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Cassidy Jones and the Luminous

(Manuscript)

Prologue

“There it is again,” Patrick Grimm said to himself.

He pressed his ragged coat sleeve against the warm blood that was trickling through his whiskers, keeping his gaze on the glimmer. Something had punctured his cheek when he’d rolled down the embankment—a rock or a stick, maybe.

A moment beforehand, he had dismissed the twinkle in the dark water as a reflection from the star-studded sky that canopied the lake. On the far end, moonlight exposed shadowy oil rigs, ominously lined up like the statues on Easter Island. *Moai*, he believed, was the name of those giant human figures that the Polynesians had carved from stone to warn off invaders.

Patrick hadn’t any idea about the name of the lake. It just happened to be the spot where those rednecks he’d hitched a ride with had shoved him out of their vehicle—a beat-up truck sporting monster tires and a Confederate flag painted on its dented hood. The only thing he knew was that he’d landed somewhere in Montana. *Or was it North Dakota?*

Truth be told, Patrick didn’t really care where on God’s green Earth he was.

“Idiot yokels,” he grumbled, busying himself with lighting a cigarette.

Those hicks had dumped him in the middle of nowhere. And they’d all been getting along just fine until his wee-little blunder.

“Who’s the heifer?” he’d sniggered, after he’d glimpsed a snapshot of what had to be the ugliest woman he’d ever seen clipped to the sun visor. He’d assumed it was a joke, seconds before noticing the resemblance between the big boys he’d been sandwiched in between and the woman in the photo.

“That’d be *Mama*.”

Patrick shook his head and took a drag off the cigarette. He was always sticking his foot in his mouth, saying and doing the wrong things. If mistakes were dollars, he’d be mighty rich.

Patrick had had every opportunity to make something of himself—an education and a family tree full of shining examples of success. He’d had doors of opportunity opened for him, welcoming him in. But had he taken his shot? No, not him! Instead, he had traveled down the road of screw-ups, with bad choice after bad choice eventually causing him to hit the actual road.

Exhaling a stream of smoke, he narrowed his eyes on the glimmer, making out a distinct speck of light. It was moving.

“Firefly?” He sopped up some more blood with his sleeve.

Suddenly, two more specks of light appeared, a dozen or so yards away from the other sparkle, each coming from opposite directions.

Patrick dispelled the firefly theory. The sparkles didn’t appear to be flying. By their slow movement and the way the flashes faded in and out, he guessed that they were underwater.

“Only one way to find out.”

Clamping the cigarette between sun-cracked lips, Patrick scooped up his military backpack and hoisted all his worldly belongings onto his back. As he made his way down to the water, he marveled at the fact that the big rednecks had thrown his backpack out of the truck after him. It had been pretty generous, considering he'd called their mother a cow.

The song "Bad to the Bone" skittered through Patrick's mind. He hummed the tune around his cigarette, noting that five more sparkles had joined the ranks. By the time he stumbled onto the rocky beach, he'd counted thirteen specks of light, no more than ten feet from shore, swirling through the water as if searching for something. The first sparkle had been in the middle of the lake.

He scrutinized the strange phenomenon for another moment, then decided the sparkles were just some type of water insect that probably posed no danger. At worst, he might get a little bite or sting if he came into contact with one.

The sparkles danced closer toward the shore. "What the—?" Patrick flicked his cigarette onto the rocks. "You attracted to my rugged good looks?"

Squatting down, he stuck his hand into the cool water and wiggled his fingers. "Well, come on. Let's have a look at you."

Like bees catching the sweet scent of a fragrant rose on the breeze, the sparkles ceased their whirling and moved straightaway toward Patrick's hand, bumping up against it.

Enchanted, Patrick laughed. A warmth filled him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt happy.

"You're beautiful." He gently swished his hand and watched the sparkles dance around his fingertips, like miniscule forest fairies. The white shimmer they cast reflected in his delighted eyes.

He scooped up a single sparkle with some water in his cupped palm. The twinkling glow immediately began to fade. Alarmed, Patrick submerged his hand in the lake. The sparkle instantly regained its luster.

“Guess you need your brothers and sisters to shine,” he deduced. After another moment of observation, he recognized a curious pattern in their twinkling, almost like Morse code. “Do you communicate with those bright flashes?”

All at once, the sparkles swam away, as if summoned home by a dinner bell.

“Where are you going?” Patrick felt a strange panic.

He slipped off his backpack, dropped it on the rocks, and stepped into the lake. Water seeped into his boots.

“Come back!” He trudged after the sparkles that lured him onward, deeper and deeper.

“Stop!” Waist-deep, Patrick took another step and the rocky floor beneath him disappeared. He plunged with a splash.

Opening his eyes in the dark, murky water, he stretched his arms as he prepared to swim to the surface. Then he noticed that the sparkles had stopped moving.

In fact, they were drawing closer.

Patrick again felt unusually happy.

He watched with amazement as they hovered about two feet from his face, as if observing him, appearing even more luminous underwater. The bright flashes came more quickly, like a speeding heartbeat.

The dark underneath him illuminated.

Patrick dropped his gaze and saw a mass of sparkles rising from the depths

like an incandescent cloud. The glare from the light they radiated was so intense that he could barely look at them. Panic began to rise in his chest, prompting him to try to escape—while he still could.

But another part of him overruled the instinct. The part that craved the immense joy amplified in his being as the shimmering wonder came ever closer. It was the joy he had ached for his entire, miserable life, a feeling he had instantly become addicted to the moment the sparkles had touched his calloused hand.

Patrick's lungs burned. His head grew dizzy. Grudgingly, he surfaced, took a gulp of air, and submerged again, right into the cluster of sparkles.

Blinded by their collective brightness, he jerked in surprise. Before he had time to understand what was happening, the sparkles attacked, rushing into his ears, up his nose, and into the open wound on his cheek, flowing into him like relentless rivers of light.

Terror-stricken, Patrick clawed his way through the water. The invaders continued to swarm into his body. His toe kicked a rock, and he sprang to his feet, screaming. He lifted frantic hands to claw at his ears, but suddenly his fingers dissolved into water.

It's impossible to describe what Patrick felt as he watched his hands turn into water—then his forearms, and upper arms, which poured from the empty coat and shirt sleeves now dangling at his sides. Fear, obviously, disbelief, and denial. Yet blanketing the expected emotions was one not normally experienced when life is coming to an end:

Euphoria.

It was as though an internal choir of angels celebrated in song when Patrick felt his physical core give way like a ruptured dam. A sweet cherubic voice

caressed his mind with a promise:

You will be a new man.

Patrick exploded into water.

Chapter 1

Thick as Thieves

“Aren’t we the brave crooks?” I asked out loud. I was sitting crossed-legged on the steel catwalk of a billboard a hundred feet above the street, watching four burglars cut a hole into the adjacent building’s rooftop. “Especially with all the extra police everywhere.” Right on cue, a squad car crawled down Spring Street below. There were definitely more police on

patrol that evening.

Probably because of Jeff Ferrell.

The twenty-one-year-old University Of Washington student had been reported missing that afternoon. The case had come right on the heels of two other local disappearances: Anita Hart, a mother of three, and Sebastian Romero, owner of Champion Health Clubs.

Three people in two weeks— has to be a serial killer.

I could see no other explanation. However, according to my dad, Drake

Jones, host of *In the Spotlight* for Channel Five News, missing person reports were filed with the Seattle Police Department almost every day. Only about one percent turned out to involve actual crimes, he said.

These particular cases had made headlines mainly due to Romero. I'd recognized him immediately when his face had flashed across the television screen eight days earlier. I'd had many opportunities to ogle the twelve-foot-high picture of him that graced a billboard off I-5 advertising his health clubs. His chiseled jaw and ripped biceps had been seared into my brain.

The guy is all muscle. He had to have been taken by gunpoint, or drugged.

I shook off the grim thoughts and redirected my attention toward the crime-in-progress. The thieves' attire, similar to mine—black clothing and a ski mask—had been a dead giveaway that these four were up to no good when I'd happened upon them about thirty minutes earlier. The high-tech power tools they'd produced from two large duffel bags snuffed out any lingering doubts.

Chunks of cement blasted into the air as they drilled. The group wasn't exactly being quiet, but wasn't loud enough to draw attention from that high up, either. Good thing I'd decided to leap rooftops that night, or there wouldn't have been any eyewitnesses.

While three of the thieves cut the hole in the roof, the fourth anchored four ropes to air conditioning units and put on a rappelling harness and backpack. The calm and proficient way the men worked suggested that breaking and entering was old hat for them. I could guarantee, however, their playbook didn't include a fifteen-year-old mutant foiling their heist.

The harnessed thief lowered himself through the hole as the others shrugged on their own equipment. One man slid on a backpack, too, and rappelled

into the dark office, followed by the next man. I expected the remaining thief to go down, as well, but he didn't.

Plan B? I surmised, searching for reasons why he'd geared up but had stayed behind. *Rappelling over the side of the building, if*—I glanced at an access door to the roof—*things go badly and they can't escape the way they had come up.*

Time for things to go badly, I thought, and pulled on a pair of soft, black angora gloves, embellished with a purple heart, dead center.

I gathered the handles of the colorful polka-dot gift bag nestled in my lap, and stood up. Then I gently tucked the bag against my side, drew several steps back on the catwalk, and took a running leap.

I soared over the alley separating the two buildings, dropping a full story, and landed, solidly and silently, in a crouch. My eyes darted to the pretty gift bag. I frowned. All this jumping was wrinkling the tissue.

No biggie, I reassured myself, setting down the bag.

The thief directed a flashlight into the hole. He had no clue that he was no longer alone on the rooftop. I slunk up behind him and tapped his shoulder. He started, but didn't scream or drop the flashlight. The guy was a real pro.

He whipped around. I introduced my fist to his jaw.

The blow snapped his head backward, and his body followed the motion. My hand shot out and secured the harness. The man dropped the flashlight, which tumbled into the hole, but his abrupt stop caused him to whiplash in the harness. A series of pops rippled along his spine.

I winced. I hated the sound of cracking joints.

I heard the flashlight strike the floor and bounce across it.

“Paves,” one of the men hissed.

Gripping the harness, I lowered Paves into a sitting position so his legs dangled over the ledge, as though he were just chilling.

“Paves!” A flashlight beam caught the unconscious man’s face slumped to his chest.

I stifled a giggle.

“What are you doing?”

Paves’s cell phone vibrated inside his jacket.

I unzipped his jacket with my free hand, ran my hand down his chest, and located the pocket his cell was in. The flashlight beam caught me.

“I see you,” the man hissed as I pocketed Paves’s cell. “Let him go.”

By all means.

I shoved Paves’s backside off the edge with my foot. The rope raced through my palms, which would have been torn to shreds if my skin hadn’t turned rock-hard—a little defense mechanism of mine. My cute gloves wouldn’t have been enough protection.

The men below shrieked as their cohort plunged toward them, then they scrambled out of the way. I tightened my grip moments before Paves reached the floor, stopping his descent. He swung back and forth in the harness like a wrecking ball, his chin bobbing flaccidly against his chest.

I adjusted my eyes and absorbed the available light, until the dark recesses of the room below were visible. Safe-deposit boxes lined the walls, and there were bars behind a closed steel door. The robbers hadn’t broken into an office. They had broken into a vault.

“Who are you?” the hisser demanded as the men cautiously approached Paves. “The Seattle Shadow?”

A giggle escaped as I let go of the rope.

Paves crashed to the floor, taking out the other men.

Moaning, they crawled from beneath their cohort. I ripped an air-conditioning unit off the roof and carried it to the hole. A bullet struck the metal.

“Not cool,” I grumbled, placing the air conditioner over the hole. The thieves had the gall to protest after shooting at me.

I brushed off my gloves and retrieved Paves’s cell, then dialed 911. When the dispatcher answered, I cleared my throat and forced my voice down a few octaves.

“There are four *armed* men trapped in a vault on the top floor of a building on Spring Street, right next to the billboard—” I glanced right at the billboard. I hadn’t paid attention to the advertisement. “—for Group Health.”

“It is illegal to call 911 if there is no emergency,” the dispatcher droned.

“I told you they have guns!” My voice pitched. Coughing, I forced it low again as the dispatcher threatened to trace the call.

“Good,” I replied deeply. “You do that. Don’t forget about the guns. Approach with caution. Oh, and tell the cops that the Seattle Shadow said so,” I added as a last-minute flourish before disconnecting. Maybe that would give this phone call some credibility.

A reporter for *The Seattle Times* had dubbed me the Seattle Shadow after a cashier called me a “phantom” when I’d intervened in a convenience store holdup. I’d thrown the two robbers into shelves, which toppled over, one after another, like enormous dominoes. It had been pretty cool.

Since the MO matched a few other crimes I’d hampered—a slight person dressed in black and wearing a ski mask, appearing from nowhere, going to town

on the baddies, and then vanishing in an instant—naturally the conclusion had been drawn that our city had gained a new crime fighter—one who could disappear into thin air, like a phantom.

I hadn't looked for those crimes per se, but I did seem to have the uncanny ability of being in the right place at the right time, or within a one-mile radius. What can I say? Not much gets past super-enhanced hearing, sight, and sense of smell.

“Speaking of which, you smell like salami, Paves,” I said to the air-conditioning unit plugging the hole. “Hope you have a breath mint on you.”

I dropped his cell phone on the rooftop for the police, then collected my gift bag, taking a moment to straighten the tissue.

“It looks awful,” I grumbled, giving up.

I tucked the bag under my arm and headed to Joe Jackson's new digs.

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I climbed down the fire escape over Joe's new home, pausing to watch another police car drive by the alley. Once it passed, I hopped down to the asphalt.

With a heavy heart, I observed the refrigerator box tucked inside the alcove of the back entrance of a vacant store. This was no way for my friend to live, even though this lonely and miserable existence was Joe's choice. Living on the streets was his self-inflicted punishment for delivering a single blow that had killed his childhood friend, Theo. They had gotten into a fistfight over a girl when they were eighteen, almost fifty years ago. Joe had served his time in prison, but as far as he was concerned, he was condemned for life.

“Knock, knock,” I called, pasting on a grin. Joe didn't like me worrying about him.

His salt-and-pepper dreadlocks poked out of the box, followed by a big smile that lit his dark face and revealed a couple of missing teeth. The smile didn't reach his sad brown eyes, however. His smiles never did.

“Hey, Green Eyes!” He wiggled out of the box, pulling his thin frame upright. “Mighty glad to see you.”

Since the evening was fairly warm, especially for April, Joe wasn't wearing the Seahawks jacket that he was typically bundled in. Instead, he wore a gray hoodie like kids my age wear, stained jeans, and tennis shoes, all of which needed to be run through the wash.

What I wouldn't have given to do that for him, and to get him in a decent home.

As it was, Joe didn't even know my name, nor had he ever seen my face, other than what was visible through the openings in my ski mask. A couple of times, locks of my dark-red hair had escaped from the mask, but Joe had just stared at them without comment.

“For you!” I produced the gift bag from behind my back.

Joe's grin widened.

“Me?” He tugged at his coiled beard, looking pleased. I noted how his facial hair had become whiter since I'd met him four months earlier, after he'd caught me scaling the Space Needle. “You're too good to me.”

“Ditto.” I handed him the bag. He handled it as though it were a precious jewel.

“Thank you.” Joe's thick tone and gratitude made me blush. My gift was really no big deal.

“Well, come on. Open it.”

He carefully removed the rumpled tissue. “Let’s see what we have here,” he said as he pulled out the box of Turkish Delight.

“Oh, wait!” I grabbed the candy from him before he’d had a chance to get a proper look at it. “This won’t make sense if you don’t see my other gift first.”

“My, oh, my. Two gifts?” His eyes twinkled. He plunged his hand into the bag and pulled out a copy of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

“This is the story your mama read to you and your twin,” he remembered.

“Yep. And she’d give us a piece of Turkish Delight as she read. The White Witch tempts Edmund with it in the story. That’s one of my best childhood memories.”

A distant look came onto Joe’s weary face. He glanced away and tugged at his whiskers. I assumed the void into which he stared held images of days gone by—much better days.

Perhaps of a bedtime story being read to him.

“Thank you kindly.” His grin returned. “What do you say we break into this Turkish Delight?”

“Oh, no, no, no! That’ll ruin it. Save it for the story.”

“Well, I certainly don’t want to spoil the story.” He winked and then gestured to the cement steps. “Take a load off. I’ll just put these away.”

I sat down on the second step, scooting to the corner so Joe had room to climb into the box. A siren wailed past the alley. Another joined it blocks away. I smiled with satisfaction. They were headed in the direction of the thieves.

Good thing you heeded the Seattle Shadow’s warning.

My gaze moved to a neatly folded newspaper that Joe had been reading. I picked it up and frowned at the headlines.

UW Student Reported Missing

Police Baffled by Champion's Owner's Disappearance

Search Parties Organized to Look for Missing Seattle Woman

Seattle's Loch Ness: Is Something Lurking in Lake Washington?

“Has the world gone crazy?” I asked.

“Crazier than a road-runnin’ lizard,” Joe said as he backed out of the box.

I laughed. Joe had the funniest sayings.

He held up two bottled waters and parked himself beside me. He offered me one.

“No, thank you.” Joe needed the water more than I did. It wasn’t like the box had plumbing.

“You sure? This is real good vitamin water,” he tempted. “A bunch was donated to the soup kitchen, so they’re passing them out like hot cakes. I got five more bottles in there.” He jerked his thumb toward his current residence.

“Thanks. But I’m not thirsty.” I smiled and looked down at the newspaper. I wasn’t taking his water.

“Suit yourself.” Joe set one bottle next to me and twisted the top off the other. “It’s mighty refreshing,” he enticed, then took a luxurious drink. After a couple of loud gulps, he smacked his lips and let out a satisfied *ahhhhh*. “Them vitamins are working wonders already. I feel as strong as a bull—or in my case, a mule. You ain’t the only stubborn one here.” He elbowed me and took another swig. “Anyone ever tell you you’re stubborn before?”

I pretended to think it over. “Nope,” I said, shaking my head. “Can’t say

anyone has.”

Joe chuckled. “Bet Mendel would beg to differ,” he said, referring to my best friend, Emery Phillips. Joe only knew the boy genius by his middle name, Mendel. In fact, he knew everyone in my life by a pseudonym, except for Jared Wells, my kind-of boyfriend whom I had kind-of introduced to Joe once.

“Ha! Compared to Mendel, I’m as stubborn as a . . . a . . . cotton-tailed rabbit!” That was the most docile critter I could come up with.

“He still got everybody fooled at your school?”

I squirmed. Me and my big mouth. Why had I ever told Joe anything about anyone from my *normal* life?

Before answering, I took a moment to categorize what Joe knew and what he didn’t know, in order to avoid revealing too much once again.

He knows that exposure to an undisclosed substance in the laboratory of Emery’s mother Serena had mutated me last October, resulting in ultra-enhanced senses, super strength and speed, and skin that can turn rock-hard. He also knows that I have the ability to learn fight moves just by watching them, and to heal from almost any injury, which might make me immortal.

I grimaced. I tried to avoid thinking about immortality.

But he doesn’t know that Serena’s experimental gene therapy, Formula 10X, created the strange retrovirus I’m infected with.

Formula 10X was a concoction of animal DNA with an Assassin kicker. Assassin had been a top-secret biological weapon that Serena and her former employer, criminal mastermind Arthur King Sr., had been developing for the military fifteen years earlier, until Serena had pulled the plug on the project.

Then there’s the Phillipses moving into the house across the street from

mine, where Serena searches for my cure, while Emery, a fifteen-year-old college graduate, poses as a ninth-grader and attends school with me, obviously.

But he doesn't know Emery's dad Gavin is a secret agent for the CIA.

On second thought, I couldn't remember ever mentioning Gavin to Joe. That was the problem with sharing pieces about my life with someone I shouldn't. I was having trouble remembering which pieces I'd shared.

So Joe knows squat about Gavin, but he does know my family finally learned the truth about me.

How could I not have told him that? Keeping my family in the dark had been very hard for me.

And he doesn't know there are others like me.

Well, sort of like me. The mutants who Arthur King Sr. had created fell more into a monster category. One of his experiments, Raul Diaz, and I had practically ripped one another to shreds before King had escaped and crawled back into whatever hole he'd been hiding in. He was most likely still there, creating more abominations.

"Yes, he does," I answered at last. "No one knows Mendel is a genius, and I don't know how he can stand it. He has to be bored out of his mind, especially in our science class. He could teach it, after all! He does have a degree in microbiology—"

I stopped talking and pressed my lips together for safe measure. At least keeping them closed would prevent more foolishness from escaping. Why couldn't I just shut up?

"Green Eyes, you ain't got nothing to worry about," Joe assured. "Your secrets are safe with me. Besides, who's going to listen to an old ex-con like me,

anyway?” His eyes dropped to the newspaper in my hand. “There’s more than just them,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s street folk missing, too. Been disappearing for a long while now.” His troubled gaze moved to the water bottle he held. “I know folks move on, but not these. Mason, Doc, now Lady Jane—they was regular fixtures out here.”

“Lady Jane? The woman with the cat?” I asked, picturing the young woman with matted hair and haunted eyes. I’d crossed paths with Jane on my midnight jaunts every so often. Hidden in the shadows, I’d watched her dote on her smoky-gray cat, Cleo. Cleo had looked well fed. No doubt Lady Jane would sooner feed her cat than herself.

Joe nodded, watching the water he swirled in the bottle.

“She really loves her cat,” I said.

“Never lets Cleo out of her sight. But the other night, Cleo was wandering through Occidental Park, yowling for Lady Jane.”

“Did you tell the police?”

“Na.” Joe watched the water spin around and around. “When you got nothing and no one, you’re invisible.”

At a loss for words, I watched the liquid swirl in the bottle, too. The water splashed against the brand name etched in the plastic in bright lavender with beams shooting out from each letter, like an explosion of light:

Luminous.

Chapter 2

The Mask Comes Off

I leapt through the window of my second-story bedroom around two a.m. I could have walked through the front door, since my nighttime activities were no longer a secret. But I preferred coming and going through my window. Bad habits are hard to break.

On my way to bed, I pulled off my mask, sweatshirt, and shoes, discarding them on the floor. I crawled underneath the covers and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. The back of a hand slapped me awake in what felt like only moments later.

“Chazz,” I groaned, pushing his hand away. It sprang back like a bungee cord, nailing my nose. It’s like the kid was made of rubber.

“Why do you keep crawling into my bed?” I complained to my sleepy, six-year-old brother.

I knew why. He felt safe with me. Whether or not he wanted to admit it, Chazz was afraid that someone would discover my secret and would hurt our

family in order to get me. I hated that he had this fear, but, as Gavin put it, fear keeps us on our toes.

Chazz whistled a snore.

Groaning, I pulled a pillow over my head.

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“Who’d you save last night, Cassy?”

I pried my eyelids apart. Chazz’s cute, round face hung over mine, red hair poking out every which way. His big green eyes were eager.

“No one.”

His face fell in disappointment.

“But I did stop a robbery.”

His mouth turned up into a huge smile, revealing a new gap where a bottom front tooth had been. He was too cute for words.

“Did the Tooth Fairy come?”

Chazz rolled his eyes, shaking his head. The song “Who Let the Dogs Out” suddenly blared from my alarm.

“There is *no* Tooth Fairy,” he stated, offended by the mere suggestion there was. He hopped out of bed. “I’m going to tell Daddy what you did. He’ll be so proud!”

“That’s debatable.” I yawned as he darted into the hall. “And there is a Tooth Fairy!” I called after him.

Adding a “woof, woof,” with the song, I slammed down the snooze button.

My parents weren’t exactly thrilled with my crime-fighting shenanigans. In fact, it took some convincing from Serena and Emery just to get them to give me permission to work off excess energy in the dead of night. My parents still

couldn't wrap their heads around the fact that a girl who could give Jackie Chan a run for his money and leap a car in a single bound wasn't all that vulnerable.



I got ready for school, then went down to the kitchen.

"Mornin'," I greeted my family and Dad's cameraman, Ben Johnson. With his mocha skin, wild corkscrew hair, and happy amber eyes, twenty-four-year-old Ben was one of my favorite people in the world.

"Hey, Cassy Girl." He gave me his infectious grin.

"Good morning, sweetheart." Dad gave me a disapproving look.

My twin, Nate, gave me the *shame, shame* gesture, rubbing one forefinger over the other.

I gave *him* a glare.

I glanced over my shoulder at my mom, Elizabeth, who was standing behind our white-marble-topped kitchen island, meticulously spreading cream cheese on a bagel as though it were the most interesting task on Earth. *Uh-oh*. Chazz had obviously brought them up to speed on my heroic deed before Ben had arrived. Thank goodness he'd come over early this morning. Otherwise, I'd be getting an earful.

"Bagel?" she offered with a side of forced smile.

"Thanks, Mom." I took the bagel and sat down at the table with the males, wondering if I was the only one who could feel the tension collecting in the air like dust particles. It was almost palpable. It isn't like my parents were *uninvolved bystander* types. They were good people. They just worried about me.

Ben didn't appear to sense anything amiss, and he continued to relay the latest Lake Washington Monster sighting. At least that's what believers in the

outlandish, such as Ben, had dubbed the recent events at the lake, despite the conflicting details.

A few weeks earlier, a couple had claimed a serpent-like creature had slithered under their speedboat, and another woman had described seeing a mermaid the week prior. The latest sighting had been made by another boater, who'd allegedly seen a silvery creature with a stark white mane, before it had submerged into the depths.

"A *mane*?" Nate repeated, raising his eyebrows. "You mean like on a *horse*?"

"What else, Nate?" Chazz answered for Ben, flipping up his palms in exasperation. His fingertips and teeth were coated with cream cheese.

Ben chucked a wadded-up napkin at Nate. "Don't be so closed-minded."

"*Moi*?" Nate aimed forefingers at his chest. "I'm, like, the opposite of closed-minded, or else I wouldn't believe in the Seattle Shadow."

Dad glanced up from his laptop to give Nate a look. Behind me, I could feel admonishment rolling off Mom in waves. Nate liked living on the edge.

"Nate, dear," Mom said, in a super-sweet voice, "would you like orange juice?"

*Nate, you are in so much trouble*, I sang in my head, smirking around the bagel lodged in my mouth.

Glancing at Mom, Nate straightened up in his chair. "Uh, no. Thanks, Mom."

The sounds of "Soul Sister" suddenly sang from Ben's cell. He looked at the text and grinned.

"Cool!" His thumbs punched out a reply. "Drake, this is Leroy. He's flying

in tomorrow.”

“Is he making an episode about The Lake Washington Monster?” I guessed.

Leroy Rays was the host of the hunting show *Big Game*. After a run-in with a supposed Sasquatch—me—he had started another cable show: *Monster Hunters*.

“Yep!” Ben beamed and sent his text. He lived for supernatural stuff.

“I look forward to seeing him.” Dad’s crystal-blue eyes combed the news on his laptop. With his golden-blond hair, clean-cut features, and million-dollar smile, he looked every bit the successful news broadcaster. “We’ll have to schedule an interview with him. Cassidy and Nate, you might be interested in this.”

Dad started a video and turned the laptop around so everyone at the table could see the screen. The footage rolled from a still of Jared’s dad, Owen Wells. He stood next to a man a bit taller than he, with deep-set eyes, a cleft chin, and a weather-beaten complexion. On the other side of the man stood a girl my age. She was gorgeous and exotic-looking. She had bronze skin, almond-shaped eyes, and a beautiful head of raven hair. Her dark, silky locks shone even on the laptop screen.

The man introduced her as his stepdaughter Ashlyn. “Patrick Grimm, Owner/CEO of Luminous Water” flashed at the bottom of the screen as he talked about some charitable work his company was doing for the homeless. Grimm had a Southern accent, and the more I looked at him, the more I pictured him in a flannel shirt, gripping an ax like Paul Bunyan. Seemed to fit him better than the swanky Armani suit and tie he wore.

“What’s Jared’s dad doing there?” I asked, noting that Ashlyn looked like she wanted to crawl under a rock. I could hardly blame her. I wouldn’t like a news camera in my face, either.



“He’s Patrick Grimm’s lawyer,” Dad responded.

“So he’s making sure his client minds his p’s and q’s,” I guessed, studying Jared’s father.

Jared had his father’s dirty-blond hair, angular face, and athletic build, but that was where the similarities ended. Where Jared was noble and trustworthy, his father was a snake. He’d left Jared’s mom Eileen when Jared was three. That was all I knew about him. Jared rarely talked about his dad.



As was our routine, I texted Emery that Nate and I were leaving for school as I collected my stuff from my room. By the time Nate and I ambled onto our front porch, Emery was waiting at the end of our English Tudor’s front walk. That morning, he wasn’t alone.

“Hey,” Nate called to Emery and his father, jogging ahead of me.

I lingered behind. Gavin and Emery noted me doing so, with identical amused expressions.

Emery was the spitting image of his father. The same jet-black hair, black, intelligent eyes, milky complexion, and chiseled good looks. The only thing six-foot-four-inch Gavin had on Emery was four inches and muscle mass, both of which I had no doubt Emery would one day match. As it was, he wasn’t one of those tall, scraggly high school boys. Emery was mature beyond his years, in more than just physicality.

Emery and Nate were in the midst of exchanging high-fives when I finally joined them on the sidewalk. Gavin smirked.

“You were busy last night, Cassidy,” he remarked.

I shrugged. “Just in the right place at the right time.”

“You’ve made a habit of that,” he observed.

Unlike my parents, Gavin didn’t mind my protecting public safety. More accurately, he didn’t mind me exercising my abilities. My superpowers fascinated him. I could practically see the gears turning behind his eyes, which would often become calculating as he watched me perform one of Serena’s physical tests, or when Emery and I would playfully spar in their family’s basement. Sometimes Gavin joined in—but, with him, the fighting wasn’t for fun. He would give it all he had, executing every lethal move he knew, and he was extremely innovative.

Once, during sparring, he had swiped a hammer from the floor and hurled it at me. I’d caught it by the handle. As Serena scolded him for the dirty trick, he’d just leaned against a support beam, catching his breath, and stared at me. Sweat was beading on his forehead; behind, those gears turned and turned.

“So, how’s the remodeling going?” I asked to change the topic. So I’d intervened in another crime. Big deal. I motioned to a dump truck piled high with dirt and the white van with “Marathon Construction” painted on the side.

The “remodeling” was more like Bruce Wayne’s construction project when he’d had the Bat Cave built. Right now, the Marathon workers—with the help of shovels, wheelbarrows, and a jackhammer—were digging out a secret room, which would eventually serve as a laboratory. They also were digging a tunnel underneath the street to connect our two basements. That way, we could go back and forth between our houses without witnesses. The secret laboratory also would act as a safe room, if worse came to worst.

Frankly, I didn’t know if this project was legal, even though Gavin had obtained building permits. We didn’t ask how, just like we didn’t pump him for information about the Marathon Construction workers. They were a shady-looking

crew. Nate and I had decided that whomever they really worked for must have owed Gavin a big favor. But we kept our theories to ourselves.

About a month earlier, Dad had queried Gavin about them when he couldn't stand it any longer. Gavin had looked at him squarely and warned, "Drake, don't ask." And Dad didn't. Where government operatives are concerned, it's best to keep questions to oneself.

"It's coming along," Gavin answered vaguely, a typical Phillips. He cast a glance at Emery and Nate. "You boys can grab a shovel this afternoon and help speed things along."

"Sounds like a blast," Emery remarked cheekily while he checked his email on his cell.

"Whoa! Wait a sec." Nate held a hand up and eyed a wheelbarrow, as though someone had had the gall to scrawl his name across the mound of dirt it held. "You mean, *we* should haul dirt?" He flipped his thumb between himself and Emery. "No offense, Gavin, but you're missing the obvious. Think speed, strength, and *not* boy."

"Wimp," I said.

"No argument there, if it gets me out of shoveling."

"Well played, Nate," Emery ribbed as he punched out something on his cell's keypad.

"You're a master at shoveling, son, and I don't mean dirt." Gavin gave my twin a playful dope-slap. "I'll see *you* after school. Bye, kids."

Gavin crossed the street to their Victorian and asked one of the workers, Cristiano, a husky, shifty-eyed man who was unloading an air compressor from the van, "How about a cup of Joe?"

“No, thanks. I’m good.” Cristiano grinned and waved a bottled water at him.

His smile was a bit of a surprise. Cristiano was hardly the smiling type.

“Hey!” Miriam Cohen called from her porch, two houses down from mine. “I thought I’d missed you!”

“Run,” Nate advised Emery.

I backhanded Nate’s chest. He made an *umph* sound, as though I’d knocked the air out of him.

“Careful,” he said, rubbing his chest. “I’m delicate.”

His poking fun at Miriam’s obsession with Emery was getting old. But, as she bobbed toward us, I couldn’t imagine why Emery wasn’t enthralled with her. Dark, smooth curls bouncing off slender shoulders, dazzling smile on an animated and classically beautiful face, cobalt-blue eyes that glistened like deep seawater— How could any boy resist her?

“When are you going to admit that you’re madly in love with me?” she brazenly demanded of Emery, probably waking up a few neighbors in the process. She squeezed his cheeks between her hands, creating fish lips and causing his black-framed glasses to lift on his nose.

I nodded. Yes, if in Emery’s shoes, I could resist her, too.

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I locked gazes with the most beautiful set of chocolate-brown eyes in the world—limpid, soulful, and fringed with thick, black lashes. My heart thumped like a rabbit.

Jared’s sculpted lips curled at the corners into his slow smile. I had spent long hours lost in daydreams about what it would be like to kiss those succulent

lips.

“He’s looking at you like he wants to gobble you up, like a coconut pie,” Miriam observed, and not quietly at that.

Chuckling, Jared continued to his table across the room, while Emery said under his breath, for my ears only, “And you wonder how I can resist her?”

I glanced at him, stumped. I couldn’t recall ever asking him that.

“Coconut pie—*yum*,” Dixon Pilchowski butted in, giving me a lecherous look. His toady, Rodrigo Perez, sniggered.

I glared across the table into Dixon’s mean, smug face, furious that he’d made me blush.

His mocking eyes slithered to Emery. Crossing his arms over his broad chest, he leaned back in the chair and attempted to stare Emery down. All at once, Dixon became uncomfortable and glanced away. Typical bully.

Ever since Emery had humbled him for threatening Miriam, Dixon had been scared spitless of him. Everyone in the school knew about the incident, including Mr. Levy, our science teacher, whom I’d become convinced was inherently evil. A well-intentioned teacher wouldn’t assign the five people involved in conflict to the same table. It was as though he’d tossed a lit match into a barrel of gas and sat waiting for it to explode.

Mr. Levy had come to dislike Emery almost as much as he obviously despised Dixon, who must have represented every bully who had ever made Levy’s personal high school existence miserable.

His resentment of Emery was apparent in his thin, pinched face, which perfectly matched his sour disposition. His reasons why weren’t as clear-cut, however. I’d assumed that he’d sensed Emery was brighter than he let on. Just

how bright would have probably blown Levy's mind.

The bell rang, and right on cue Dixon slouched in his chair, setting his jaw and tucking clenched fists into crossed arms. Levy had trained him well. Dixon would remain in that position, not speaking, unless Levy decided to humiliate him.

I peeked over my shoulder at Jared. He gifted me his breathtaking smile. I never grew tired of that smile.

“Blackwell . . .” Mr. Levy began roll call.

Reluctantly, I turned back around. When Jared had transferred into my class for our second semester, I'd been ecstatic. Then Levy seated him at the table farthest away from mine. Like I said, the man was pure evil.

After roll call, Levy walked to the front of the room—in his odd, crabby, hunched-over, shuffling way—and grimly peered at the open textbook in his hands. Jerking up his head of stringy hair, he scanned the room, planning an assault. His thin lips turned up into a quivering smile; his hostile gaze rested on Emery.

“Mr. Phillips, you do realize that when you are absent, it is your responsibility to be prepared for class upon returning?”

Emery had played hooky the day before so he could track down a delinquent client for bail bond agent Riley O'Shea, his employer and former college mate. When Emery wasn't keeping an eye on me or pretending to be a regular teenager, he often did skip tracing for her.

Emery gave Levy a cocky grin. “Yeah.”

My stomach tightened. The dislike being mutual, Emery dumbed himself down even more for this class, just to set Levy off. You'd think the old sourpuss wouldn't have been worth his effort. But I've learned that, genius or not, a fifteen-

year-old boy will behave like a fifteen-year-old boy.

“Since you have familiarized yourself with the chapter, as I observed you doing while entering the room—”

“Busted,” David Hsu whispered behind us.

I squirmed in my seat. Emery was in the habit of doing assigned reading while walking between classes. He thumbed through pages so rapidly that it had become the source of a joke among our friends. No one believed he was really speed-reading. I knew better.

“—Perhaps you could tell us which revered scientist is known as the Father of Microbiology.”

“Er, Einstein?”

Miriam giggled and reached around me to pinch his arm. “You’re naughty, Emery *Mendel*.”

Laughter rippled through the room. Our classmates caught on, teasing:

“I wonder who it is, Emery *Mendel*?”

“Emery *Mendel*, I’m clueless, too.”

“Emery *Mendel*, didn’t you read the chapter?”

“Silence!” Levy shouted. His puckered face displayed outrage, but his beady eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

I sighed, seeing another detention in Emery’s near future.

“Mr. Phillips, as your classmates *perceptively* deduced, you did not read the chapter. Since you are unable to find time to prepare for class, I need to create an opportunity for you—in detention, *this* afternoon.”

“Sounds fair.”

Mr. Levy’s gloating expression faded. “Let us see if your tablemates are

better prepared.” He glared at the back of Dixon’s head. “Mr. Pilchowski, please turn around in your seat.”

Dixon mouthed a profane word and twisted around.

“Mr. Pilchowski, which protozoa can be distinguished by their unique slipper shape and by the cilia that surround them?”

“Paramec—”

“Incorrect,” Levy cut him off.

Emery tensed.

I considered the answer. “Paramecia” sounded right. The soft murmurs around me agreed. But Levy’s harsh expression dissuaded challenges.

His eyes skirted to the other side of the room. “Miss Ling, define ‘sporozoa.’”

Yue Ling visibly gulped and glanced helplessly at her tablemates. As she opened her mouth to speak, Emery’s deep voice resonated, and it was his true voice—incisive, confident, and mature—not the voice he had adapted for his act. “If ‘paramecia’ is wrong, what is the correct answer?”

“Mr. Phillips, I did not see your hand—”

“If it isn’t ‘paramecia,’ what is it, then?” Emery repeated calmly.

Levy stared at him, speechless.

I tapped my foot nervously, glancing sidelong at Emery’s composed face. He always drilled in how critical it was to be discreet. What was he doing?

The ticking of the clock echoed over the SMART Board. An anxious tension collected in the air, as everyone became uncertain of what to do or where to look, with the exception of Emery. His steady gaze didn’t waver from Levy.

“Class, take out a piece of paper for a pop quiz,” Levy ordered, taking his

revenge.

No one protested.

As the sound of clicking binders and rustling paper filled the silence, Mr. Levy shuffled to his desk, picked up a bottled water with an unsteady hand, and took a long drink.

“Dude, that was cool of you,” Dixon whispered to Emery.

Emery looked at him squarely. “You were right, Dixon,” he stated matter-of-factly.

Dixon nodded, then looked at Rodrigo and snatched his pencil.

Smoothing a piece of paper, I attempted to calm myself. The scene had driven a wedge of icy fear into my heart. Emery had revealed himself. Screw-ups were my department, not his. His removal of the metaphorical mask confirmed a whispering terror that tormented me every night while lying in bed, waiting for sleep to come after racing around Seattle.

This charade of ours won't last forever.

When the jig was up, what then?

Emery slid his sheet of paper in front of me. He had written: *I was wrong to let the pretentious windbag get to me. The mask won't come off again.* He pulled the paper back and scribbled over his note.

Levy tossed the plastic bottle he had drained into the wastebasket. He twisted off the top of another, took a swig, and then read the first quiz question.

Pens and pencils sailed across paper, except for mine. I hadn't even heard the question, as my eyes stared at the spot where “mask” had been written on Emery's paper.

Was his word choice a coincidence?

At one time, I would have presumed so. But we'd had too many coincidences.

Fear wasn't my only nightly tormenter. Guilt was equally persistent. Emery wasn't normal, and I knew why. And every day I regretted the promise I'd made Gavin to keep my mouth shut about it until he felt his son was ready for the truth.

Arthur King Sr. had experimented on my friend when Emery was young, and had changed him.

Somehow.

Chapter 3

Three Down, One Who Knows

“Levy’s class was intense,” Jared said, breaking the silence.

We were walking to his mom’s apartment after school to get his stuff and feed the pets. Eileen was on a business trip, so he was going to hang with us for the weekend.

I had fallen into deep thought about Levy’s class, too. Emery acting out of character had thrown me. Sure, what Levy had done to Dixon was wrong. And, yes, the pompous jerk should have been called out for abusing his authority. Emery had a strong sense of justice. But he wouldn’t normally act so rashly. I expected *me* to make stupid decisions, not him. Emery dropping his act had been a rude awakening. He was subject to mistakes, too. After all, he was only human.

Maybe . . .

Having fought King’s mutants, I couldn’t comfortably presume Emery was completely human. I had no clue how King had tinkered with his mind, or why he

would have. Gavin hadn't felt obliged to fill me in when he'd sworn me to secrecy.

"Uh, Cass? Did you hear me?"

"Yes!" I blurted so abruptly that Jared jumped.

"Man," he said with a laugh. Bending over, he pressed his palms to his thighs and laughed more. He found almost everything I did funny, especially the odd stuff.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to yell. I was sort of lost in my head."

"No worries," he said, trying to catch his breath. "You just took me by surprise." Grinning ear-to-ear, Jared straightened up. He put me in a light chokehold and grated his knuckles over my scalp.

"Well, that's romantic!" I protested, squirming free. I smoothed my mussed hair and attempted *a look*. It failed utterly, earning me more chuckles from Jared.

"Is this better?" He wove his fingers into mine, taking me by surprise.

We started walking again, hand-in-hand. An elated smile split my face, making my cheeks feel ready to crack.

"Let's try this again," Jared said, smiling at my smile. "Levy's class was intense."

"Uh-huh." His palm was toasty warm. Our hands fit together perfectly.

"*Uh-huh?* That's all you have to say?"

"No. I like this." I swung our clasped hands up.

The last time Jared had held my hand was when he'd told me I was special to him. He had shared his feelings for me with my dad, too. Dad thanked him for being honorable, then informed him that Jones kids weren't allowed to date until they reached the age of sixteen.

“Me, too.” Jared returned. His smile tightened, and I felt his fingers loosen. Bummed, I assumed he was recalling his talk with my dad, too. He probably figured holding hands was barred. Safe guess.

“I’m getting the feeling you don’t want to talk about Emery,” he teased as my hand fell from his.

“That *was* intense.” I balled my lonely hand and shoved it into my sweater pocket. “Levy needed to be challenged. He is a total jerk! So is Dixon, but no one deserves to be degraded like that.”

“Agreed.”

I could see on Jared’s face that he was evaluating whether to share more of his thoughts on the incident. He wasn’t one to blurt out whatever sprang into his head.

“What are you thinking about?” I prompted.

“This hilarious thing happened at Cherry Street last night,” he eluded, changing the topic to the coffeehouse where he played guitar.

I knew that wasn’t what had been on his mind, but he didn’t claim it to be. And he wouldn’t. Jared never lied.

~ ~ ~

“Hi, Athena,” I cooed at Jared’s cat. She was curled up on the sofa, which was bathed in sunlight filtering through the picture window.

Jared locked the front door.

The building had been built in the early 1900s, so the apartment had all the cool architectural details common to that era—high ceilings, elaborate moldings, oak floors. I found it charming, eclectic, and homey, especially furnished with Eileen’s antique shop finds.

The calico had cracked an eye open when I'd spoken to her, then let it slide shut again. It had taken some effort on my part to get her to warm up to me. Due to odd reactions from other animals since my mutation, I had come to realize that I didn't smell human anymore. I usually didn't care what animals thought of me, but that wasn't the case with Athena. She was Jared's cat.

The first time she'd encountered the new me—the old one, she didn't give a rip about—she hissed and ran away, as if in mortal danger. Jared had been stunned by her reaction. I'd felt humiliated, and scared. I didn't want him to think there was anything wrong with me. But by sneaking her cat treats and patiently petting her, I eventually gained her trust. A few times, we had trapped one another in unblinking stares, and I'd felt some sort of weird mind-meld initiate. That had been my cue to look away. I didn't want to know what would have happened if we'd kept it up.

“How about you feed Athena, and I'll feed Killer? Unless you'd rather feed Killer?” Jared flashed a grin.

Killer's future meals chirped in Jared's room.

“Ha! The only thing I'd do with Killer's *food* is set them free.”

“So I'll feed Killer then.” He tugged my hair and headed down the short hallway to his room.

I walked through the dining room to their adorable galley kitchen, with a black-and-white checkerboard floor, mint-colored cabinets, red countertops, and 1950s reproduction appliances. Entering their kitchen felt like being time-warped to *Leave it to Beaver*. There was a faint odor of meals from the past that only I could detect, though probably Athena could, too. It was as though ninety years of food preparation had seasoned the room.

After a long, savoring breath of the comforting kitchen aroma, I filled Athena's food bowl with kibble and gave her fresh water. Then I walked to Jared's room, where I took another long, savoring breath that ended in a sated smile. The room smelled of him: exquisite.

"What are you smiling about?" He dropped a cricket in his tarantula's terrarium.

"Nothing." I swiped up a goalie mask that I had almost stepped on and tossed it onto his unmade bed. "You need to clean your room."

"Look who's talking!"

"You're right. My floor is my dresser, too. Oh, listen to them!" I motioned to the jar, from which Jared was in the process of fishing out another cricket.

"They're pleading for their lives!"

"Not for long." Jared wiggled his eyebrows and dropped another cricket to its death.

"You're heartless!"

"A guy's gotta eat."

There was a knock at the front door.

"Mrs. Carmichael," Jared predicted.

Mrs. Carmichael was a widow who lived a couple of apartments down. She kept Eileen and Jared in ample supply of homemade baked goods and motherly advice.

"I hope she's bearing gifts of warm chocolate chip cookies," I said, glimpsing one of his soccer shoes thrown on its side near the window. The cleats were packed with mud and grass. That explained the earthy smell in the room.

"Me, too." Jared handed me the jar. "Don't feed him too many. He's

starting to get cricket belly.”

“Charming. And no worries.”

With distaste, I set the jar next to the terrarium just as Jared left the room, leaping over a pile of clothes on his way out. I would never want a pet that required live food.

“You’ll have to make do with what you’ve got,” I told Killer, bending over to peer at him through the glass. Hanging out in his shallow water bowl, Killer appeared not to give a hoot about the crickets hopping all around. “Not hungry, eh?” I tapped the glass. The spider didn’t flinch.

The front door opened. “Can I help—”

There was a fast movement of feet.

“Wha—” Jared gasped. A sharp smacking sound cut him short.

My heart leapt to my throat. I ran to the bedroom door and peeked out.

A rough-looking man with sunglasses bolted the front door. Another thug had an arm around Jared and a hand clamped over his mouth. I could see a red welt forming on Jared’s cheek where he’d been backhanded. A third man held a gun on him.

Jared began to struggle.

The gunman cocked the pistol.

Glaring at him, Jared stood still.

Think, think! I willed my brain, my heart hammering against my ribs. *If I go out now, Jared could be shot. All that creep has to do is squeeze the trigger.*

A shudder shook my body. My head swam. This could not be happening.

THINK!

My frantic eyes latched on to the hockey jersey wound around my shoe. It

had gotten caught on my foot when I'd run to the door.

"Tape him," the gunman ordered.

I yanked the jersey over my head.

"You have your old man to thank for this—"

I swiped the goalie mask off the bed.

"When you play with fire—"

Pulling on the mask, I dashed to the door and looked out. The thug in the sunglasses was wrapping duct tape around Jared's wrists while the other thug held him still. Jared's mouth was taped shut. I gripped his hockey stick leaning against the wall.

"—*you* don't decide when to stop playing."

I prayed the gunman would uncock the weapon and lower it. He didn't, keeping it trained on Jared. The thug binding Jared squatted down to tape his ankles together, while the other, wearing a sordid smile, held him still.

The gunman approached Jared. "Shame. You're a good-looking kid."

"No!" I screamed and shot out of the room.

Swinging around, the gunman released the trigger.

My eyes slowed the speeding bullet. I saw it coming and could have avoided contact, but the thug in sunglasses distracted me. His hand dove for a gun tucked into his waistband. My skin hardened as the hot metal tore into my left shoulder, stopping the bullet's progression. I launched forward, swinging the hockey stick back and into the gunman's chest. The stick snapped in half, and the gunman crumbled to the floor, his head smacking against the wood.

Without pause, I seized the thug who'd been going for his weapon. I grabbed him by the throat, lifting him off the floor and throwing him. He flew into

a hutch that displayed Eileen's prized fine china. China and glass shattering, the hutch toppled over and pinned the man underneath. His sunglasses sat cockeyed on his face, and blood streamed from glittering shards sunk deep into his right cheek. It trickled over his drooping lips and splashed on the floor.

The man who held Jared released him and stumbled backward, his vile smile gone. I came at him in a flying kick, ramming my foot into his gut. His body curled around my leg, the impact propelling him backward. He took out a rocking chair and side table, sending the lamp and ceramics on top crashing. He rolled on the floor in agony, gripping his stomach, and squealed like a frightened pig.

I sprang at the creep, pulled him to his feet, and brought my fist into his face. Cartilage cracked under my hand, and blood spurted from his nose, splattering my face through the mask. I could taste it on my lips.

His eyes rolled into the back of his head. I released his collar, and he collapsed into a heap at my feet.

I spun around, prepared for another attack, but found only sprawled bodies, overturned furniture, broken glass, blood, and Jared. He was on his knees, his chest heaving, his round eyes full of shock . . . fixed on me.

My heart sank.

Jared was terrified—of me.