. Just tell me.

What's going on?"

She froze, her hair blowing with the breeze. When she turned, her eyes glistened, though not a tear fell.

*Emotion? Worry? Control?*

I strode toward her, stood at her toes and tilted down to her. "You made it out. You won. Did you get Zoe?"

"Yes."

I closed my eyes as a rush of thanks washed through me. "That's it then, you know. This was a test."

She didn't flinch. "I know."

"And you aren't stuck in whatever form you were in."

"I know that, too."

"There's only one more step. Promise you'll never go back."

Her head tilted down.

Like involuntary movements, my hands went to her arms and slid down until her fingers entwined with mine. Despite the chill in the air, her touch warmed my skin.

"So let's go, and you can tell me about it." I reached up and tucked a hair behind her ear. "I want to know what it was like. I want to know what you went through, what you learned, what—"

She grasped my hand and tugged it back down. "I need to tell you something." Her tone of voice and demeanor already said more than words would.

Something had changed between us in our time apart.

"I came back last night."

An involuntary jerk set me back a step.

"I told Suze not to tell you and not to bring you to me until now."

"What—what about Zoe?"

"She came home with me."

*Which explains why my dad has been gone all day.*

"Did something happen while—"

Mac's hand in the air stole my words. "I'm going back."

"What? Wait. Back in the in-between? When? But you just left. You have to renounce—"

Her hand touched my lips. "You know I've never liked my life. You know choosing a form is the hardest thing that could be put on me. You

know I don't like humans. I came back like I had to. I'll go back the moment I can."

Which meant midnight.

I started to mumble, but she pressed her finger harder against me.

"I was happy, Winn. I met my mom. My *real* mom." She smiled as if the memory alone brought her intense pleasure. "I'm not ready to rule a race that isn't ready for some big chang—"

"But they—" Again stoppered by her fingers.

Without a chance to tell her about Mel and Roge and my conversation with them, how would she ever learn? She'd been there when Raven told us about the place and the darkness that lurked. Had Mac forgotten? Had she not experienced the same negativity as Raven did?

"It's peaceful, Winn. I want to know more about my dad. I want to understand why my mom made the choices she did. I want to hear those answers from her. I didn't have time to ask all those questions. I just ... need more time."

I broke free of her hold on my lips. "Are you coming back?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

She shrugged. "Sometime in the future."

"You have to come back on the Ides—"

"Don't you think I know that? Don't you know how hard it was to come back today at all?" She whirled away from me as if I'd insulted her and all her kind.

"No, Mac. I don't know. I've been searching for answers the entire week. The entire month. For the last three, in fact. I've been meeting with *your* Council, for *you*. I've been trying to do the stuff *you* asked me to help you with. I don't know what it's like in the in-between because I can't go there." My stream of words picked up speed as I said them, all the frustration of the preceding week dumping on me like a pile of bricks.

She spun toward me again. "Maybe I won't come back at all. Would you prefer that?"

Her words shocked me still. "The in-between isn't a place to live." I said it with as much softness as I could. "It's a place to die, Mac. Why would you pick that over what you have here? Over me."

She stormed my way, her finger jabbing into my shoulder. "Because I didn't ask for this role, and it's my only out."

“There’s another out.” *Don’t tell her, Winn. She’s supposed to learn on her own.* As I thought it, I also realized I’d been doing exactly what the Council had for eighteen years—letting Mac find stuff out on her own, and failing to give her what she needed in favor of their stupid rules.

I’d become them without even realizing it.

Mac needed someone different. Someone to help her ... her way. “You can choose human.”

She staggered backward. “What?”

I grabbed her wrist and pulled her in to me. “You can choose human. You won’t be on the Council. You’ll be done with everything. You can be with me.”

“That’s not poss—”

I stared into her eyes. “Yes. It is. The last two Changelings did. They picked a life with an end over a life of ancient rules.”

“You’re wrong, Winn. They were killed. They—no one would deliberately pick human.”

I let go and stalked away. Anger had no point when it came to the human discussion with her. Mac had always said she’d never pick human even if she could. My admission had been for me, not for her.

Facing the canyon of trees on the side of the mountain, I said, “Some of your kind are looking for a new, strong leader, Mac. Mel and Roge, Cleo and Robin’s husbands said so. They talked with me openly about the need for change. They’re looking for that in you.”

“Well, they won’t get it because I’m not. The Council’s antiquated.”

“You’re not supposed to kill yourself at eighteen to get out of a role you were born for.”

Without my command, my entire body pivoted. Mac’s hand raised, her finger stretched out, pointing to me.

*She’s using magic? How?*

“I’m not killing myself. I’ll come back on the fourteenth just like anyone else. And I didn’t say I wasn’t going to take my place, just that I don’t like it, and don’t want to spend the last four and a half months of my life living a hell on earth with a bunch of people I don’t even like until I absolutely have to.”

A pang struck my heart. I firmed my lips, preparing to throw back whatever I had in me, though nothing surfaced. “Raven was right. Maybe the in-between is a better place for you.”

Mac's eyes glowed red, a change I'd never seen in her. "Don't ever suggest she's right."

"She said you'd stay. She said you'd never come back."

"I said I'm coming back!" Her hands flew into the air and landed with a thunk against her thighs. "I just want more time, and this is the only chance I'll get."

"So you're going to choose a mother you didn't know you had and who's dead in an undead kind of way, and a dad you still don't know, over two surrogates who've lived and trained with you for eighteen years, and ..." I didn't want to say it. I really didn't. "... me." It came out despite my best intentions.

From her spot in the middle of the dial, Mac said, "Yes."

"Wow." Hand on my head, I paced to the sidewalk and back. "Wow, Mac. I thought we had something."

"We never had a future. You knew that."

"That didn't mean I couldn't hope."

"It should have. I officially release you of your bond, too." Her hand and wrist circled around until they held flat, parallel with the ground.

I didn't think she could break that tie, though I didn't care either way at that point.

With the moon directly above her, Mac began the chant she'd used just a week before. Her gaze stayed on mine, her eyes returned to the deep chocolate I loved.

If she'd started, midnight must have arrived.

She recited the second line as the wind swirled around us.

"I'm not going to wait for you." I didn't expect her to hear me.

The third line brought the light.

The fourth, the tunnel.

"I don't expect you to," she said.

## 22

Suze drove me home. I figured, since I wouldn't see Mac again before she took over on the Council, and maybe not even then, I wouldn't see Suze either.

I held out my fist, and he bumped it, but as I went to step away, he gathered me in a fierce, bear-sized hug—a Suze-sized hug—and set me back on my feet.

His sniffles carried through the silence as he retreated to his truck and drove away.

Walking into my house brought familiar smells, and with them, my dad at the kitchen table, a steaming mug of coffee in his hand.

He turned to me as I entered. “Bad night?”

“It shows?”

“Pretty much. Zoe’s in her room asleep.” He thumbed over his shoulder.

“Good.” I took the chair across from him. “Mac and I are done.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I gave my dad huge props for not flinching, cringing or commenting in some super sappy ‘I told you so’ way. “She prefers her dead family over me.”

His lips firmed. “I’m sure it’s just the shock of seeing them for the first time. If you met your mom, you’d want to be with her all the time, too, don’t you think?”

“You’re going to take her side?”

He held up both hands. “No. You’re right. I’m not.”

“The Council said this was a test. To prove she could stay in this world. To show she was stronger than the lure. The whole grass is greener thing you always say.”

My dad nodded. “Sometimes, realization requires time. Mackenzie doesn’t have as much time as you or I expect to have for ourselves. Maybe she’ll find that with another few days?”

“I’m done waiting.”

He stayed silent.



“She released me from the bond. Did you know about that? Do you know if that works?”

He shook his head.

“I told her I loved her once.”

“Those are big words, Winn. I’m sure you meant them, but Mac doesn’t seem like the girl who’d return the sentiment easily.”

I didn’t want to agree, though I knew the truth. Mac hadn’t said it back.

“I loved your mom with all my soul. When you do that, it doesn’t matter what happens in the future, how much the person disappoints you or doesn’t do what you want them to do. You love them for who they are, what they represent, not what you want them to be.”

Rubbing at my chest, I said, “I wished I’d gotten to meet Mom.”

“She’d have loved everything about you.” His hand laid over mine. “One day, you will. Luckily, there’s one thing about the human spirit that seems to beat out the immortals.”

“What’s that?”

“We’re resilient. Time heals all wounds, and it will heal this, too.”

“Better to have loved?” With a glance back at my dad, I added, “Really?”

“Absolutely. I’ll never regret a moment I had with your mom.”

“Sorry, Dad.” I stood. “This is getting too mushy. I have homework to do for Monday.”

• • •

The walk up to my room from the kitchen seemed to take longer than any other time I’d made it. Those fifteen steps went on and on as if telling me not to escape to my room. Not to go up there and fall asleep. Not to use it as an excuse not to think about Mac.

Nothing had changed when I arrived. Same room. Same bed. Same furnishing. Same laptop, waiting for me to look through.

I thought about the jumbled words I hadn’t yet put together. I could spend all night long working on that, or I could forget about it all.

*Help Mac still?*

*Pretend she never existed?*

The options weighed heavy on my heart.

“Winn?” Zoe’s voice had me whirling.

“Hey. I thought you were asleep.”

“I was, but I heard you thinking.”

“How can you? You know what? Never mind.” I started to reach for her, to give her a hug, but something stopped me—like a new relationship dynamic had built up a wall between us. Before I even said anything, she shuffled her way back in her room.

“Good night, Zoe,” I said to her closed door.

She didn’t respond.

With my own door closed, I sat at my desk, the laptop unopened but, like a burning ember, tempting me to touch it. If I opened it, I could easily get sucked back into Mac’s life, just at a time when I needed to get away.

If I didn’t, my curiosity with the word scramble would get the better of me.

“Last thing. This is the last thing I’ll do, and I’ll ... send her a copy. She’ll have it, and that’ll be that.”

I opened the laptop screen, the hard drive whirring to life.

Before it could fully spin up, I shut the machine again. “This isn’t your fight anymore. Mac let you go. Doesn’t matter what the Council said. She was the only reason I was helping.”

I opened it again, letting the dark screen brighten, and my password field blinked at me with a request for letters.

My fingers tapped the keys without pressing. “Shut it off and go to bed. Stare at it and figure out nothing. Stare at it and figure out something.”

Dropping my head to the surface of the table, I let the possibilities float through my mind. Everything about Mac had been a pain in my butt. She and I had absolutely nothing in common. Worse, we weren’t even opposites. We were two people living parallel lives in separate worlds that also had nothing in common.

*Nothing. Absolutely nothing.*

Even as I tried to convince myself, I knew I wouldn’t be able to. Like no other girl in school, Mac Thorne had pricked my finger and made me bleed. Only the bleeding hadn’t stopped.

With that curser waiting for my input, I typed in my name and password.

It opened right up to the page—exactly where I’d left it, with the jumble of words all mixed in. Dozens of them. Lines of them that I’d put together, trying to piece them into something coherent.

The knock on my door took me from the stare down I had begun with the screen. As late as it’d gotten, I wouldn’t have expected anyone to be up, let

alone want to talk to me. “Coming.” I opened the door.

Zoe stood outside in her pink pajamas, hair all over the place and finger between her teeth. She hadn’t done that since she’d been five.

With as much gentleness as I could, I pulled her hands away from her face. “What’s wrong?”

“I—miss my mom.” Tears filled her eyes as she stared up at me.

I tugged her in for a hug. Had anyone thought about the consequences of her time inside the space? Had anyone considered the impact of it on Zoe? It had all been for Mac’s benefit, and Mac had chosen to return. With each breath, the rattle of choked-back tears reminded me how much I missed my own mom, and I hadn’t even known her.

“You want to come in? You can sleep on my bed if you don’t mind me at the laptop.”

Her head moved against me in what I took as an affirmative. She slipped away and curled up under the blanket. She hadn’t snuck into my room in so long, the act brought back a ton of memories from when we were younger and she’d been just-my-annoying-little-sister.

I went back to my mystery puzzle, intent on focusing and finding some pattern to the words.

“Winn?” She barely whispered my name.

“Yeah?” I said facing my computer.

“Will you come over here and do that? I don’t want to be alone.”

Rolling my eyes, I unplugged my laptop and took it with me. There wouldn’t be any harm if she saw the words. They wouldn’t mean anything, and with her tie to the non-human race, she’d be safe knowing.

Zoe propped her head against my arm as I situated myself cross-legged on the bed, computer on my lap.

The words meant nothing to me. I could create all manner of sentences as useful as *Big dog sleeps at night. Man loves woman.* None of those made any sense, and the words didn’t even fit any of those exactly, anyway.

*Why would someone put these extra symbols and characters into a book meant to be read and not explain them?*

If I ever met Maya, I’d have to ask her. She, Mac’s mom, had been the last to contribute to the book. All the goddesses before her had added input, too, according to the inner front page.

“There need not be twelve—” Zoe started.

Her voice startled me, jiggling my computer and my grasp on it. It slipped to the side, but I righted it. “What did you say?”

Her arm slipped out from under the blankets, extending toward my laptop, the nail she’d bitten off jagged and short to the nub. “Right there. The letters. They say, ‘There need not be twelve.’ Twelve what?”

“How can you read this?”

“What do you mean, how can I read this? It’s right there, Winn.” She pushed up, took my computer and slid it onto her lap.

“There need not be twelve,” Zoe read. “The position of power rests not in the most wise, but in she who revels in the ancients, seeks what is to come and provides solace to the least fortunate. The well of knowledge runs deep and wide, the pathways marked with the souls of the past. Look not to what stands in front of you. For what is said is influenced by the wants and needs of the speaker. What is true is never able to be contested but is oft overshadowed by he who speaks the most. To opine with authority, one must be as one. Whence oration has been made to the entirety of the deities, selflessness shall beget the future. The fruit of sacrifice shall bring about the great one. The fair one. The thirteenth.” Zoe took a deep breath. “Cryptic much?”

I leaned back and closed my eyes. My sister had read it as if all the letters matched up, A to Z, one, two, three when it had resembled only gibberish to me. “I’m in awe, Zoe.”

“About what?”

“That you can read that. And that you did. Thank you.”

“What’s it all mean?”

“I don’t really know.” I hadn’t expected a riddle. Then again, nothing in Mac’s life came out cut and dry; she hadn’t arrived with an instruction book. Not that I had either. “Let me think this through out loud.”

“Okay. Not that I’ll understand it, but okay,” Zoe said.

“Hey ... you read it as if you’d been practicing for years. Maybe if we talk through it, you’ll figure it out before me, too.” I said it without malice, truly valuing my sister’s help, and turned back to the screen. “There are the twelve ruling lines of the Council. They’ve always said there had to be twelve, one for each line and a Changeling replaces someone to keep to the twelve. What was the next line?”

“The position of power rests not in the most wise, but in she who revels in the ancients, seeks what is to come and provides solace to the least

fortunate. She writes old. What's it mean?"

I laughed as I considered. "It means all the Council members have equal authority even though Nahir's been there the longest. Mac has to learn from them by looking out for the future. I don't know about the solace thing. Who's least fortunate? They all seem to love being immortal. Next line?"

"The well of knowledge runs deep and wide, the pathways marked with the souls of the past."

"Same thing I think. Look to the past to learn about the future."

"Don't let history repeat itself, maybe?" Zoe asked.

"Yeah. Maybe. Next line?"

"You really can't read this? It's clear to me." She tapped on the screen.

I cringed at her nails against the film, but said, "It looks like gobbledygook to me."

"Where did it come from?"

"Hidden lines in Mac's book you helped translate."

"In Greek? So I can read Greek?"

"No, I translated them, but they came out all jumbled in combinations that make no sense."

"Oh. Why do they work for me then?"

"Who knows, Zoe? Why can you talk to Mac's ... I mean your mom? Why is Mac a Changeling and I'm a nothling?"

Zoe giggled. "That was cute. A Nothling. I like it."

A small smile curved my lips. "Moving on ... re-read the next line?"

"Okay, fine. So ... it says, 'Look not to what stands in front of you. For what is said is influenced by the wants and needs of the speaker. What is true is never able to be contested but is oft overshadowed by he who speaks the most.'" She turned to me as if to ask if she should keep going.

"It means just what's been happening to Mac. The Council tells her something and then we find out it's not a hundred percent true. They tell us what *they* want her to hear."

She snorted. "Like a politician."

"Exactly. And actual truths are always truths. You can't get around them if you know what they are. This book—" I pointed to my laptop screen. "It's a book of truths." I palmed my forehead. "I get it now. I got it before, but the purpose of the book isn't to teach, it's to ensure what the Council says comes out as truths. Why the hidden words then? They give this book to every Changeling. Has no one picked up on them before?"

“Uh ... I don't know.”

“Sorry, that was rhetorical. Next line?”

Zoe's eyes darted from one side of the screen to the next. “To opine with authority, one must be as one. Whence oration has been made to the entirety of the deities, selflessness shall beget the future. Dude. That's deep. I think. Do you have any idea what it means?”

I processed the words. “Um ... opine means to speak. To speak like someone else you have to be like them. So, like if you want to be listened to and heard, you have to be like the person you're speaking to.”

“Like how Dad says he we have to listen to him, but he forgets to listen to us? Because we're not 'adults'?” Zoe air quoted.

“I think so. So if Mac wants to be heard and trusted, she needs to be on the Council. But she knows that already. That's nothing new. And she can't be on the Council with everyone. Because she has to pick a form and take one of the existing seats.”

“She can't just be number thirteen?” Zoe pointed to the last word. “The fruit of sacrifice shall bring about the great one. The fair one. The thirteenth.”

I shook my head. “It doesn't make sense. One for each line. Twelve total lines. There'd be an imbalance if that changed in any way. Twelve is like a circle. It's like the dial on a clock face.”

“Or a baker's dozen donuts.” She giggled.

“Assume she can do what the book suggests. What would that mean?” I eyed my sister. “It would mean the Council has been lying to Mac, and she's got more power than they've told her if she can assume a thirteenth place. It would also make me wonder about all their motives. One half seems to dislike her. Another half loves her. They've probably all got their reasons, especially if she can add to it. Why though? Why would they want, or not want, her to take their spot or add to it? What benefit does it provide?”

“Weren't there thirteen gods on Mount Olympus?” Zoe asked.

“No. Just twelve.”

“Unh-unh. Thirteen.”

“No, Zoe. Twelve. That's why there are twelve on the Council and how they're organized.”

Her fingers speed-typed on my keyboard until Wikipedia showed up. “No, see. There were thirteen. See? Dionysus was offered a seat and the

total number of Olympians became thirteen. Expecting a bunch of fights among the gods, Hestia selflessly stepped down.”

“How did you know that?”

“We just finished our study of mythology, remember? Ninth grade project thing?”

I’d done the same study my freshman year but had forgotten.

Zoe adjusted until she sat on her knees. “Winn! Don’t you get it? This is saying that Mac should be numero thirteen so someone *else* will step down. She doesn’t have to replace someone, she can let them replace themselves!” Zoe pushed at my arm. “It’s like our mom giving up herself for us.”

“But you don’t even know why—or do you know why? What—”

Zoe pointed to the screen. “All I know is that she gave up her life for Mac. She let herself be taken away so Mac would have freedom. That’s what she said.”

“But that doesn’t have anything to do with the Council or Mac’s place on it.”

“How do you know? For all we know, that had to happen. For all we know, you needed to come into her life to tell her this, to find these words and translate them—”

“What about you, though, Zoe? She left you, too. This can’t be all about Mac.”

She slunk down.

I realized, far too late, I shouldn’t have thrown that at her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it bad, just why—”

“No, I know. Mac’s got a more important future than me—”

“No—” I started, but she shook her hand in front of my face.

“She has a more important future, but I get to talk to our mom. I get the contact, Mac gets the future. It’s like her only win. Next time I see Mom I’m going to ask. Or I’ll ask Mac.”

“Mac probably won’t be around much for a while.”

“Why?”

“She—she went back. And she broke up with me.”

Zoe stuck her hands on her hips. “What did you do?” The accusation came straight at me.

“What do you mean, ‘what did I do?’ I didn’t do anything.”

Her finger poked me in the shoulder. “Yes, you did. How could you do this? I need her around! Why would you break up with her?”

“I didn’t! She did. She’s done her thing, made her choice, and now I need to go do mine.”

Zoe let her head fall back as dramatic as ever. “You’re kidding, right? You’ve got to be kidding. I finally find my sister and my mom ... all thanks to you, and now you’re going to break the link? I got to go meet her because they couldn’t send you. I got to meeeeet her, Winn.” Zoe emphasized her point with her fingertips together. “I got to talk to her and hug her. Yeah, it was weird and all, but she told me she loved me and she made the choice for Mac and me ... for our futures.”

“What about your dad? Why—”

Zoe shook her head. “She told me that she would reveal our dad after Mac made her final choice. But until then, it was best to leave the situation as it was and everyone would be relatively safe.”

“He’s human, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Did you ask her why, though? What makes it unsafe for her to tell you who your dad is?”

Zoe slunk down onto the back of her feet. “I don’t know.” Her hands flew into the air and landed against her side—a distinctly Mac action. “I met my mom, Winn. For me, that was enough. I just wanted to know the woman who comes to me in dreams and as a ghost in my closet. I like her. She’s beautiful and kind, and she loves me.” Her arms went over her chest. “And I got that all because of you. You and my sister.” One finger extended toward me. “You. And now you just want to make it all stop because Mac pissed you off? Well, thanks a lot.” She scooted off the bed. “For all I know, without you getting Mac back here, my mom won’t have a reason to talk to me anymore. That’s the last time I’ll read stuff out of *your* book for you.”

“But I didn’t—I’m not a link, Zoe.”

She backed up through the door and into the hallway. “I will never forgive you if she won’t talk to me anymore because of you.”

Somehow, as always, the problem had been pinned on me.

After closing the laptop and setting it off to the side, I laid down on my bed, clasped my hands and stared back up at my ceiling.

Zoe didn’t need me to talk to her mom. She’d done that herself for years before.

If Mac never returned, that might give Maya a reason to give her attention to Mac, but when did that become my problem?



I'd been assigned as the helper. The teacher. I didn't have all the answers, but I'd found most of them.

I'd send Mac the information I'd finally gotten to read and my interpretations.

My job had ended. Whether Mac did anything with it should no longer matter to me.

She'd opted out of our relationship.

She'd been the one to give up.

Not me.

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## 23

With Mac gone and Zoe returning to school, I prepared for the questions and questioning looks. Dad had asked if I wanted help coming up with a story, but I intended to not say anything at all. Zoe had agreed to do the same.

We walked into school, Zoe heading left, me right toward homeroom.

Just as I expected, Maddie caught up with me first. She flitted around me as if Mac would magically appear. “How was your Valentine’s Day?”

“Sucked.”

“Still ill, huh? I heard she was feeling better, but ...”

I stopped and turned to Maddie. “I don’t know if she is or not. You’ll have to ask her if ... when she comes back.”

“Ouch. You having problems?”

We began walking again. “No.”

“But you’ve got your angry face on, Winn. You almost never have that face. What’s going on? This is about Mac, isn’t it?”

“It’s nothing,” I said. “Mac did her own thing before, she’s doing it again.”

“And you’re not a part of it.” Maddie’s hand ran down my arm. “I’m sorry, Winn. Truly.”

That conversation ended with our separate classes, only to start again as Caroline caught me after first period, in the hallway. “No Mac?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

“Dude. You’re in a peon mood.”

“Peon?”

Caroline’s head bobbed left and right. “Couldn’t think of a good one there. What gives?”

I shut my locker door and faced her. “You’re friends with her, why don’t you ask her yourself?” That being said, I walked away.

By the end of third period, I’d pissed off at least three more of my friends.

While in the hallway, I'd heard my name and Mac's in mid-conversation, though I didn't care enough to butt in and ask. I figured Maddie and Caroline would have spread the word fast enough.

Pete, luckily, had offered me a fist bump and a chess match challenge to get my mind off of Mac. During our senior project class, the whispers continued, though Ridge had the nerve to walk right up to me, hitch his butt on my desk and start a stare down.

"What?" I asked.

"You and Mackenzie. Yes? No?"

"Look, Ridge ... I already told you, Mac wants nothing to do with you. But, hey ... it's your funeral, so by all means ... go for it." If he could find her, she'd probably beat him up. If he couldn't, maybe he'd leave me alone.

"I was only asking as a friend, man. Why so testy?"

"A friend?" Hanging my head, I shook it. Back to Ridge, I said, "You're serious? You want to go after my girlfr—after Mac when we're dating, and now you think asking me if you have some sort of permission is going to win you some sort of favor?"

"No hard feelings then?"

Forgiveness didn't come cheap, and Ridge's kindness came with a hint of a warning. "Get off my desk."

Mr. Clark came in just as Ridge opened his mouth again. "Later, Winn." He knocked on my desk and retook his.

As the day rolled on, people must have gotten the hint that I didn't want to talk.

I met Zoe at my car, happy to have Monday end and ready to get to the library for work. I'd called them on Sunday and asked if they needed help—even volunteer efforts. They'd agreed to let me come back.

• • •

The routine of stacking books and shelving them, of checking them in and helping people find answers that didn't have trick meanings or innuendo, took me from irritated to mildly annoyed. By the end of the night, I'd found a new happy place—as Zoe liked to call it.

I had to admit, with each swish of the front door, I'd turned and checked to see if Mac had changed her mind.

If she had, she didn't show up at the library.

Maddie, Caroline, Pete, and even Matthew, who'd stayed away since Mac had come along, had joined me an hour before closing and stayed as I finished up with the last of the kids and parents. The five of us sat around one of the long, brown tables, our papers and books in front of us as the head librarian finished up her duties.

"So," Maddie started, "Friday night. Opening of the newest vampire movie. Who wants to go see it with me?"

Caroline leaned back, her hands in the air. "Not I, says the scaredy cat."

Pete laughed and wrapped his arm around Caroline.

Matthew leaned forward. "There's also a fencing tournament this weekend."

"The annual Shakespeare festival is coming up, too. I think this weekend is their big reenactment thing with all the food and stuff," Caroline said.

"Don't they do something every weekend right up to the Ides and then recreate Caesar's death?" Matthew asked.

"Yeah, they do," I said.

The company would have their grand finale on the fifteenth of March. The day Mac would have to return—for twenty-four hours or not at all.

*Why did every conversation, every topic, every action remind me of her?*

I stood, wanting to get her out of my head. The hand on my back had me whirling.

Maddie stood behind me as my heart pounded in my chest. "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

"Sorry. I just ..." *Just what? Needed to think? To get away?*

The four people at that table had been my friends for years, and Mac had driven us apart. I couldn't spend fifteen minutes talking with them?

"It's okay, Winn. We know you're upset about Mac. Don't know what's going on exactly, but if you're in Splitsville, then, well, we get it."

I gave her a slow nod. "Thanks, Maddie. I know she's your friend, too. Doesn't it kinda make you mad that she's not talking to us anymore?"

"It does, but Caroline and I have been friends longer, so we're okay, you know?"

"Right. Friends longer. Hey, you know what? Let's go to that new movie on Friday. Though, I don't know why you want to be scared out of your mind. The reviews say it's the most frightening new release coming."

"All the better to snuggle up with the boy I love."

"Ooh." I opened my eyes wide. "You bringing that dude from the party?"

She smiled at me, her eyes twinkling. “No. He was a family friend who was in town. I told Mac that.”

“Ah. ‘Kay. Who then?”

“You’ll see.” She pinched my arm and went back to the table as I pondered who she’d bring to the movies with us to snuggle up with.

• • •

The week passed with school and work, school and work, school and work. Friday came and went, our spring sports pep-rally ending the day.

While Zoe had moped all week, by Friday, even she perked up a little.

Until night fell.

The power of memories came on stronger than anything I’d dealt with before. Night had become synonymous with Mac and her side of the world. The part of the world few but me even knew existed. I’d walk down the road, or even walk into the yard, and expect the unexpected, but no one appeared from within the shadows. I never saw Lucas or Felix stalking around.

If I didn’t already know, I simply would have remained oblivious to what went on after the sun dipped below the horizon. Forcing my memories down in my head, I arrived at the theater at nine-forty, ten minutes after the library closed.

Maddie met me at the door. “You made it. Caroline and Pete saved us seats.” She threaded her arm through mine.

“She came, after all?”

Maddie nodded. “For moral support.”

“What about Matthew?” I asked.

“He had that chess tournament. Seriously, he went to that instead of this.”

“Uh ... okay.”

Maddie led the way through the lobby and into the darkened theater. Previews had begun ten minutes before, but the movie hadn’t yet.

We threaded our way up the stairs and to the back row in the center.

“You must have gotten here early.” I whispered my comment as I sat between Caroline and Maddie.

Caroline leaned into me. “We did. Pete came and staked out our seats as soon as the other movie ended.”

“Are we waiting for anyone else?” I wondered for a moment if her mystery invitation included a person.

“No.” Maddie said it matter-of-factly.

“But you said—”

She rolled her eyes at me. “I was talking about you, silly. You’ve been missing from our group for so long, I was hoping you wouldn’t back out.”

“Oh. Gotcha.”

Six previews later, Hollywood’s version of a vampire strode onscreen, his pale-white face and sharp fangs dripping blood, black cape billowing out behind him as he left a graveyard.

I shivered at the idea of the graveyard and how many times I’d come in contact with vampires. The stereotypical dripping teeth, though, that kinda annoyed me. I kept my feelings to myself while Maddie wrapped her hands around my bicep and a body popped out of the ground.

She buried her face against my arm three minutes later as a zombified face appeared.

The more I thought about the special effects, the more they looked fake to me. Fake, unfortunately for Hollywood, meant I didn’t have a reaction. Knowing the truth had killed my ability to be enthralled by the such entertainment.

Maddie, on the other hand, kept turning her head from my arm to the screen. Back to my arm. Back to the screen.

Eventually, I pulled her in tight against me.

She stopped squirming.

• • •

With the monsters all dead and the humans victorious again, we left the movies and headed for pizza. We laughed. We threw stuff at each other. We arm wrestled. It had been so long since we’d all hung out.

We had fun.

Even at midnight, the pizza place still had a bunch of people waiting for dinner or snacks, sipping on Coke and other drinks. I’d grabbed a piece of the loaded supreme as Pete did the same. Both the girls opted for cheese.

Maddie sat with me. Caroline sat with Pete.

Like we used to.

“So, what else should we do this weekend?” Maddie asked.

“I’m working.” My words came out mumbled as I talked through the giant bite I’d taken.

“Project work for me,” Pete said. “You might be done, Winn, but I’ve got a long way to go.”

“Me, too.” Caroline waved her glass at me.

“I’m free if you want to do something after work, Winn.” Maddie sipped at her Coke.

“I thought you and Ridge had a ship-load of stuff to do on the project,” Caroline said.

“Nah.” Maddie waved a hand. She gave me an exaggerated roll of her eyes.

“You and Ridge already done?” I asked. “Has he actually *worked* on the project?”

“Are you kidding? Boy Wonder thinks school is woman’s work, and I should handle it.”

“She’s wanted to pop him one a few times,” Caroline said.

“No, no.” Maddie raised her hand. “I’m bigger than that. Remember? We agreed. No murder until after we graduate.”

Caroline narrowed her eyes as I did the same. We turned to each other before returning to Maddie.

“So he’s *not* giving you grief anymore?” I asked. Less than a month before, she’d seemed desperate. A week before, the same.

“Ridge is getting ... easier to convince I’m not off my rocker,” Maddie said.

“But—” Caroline started and stopped; I presumed from the glare Maddie sent her way.

“So he’s getting into his Women’s Studies then?” I expected the elbow in the side and feigned slipping toward the end of the bench to avoid it.

“Let’s just say Ridge and I have had several heart-to-hearts in the last few days. We’ve managed to come to an agreement that is mutually beneficial to us both.”

“That sounded way too ... old.” Caroline held up her glass and waved it once. “Let’s just hope it stays mutually beneficial then.”

An unease took hold of me, though I didn’t know why. Just a sensation. A decisive tingle.

“So, Winn. Without Mac, who’re you going to do your project with? Like the presentation and stuff?” Maddie asked.

“That’s a long ways away.”

“Yeah, but what if? You know if she decides to not come back from wherever she is. She could just bail, what with her not planning to go to college and all. She could just get her GED and move on with life. Or whatever.” Maddie’s statement held a strong amount of truth.

“Like I said before, I—we had it finished already. Or enough to make the final tweaks for when ... if ... when she comes back to school.”

Maddie nodded, her lips around the straw. Those blue eyes sparkled up at me. “Any word on when she might return?”

“Uh ... not that I know of, no.” She hadn’t called or sent any subliminal messages. Neither had I. Not that I could.

Maddie’s lips curved. “You know what? Forget about Mac. She’s always done her own thing, so we shouldn’t expect anything different now. It’s nice having us all back together.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think it is, too.”

• • •

School. Library. School. Library. Day in. Day out.

Without the burden of research on Changelings, I had more time for me. I hung out with Zoe, taking her shopping for her soon-to-be fifteenth birthday on the thirty-first of March. I helped my dad clean out the garage. I worked; I studied; I passed the time without worrying about what might happen on any given day.

Without Mac around, no one bothered me.

Maddie joined me most evenings at the library, our friendship returning to what it had once been. Ridge even showed up a few times, sitting across from her at a table as if he’d changed his mind about the project or about Maddie.

I’d stack books and catch Maddie’s gaze on me. One smile and she’d turn away, back to the pile of papers and stuff on the table in front of her.

“That one’s catching yer eye a lot, isn’t she?” Margerie, the head librarian, asked in her Scottish lilt as I finished up Friday night.

Maddie had arrived alone and gone to work at her usual table.

“She’s a friend from school.” The beep from the scanner registered the books as I passed them through, restarting the magnetic security device in the process.



“I don’t think that kind of lookin’ is just friendship.”

*Is that what I sensed?*

“Especially now as yer on your own again. Though I quite liked that one you were with.”

“Mac?”

“Rightio, yes. She was a spunky one, wasn’t she?”

My smile grew without trying. “She was ... spunky.”

“And what would you have done with her then? No longer even friends?”

The scanner beeped and beeped again. “We just kinda had a difference of opinion, is all. She didn’t really like the library, either.”

“Aye. Well then. When yer opinions change as much as they do when you’re in your teens, it’s a wonder you don’t despise everyone before you go out on your own a bit.” She patted my shoulder. “But don’t let opinions mar a good thing.”

“Uh ... okay.”

She walked away, pushing her cart with her.

“You forget how to work that thing?” Maddie asked from right in front of me.

“What?” I looked down at the book I’d thought I scanned through still in my hand. *Magic of the Dawn. Figures.* I swiped it and set it on the pile. “You all done?”

“Yeah. Ridge had an early baseball scrimmage, so we’re not working on the project today at all. Want to get some dinner? Maybe hang out?”

“Uh ... sure. Yeah. I have—” I checked my watch. Time had passed without my realizing it. “I guess it’s that time already.”

Maddie blinked her big eyes. “Yeah, most people left like half an hour ago.”

“You could have gone home.”

She waved my thought away. “Nah. I don’t mind waiting.”

## 24

“Yes, she does.” Caroline stood next to me at our lockers on Tuesday morning.

“No, she doesn’t,” I said.

“Oh, my *freaking* goddess of love, Maddie does, too, like you.”

“She does not.”

Pete squished up his face. “I’m with Caroline on this one, man. Sorry.”

“What about Ridge? They’ve been kinda ... you know ... nice to each other.”

Caroline’s exaggerated eye roll answered that. “She got him to stop being an Aztec monkey. She doesn’t want to date him.”

“Whatever.” I spun to my locker and grabbed my books.

“You’re not into her though, are you?” Caroline asked.

I didn’t answer because I really didn’t know what to say. *No, because I still hoped something might happen with Mac even though she’d been gone two and a half weeks? Yes, because that would give me a potential prom date? No, because she’s Maddie, and she’s like a sister to me?* “I’m not looking for a relationship right now.”

“That’s girl-talk, Winn,” Pete said. “Even I know not to say that out loud. And I wouldn’t let Mac find you with Maddie. Not like that.”

“Mac’s not here, and Mac’s not my girlfriend anymore.”

“Coulda fooled us,” Caroline said.

“Fine. You want a definitive answer? Then no. I’m not—”

“Not what?” Maddie appeared as if from nowhere.

“Uh ...” A glance to Caroline and Pete gave me shoulder shrugs. “Not ... ready to ... stand up in front of the class and give my speech.”

“You sure?” Maddie tilted her head, her books held tight to her chest. “I thought you were done.”

“I am, just not ... ready. To stand up there.”

One hand ran down my arm. “Well, you still have two months before the final presentation.”

“If you live that long,” Pete said under his breath.

“What?” Maddie asked as Caroline burst out laughing.

“Nothing,” I said. With a nudge to Maddie’s arm, I pushed her toward our fourth period class.

• • •

Maddie sat at her usual table Thursday evening as I worked at the reference desk at the library. Floods of underclassmen entered and exited, using the library to study for end-of-quarter exams and preparation for final term papers. Even local college students dropped by—our small, urban location a quieter and more remote spot than campus. I’d gotten that from the few who asked questions about where they could sit if they’d come just to relax.

At a thud, I turned from the rolling cart to the desk.

There, at the edge, dressed in simple jeans and a T-shirt—something I’d never seen her in—stood Mac’s Mom.

“Hi, Winn,” Alina said.

“Um ... hi.” I moved to the desk and took books from the pile next to her. “Are you returning these?”

“Ah ... no. They were left by a youngster as I walked up.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“How are you?” she asked.

“I’m okay.” *Why?*

“Would you have, maybe, two minutes to talk with me?”

Out at the table, Maddie’s head popped up; she smiled and gave me a little wave.

Giving my attention back to Alina, I said, “Yeah. Sure,” and tapped Margerie on the shoulder. “Can I take ten minutes?”

“Absolutely.” She stood and replaced me at the desk.

“It’s nice outside today,” Alina said. “The sun has set but the temperatures are warming again.” Mid March in North Carolina could be thirty degrees or eighty.

“Outside is fine.”

Alina nodded and followed as I exited from behind the counter.

We walked in silence down the fourteen steps as a group meandered their way up. Across the road stood Primrose Cemetery. I’d managed to avoid looking at it every night, but with Alina by my side, it drew my gaze up.

We started down the sidewalk, away from the more congested area of town.

“I wanted to thank you, Winn.”

“For what?”

“For being so kind to Mackenzie. She needed you.”

“Um ... you’re welcome.” What else could I say?

“She still needs you, Winn.” Alina stopped me with a hand to my forearm. “I know what she did to you, choosing another path. But I want you to think about something before you act as her judge and jury. Mac actually chose that path with deliberation. She came to me on Valentine’s Day and asked me for my advice.”

I crossed my arms over my chest.

“She wanted to know what to do. I told her to do what lay on her heart.”

“She did.”

Alina shook her head. “No, she did not. Quite the opposite. She said if she led with her heart, she’d never accomplish anything. She wouldn’t learn how to choose by what made the most sense—that you’d taught her to look logically at problems and to flesh them out before she made a rash decision.”

“She picked going back into a place she’s supposed to renounce, Alina. How’s that rational?”

The twitch of her lips grew into a full-blown smile. “Don’t you see, Winn? She did exactly as you would have done. She chose the logical path. She chose to get more information before making a decision. Once I realized she’d opted for that, I told her she should tell you.”

“She told me.” I stared down at the ground, my foot digging into the crack of the cement paver.

“And there, I believe she failed because she listened to her heart. She didn’t want you to sit idly by and wait for her. She’d already imposed on you so much.”

“She should be telling me this.”

“I know, Winn. I know. But ... well ... Zoe came to talk with me, too, and she mentioned that you’d perhaps moved on with your life. I thought, before you did so, you should know Mac’s motivations for her return.”

“But she wasn’t supposed—” I closed my eyes as I stopped. “She was supposed to come out and renounce the in-between.”

“I know that’s what the Council said, but have they steered you wrong in the past?”

“Is that a trick question?”

Her smile reached into her eyes. “Go talk with Moira if you haven’t already.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“Please, Winn.”

“No one on the Council returned my calls the week Mac was inside the first time and—”

“Mackenzie released you from your bond afterward.”

“How—”

Alina touched my cheek. “I’m the surrogate to a Changeling, Winn. There are some things I have learned about Mackenzie that even she wishes I did not know. She released you to give you freedom. She released you to let *you* choose, too.”

“Choose what? She’s the one with choices. She’s the one with a final point in her mixed-race life.”

“We all have choices to make, Winn Thomas. All of us.”

“Winn?” Maddie’s voice sounded in the distance.

I glanced toward her, and by the time I’d turned back Alina had disappeared.

• • •

Tables, people, laughter, voices and the smell of greasy foods permeated the school cafeteria.

“You look like you’re pondering,” Maddie said from her spot beside me.

“He looks like he’s *pondering* all the time,” Caroline said.

“Is it bad to be thinking?” I asked. *Of Mac. Of Moira. Of whether or not to call.* Why had Alina talked to me? Why hadn’t she plucked me from the human race nearly two weeks before when Mac had been so selfish? Why not tell me, then, that it had been some sort of sacrifice on Mac’s part? That the bond reversal had worked? That Mac had actually thought through her actions before she’d taken them?

“See? There he goes again.” Caroline laughed.

“I have a lot on my mind.” The chicken-salad sandwich in my hands had warmed to room temperature and lost its flavor. I let it fall to my tray,

uneaten.

“You have your project done. You don’t have to present for a long time. You have a good job. You have perfect grades. What more could you want?” Maddie picked at the salad she’d brought from home.

“Yeah, what more?” Pete swirled fries in a bath of ketchup.

“Just thinking about life in general. What do we really have for ourselves, you know?” I asked.

“Uh-oh. Winn’s on a philosophy kick. But go ahead.” Caroline nudged me with the back of her fork. “Let’s hear it.”

“I mean, what do we get to do with our lives? Live. Learn. Work. Create the next generation so they can do the same?”

“Dude, you’re getting deep,” Pete said.

“See? He *has* been thinking again. But I’m with you, Winn. Go on,” Caroline said.

Beside me, Maddie’s brows furrowed. Whether because she considered my question or thought me stupid, I didn’t know.

“I just ... look at my dad ... he—”

“He’s successful, has a great career and drives the newest Jag.” Maddie bumped me with her shoulder. “What more could you want?”

“His wife?” Caroline covered her mouth as soon as she said it. “Sorry, Winn. That just kinda popped out.”

“No, it’s okay. And that’s just it. He does want that. He misses my mom. I didn’t even get to meet her. There’s just nothing about life here that’s ... exciting.”

“Wow.” Maddie set her fork down. “You have all this potential and great opportunity. You could be president of the United States for all we know, Winn. The future holds all sorts of chances and challenges.”

I rose from the table. “Will you tell Mr. Clark I’m going home?”

Maddie stood too. “Are you ditching? We don’t ditch, Winn. That’s for people like—”

The glare I sent her must have stopped her. I knew what her next words would have been.

*People like Mac.*

“Yeah, I’m leaving. It’s not like I don’t already have all the work done.”

• • •

Even though I promised myself I'd stay away, I called Moira. She'd been on my list before Mac picked insanity over me. If nothing else, I could add 'talked to a goblin' to my resume of otherworldly deeds that no one but I could know about.

Luckily, Moira welcomed my impromptu, mid-afternoon meeting request. I'd thought goblins were nocturnal, but given she also had a human form, who knew what kind of life she actually led?

Directions to her house included a caveat that my GPS wouldn't get me there. She called her location 'off-road'. The ruts I bounced through on the single-lane, forest-on-all-sides path, definitely qualified as 'off-road'. I wished I'd had my Jeep, but my dad had asked me to drive his Jaguar that morning since it had sat in the garage unused for several weeks.

After what seemed like an hour, but probably only lasted ten minutes or less, I emerged into a clearing of beautiful green grass surrounded by trees in full bloom.

"In March?" Even North Carolina didn't look like summer then. "This can't be possible."

*Neither are Changelings real*, I reminded myself as I pulled up to the two-story, white-washed home.

Moira stood on the front porch, her hands in the pockets of simple tan pants, sandy blonde hair pulled up behind her in a tail. She didn't seem to have the elegance that Cleo, Robin, Josie, Alina or even Raven had.

"Welcome, Winn. I'm so glad I finally get to talk with you. Come in. Come in." She escorted me inside, where a fire burned in the chimney and the scent of roasting apples wafted through.

I followed to what I perceived as the center of the house, with a high-arched wood ceiling.

"You really do live in the middle of nowhere." *Lame, Winn. Lame.*

Moira laughed, a full and hearty sound. "Even this is far too close for me. Goblins don't generally take to others, and given we are a pair, here, these woods conceal as well as protect. Had you not had permission, you would never have been able to pass through my gates."

*Gates?* There hadn't been any. *Magical maybe?*

"Come. Sit." She sat on a brown leather sofa. "What can I tell you?"

I took the chair on the opposite side of a glass coffee table. "Um ... I don't know really. I'm not ... you know ... doing anything for Mac, really. Alina just suggested I come talk with you."

“I see.” Moira interlaced her fingers and wrapped them around one knee, hiking it up and crossing it over the other. “Hypothetically, let’s pretend you *are* still helping Mackenzie. But more than that ... what would *you* like to know, Winn?”

I’d spent so much time rehearsing my questions, picking and choosing them for each interview that to have come unprepared left me almost lost. “Why did you pick goblin?” *What a stupid question.*

“Excellent question.” Her hands slapped her knees. “I’m quite intrigued by the magical, you see. Yet, to become a fae, I would have had to give up my more ... let’s say ... elusive side.”

From what I’d read in the book, goblins ranked right up there with gremlins and the more evil side of the fae realm.

“And Phelps, my partner in ... life, he and I do like to have our fun. So ... goblin was an easy choice for me.”

*Was she about to say ‘crime’? Isn’t that what most goblins are known for? Hiding stuff? Confusing people?*

“Is being a Council member stressful?” *Yet another stupid, obvious question.*

She shook her head. “It’s only as stressful as someone wants it to be. Like your governors for example. They maintain the order in their states. We do not rule the entirety of the country. It’s smaller. More centric and unique to us. I do the same for the pure breeds of the immortal. They are my ... state.”

“How old are you? When did you join the Council?” I’d never gotten so personal. “Oh, my god, please don’t answer that first one. I’m so sorry.”

Moira laughed, her hair falling around her.

Despite the smile, my stomach curdled; a goblin’s laugh could do that to a non-goblin.

“I’m far older than Raven though I am the Council member just behind her. In fact, do you know our order?”

I shook my head.

“Nahir, Gerard, Josie, Saroya, Equatino, Felix, Robin, Magwa, Cleo, Nomas, Me, Raven.” She ticked them off on her hands. “All twelve. From back to front. Oldest to youngest.”

*Dragon, gnome, siren, elf, sphinx, vampire, griffin, wizard, shapeshifter, demon, goblin, angel.*



Moira giggled though the sound didn't have the same effect as her previous laugh. "The Council will tell you, they had more problems with me than even Raven."

*I can imagine given she chose goblin.*

"What did the Council do when the other two didn't pick? You know, the ones between you and Raven?"

Moira waved a hand. "The usual. Nothing."

*Huh?*

"It happens. You humans are so damn hard to give up." She fanned herself with her hand. "I mean if Phelps hadn't wanted to convert, I'm pretty sure I'd have gone his way."

*Say what? She picked a human and converted him?* "Convert?" I asked with a distinct hesitancy.

"I fell in love, and since the rules were the rules, I had to deal with them. As we all do still today."

*But goblins like to break the rules.*

"How does someone convert to ... goblin?" I could guess at vampires. I could guess at any of the animal forms, too. A bite, some sort of transformation. Goblin didn't fit any mythology that I'd found on transformation from human.

"It's quite the intricate process." Her eyes glistened excitement.

*Is this why Alina sent me? To show me I could turn into something other than vampire?*

"Why would a human ... willingly ..." I assumed it had been a willing decision. "... choose to become not human?"

"Who actually wants to be human? Immortality is all a human wants. I simply offered what he yearned for."

"Then why wouldn't the Council make the whole, 'marry into your own kind', rule just go away?"

"Because the Council is made up of a variety of opinions. Trust me when I say, there are a few people trying to change that. I kept trying to tell Mac that. And when she came to me a couple weeks ago ... again ... I told her. Again. She's bound and determined not to break the rules, that one."

"Are we talking about the same Mac? She prefers to fight than talk anything out."

"One in the same. She's infuriatingly frustrating, isn't she?" The smile she gave me sent a shiver through me. Goblins were known to curdle blood

with their smile, too, but in human form, I'd expected her to be more normal.

"Mac is ... disunity in person form."

Moira laughed again, her voice changing from a low to high pitch and sending knife-like stabs into my head. I wanted to learn more, but the more we talked, the more she seemed to take on her true form.

"Oh, Winn. Winn. Winn. Winn. Mac Thorne may look and act tough, but inside, she wants what everyone else in the world does."

"Immortality?"

"No. We already have that. To be loved, of course."

"But she was! I did! I even told her." *Oh, geez. I just said that out loud.*

"Yes, Winn. I believe she wants you. And I believe she wants to maintain tradition. Mac likes rules."

"Mac hates rules." I wanted to say, *do you even know who she is?*

"Mac loves to *hate* rules, but they define her. Once she stops fighting it and rolls with it a little, she'll see she has the power to *change* them. Listen, Winn. Mac's a Changeling daughter of a goddess. She's even more special than anyone could imagine, they just aren't telling her. Don't look at what you see on the outside. Look at the inside. Some have been working to change the Council for years. The rules. The way things are done. The thing is ... to change the rules on the Council, it takes someone special. Someone willing to sacrifice. We finally have the opportunity to push change through."

"Then why not just explain that to her so it isn't so much of a game?" I'd said it far too loud and with too much of my own frustration. "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"Yes, you did. And that's okay." One eyebrow rose. "It would have been much easier, of course, but like us all, Mac has to decide where her priorities lie."

"I told her she could ... you know ... pick human."

Moira's eyes opened wide. "Good for you! That's exactly what Mackenzie needs to hear. She needs you in her life. She needs someone who isn't going to bow down to us. Who'll stand up for her and who'll push her to find her way."

"But in the binding ceremony—"

"Nonsense. You were bound as her teacher. However you do it will work just fine."

Now someone tells me. “She didn’t come back and renounce the in-between.”

“She will. Give her time.”

Which is what Mac said. “How do you know she will?”

“Because you’re still here.”

I flopped back against the seat. “I don’t think I matter anymore.”

Moira’s lips curved up. “Trust me, Winn. You matter. Call it ... women’s intuition.”

Behind me, the front door opened and closed. “Mom, I’m home!”

I turned as the new arrival disappeared around a corner and just caught a glimpse of blonde curls, my head spinning with the sound of the female voice, though a disconnect prevented belief from settling within me.

On a slow pivot, I faced Moira again, my stomach bubbling.

She smiled at me. “Winn, I believe you know my daughter.”

The one in question stepped into the living room, her hands sorting mail, eyes downcast.

As she lifted and turned to me, my world shattered into a million pieces.

## 25

“Winn?” Maddie stared at me with big, blue and freaked-out eyes. “What—what’re you doing here?”

“Uh ... just ... talking ... with ... your ... mom.” My brain and lips had stopped processing at the same speed.

Her body trembled.

“Come, sit, darling.” Moira patted the couch cushion next to her.

Maddie lowered to the surface, her legs buckling just as she hit the top, mail spilling from her hands.

Did Maddie know about Moira? About Mac? About me? About the Council? Or did she live under the assumption the world revolved around humans and no others?

Silenced by her presence, I sat still. Unmoving. Waiting.

“How was your day, honey?” Moira asked.

Maddie tilted her head at me. “Um ... fine. Normal. A little boring.”

“Any more problems with your project partner?”

Maddie jumped a little. “What? No!” She said it too fast. “I’m sorry, I just wasn’t expecting company.”

Moira rubbed the back of Maddie’s shoulder. “Not to worry. You’re welcome to chat with us. Winn and I were just talking about his plans for the future.”

“For the rest of this year or in college ... and stuff?” Maddie asked.

“All of the above.”

Maddie narrowed her eyes. “Is that why you left early? To chat with my mom? Why?”

*Good question.*

Before I could come up with an answer, Moira said, “Darling, I have connections at Duke, of course. Why else would he come so far?”

*Yeah. That.* I nodded at Moira. “The timing worked out since I got a letter from them. An ... acceptance.” I hadn’t lied. The letter sat on the counter in the kitchen at home.

“Oh,” Maddie said. “I didn’t get anything from them yet. I thought you were going to Stanford.”

“I thought you got in already,” I said.

She shook her head. “I told you I did when you said you applied, but I lied. I called them last week because it’s past the first decision point, but I haven’t heard back.” Maddie and I shared the top two spots in our class every year. That she wouldn’t have heard, and I’d already been accepted, made me both happy and sad.

Moira rubbed more. “I told you I would pull some strings, darling. You’ll get your chance.”

“So, Winn ...” Maddie started as Moira said, “Why don’t I let you two chat? I have a bit of work to do and could use the time in my office.”

Maddie acknowledged her mom with a head nod.

I stood and held out my hand. “Thanks for the ... chat.”

“No problem,” Moira said. “I’m so glad I got a chance to talk with Mac’s beau.”

She sauntered off as unease filled me. A glance at Maddie, and I figured out why. Caroline had said she liked me. Had she not told her mom? If she had, why would Moira comment that way? I’d spent way too much time in my own head that afternoon.

“Um ...” I started.

Maddie whirled to me, bright eyes shining. “You want to get something to eat? Maybe ... take a walk? The gardens are kinda lame this time of year, but my mom’s a landscaper so at least we have green grass.”

*Landscaper. Right. With flowering trees that can’t possibly be flowering.*  
“Uh ...”

“Or we could just sit outside. It’s kinda hot in here. My mom always has that fire burning. Even in the summer.”

“Sure. Outside.”

Maddie led the way to a deck where chairs had been arranged in a semi-circle, facing the forest. We sat, both of us leaning back in two chairs right next to each other. A calm washed over me as I listened to the early spring birds tweet .

“I’m sorry I never invited you out here,” Maddie said after a few minutes of silence.

“That’s okay.” The sun soaked into the exposed skin on my face. Warm rays meant I didn’t need my jacket. “It’s pretty far out here, you know. I’m

surprised you go to West.”

“Yeah, well, that was my mom’s doing. All my schools were actually. She’s always made sure I could go to the best.”

“Why not one of the private schools then?” I laced my fingers and rested them on my stomach.

“They aren’t always the best.”

“Oh. You like living in the middle of nowhere?”

“Um ... yeah. Mostly. Gives me a lot of time to study.”

I chuckled. “I’d probably be out here on this deck all the time.”

“But you have that big Brownstone with the balcony bars and stuff. You don’t sit out there?” She’d been to my house for a few parties.

“Too loud. Too many people around, and people are noisy.”

“Oh. Yeah. True. Guess I never have that problem.” She sighed, a soft sound.

Shifting toward her, I opened my eyes. Maddie rested on the chaise, her face to me, hands under her right cheek, eyes open, just a few inches from me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She adjusted until she faced the sky. “Nothing.”

“Oh, come on, Maddie. I know you better than that.”

“It’s just girl stuff.”

“Okay.” I turned until I, too, stared up at the deep blue of the sky.

“Why’d you come out here, Winn? Tell me the truth.”

“What?” We faced each other again, and I stared into her eyes. “To talk to your mom. Like I said.”

Maddie nudged closer to me. With our chairs touching, she wouldn’t have far to go before she ended up in mine. “I don’t believe you.”

*Uh-oh. Think. Think. How do I respond? What do I say? I needed your mom to answer questions about Mac?* “Wh-why do you think I came here?”

She edged closer, her body laying along the the seam of her chair. “You have your thinking face on again.” One finger snaked out and touched my arm. “Maybe ... you wanted ... to talk to me?”

“No—”

Her eyes opened wide.

“I mean—I—” *What did she want me to say?*

Maddie moved closer until our arms touched. “You’ve never come out here before and all of a sudden you do. There has to be a reason that’s not

my mom's connections."

I pulled away from her. "It was. Really. To talk to your Mom."

Maddie rested her head on my shoulder.

Moving seemed rude, but her proximity, and my lack of personal space, worried me. "Uh ... Maddie?"

She tilted up, our faces millimeters apart, my chin touching her forehead—not separated far enough. Before I could say a word, she pressed her lips to mine.

Yanking back from her and jumping from the chair sent Maddie tumbling into the one I'd been sitting in.

"What was that?" I asked.

From her perch, she angled up to me. "Why don't you want me, Winn?"

"What?" My eyes narrowed as if squinting would bring clarity to the situation.

"You wanted Mac. You wanted Caroline. But you don't want me?"

"What're you talking about? We're—we're friends." I took a step backward, bumping into the grill on the deck.

Maddie sat up, spun until her feet hit the deck and stood. She took one, two and three steps, stalking toward me much like I'd experienced with Tino when he'd turned into the sphinx.

"You came all the way out here to talk about college?" Another step to me. "I don't think so."

I had nowhere to go with the railing behind me, and only a friendship to ruin if I jumped it. I placed my hands on her arms. "We're just friends, Maddie."

"We are not!" She screamed it at me, anger taking hold of her expression.

*Oh, my god, she's gone psycho.* "Who are you?" I inched to the left. *Gotta get out of here.*

"You know me, Winn." Her voice turned to a plea. "We've been together through school. Everywhere. All those years of competing for the top spot, and in the last year of our time together, you pick her!"

"Maddie, seriously. You're freaking me out. You and I ... we're friends."

"You don't love me, Winn?" Her bottom lip jutted out.

*When had she gone nuts?* "You're ... like a sister—"

"Ahh!" She whirled. On her return, she grabbed my shirt, pulled herself up and kissed me again.

Hard.

I pushed at her shoulders to get her to release me. When that didn't work, I tried plucking her fingers away from my shirt. My mouth refused to open for her—for the tongue lashing she attempted. She finally slowed and moved enough so I could speak.

"I need to go," I said.

"No!" Her arms wrapped around me, her weight tugging me down as she swung from my body.

Mine involuntarily went around her, but I yanked them back so she hung loose. "Maddie, seriously. What's going on?" *Why are you doing this to me?*

She dropped to the ground, eyes narrowed, stance rigid. "You're still in love with that bitch, aren't you?" Her fists curled.

I'd have sworn sparks flew from them, but with her silver-painted fingernails, what I'd seen had to be them and nothing else.

"Whoa, Mads. You're crossing the line." I held out both hands, palms toward her, hoping she'd take it as a *stay away* and not an *I'm-totally-freaked-out-by-you* gesture. "Mac's not—and that's none of your business. You and I are friends. Always have been, but at this rate, I can't say always will be."

She softened, the lines in her face fading. "You called me Mads. You only do that when you're being nice to me. When you love—"

"I'm nice to you because we're *friends* and have been for a really long time." *Or were. Think, Winn, think. Why would she act like this? What did you do to make her think you liked her?*

"But you love Mac, not me."

Like a parent to a child, I braced my hands on Maddie's arms, preparing to use the voice my dad always chose to make sure I understood, in no uncertain terms. "You and I are *just friends*."

"Because you love Mackenzie Thorne and not me!" She swatted at me.

I backed up, covering my face. "Maddie, stop!"

A screech resonated from her and sent birds into the sky.

"Admit it, Winn. Admit it!"

"Yes, Maddie. I love Mac. I have all year, and I still do."

"Even though she's gone?" Her eyebrows wiggled even as her voice turned to stone. "Even though she's left you and has no future ... plans?"

"Yes. You can't help who you love, no matter their faults." With that, I headed for the door, away from the Maddie I didn't understand.



She rocked on her heels, taking a spot against the deck railing as I grabbed the door handle. “Fine,” she said.

*Fine? All that drama, and fine?* Using that as my cue, I opened and walked back through the door, into the living room, through the house, and out the other side without another look back.

I’d have to call Caroline to find out what had gotten into Maddie.

She’d never been so dramatic. So odd. So psychotic.

Never.

• • •

The sun had set during my weird-fest with Maddie. In the car, I tried to forget her and focus on the conversation I’d had with Moira instead.

“This whole day has been nothing but weird,” I said to the empty passenger seat.

Taking a deep breath, I thought through the very odd conversation-fight-and-one-sided-yell-fest Maddie had dished out on me. The action had been completely unlike her—or unlike the Maddie I knew. Her mom had seemed normal, though who knew what could come of the mating of a former human and a goblin. *Maybe that’s it? Maybe mixed blood is a light switch for insanity?* The theory would fit Mac, but at least Mac wore crazy well. Maddie, though? I just didn’t get.

She’d been such a good friend for so long; I’d never looked at her as anything but.

Why had she acted so weird? *Why kiss me?*

A shiver tore through me as the Jaguar’s wheels fell into every rut in the road again. Navigating them in the dark became a fruitless activity. I slowed and continued on, bouncing and throwing myself from side to side with each giant pothole.

“Why wouldn’t Moira fix these things? A little magic would help.”

*Does Maddie not know about the magic?* How could she not with a mom on the Council?

As the trees thinned and I figured the main road would appear, lights flashed and a figure stepped into the middle, backlit by those lights. I braked hard—not that I’d been going fast. My car bounced in another rut as it came to a stop.

As I touched the door handle to step out, my windshield exploded into a light so bright I had to cover my eyes. “What’s going on?” I said to myself, fumbling for the latch.

The light grew brighter, if that were possible, searing into my eyes and giving me an instant headache.

Chanting reached my ears, but I couldn’t make out the words.

Without warning, my car spun as if I’d been caught up in a tornado.

Removing my hand from my eyes burned my retinas as if I’d stared at the sun for too long.

With my lids re-shut tight, I grappled for my cell phone, hovered my thumb over the screen and swiped with no idea if I even found the right program for a phone call.

Whiteness breached my closed eyes, shooting pain deep inside my brain. I grasped my head as pressure built up. Any minute and I expected it to explode and dump the contents of my skull all over my car.

The phone fell from my weakened grip.

I slumped in my seat, clutching my head and screaming.

What had once been light became dark.

## 26

Darkness remained. Within my head. Within my scope of vision. Within every nuance of myself. I could see nothing.

“Winn.”

My name echoed through my head, not spoken by me, but by some soft voice, somewhere, far away.

I remembered the light. I remembered the potholes. Braking. Stopping. Getting out of the car.

*Accident?*

“Winn.” Again the voice. No closer than before, just a far away mention of me.

Me.

*Did I die?* Had I hit a tree with all swerving and jostling? *Did the other car hit me?*

“Winn. Wake up.” Same sound. Still no visual.

I opened my lips to speak, but a parched throat kept me from saying anything.

Snapping fingers resonated through my pounding head. “Winn, dammit. Wake up already. Why’s he not waking up? How’d he get here? He’s not supposed to be here.” Storming feet vibrated the surface underneath my body.

A shift of my butt gave way to a solid, flat surface. *Am I still in my car?*

“Shh. He’s not yet accustomed. Give him more time.”

*Who’s talking?*

My head lolled to the side as I strained to understand, to focus, to function.

“That’s it! Winn, if you don’t open those damn eyes right now, I’m going to kick your ass.”

*Mac?* “Mac?” My question came out hoarse and dry, though I couldn’t force my eyes open.

“Who the hell else? And how did you get here? Dammit, if you die in here, I’m going to be so incredibly pissed!”

“Can’t ... can’t see.”

“Well, you’d be able to if you opened your eyes.”

“Too ... bright.” With each attempt, light filled my vision, blinding just as it had before. “Mac. Really, I can’t—” Panic struck. What had happened? Why did I get nothing but blinding whiteness when I tried to open my eyes? “I can’t ... see!”

A hand touched my face. “It’s okay, darling boy. Panic is not the answer.” Not-Mac’s-voice said.

For that I said a silent ‘thanks’. At least someone wouldn’t yell at me for not doing what I couldn’t do.

The hands stayed against my cheeks, relaxing my muscles and stopping the trembles. “Help him sit up, Mackenzie.”

The grip under my armpits brought me upright as the hands on my face moved to cover my eyes. “You got heavy in the last two weeks, geek boy.”

With Mac near me, I pulled her in closer. “I can’t ... see.”

A hand caressed my cheek. “The frailty of the human body is a negative consequence of the journey. You may not have all your senses about you for some time. You can hear. Can you feel?”

“Yes.” *I can feel Mac’s body against mine.*

“Smell?”

I breathed in deep, infusing myself with Mac’s scent. “Yes.”

“Taste is unnecessary at this point. You’ll compensate with your mind. Mackenzie, take your young man’s hand.” What I assumed was Mac’s hand slipped against my palm. “You feel the connection? Does she bring a familiarity?”

She did. The plane of her hand against mine fit just as well as the leather gloves my dad gave me two Christmases before. “Yes.”

“Focus, then, upon that. Let your mind function for your eyes. It is not necessary to use them here. Quite the opposite in fact. It is not what you see but what you feel.”

*How is this possible? “Am I ... dead?”*

Sweet, warm air tickled the back of my neck. “You’re not dead, but you might as well—”

“Hush, now, Mackenzie.” The cover over my eyes disappeared, letting light seep through my lids. “Though I do believe, for the duration of your stay, you will need to see through your mind’s eye, as I’ve described.”

“Focus, Winn!” Mac’s insistence made me shiver.

The first few blinks shot pain into my retinas.

“Don’t try to open them,” the second voice said. “Feel with your mind. Allow it to control what the eyes cannot.” The hands on my cheeks moved up to my eyelids. Her thumbs caressed from the outside to the inner center and back. “Now, open again but only to the imagination. What you see will not always be what you expect.”

A few blinks and the white light faded to a soft grey. I could make out forms, shapes. Mac’s shape—the one I knew so well. Someone next to her. The colors green and white, blue and something dark like brown or black.

A shadow filled my vision a second later. Two beats afterward, lips crushed mine.

Mac’s lips.

Mac’s touch.

Mac’s scent.

Instinct brought my hands around, grasping her back and tugging her closer. Something slipped between my legs, digging into my crotch. I hoped her knee found that spot, but I didn’t take any more time to assess, simply took.

Enjoyed.

Passionately accepted.

As our kiss slowed, she released our lips, but not our hold. Her finger traced around the back of my ear and down my neck. “How did you get here?”

“Where is ... here? Are you sure I’m not dead?”

“No, you’re not dead. Why won’t you believe me already?”

A small laugh left the second person—who I couldn’t focus on or get a visual of.

I reached out as if to point, though where I’d angled my finger, only someone with fully working vision would know. *Mac came back for me, then. Right?* Yet again, I struggled with the information that swirled in my head but an inability to believe. *How can I see, but not see?*

Mac’s laugh hit me. I’d missed that sound. Two weeks had seemed an eternity. Adding in the week before doubled the feeling we’d been separated forever.

“Why? Why am I ... wherever I am?”

“I don’t know, Winn. I really don’t.” She let go.

I blinked fast, Mac's face coming in clearer the more her essence seeped into me, the more my memories overrode what my eyes wanted to take in. "You don't know where I am?" My grab didn't reach her.

"This is just not good." Each of Mac's exclamations grew louder as if my hearing had been foggy for a bit and cleared, too. She stopped right in front of me.

The fact she'd ignored my question made me tremble. I went to pace but my head spun as if I'd been on a Tilt-o-Whirl for a few too many rides.

"Sit, sit," the second voice said. I still couldn't see her.

"Mac? Tell me ... please ... where am I? Please tell me what's going on. Why can't I see anything but you?"

"You're going to be royally pissed when I tell you," Mac said, as the other voice said, "You see only her because she is the only familiar element you have here. This is a place where you can envision life in any way you wish and pull from shared memories to connect with others. Focus on Mackenzie, and she will come clear. Focus on a scene you know, and it will come clear. Let her lead you, and what she sees, you will see."

I willed my eyes to focus on the invisible scene around me. Not a forest. Not a bumpy road. No car. Lots and lots and lots of puffy white. *Cotton?* "I've gone nuts and am in a padded room." Maddie must have bled her craziness on to me. *This has be some sort of magical dimension or spell.*

"What? No." Mac laughed again. "What's it look like?"

"Didn't I just say?"

"No. You said a padded room."

"Uh ... big fluffy clouds. Lots of them. And people or shapes. Lots of blue. Gold, too. It reminds me of the pictures of heaven in the kid coloring books I got from the vacation bible school I went to one summer with Caroline."

"Typical human," the second voice said without any malice.

"So is there a third dimension then? Some alternative to ... you know where?"

"Nope. You, my friend, are in the in-between," Mac said.

An involuntary jerk worked along with the rapid beat of my heart. "I can't—that's not—what about—" *All the rules about humans entering.*

I didn't want to die. I didn't want to remain inside. How had I entered in the first place without being cryogenically frozen? My thoughts ran rampant as realization stuck.

No third dimension. No crazy padded cell. Nothing but reality and one I couldn't be a part of.

"He's hyperventilating." Something touched my lips. "Breathe deeply, dear. That's it. Slower. Big deep breaths, now. There you go."

Mac came into focus again as I blinked through each breath. "Like she said. Typical human. Damn you. Why couldn't you just be immortal?"

• • •

I sat there for what seemed like forever, staring at the space around me. I'd believed I sat in heaven, so it looked like it—or felt like, or had become heaven because my mind chose it to be—that kids' bible school version of heaven at least. My feeble human brain refused to conjure up any other image. We'd learned the in-between worked that way—using dreams of some sort. I didn't realize just how much I'd have to rely on it.

"Don't worry, dear boy," the second voice said.

"Who—"

"Oh, yeah. Winn, meet my mom, the goddess, Maya. Mom, meet Winn."

*I should have guessed.*

"How do you do, Winn? And, please ... call me Maya."

"My head ..." I circled around it with a finger.

"Here, touch my hand. I'll help steady you." She reached out, still an amorphous shape.

With one touch, my head cleared as if she'd been what the doctor ordered. Though still edgy, my balance leveled out a little. A glance down and the clouds rushed up at me. My stomach dropped as I realized I had to be standing on top of them.

*What's keeping me from falling through? Oh, god, what if I fall through? What—*

"He's doing that breathing thing again, Mom." Mac's grip around my arm steadied me, though I stared down, the clouds parting and the view of the earth, thousands of feet beneath my feet, coming clear as if I stood on a piece of glass.

My hands shook. My body started in again. I didn't want to move for fear I'd start a free fall to earth.

"Winn, darling. Remember that the in-between is a reality based on inner visions and dreams. A place without a true essence. It is whatever you

believe it to be.”

“I—I’m going to fall if I move.”

“Then give yourself something to stand on.”

“What?”

“He’s not getting this, Mom. This is why humans shouldn’t be in here.” Mac snapped in front of my face. “Yo, Geek boy. It’s not scary like Raven suggested. She just has fun torturing me.”

A smile flitted through my lips.

“Focus beyond what your mind wants you to believe, to what you *need* to believe,” Maya said. “Look into your own heart, and the image before you will change.”

“Just think it, dude.”

“Yes, as Mackenzie said. What she sees, what you see, and what I see are all different. Though we interact with each other, again, through shared memories. Think it, and your view will change. Try a memory you can revel in, Winn. That should help.”

I thought of my own mother, the woman I’d only met in pictures—with the long, brown hair that curled up at the bottom edges into gold. The woman who had her arms wrapped around my father’s waist, snuggling into him in almost every picture I’d ever found of them.

The edges of my vision turned dark. “Uh ...” The white clouds grayed, deepening toward black. “This isn’t—” A lightning bolt flashed from the sky.

“Release the thought, Winn,” Mac’s mom said.

“What?”

“Go somewhere else,” Mac said.

The dark continued to roll, to roil, to build and bubble above me. “What’s happening?”

A snap of lightning. The whip of wind.

Nothing stood between me and the sky—the ugliness of the storm. I couldn’t let go of it. I couldn’t believe I’d conjured such anger in the thought of my own mother.

“Let it go, Winn!”

Mac and Maya disappeared from my view.

All that lay before me came as a barreling storm set to unleash its fury on me at any second.

“Winn!”



Murmurs built and grew in sound, ones I didn't understand.

*How can this be what comes when I think of my mom?*

Darkness edged closer and closer; deafening screams filled the air around me.

The press of lips against mine broke my focus.

Mac's lips.

Again.

The tweet of a bird reached me first, and as I opened my eyes, the skies had cleared. The blue, white and rays of sunshine had returned, and on the branch of a giant oak, in the middle of a cemetery—Primrose in fact—stood a tiny bird.

I didn't want the new vision to end, or the memory to go away, so I wrapped my arms around Mac. As angry as I'd been with her when she left, I'd been just as angry with myself for giving up, for being stupidly human enough to say her selfishness had been too much for me. She had everything to worry about. I had nothing.

Maddie had it wrong when she'd said humans have everything to aspire to. Mac had greatness coming to her.

Our kisses slowed even though our bodies pressed against each other.

"It seems Mackenzie has a nice effect upon you, Winn. I see why she loves you so."

Mac whirled, her body rigid. "Sheesh, Mom!"

I tugged her back and pressed my lips to hers. "Loves me so?" I mimicked her mom's tone and rhythm.

"She doesn't know what she's talking about."

With a raised eyebrow, I said, "Really, Mac? 'Cause I heard that pretty clearly."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Okay. Never mind. We'll get to that later." I relaxed my head against hers. "What happened with my thoughts there?"

"Not pretty, huh?"

"Could you see it?"

"Yeah."

"How? If your mom said we all see different things—"

"We do. But we can sense it, and if we tune in, we can feel it and see it ..."

Her hand slipped down to mine.

"I hear a *but* coming."

“Okay, listen. All cards on the table, ‘kay?”

“I’m all in already, so you might as well tell me, and tell me how I’m going to get out of here ... *if* I’m going to get out of here.”

“A reaction like that comes when you tap into someone *else’s* memories. Someone else who’s in the in-between. Someone who doesn’t want those memories revealed or shared or remembered or who has negative ones.”

“I was thinking about my mom, and so was someone else? Who’s in here? Who’d have memories of her that would turn the world evil looking?”

Mac’s mom approached, dressed in a flowing gown of white, just as we’d picked for Mac with her first trip. “Your grandfather.”

*Dad was right.*

“Something similar happened when I first came in here,” Mac said. “I thought I was thinking about you, and it got all stormy like it did for you just now. But I have memories with you, so I didn’t realize what was happening.”

“Is ... my ... *mom* ... here, too?” I twisted as if I might conjure her and see her.

“No, Winn, she is not,” Maya said. “Your mother ... no. She’s not. ’Tis your grandfather with the connections.”

“My dad told me he figured this place out, but I didn’t realize he was still inside. I mean he died when I was five.” I ran a hand through my hair, brushing back and forth until I stopped on my face again. “Why would the memory be so bad then? I mean ... I didn’t ever get to meet my mom, and I still have good ... thoughts about her.” If my grandpa held memories so weird, did that mean something had happened with my mom? Or could something have changed him?

“You’re thinking again,” Mac said.

“What? Maddie and Caroline mentioned that this week.”

Mac’s lips firmed.

“Those exact same words actually.”

“Because I used them. I told them that’s the face you make when you’re thinking.”

*Maddie’d said that when she’d attacked me, too.*

“It doesn’t really matter why, just remember that any memories you try to conjure that are shared—like a story you’ve been told or something—you have no idea what the consequences will be. So just stick to ones you know for sure, and if you get caught up ...”

I gave Mac my best smile. “You can just kiss me and make it stop.”

“Spoken like a true geek boy.” She tweaked my ear before laying her lips against mine again. “I missed you, Winn.”

“I missed you. Now, can you tell me why I’m here?”

• • •

“Walk with us, Winn. And while you do, concentrate only on your connection with Mackenzie.”

“Uh ... okay.” I couldn’t believe how much I’d stuttered since I’d arrived—since Maddie had accosted me with her girl weirdness.

“Focus, nerd boy,” Mac said from next to me.

I took a deep breath and did as she asked. We started down a cloud-strewn path of white cotton. I kept my mind trained on the hand that Mac held, on the way her body moved beside me. On her smile. On her typical black clothes and on how much happiness surrounded me when I stood with her.

The road turned to golden bricks, grass ebbing like waves from the edges and spilling out into what used to be my clouds. A whole world formed in front of me, a vast horizon of houses and people and life.

“This is ...” I didn’t know how to describe it. “This is like the movie *The Wizard of Oz*.”

“Bizarre is the best word I can come up with,” Mac said.

Maya led us to an open park of more green, blue skies and a rainbow so vivid I didn’t understand how it could exist. “That’s not possible without rain.” I pointed up.

Mac tilted her head toward where my finger directed. “It is in the in-between.”

“Come, sit, Winn,” Maya said, “and I will tell you what I know.”

## 27

Maya sat on a concrete-looking park bench. It could have been made of clouds, actual cement or cheese, and I wouldn't have known. *Just go with it.* Mac and I took the seats across from her as people materialized from behind trees, from within shops and buildings that appeared as if from nowhere.

“Is this city ... growing?”

“That would be your mind allowing you to connect with the dreams of others,” Maya said. “Where once your vision may have seemed ... fuzzy ... now, you may see what others see.”

“And people who die want to go shopping? No, thank you.”

Mac laughed. Maya did too, a soft sound so different from Mac's. “In your version of heaven, humans get to do whatever they wish for eternity. In here, our kind has a stop-gap until we are no longer. It may seem like eternity, thus, the mundane such as shopping becomes an integral part of delineating the days. Now, Winn. Let us start with your presence here.”

“Wait ... before you tell me I can or can't leave ... no matter what happens, is it possible for me to talk to my grandpa?”

Maya's lips pursed. “It would not be wise.”

“Why? I'm already here. I could just ask him—”

“You're aware humans may not exit the in-between, correct?”

“So I've been told.” My grip on Mac's hand tightened. “But if he's here, that can't be true.”

Maya tilted her head. “There are circumstances in which you do not understand. Your grandfather is an interesting exception. Thus, it is not wise, Winn, to make that connection. Should you do so, it may be more difficult for me to secure your return.”

“I don't understand.” What could it hurt to see my grandfather once? Why would talking to him in a place he understood best be a problem? “He's my grandpa. I remember him ... a little. I—”

“He should not be your focus.” Maya lowered and shook her head. “Your grandfather was instrumental in finding this place, in reaching outside the

boundaries of the human world and into ours. You need to leave that to his memory and keep the memories you already have.”

Mac bumped me with her shoulder. “Probably should give it a rest. Sorry.”

“Now ...” Maya said. “You have no history or lineage with the immortal.”

I nodded even though a question hadn’t been asked.

“But you are bonded with the Council.”

“Right, but Mac broke it when ... last time ... before.”

“I can’t break a bond like that. Who do you think I am? Magwa?” She slugged my bicep. “No one can break that.”

“But you—”

“Of course I said that. Tried to make it easier on you, and then you went and stopped trying!”

“Huh? What’re you talking about? You left. I didn’t have a reason to keep going.”

“Yes, you did! You had *me*. I told you I’d be back.”

“You also told me not to wait.”

“Yeah, well. There’s that. I was trying to be nice.”

“Your version of nice is a little off, Mac.” Even as I said it I laughed.

“I saw that in a movie once and figured it was the right thing to do. You know, let you out of your—” She air quoted. “—tie to me, and you could live happily ever after, but then I’d come running back once I did what I needed to do.”

“Back to our dilemma ...” Maya shut us both up. “Winn is here involuntarily, correct? Tell me what happened.”

“I was driving, saw a light and here I am.”

“Back up from that. Where were you coming from? Where were you going?”

I relayed that I’d talked with Moira, and had been talking with Maddie though I didn’t go into details on our conversation. “And the next thing I know—tada.”

“Back up another sec,” Mac said. “Maddie’s mom is Moira? Are you—is she—”

“You didn’t know?” I asked.

“Of course not!” Mac’s hand flew up and back down like a bird deciding not to fly away. “Does she know about me? Is she human or goblin? How—”

What—” Mac sounded as confused as I’d been.

“I believe what our darling Mackenzie is trying to ascertain is do you believe this young lady is human or not?”

I shrugged. “She didn’t do magic, and when she asked why I was there, Moira made up an excuse for me. A good one about college, but she did that whole open your eyes wide thing as if I wasn’t supposed to tell about what I knew.”

“Argh,” Mac said. “I sorta get the Maddie thing if Moira never told her and she’s just plain human, but who sent you here, how, and better yet, why? Because Maddie and Moira wouldn’t have done it.”

“I don’t believe you can make that assumption,” Maya said.

We both faced Maya. “Why not?” Mac and I said at the same time.

“Because you were within the confines of a goblin’s presence, and they are well known for their trickery.”

“But Moira’s a Mac supporter. And me. She even said Mac needed me and seemed really happy that we were together. Maddie ... well, she’s just Maddie. She’s ... just a girl. Why would she be involved?”

Maya tapped a finger against her chin. “Perhaps this mystery is not one we will solve from here.”

“Yeah, instead, we need to find a way out before—” Mac twisted her wrist toward her.

“You’re wearing a watch?” When had she ever? Mac wore no jewelry except the chocolate diamond I’d given her for Christmas, which hung on a chain around her neck. No earrings. No bracelets.

“It’s how I know when to go back. Suze gave me the idea when he visited.”

“Suze can visit?”

Mac nodded. “Of course. He’s a demon, and he’s my protector, so he can go wherever.”

I hung my head hoping the re-pooling of blood inside might help store all the information I’d been given and taken in. “How much time do we have?”

“Um ... about a day.”

“What?” I snapped up straight. “It was Friday when I was at Maddie’s. How—that was only the seventh.” Shaking my head harder didn’t help. While my headache didn’t pound or throb, my thoughts stayed all jumbled—like I couldn’t put them all together to understand what came first or after or think anywhere into the future. I’d understood that time sped up in the in-

between, but a week in a day? *Is that what's messing with my head?* “Oh, my god. My dad! He doesn't know where—”

Maya held up her hand. “I have been in touch with the Council. They are aware of your predicament and have informed your father.”

“You can do that?”

“Yes, Winn. I *am* a goddess.”

“But you're a dead one who lives in a place that's all fantasy. And you've passed the Ides at least fifty times!”

“Ooh, he told you, Mom.”

As I prepared to glare at Mac, Maya laughed, a sweet sound that took away a little bit of the mixed-up-head stuff going on inside me.

“As I explained to my daughter, my entry was by choice. As a goddess, I had ... freedom ... to do so. Now, though, we have a problem.”

“On that ... not the problem part, but the freedom part. I—” With a look to Mac, I turned back to Maya and pressed on. “Zoe thinks you chose this place for her and Mac. My question is why? Why leave your children? My mom wouldn't ever have done that, if she had a choice.”

Maya's lips fell into a tight line. “Sometimes, Winn, what we do not know about others is what helps us proceed in life. My presence in the human world was a danger to my daughters. After careful thought and consideration, I opted to remove myself. I remain connected, however, through the in-between.”

“So you're up in the godly realm—” I didn't know whether to point up, down or around, given where we stood.

Maya laughed, infecting Mac and I, too. “My reasons are my own, Winn,” she said. “If we can leave it at that—”

“No, I really don't think I can. I'm sorry to be so ... stubborn and probably even being rude, but I've been told things and lied to and made to believe stuff that's not true. I want the truth. For once. From someone.”

“I'll tell you later,” Mac said.

“No, darling, it's all right. Your young man deserves some truths.” Maya's hands clasped in her lap. “As Mackenzie knows, her father is human, and no, I will not reveal who he is. When the Changeling prior to Raven chose to remain with her human partner, I realized that meant a new Changeling would come from me very soon. I fought for years to change the tradition, right up to and through Raven's choice. I became her friend to influence her, but then actually became her friend. Unfortunately, the

Council disagreed with everything I tried during Raven's first eighteen years so that when I bore Mackenzie, the Council left me with an ultimatum: follow the tradition or enter the realm of the human."

"They were going to make *you* human? They can do that to a goddess?" I asked.

"They would have made it a recommendation to the gods. It is a ... punishment, if you will."

"But you're a *goddess*," I said.

"Yes, I am. But I am a minor goddess, born of the copulation of other minor goddesses and humans. You see, in my family, we have a history of mixed marriages, shall we say. I fought for six years, but in the end, I chose to relinquish my rights to you in exchange for the privilege to remain myself." She held up a hand. "Hate me if you will, but—"

"I don't," Mac said.

Maya's shoulders relaxed as if she'd expected a different response from Mac. "During those six years, I remained an active part in Mac's life, though I could not call myself her mother. I took her to the library, read to her from the book, but every night, had to return her to Alina and Lucas. They did the best they could, but it was never enough for me. Then ... Zoe was born—"

"Why didn't Suze know who Zoe was? Sorry to interrupt."

Maya chuckled. "In order to protect her, he performed a memory spell on himself. It ... mostly worked. He is quite the character you know."

I did know. "Okay, so Zoe?"

"Yes. When I had Zoe, I tried again to bring my family together, and the Council acted as they often do about traditions. They claimed my loyalty to the human realm had put them in an untenable position. On the side of tradition, one-half laid claim. On the side of change, the other half remained with me. There was to be no compromise. There are moments in life, dear boy, where we see the future clearly. The only way to ensure both my daughter's safety as well as that of my mate, I would have to separate myself completely."

"You can't ever come back?" Mac's eyes widened.

"Not yet. Not soon enough, but yes, I can." Maya ran a hand down Mac's cheek. "It is something I have long waited for. But it cannot be now."

"When?" Mac and I asked.

"All in due time."



“So Raven’s lightning bolt or star or whatever it was—she did or didn’t send you here?” I asked.

“Raven did for me what I could not do for myself. We fought, against and on each other’s sides, not over Mackenzie, but over my decision. She knew of my plan, but I’d bound her from speaking of it. We were the very best of friends, you know. So I used her falling star.”

“Raven mentioned your friendship but wouldn’t talk about it in detail,” I said.

“I imagine not. She, too, lost a friend. She very rarely used the stars but her frustration made one fall, and I took it as an opportunity. You see, a falling star can be multi-purposed. For you, Winn, you wish upon it. For me, it is a transport method. A star is the passing of a spirit from one location to the next. I was taken directly here. And here, is where I stay.”

“But you communicate with Zoe.”

Maya’s head swiveled side to side. “Only because of *her* ability. Until she joined me, I was not allowed to tell her about our relationship. Now, when she thinks of me, I can respond in kind. She’s fully aware now of what we can and cannot do. But until all is settled once again, I cannot return.”

“You know, staying in here means Mac and Zoe both will want to come back,” I said.

“Mackenzie knows that one day we shall reunite.”

“So you were being altruistic? For the good of everyone even though your daughters didn’t get to grow up with you ... and ... your husband or boyfriend or whatever gets to grow old and die without you? How is that better than being human?” I asked.

“Perhaps you’d like to ask Mackenzie? I believe she’s indicated a number of times that she shall not choose human.”

She had. Many, many times. “The book ... it says to choose ... it say she can choose a thirteenth spot. That Mac can *add* herself to the Council. How?” Mac’s wide eyes reminded me she probably hadn’t gotten the email I sent with the details since she’d been in a world that didn’t use computers. “I figured out the subliminal message. Well ... Zoe did.”

Like she had with Mac, Maya ran her hand down my cheek. “You are such a wise boy. And yes, Mackenzie has an opportunity you’ll have to explain to her later.”

Mac’s eyebrow rose. “Maybe *you* could explain it now, Mom?”

“No, darling. I cannot. You see, in this, your teacher must guide you.” Maya smiled right at me. “And he’s done a wonderful, wonderful job so far.”

“But I’m stuck in here, like you,” I said. “How is that doing my job?”

“Because it will teach true selflessness.” She turned to Mac, took her hands and held them. “Darling, answer me this. If I were to secure Winn’s re-arrival into his human corpse with as little damage as possible, would you return to earth, take your rightful place on the Council and strive to make the changes we’ve discussed?”

Mac spun toward me. “Do you still hate me for leaving?”

I reached for her, tucking a hair behind her ear. “I didn’t hate you before. Like I told you, Mac—”

“Don’t say it.”

Maya chuckled; I presumed she knew what I’d been about to say, and Mac’s reaction had been normal.

“Fine, fine,” I said. “No, I don’t hate you.”

Maya’s lips twitched. “I hope my darling daughter here will see how much of a wonder you are before it is too late. If you have further questions, you may always ask them through Zoe, but we are running out of time and need to prepare.” She turned her attention to Mac. “Please ask Suze to join us.”

“Why?” I asked as Mac lifted her face to the sky and said, “Suze!”

“Because it is time to solve the problem that is your arrival into this plane unexpectedly. And to every problem, there is a solution if one can find the proper entity to help in its execution.”

A mass of glitter in silver and gold fell from the sky, dripping like water in a circle around us and covering the grass. No loud bang. No bright light. No smoke. Just calm.

Mac held out her hand. On her palm, stood a miniature creature.

*Suze?*

“Now what you want, *Maaaaackenzie?*”

*Definitely Suze.* The voice matched, though the body did not.

“Why is he so small?”

Mac grinned and raised her eyebrows. “Winn ... meet the *real* Suze.”

“But he’s ... tiny.” He couldn’t have been bigger than my middle finger. “I thought he was a destroyer demon.”

“Who you calling tiny?” His stature had not altered his voice: deep and rumbly. As Suze turned, he giggled. “Size only matters in your world. Only in yours.” He tugged on a miniature orange construction jacket and righted a hard hat.

The irony of the massive Suze in such a small package had laughter filling my lungs. I tried to force it and my smile back down.

“Wait ... wait ... wait ...” Suze scratched at his chin. “Something is amiss here.”

“The fact that you’re five inches tall?” Mac asked.

Suze held up a finger and pointed it straight at me. “What is *he* doing here?”

“We need to extricate Winn from within the in-between,” Maya said.

“But he’s a human. He can’t be removed. Unless ... well ... you know.”

*Unless?*

“*Unless* what?” Mac asked. “We need a way out for Winn.”

*My question exactly.*

Suze spun on Mac’s hand. “He’s not supposed to be in here! Why can’t you two follow any of the rules?” His voice turned to a pitiful whine.

“You were supposed to keep him occupied until I got back,” Mac said.

“I tried.” Suze stomped his feet on Mac’s hand. “But he went off the grid. AWOL. Rogue. He disappeared. Well, his soul did, at least.”

“Because he’s here, Suze.” Mac thumped her head with her fist.

“Oh, well, that explains why he’s in a coma at the hospital.”

“Wait ... where am I? I thought the whole body came in here.” The realization that mine waited for me somewhere freaked me out a little.

The sheepish tilt of Suze’s head and twist of his body made me wonder what had happened. “Human bodies stay in their real life. You know ... Zoe’s was at Saroya’s house while she was here, ‘cause she’s half-human. Anyway ... you couldn’t pick a better spot to read that incantation than in Moira’s driveway? Like back up on the mountain? Somewhere with wide open space so it would be easy for m—”

“I didn’t read it, Suze.”

He scratched at his miniature chin. “So someone sent you in? Hmmm ... this is not good. Nope. Not good at all. Not a bit. Nary a squeak.” His eyes opened wide. One finger pointed to the sky. “Give me a sec.” Suze disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“Where’d he go?” I asked.

Mac's shoulder shrug made me think she didn't know either.

No sooner had she dropped her hand, Suze plopped onto Mac's shoulder like a miniature devil. I expected him to have a second version of himself in angel form on her other side. Given the horns and change of attire into all red, he fit the picture exactly as I envisioned it.

Suze crossed his leg over his knee and swung it, hitting Mac's shoulder each time it returned.

She raised a hand, bringing her middle finger and thumb together and with one flick, he went flying. "That's for not paying attention to Winn every single moment of the day."

Suze raced back, like a mice among cats through the grass, and stood at Mac's feet. "Step on me and you won't have me to help you anymore."

I could hear him, but not see him well, so I crouched down and lifted him in my hand.

"Now that's what I call superior service." Suze settled on my palm.

"Where did you go, Suze?" Maya asked.

"I went to tell your dad you were in here instead of ... like, mostly dead, what with all those lines and tubes and breathing machines attached to you. You know ... so they don't pull the plug."

"You did not, Suze! He's human! He's going to think Winn can't get out!" Mac stormed off and came back. "Now they have no reason to *keep* him on life support."

"Oh. Was I not supposed to say that?"

"No," Maya and I said.

Maya's lips moved into a grin. She took Suze from me. "I believe, my darling, we must prepare for this human's exit. He's been here too long, and we need to ensure his father doesn't mistake his human status for a permanent one despite what I already told the Council til tell him. And we haven't much time. Not much time at all." Maya turned to me. "Your grandfather remains with us to this day because the last time he ventured inside, he was unable to sustain the force of the return, and his human body thusly perished while his mind stayed within."

"He ... died because of ... this place?"

"In so few words, yes. But he had no protector like Mac and ... like you will. As I said, his case is far different than yours. We will return you, but you'll have to trust me, Winn. What you will experience will not be

pleasant. Why any human would venture inside here is beyond my level of comprehension given the rigors of the return.”

“But my grandfather did.”

Maya nodded.

“And others have?”

“There have been a few instances, yes. Thankfully, we’ve been able to curtail any others from crossing the barrier between our worlds.”

“What do I have to do, then?” I asked.

“Better question is how soon can we make it happen?” Mac turned her watch to me. The hour and minute hand spun, around and around reaching the six o’clock hour as I stared at it. “Six hours and we have to be outta here.”

“Mackenzie ... why don’t you give Winn a ... tour for a moment.”

Even a human could read the ‘go away so I can talk to Suze innuendo’ in that statement.

Mac grabbed my hand and tugged me toward a wooden bridge which turned into a road with a silver Mercedes on top of it. As we walked closer, I said, “I want to talk to my grandpa before I go.”

She twisted toward me. “How did I know you’d ask me that?”

## 28

Mac ran her hands along the Mercedes' sleek surface. "This isn't just *a car*. It's a Gullwing Mercedes. It's ... an adventure."

As she reached for the handle, the scene wavered and morphed until we stood in front of a four-wheeled carriage complete with driver in top hat and tails.

She turned to me and pointed. "This your idea?"

I opened my eyes wide. "No! Not me."

"How much you wanna bet this is my mom's deal?"

"Why would she interfere like that?"

Mac climbed into the back seat. "Apparently, it's something she and my dad used to do a lot."

"Oh." I joined her, the seat squishing under our combined weight and sinking us close together. My body temperature superheated at our near-private closeness.

I wanted to kiss her, to hold her, to pull her against me in all sorts of ways.

We rocked backward as the driver snapped the horses into a walk.

"She really won't tell you anything about your dad?"

Mac shook her head. "Says my focus is to be on the Council." She started to brush off the thought with a wave in the air, but I caught her wrists and pulled her against me, just as I'd pictured ten seconds before. "What're you doing?"

I leaned in, our noses brushing, my lips grazing over hers. "I just ... need a minute."

"You do know every thought you have here is public, right? And that means the growth formula you got going on is seeping into my head, too."

Crushing my lips to hers, I didn't care who knew I'd missed Mac and everything about her. She reciprocated, our tongues meeting as they so often did when we had time together. Desire overrode common sense, which at that point, I figured I'd lost.

The question of whether Mac cared or not remained unanswered as she met my touches with her own, mirrored my tilt with hers, and her arms wrapped around me as if she wanted what I did just as much.

With my eyes closed, I imagined life with Mac beyond her nineteenth birthday.

“Ahh!” Our mixed scream sent my heart rocketing as my stomach plummeted. “Oh, my god,” I said. “What happened?”

The carriage had disappeared, replaced by nothing but the pavement below. My butt stung as if we’d dropped straight onto rock.

Mac rose, standing again on a cobblestone road and holding a hand out to me. “See? Public mixing of connected thoughts. I’ll take a guess that someone didn’t want us going any further with that kiss.”

*Or we have no future, and there is nothing to consider.*

I stood, too, wiping what I imagined to be dirt off my rear. “This place is freaky. Why would anyone want to be here?”

“It’s not a place where they connect thoughts regularly. It’s just that it can be done and if it is, you see the consequences. If it hurts someone else, it will change. Well, not always, but most of the time.”

“And you learned all of this in the time you’ve been in here?”

Mac slipped her hands in her pockets. “Yeah. What feels like a whopping four days has been nearly three weeks of your time. I also know what’s going to happen when you leave.”

“What’s that?”

“You don’t want to know.”

I rolled my eyes, something Mac did to me often. “Then why bring it up?”

“Because it hurts me to think about it.”

I moved to just in front of her and put my hands on her cheeks. “Whatever it is, I can handle it.” If the return ended up in any way like my entry, I could deal with the temporary confusion, eyesight issues and nausea.

She nodded, her gaze on mine. “In a little while. We still have ...” Watch toward her again, she said, “Five hours.”

Five hours gave me plenty of time to find my grandpa, get back and deal with the consequences of being human in a place I shouldn’t have been. Mac might be able to get the answers about her dad at a later time, but I didn’t expect to be able to reenter. Ever.

“How long do you think five hours really is?” I asked.

“Um ... maybe about an hour? Hour and a half?”

*An hour and a half.* I could deal with it. “I want to see my grandpa.”

Mac crossed her arms over her chest. “Why?”

“I just do. He’s the one who got my dad involved, sorta, and that passed to me. I want to ...”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Hey ... you came back to get answers, didn’t you? Why can’t I? This is my grandpa, Mac. He’s the one who screwed up. I want to know why. I want to find out what made him want this so bad that he stayed, or failed to put in the proper protection for his ... trip.”

She leaned in close. “I’d take you, but I don’t know where he is.”

I walked away from Mac, letting ideas and thoughts simmer. I spun and held up a finger. “Connected dreams and ideas. You said that’s how things happen in here, right?”

“Yeah, but—”

“If I think about my mom, that would be a connection with him. Maybe. Probably. Would it let me talk to him at least?”

Mac stretched her neck left and right, popping her shoulders.

“Come on. You got what you wanted. And if your mom is right, I’m probably never going to be able to come back and ask him about it all. I need the chance. I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Fine. But if it gets really weird, I’m going to stop you. Got that? I mean, like the whole big storm surge thing and whatever. You connect with thoughts like that, and you’re done. Go with butterflies and flowers or something.”

A smile wouldn’t thank her enough. I brushed my lips over hers. “I really missed you.” She took what I offered while at the same time, tapping her watch face. After one more kiss, I thought of my mom, picking wildflowers in a meadow.

The scene before me didn’t change.

I thought of my mom in the kitchen baking bread.

Nothing.

“It’s not working. Why isn’t it working?”

Mac shrugged. “What are you thinking about?”

“Stuff I figured my mom did.”

“Think about stuff she did do.”



“But I don’t know those because I was never around her. She died when I was born.” Frustration and disappointment pitched my voice to a whine. I firmed up my tone with a cough. “What do I do?”

Mac took my hand again. “You have pictures of her, right? Any with your grandpa?”

“A whole album. With my dad, too.”

“Start there.”

I thought about one of the photos in the album where she’d been smiling, with my grandpa on one side and my dad on her other arm. They radiated happiness. I could all but hear the laughter from the three of them, filling the room, infecting each other and even me. I imagined the hugs she gave my father and how their embrace seemed as real as any in my mind.

The skies darkened just as they had before, rolling in faster than the first time, too.

Lightning pierced the sky.

“Winn, no!” Maya’s voice reached me as the wind became a torrent of surrounding sound and air.

I imagined my mom holding me as a baby, something I figured she’d never gotten to do but expected she’d have loved doing and I would have loved, too.

All light disappeared.

Sound erupted around me, a volcano of deep rumbles.

Trembling, my eyes darted left and right as I thought of reconnecting with Grandpa. “Just once, please, Grandpa.”

• • •

“Just once, what, boy?” He stood in front of me, his grey beard just as I remembered, sturdy work goggles on his face, and his corduroys and flannel shirt covering the rest of him. Smaller than I remembered—though I’d been only five when I saw him the last time.

“Grandpa.” I stepped to him and wrapped my arms around him.

It took a second but his ended up around me. “Winnie. You’ve grown up.” His voice tore me from the images and back to him. “But—No! What are you doing here?” His hands gripped mine.

“It’s okay. I—”

“Did your father convince you to freeze yourself? Have you ... died?”

The scent of his cologne drifted to me, drawing memories from deep inside and altering the landscape to his workshop in his backyard. Tools hung on the walls or rested on the tabletop surface. On the bench behind him, he worked on a bike. My bike. The one I received for Christmas the year before he passed, and he'd let me help put together in his shed. It had been the first time I'd played with his tools. It had also been the last.

"No. I'm not dead. My girlfriend is a Changeling. *The Changeling*."

Grandpa leaned back and belted out a laugh toward the sky. He chuckled and coughed hard as if I'd said the funniest five words in the world. When he calmed, he faced me, a giant smile in his lips. "You're joking, right?"

"No." I turned to bring Mac forward, to introduce her, but she didn't exist. "It's true. I promise."

Grandpa moved to the bike, running a hand down the blue piping I'd repainted red when I'd reached my eighth birthday. "You shouldn't be here, Winn." Under his touch, the wheel spun. "What about your Dad? Does he know ..."

"He's ... aware."

Grandpa nodded, his head bobbing up and down at least a dozen times. "Why are you here, Winn? How did you find out about this place? Did your father tell—"

"No. I found out on my own. Because of my girlfriend." I didn't understand why Mac had disappeared. I'd been able to see her and Maya and Suze, why couldn't she have stood by me with my grandpa?

Grandpa stopped the spinning wheel. "How? How did you come about with this? In life? Are you sure you're not dead?"

"I promise, Grandpa. I'm not dead. Or ... I think I'm not dead. At least not yet." *Am I? Do I just not know it? Am I some spirit who doesn't want to believe it's time on earth is over?*

As I thought of Mac, the image before me faded. I brought my mom to mind again, and the shed disappeared, replaced with a hospital bed, my Grandpa, in the same spot in the plane of the image, his hand on a woman's head, not the bike.

"I—I don't remember this." I moved closer, inspecting the scene before me. The woman's lips were a pale purply-blue. Her body seemed at rest or very, very still.

The sound of a muffled cry, from a tiny baby, made me turn. My dad stood against a wall, a bundled moving baby in his arms, his eyes wide

open, staring at what I believed to have been my mother.

“Mom?” I slid to the edge of the bed, her ghostly pale face unmoving. “Mom?” I knelt and took her hand, cold to my touch. “Mom?” A part of me expected she’d open her eyes and talk to me.

A sadness sent Grandpa’s face into a deep frown. “It wasn’t supposed to be like that.”

“Is this ... my mom?”

Grandpa nodded, lips trembling. “So ... beautiful. She was always so beautiful. When I was a child, she was beyond wonderful. As I grew, I wanted her for myself.”

“What are you talking about?” I leaned toward him. “This is *my* mom, right? Grandpa?” How would he know my mom for so long?

His focus stayed on her. “I miss you still.” He knelt and took her hand. “Why did you choose this? Why?” His head dropped to her bed, deep breath heaving from his chest.

“Grandpa?” My question came out tentative.

His head rose, red-rimmed eyes facing me again. “This is all your fault, Winn.”

My entire body jerked. “What?”

A maniacal craziness took over his face. “She wanted a child more than she wanted anything. A human child, she said. The human experience. She couldn’t wait for me to join her, to become one like her. Instead, she chose mortality and my own son instead.”

I moved back from the bed, hitting the side wall. “I don’t understand.” *Immortality?* “My mom was ... non-human?”

Grandpa stood, stretching out his full six feet, the slight hunch of his shoulders a part of him I didn’t remember. “She was a goddess.”

“But—”

“A woman with immortal beauty. She wasn’t ready for me as a young man, though she herself remained young. I never should have introduced her to my son as a child, but he’d suffered so much and needed a friend.”

Like before, when Maya and Mac had explained what happened to me, confusion reigned. “I—I—don’t understand.”

“She chose having you over her immortality, Winn. You. She chose you over me.”

*How could she choose me if I didn’t exist?*

“I worked so hard to find a way that I could be with her. I tried for years to convince her I’d be with her forever. I had the solution. I’d worked it out. And she still *chose human!*” The more he talked, the angrier and darker his tone turned. “Decades of research for nothing. I fought the others who used my idea. I made sure they couldn’t follow me. All for her!” His arm whipped toward her unmoving form. “And you took her from me!”

“But I—”

He swung around to me, his pointed finger shaking. “I’d have given her everything. But she wanted you ... a human baby ... more than she’d been willing to wait for me.”

“What about Grandma?” I knew she’d died when my dad had been small—an auto accident, he’d said, but had Grandpa cheated on her with an immortal?

Grandpa’s huff came with a spin back to my mom.

“Are you telling me you loved another woman while married to Grandma?” *How dare him!*

“Get out!” He pointed to the door on the opposite side of the room.

“No! Tell me. Explain to me why—”

Grandpa came at me with his hands out. “Don’t you understand?”

I wanted to scream, *No!*

“This place was supposed to be our salvation. To bring us together. To give us the only allowable future! And she ... chose ... she picked ... a human existence and to grow old ... with my own son! If she hadn’t had you, she’d still be alive. She would have been alive and I could have won her over.” He beat his hands on his chest. “Here. With me. You killed her! You! If you hadn’t been born, she never would have died before I could bring her here and convince her *I* was her future!” His lip quivered, his trembling finger back in my direction. “Now, you! Get out!”

My heart lurched as Mac’s lips covered mine.

The scene changed, but the emotion inside me did not. My grandfather loved the woman who’d become my mother. A goddess. Yet she’d chosen my dad and become human. In the end, she died because of me.

“Winn—”

Because of me.

“Don’t talk to me.”

“Winn, we have to go.”

I jerked away, striding toward the oak in the center of the cemetery. Had my own mother loved them both somehow? Did age even factor into the decisions made by immortals? Had she chosen human to get around the F's?

“Winn, it's time! We have to go, now!”

I slid down, my back against the tree, anger and rage hitting me as much as a need to cry. I gave in to neither. I'd seen my mother in a way I never wanted to remember. I'd seen my Grandpa in much the same way. He'd never acted like that when he'd been alive. The in-between had made him crazy, but his plight hurt me the way Mac choosing to leave me had.

A hand gripped mine.

I tried to yank it free. “Leave me alone.” Like grandfather like grandson. Two worlds. Two goals. Neither to merge.

“Winn, we have to go, right now!”

“It doesn't matter.” It didn't matter what I said or what I did, I'd end up like my grandpa, pining for a girl who wouldn't be able to let me in her life.

A laugh, an infuriatingly crazed sound, burst from me. “Just leave me. Let me rot. You left me. My mom left me. My grandpa thinks I killed her. What's the point of going back?”

“Because I love you, dammit. Mayday, Suze!”

Mac's words registered right before strong arms wrapped around my body, and Suze said, “This is really going to hurt.”

## 29

A heaviness weighed on my chest. Voices and sounds came from all directions, none recognizable, while my mind swam in a sea of darkness.

If I blinked, I didn't know.

If I breathed, I couldn't tell.

I remembered my entry into the in-between.

I remembered my grandpa and his admission that he'd found a way to be with the woman he loved only to have her choose another.

I remembered Mac's words.

*I love you.*

She'd said it. After so much time, she'd said it.

"Paddles!" A voice I didn't recognize said.

My body arched, muscles seizing, lungs burning. Instantaneous pain shot through every nerve ending as if I'd been on fire. Searing heat stung and bit, boiling me in its intensity.

I tried to scream, but an inhale failed.

Arms and hands flailed as I realized I couldn't breathe.

I gulped.

Nothing.

I clawed for air.

Nothing.

"Start compressions again."

No water. No earth. Nothing around me, but a crushing sensation pushed into me from all sides, squeezing and pressing.

My chin went skyward, my head backward. The need for air consumed my every thought. A desire to live, to understand, to find a way, pushed me to keep my consciousness.

"No rhythm! Give me another push—" Whatever came after held no meaning.

Life had had meaning.

I'd had a girlfriend.

I'd had a future.

I'd had something to live for.

I could go back. Back to where I could live among other dreams.

*Winn.* The voice sang through my head, a sweet song. *You must return.*

*Maya?*

*You must release your hold on the in-between. It is not your place. Mackenzie needs you. She needs your intellect. Your logic. Your love. She needs you to return to her, Winn.*

*But it'll all end, and I—*

Maya's face appeared. *No, Winn. This is not your place.*

"Clear!"

Her face dissolved into the vastness of space as waves of electricity coursed through my body.

"Again!"

I arched under the zing of volts.

"Again."

Zap.

Beep.

Beep. Beep.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"Looks like he's back, Doctor," a female voice said.

"I told you we should keep going," a male voice said, animosity singing his tone.

"It's not always in a patient's best interest to continue for so long. There can be brain damage—" a different female voice started and stopped. "Organ failure. The next twenty-four hours are critical."

"Don't you think I know that? He's just a kid. He needs a shot at life." The snap of rubber gloves doubled as my body jostled.

"But what kind of life? You need to learn this before you try to play God and save even the unsaveable. Protocols dictate—"

"Screw protocols. He was a perfectly healthy kid until a week ago. You can't stand there and tell me you think I should have let him die."

Light and dark fought with each other to keep my attention.

*A soaked towel thrown over a deck rail. That's what I feel like.*

"Head trauma—"

"He didn't have a scratch on him."

"He was in a single-car wreck ... wrapped his car around a tree. Internal injury—"

“With no signs of drug use or any sort of chemicals in his system.” A deep sigh followed.. “He had a full body MRI on Monday that revealed nothing. And you know all this.”

A touch to my toes tickled, though I didn’t think I reacted anywhere but in my own thoughts. “Yes, but a week in a coma and a Grand mal seizure without warning indicate something happened. And he’s non-responsive to stimuli.”

“He died. We brought him back. If he wasn’t meant to have a life, his heart wouldn’t have restarted. He needed a shot.”

“You can’t play god, Dr. Parker,” a woman said.

“I can sure as hell try.”

Warm softness covered me, dousing me in sleepiness.

*No! Don’t fall asleep. I won’t wake up if I fall asleep.*

Though my eyes remained shut, I forced my ears to function, to stay alert long enough to listen.

“You shouldn’t have taken this case,” she said.

“You’d have if this was your kid.”

“But he’s not yours,” she said.

“I’m not going to walk out there and tell my eighteen year old daughter that her boyfriend died because I didn’t try hard enough.”

*Mac’s dad? Did I just meet Mac’s dad?*

Their voices faded as the swish of footsteps on the floor moved in and out of my range of hearing.

Silence.

My breathing slowed as my consciousness wobbled its way toward sleep.

• • •

A swish had my senses coming alive, though I couldn’t open my eyes or even move.

*Why can’t I talk? Why can’t I see?*

“He lives.” Nomas’s deep demon voice carried through my head. “I am ... simply ...” Something touched my hand. “Master Thomas—I mean, Winn, it is with my deepest apologies that I ever doubted your strength.”

*If I’m alive, why can’t I move?*

A huff followed.



“Nahir—” Tino, the sheepish sphinx took over the sound in my head, his address telling me to whom the huff had belonged. “The boy has shown great courage. He’s done as he’s been asked with far greater success than we ever expected.”

“He has not completed all his tasks,” Nahir said. “He has not taught Mackenzie all that she must know. He has not convinced her to relinquish the in-between. He has not convinced her to give him up.”

“Oh, but that he has.” Moira’s voice replaced the men’s. “Of that I have confirmation.”

“How?” Nahir asked.

“My ways are not of your concern. But you cannot doubt me if I say it is so, and I do.”

“Why does she sit outside this room?” Tino asked. “Why does she pine for him so?”

*Mac, pine?* Laughter rang inside my head, but I knew it went nowhere else.

Moira sighed. “I said has. That does not mean they have not come back together. Have you forgotten the human emotions that run through young love? The boy remains unconscious, unable to speak, move or eat. How else would you expect her to respond?”

“The boy should never accept a selfish girl who would eject him from her life for her own needs. When he heals, I expect he will understand his purpose in her life. Nothing more than a distraction. A test of her human emotions.” Nahir’s distinctive shuffle sent sounds farther to my left.

“Acceptance of another, lesser being, Nahir, is the path toward Mackenzie’s future.” Moira’s voice accompanied a touch to my leg. “We do not all choose to reach our destination by following the same roads. We should be mindful of that. Winn’s participation has, indeed, been a success. Mackenzie has renounced the in-between as required, as well.”

*She has?*

“But has he truly succeeded in his teachings?” Nahir’s voice came through as if muffled by pillows.

Any answer, if spoken, faded into the distance until no other sound existed.

• • •

A mix of tones, sounds, voices and music roused me from whatever darkness I'd fallen into.

"Humans are so frail." Cleo, the shapeshifter sniffled. "I hope this isn't finished."

"The boy asked the hard questions. He did well by our Mackenzie." Had I won over Gerard? The gnome with so little confidence in me that he never let me interview him.

"And resourceful." Saroya's small voice reached me. I'd have to thank the elf for his help. "To have chosen to go in, to have used the spell on his own. Magic lives in him in some form."

*No! I didn't! Don't they know someone sent me? Who? Why?*

Something moved my hand—both hands—pulling them in toward my stomach, the muscles useless, but able to at least recognize the adjustment.

"We must reverse the binding," Magwa said as my hands jiggled under somebody's hold. "Albeit strangely, he has succeeded in this portion of his duties."

My arms stretched up. They lowered.

Another touch suggested more than one person held my hands.

Soft material slid over the top, under the bottom and back over.

*Wrapping them again?*

I tried to picture, with my brain, like I'd been taught to do in the in-between, but the visuals didn't work the same way.

More softness tickled my hand until weight pressed from the top and bottom.

"From this moment forward, Master Winford Richmond Thomas is granted freedom from his bonds. Freedom from his promise. Freedom from the consequences of failure," Magwa said.

"That's kinda an oxymoron, you know," Robin began, "since he almost died. We should have been protecting him from *that*. Mac can handle herself. It's the humans in our midst that we need to be keenly aware of."

*Is she really talking about me or the bunch of griffin babies she'd be producing soon?*

"Hush, now, dear Robin," Magwa said. My hands fell to my stomach again, untouched. "He will heal."

"And be stronger for his experience," Saroya said.

"Yet, still as fragile as glass," Cleo said.

“One can only hope, should he wake, that he has as great an influence on Mackenzie as he did before,” Gerard said.

With that, their voices ceased, and silence returned.

• • •

“No, Suze, you can’t pretend to be his doctor.” Alina’s laugh pulled me again from my sleep.

*Why can’t they all visit together?*

“But it’s the only way I could get in here. All them rules about family only and then about two people at a time. Why won’t they let Mac in?”

“That has to do with her being a child. There is an infection fear with him being a child still as well.”

*I’m eighteen. I’m not a child. Mac’s eighteen, too.*

“But—”

“Leave it to Winn’s father to work out, Suze. We’re just here to say hello and wish him well.”

“But he’s so scrawny. You know, in the in-between, he was happening. He had his determination face on. He was ready to take on the world. Shoulda listened to Maya, though. She was right mad at him for talking to his grandpa.”

“He did, did he?” Alina asked. “Do you know what he learned?” A silly whistling sound replaced their conversation. “Suze? Whatever is that for?”

“I’m not supposed to say. What happens in the in-between stays in the in-between.”

“That’s Vegas, Suze. As in Nevada.”

“Oh. Erm. Hmmm. Well ... it should apply, I think.” A thump followed.

I imagined Suze pounding his chest, a gorilla-like swearing to keep a secret—like the one about my mom having chosen to be human so she could have me. I’d have to talk to my dad about that if I ever regained consciousness.

“So you think he can hear us?” Suze asked.

It surprised me that no one else had asked that question.

“They say those in comas may be able to, but you know humans, Suze ... they don’t have our abilities. I think he’s just resting.”

“But he’s stone cold pale.” My bed shifted to the left, like it had squished down. “I think something’s going on in that head of his. You know ...” My

eyelids flipped up and back down, one at a time. “His eyes are brown again, not that white they were inside. It was freaky.”

“I’m sure it was, Suze. Shall we exit?”

“Maybe I should stay?” The mattress raised on the side again.

“You’re already staying, Suze. Just not in your present form. Bid him goodnight and return to your post. He’ll have your protection until he asks that it be removed.”

“I hope he never does. I like this one. You know, Raven’s boy ... he was mean. I’m glad she went immortal. Then again, Raven’s not the nicest either. Moira still has Phelps, even after all these years. Wonder how she keeps him young. You need a beau, Alina.”

*Phelps? Keep him young? Her husband isn’t a goblin?*

“Come on, Suze. Our time is up.”

“But I like this one, Alina. I want to keep him.”

“He’s not a puppy, Suze.” Her chuckle faded to nothingness.

• • •

“So they say to just talk to the dead as if they’d be able to talk back.”

*Raven? But I’m not dead. I don’t think. Did I die? Did something happen since Alina and Suze came by?*

“Still can’t believe you went in to get her.”

*No! Really, I didn’t! Why do you think that?*

“That takes guts. Never thought you had it in you. Never thought Mackenzie did either. Hell, she’s got more than me. I followed every rule set before me. Mackenzie skirts around them.”

*Go away, Raven.*

“Tell her she can’t do something and what does she do? She does it. Worked like a charm. Until you showed up. Then she started to really question. For a human, you’re a freakishly good influence on her. I hate that I even have to say that and am so glad the doctor said you can’t hear me. It feels good to get that out. But, god, Winn, you say that out loud to Mackenzie, and I’ll strike you down like everyone thinks I did Maya.”

*Which you didn’t do.*

“I miss her. I wish she’d screw the rule like her daughter and get her ass back down here. You should have convinced them both to come back. No, never mind. That’s stupid of me. Selfish. I didn’t pick the right man in my

life, and I'll be damned that Mackenzie picks you every time. Someday. Someday. Maya promised me she would—”

At the knock, she quieted.

“Chatting up the sleeping boy, Raven?” Josie asked. It dawned on me just how different an angel and siren’s voices were when not overwhelmed by my gawking at them.

“Just checking in, like we all agreed, Josie. Every hour. Twelve times. In and out. Each one of us. Remember? Or have you forgotten since you’re too busy with his dad to focus on your charge. You know she’s your protégé. Yours, Josie, and you haven’t done a very good job.”

*Oh. Wow. Josie’s? And what’s with the change of attitude. One minute begging me to keep going and another being angry?*

“Yes, Raven, I realize that, and it’s not for lack of trying. We’ve all tried. It seems the only person who can get through to her is this young man. Sticking to his father is a side benefit and, if Mac has anything to do with it, will bring about changes bigger than you or I did with our acceptance on the Council.”

*“If she accepts. She hates every one of us. She thinks I killed her mother. She thinks Nahir is out to get her. We’re split, Josie. Right down the figurative middle, in a battle over human acceptance on the Council and in our own lives.”*

*They want to let humans on the Council?*

“I think you’re wrong, Raven. Quite the opposite, in fact. The girl’s been tormented from day one. Goddess born Changeling. One in a thousand chance she would arrive now as the Council is of such disparate beliefs in the ways of old.”

“At least I tell her like it has been and don’t spout off my own ideas.”

Neither said a word for a moment. I wanted to disagree with Raven. She must have forgotten just how negative she’d been with Mac. Down to the last time they’d been in the same room. It didn’t make sense that she’d be on Mac’s side.

“Like I told you,” Josie said after a few moments. “Mackenzie needs to understand all our positions. Just because you’ve kowtowed to Nahir’s wishes not to tell her she’s the deciding factor on the future of human-non-human relations, doesn’t mean I won’t give her my opinions in some way, shape or form. I disagree with him. As you know. It’s our duty to explain, and I’ve been trying as best I can without giving it away.”

The huff, I assumed, came from Raven.

“We have a duty to protect our kind, Raven, but it’s also time the Council changed its attitude. My sister tried, and look where it got her?”

“A half-dead kid in a hospital bed. She brought this on herself.”

*My mom is Josie’s sister?*

“We have to learn to not fight what lives within us. Around us and in our hearts. You of all people should know that, Raven. You gave up the love of your life when you chose the Council over him. My sister did not. I am trying my best not to lose mine.”

*My mom was a Changeling? That’s not possible. The math doesn’t add up.*

“I didn’t choo—No, never mind. I need to go. You can sit in here and babysit the human now.”

“I will, and I’ll wait for Bernie and Mackenzie as I believe they have the next shift.”

“Whatever. One of these days, the boy’s going to figure this all out, you know, and when he does, he’s going to tell Mac.”

“I hope he does. He’s the only one of us not bound by our own rules into silence. He’s the only one who has a shot at convincing her to bring change.”

*What change? You’re here telling me all this stuff, but you won’t tell me what change you want! Tell me!*

“Really? How is Mac going to do that when she has to give him up to join the Council? Tell me, Josie. Do, please, because one negates the other. There is no both. First, she must accept her fate, and by that point, his memory will be gone.”

*Give me up. Figured that one. What if I don’t want to give her up?*

“We can only hope, Raven, that they find a way. We can only hope.”

*Hope is all you can do if I don’t wake up.*

## 30

A touch to my hand sent tingles up my arm.

“Winn?”

*Mac.*

“Are you alive?”

*The beeps should tell you that if nothing else.*

“They wouldn’t let me in. It took your dad hours to convince them, and then he offered to sneak me in, but it’s five in the morning, so I came on my own. The power to change shape and all.”

The mattress squished to my right.

“You had to die to come back, Winn. I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t want to tell you because—”

*Probably was a good idea not to.*

A heavier weight hit my hand along with the tickles from what I assumed to be her hair. I wanted to run my hand through it, to tell her all would be okay. I’d made it. That meant I’d lived. Or so I thought. I needed and wanted to be with her even as my heart hurt with the idea she’d leave me again in three more months.

“They didn’t think you were going to make it. But I told your dad to *make* them keep going. I knew it was just a matter of time. Suze had to hold you tighter than anything.” She chuckled. “And he did. He held you really tight, just like I asked him to. But you still had to die.”

Her hands clenched around mine.

I wanted to squeeze back. I told my brain to work my hands, but they didn’t.

“I told him not to let go, and I came straight here. God, Winn. Why did you come in? We need to find out who sent you. You have to help me. I can’t do this without you. I tried. I tried to go find my mom and to ask her questions, but I don’t know what ones to ask. I’m an idiot. Please don’t leave me.”

*I have so much to tell you. I think the Council was trying to tell me something for the last hours ... days ... weeks, however long it’s been. Did*

*you get my email, finally? Do you know what you can do? Did you know my mom is Josie's sister? Did you know half the Council wants you to change it so humans can be involved? Mac, please, hear me!*

The swish returned along with the weight on my hand lifting.

“Mac?”

*Dad? Dad!*

“Yeah?”

*Dad ... you have to get me out of here. Mom ... Mom was a goddess. A real one. I thought Grandpa might have been saying it figuratively, but I think that's why he went in. He thought—no, never mind. Dad, please help me wake up!*

“Can I join you?” Dad asked.

My frustration ratcheted up a notch with each attempt to speak. I took the shuffling to be sliding feet across a tile floor. Warmth surrounded my other hand, too.

“How's he doing?” my dad asked.

“I don't know. The machine beeps. I figure that's good.”

“Are you ready to talk about it?”

“Not really. I did the whole ‘tell my side of the story’ thing to the Council already.”

*I'll bet you did. What didn't you tell them? Did you know that Raven's actually on your side? We have to find out why.*

“Why'd he go get you?”

*I didn't! Why does everyone think I did?*

She said nothing for a moment. “He said he didn't. He said it happened to him, not that he said the words or anything. I mean ... I'd already decided to go back and do all the stuff I had to do, and bang! There he was. Moira said she found him unconscious outside the car as if he'd pulled over and said the words on his own, but he said he didn't.”

“He had a lot of interest in getting answers. Maybe he lied to convince you to come back.”

*No! At that time, I wasn't. I was just driving back!*

“This is all my fault,” Mac said. “If he'd never met me—”

“Don't, Mac. Just don't. The ‘what if’ game doesn't do anyone a bit of good. I've seen the two of you together. You're ... you ... make him happy.”



“But we don’t have a *future*. The docs don’t even know if he’ll come around. He’s in a coma, Bernie! A coma because of me.”

“And that’s going to keep you from him? You’re going to give up on him a second time?”

“I didn’t give up the first time. I told him not to wait so he wouldn’t worry and so I could make a grand comeback. I even told him that.”

*She did, Dad. It was kinda sweet.*

“So assume he will, and support him while he heals. It’s only been six hours.

“Ahh!” Feet stormed from my right side to my left. They shuffled around until they quieted. “But even then, Bernie, I can’t pick human—”

*Yes, you can! No, no, no you can’t. You even have to give me up.*

“—I just can’t. I don’t want to be like—”

“Be like—”

*Thanks, Dad. I want to hear, too.*

“My mom.”

*Ouch.*

“Why?”

“Because she was selfless. And I’m not. Never have been. I want what I want. I’m never going to be able to give up who I am for him. It’s not fair. To either of us.”

“You’re more mature than you act sometimes, Mac.”

She snorted a laugh. “I doubt that.”

“What do you plan to do, then?”

“I don’t know. I hate these kinds of decisions. I hate that I have to pick a form. I hate almost everything about my life, but—”

I waited for what would come next.

“I’ll do it, because that’s *my* sole purpose. But I won’t let him be anything more than human, Bernie. I just won’t. He’s ... Winn. He’s supposed to be who he is. I’m supposed to be who I am.”

“You know, it’s his choice, too. His future. I do have one thing to ask of you.”

“What?”

“If you decide to break his heart again, do it gently.”

“I will, Bernie. Do both that is. It’s already a given.”

• • •

If time passed, it went without my realization. For a long while, no one interrupted my sleep or my coma or whatever state I'd been stuck in.

The steady beep of the machine to my left reminded me I could hear, though I really wanted to know if all my senses worked.

A heaviness weighed down my right side. Trying to move my arm proved fruitless, and I quit before frustration overtook my desire to try out the rest of what functioned. Or not.

*Eyes first.*

I forced my brain to connect with my eyes and to open my lids. Brightness exploded into lines and waves of yellow against black, similar to what it had before. I tried for a blink, to get out from behind my own body's confines, only to be accosted by light so bright I had to shut my lids tight to block it again. At least, I thought I did.

*Had I opened them at all? I'm back in the real world, aren't I?*

A shift of my leg had an ache running up my thigh—the kind of soreness that came with overuse of a muscle. In fact, my entire body throbbed as if I'd run a marathon or two or three, non-stop and without food or water. I'd never run a marathon, so I only imagined it, but it made sense to me.

A smack of my lips brought a nasty, sticky, gooey sensation, along with a parched throat, cracked and dry lips.

After an interminable amount of time, the pressure on my upper body eased as the space around me shifted.

“Has he woken up at all?” My dad's voice returned along with the scent of coffee.

A grumble worked in my stomach.

“No,” Mac's voice worked right at my ear. “I thought I felt his arm move, but I think that was just me.”

*Yes, I am waking up. I can feel it.*

“It's awfully bright.” The sounds of blinds being turned made me smile. “I'm surprised you can stand it in here, Mac.”

The idea I'd be blinded by actual light made me pause. *Yes!* I could see it. *I am awake.*

She laughed against me before saying, “I was asleep. It was dark in my world.” The bed squeaked and shifted; Mac must have stood up or moved away.

I wanted to see her. To tell her I lived. Forcing my lids to open against their will seemed a ridiculous activity, but I tried, fluttering my lashes

against eyes that wanted to stay shut.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Each effort sent an internal shock to my system, one that had me closing them tight.

“How about I buy you some breakfast. I hear they have chocolate in the cafeteria,” Dad said.

A groan sounded on my right, more of a stretch than disgust. “Yeah. That’ll do.”

“I’ll meet you in the hall then,” he said.

“Kay.” Hands cupped my cheeks before lips hit mine. “I’m so sorry, Winn. I didn’t know it would be this bad. I just thought they’d make you die and the doctor people would zap you and bring you back.” She kissed me again. “I really didn’t know. But I’m going to find out what the hell is going on and bring you back, and it’s never going to happen again. All you were asked to do was help me. And you did. Job over, no matter what the Council says. You don’t deserve this.” Warm breath wafted over my nose. She kissed each of my lids in a move I’d never, ever expected to have come from Mac.

*I signed up knowing it wouldn’t be easy. I’m supposed to know stuff and teach it to you, and now I know stuff and can’t even tell you.*

When she pulled back, I forced my eyes to obey, to want to try so I could see Mac.

*Please don’t go!*

A blip of light hit me.

More concentrated effort.

More raising.

More thought.

A mix of light and shadow came into my view. Lines back and forth.

*The blinds!*

I focused on them, blinking to keep my lids moving in the hopes that would help.

It did.

More and more deliberate widening had my room coming clear.

*Yes. Now try to talk.*

Using the same process as I had with my eyes, I worked my jaw. The muscles at my ear popped and cracked as if unused for years. I squeezed my hand into a grip and watched as it bent and folded my fingers into my palm.

With those successes, I opted to try my voice, only the words that came to mind made me laugh.

*Testing, one, two, three. Really?*

Never in my life did I imagine my body would react so poorly to an experience. Without Mac, I had no reason to keep trying.

*Keep trying anyway.*

Taking a deep breath, I thought about opening my eyes. I thought about making myself open my eyes. I stretched my eyebrows as high as they could go. I thought about Mac.

Mac.

Mac.

“Mac—” The tickle of air made me cough again.

“Winn? Winn? Winn!” Her arms wrapped around me. “Oh, my god, Winn!”

With her palms against my cheeks, her nose touching mine, I couldn’t focus on her, but I knew she waited for me to speak.

“Mac ...” The single word took way too much energy.

A finger touched my lips. “Winn. You’re alive. You’re here,” she said in a breathy whisper.

I managed a small nod.

“You made it.” Her hair fell over my face. “I love you.”

“I—”

“Shh.” Her lips touched mine. “I know.” Nose to nose, lips to lips, her hands never left me. “I know.” She snuggled against me and wrapped my arm around her body.

With great effort, I managed to keep it there.

Knowing I could speak, that I’d heard my own voice, that I’d seen my limbs move, proved to me that I survived. I’d lived. I’d made it.

We’d made it.

With a sigh that brought us even closer, Mac said, “How am I ever going to give you up?”



## **EMI GAYLE**

Emi Gayle just wants to be young again. She lives vicariously through her youthful characters, while simultaneously acting as chief-Mom to her teenaged son and searching for a way to keep her two daughters from ever reaching the dreaded teen years.

Ironically, those years were some of Emi's favorite times. She met the man of her dreams at 14, was engaged to him at 19, married him at 20 and she's still in love with him to this day. She'll never forget what it was like to fall in love at such a young age—emotions she wants everyone to feel.

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