

EMBOLDEN

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Excerpt: Chapter Six

SIX



“I wish Brian would get his head out of his ass.” Claire was standing with Alec by his vintage car in the junior parking lot, his arms around her.

“Is that what you really want? The two of them together?”

“She’s my best friend. I want her to have what she wants.”

“If it’s right, it’ll happen.”

“Since when did you become Dr. Phil?”

Alec smiled into her eyes. “I’m not. But I’m learning. Slowly.” He kissed her. Also slowly.

It was a lovely kiss. As always, Claire’s heart fluttered. When the kiss ended, she gallantly opened the door to his Mustang and waited until he was seated inside. “Drive safe.”

“You too. We’ll talk tonight.”

As Alec drove off, Claire crossed the lot to where her own car was parked, unable to hold back her smile. Having Helena in their lives had certainly come with some great benefits. Besides having her long-lost Grigori grandmother around all the time, which Claire loved, money was no longer a problem. Claire’s tuition was paid in full (no more stressing about her grades to keep a scholarship), and they’d moved into a luxury condo in Brentwood, just a five-minute drive from school. That meant a little extra sleep every morning, which Claire really appreciated after her late-night video chats with Alec.

And with Helena’s seemingly limitless bank account, Claire could at last have a car of her own, like everybody else at Emerson. But not just any car. It was a brand-new Acura hybrid with a garnet metallic finish, a top-notch sound system, and all the bells and whistles a girl could want.

Claire unlocked the door, heaved her backpack into the rear, and settled on the smooth leather seat behind the wheel. The space was so snug and the instrument panel so cool, it felt like she was in the cockpit of her own private airplane. The car—her car—made her feel grown-up, which was both exciting and intimidating.

As she stuck her key in the ignition, the sound of a man clearing his throat beside her was so startling, she shrieked. She turned her head to find a man sitting in the passenger seat. A man who had definitely not been there a second before.

“Holy shit!” Claire’s stomach jumped in fear as her hand moved to the door handle. “Get out of my car!”

“I’m sorry if I frightened you, Miss Brennan. I’m not going to hurt you. There’s no need for a fuss.”

Claire hesitated, some instinct making her think he was telling the truth. Maybe it was the man’s eyes: they weren’t menacing, but rather appraising, reassuring, and very, very tired.

She struggled to control the beating of her heart as she studied him. He was slender, with a long, smooth face augmented by a hint of a goatee, and everything about him was pale, from his white skin, to his blond hair, to those eyes, which were the gray of an overcast sky. He wore a white turtleneck with a beige blazer and washed-out jeans. His legs were so long that they looked cramped in her car.

“Damn right, there’s a need,” Claire said. “Who are you? What do you want? How did you get in here?”

“Locks aren’t a problem for me.”

That wasn’t exactly an answer to her questions. “You weren’t here when I got in the car.”

“Oh, but I was. I’ve been waiting for you for the past half hour.”

“That’s impossible.”

He gave her a small smile. Suddenly, all the color drained from his body, until it looked like he was made of ice, at which point he faded entirely from view.

Claire gasped, staring at the empty space where the man had been. He had totally, utterly *vanished*. Yet she sensed that he was still there. Definitely some Fallen witchcraft. "You're one of *them*! Did Celeste send you?"

He reappeared. "No, child. I fight for the *other* side. I am the Watcher for this city."

Claire nodded slowly. She remembered hearing Alec talk about the Grigori who watched over Los Angeles, policing its Fallen, and initiating newly awakened Nephilim. The one Vincent had temporarily replaced during the horrible events of last fall, when *she* had awakened. The authority figure Helena had to constantly check in with to confirm that Claire was walking the straight and narrow.

But far worse: the person most likely to discover Alec and ship him back to their Grigori brethren. When Claire spoke again, her voice was no more than a whisper. "You're Zachariah."

"So, you've heard of me."

Claire's heart pounded, but she just shrugged her shoulders, hoping to appear casual as she carefully chose her words. "Helena may have mentioned you once or twice."

"I see." Something buzzed in Zachariah's pocket. He pulled out his cell phone and began texting as he spoke. "Please forgive my dramatic greeting, Miss Brennan, but as Emerson is a closed campus, I had little alternative."

Claire studied him, aware that she had to keep this man on her side. "Am I in trouble?"

"Not at all. I've had you on my mind ever since I resumed my post, but this is the first time I've been able to fit you into my schedule. I've been meeting with Helena telepathically with regard to your progress, which is all positive. Well done." He glanced at her. "But I thought it important that I meet you for myself, face-to-face."

"Why? So you can see if my grandmother's been telling the truth about me the past three months?"

Zachariah silently resumed texting, his expression betraying nothing.

I guess that answers that. Claire sighed. Clearly, he'd cornered her in her car so he could give her the third degree without Helena there to influence or protect her. "Okay. Great. We've met. Now what?"

He put his phone away and rubbed his eyes wearily. "Let's take a little ride. I hope you don't mind if I accompany you home?"

Claire's jaw clenched. This was the last thing she wanted. A cold fear gripped her as she thought of all the times Alec had come over since Zachariah had returned to L.A. Thank God Zachariah had been too busy to worry about her until now. Otherwise, he could have been lurking (invisibly!) at school, in her old apartment, or the new condo. He would have recognized Alec on the spot and busted him. Good thing Alec hadn't made plans to come over today. Aloud, she said, "Do I have a choice?"

"Not really." Zachariah pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a long, exhausted breath, reminding Claire of the way her mom looked after working back-to-back open houses and carting clients around all weekend, hunting for homes they didn't buy.

"All righty then." Claire drove out of the parking lot, up the hill, and onto the busy Brentwood street, her palms sweaty as she gripped the wheel. Stealing a sideways glance at Zachariah, she sensed his confidence, which made her even more tense. His pleasant manner could just be a mask. After all, Vincent had seemed this polite the first time they met, and look what *he* turned out to be.

Both men had a lot of power. And people with power could never be trusted. She'd have to watch her words around Zachariah.

"So," she commented after an awkward silence, struggling to keep things light, "how's the Watcher thing going?"

The question seemed to amuse him. "Fine."

"How does L.A. fit into the grand scheme? Is it one of the biggest hives of scum and villainy?"

"It ranks well behind Caracas and San Salvador, but it's still a challenge." His tone was straightforward, without a hint of irony. "The cell of Fallen in Los Angeles has a very powerful leader with a strong following. They keep me on my toes."

"Yeah, I've met three of them," Claire shot back. "They're not my favorite people."

Zachariah's eyebrows lifted. "Oh really? Helena neglected to mention that. When did this happen?"

Damn, Claire thought. I never should have said that. "Um. Well. That's because I never mentioned it to her," Claire lied. "A few months ago, at the Homecoming dance, these three kids showed up who didn't go to our school. They promised me protection and stuff from the Grigori, who they said wanted me dead. I told them to back off, but it really freaked me out that they knew I'm a—" Her cheeks flushed as her voice trailed off.

"You can say Halfblood, child. There's no shame in it."

"Tell that to your predecessor."

"Vincent was ... misguided. He should never have attacked you and your mother. His duty was to steer you toward the right path. A Watcher is only allowed to take drastic measures if there is no way to sway you from the Fallen's influence."

"You call it drastic measures, I call it attempted murder." Claire would never forget that terrifying night, right after the Homecoming dance. "Vincent turned my living room into a Biblical wasteland, then tried to kill us."

"So I heard. I'm still unclear as to how you were able to fight off someone as powerful as Vincent."

Claire felt his eyes on her as she drove and wondered if he was fishing. Did he suspect that Alec had been there and saved her life? No, she decided. Zachariah had no reason to think Alec was in Los Angeles or that he even knew her.

"I have these psychic abilities," Claire replied, hoping she sounded more nonchalant than she felt. "Or haven't you heard?"

"Is your psychic power the only talent you used on him?"

Claire's brow knotted. "Well. Yeah. Since it's the only one I have."

Zachariah nodded as if satisfied and said nothing further, just stared out the window as they entered the parking garage beneath her building. She led the way to the elevator, which whisked them to the third floor, her anxiety mounting in the awkward silence.

Claire unlocked her front door, but before pushing it all the way open, she called out, "Grandma! We have a visitor!"

The entryway opened onto a high-ceilinged, open living area with gleaming hardwood floors and fresh white walls hung with an eclectic assortment of delicate watercolor paintings. A sliding glass door, leading to a balcony, infused the room with light. A leather sofa and two overstuffed chairs were flanked by antique end tables topped with knickknacks that Helena had had shipped from her flat in London. The kitchen, immediately adjacent, was divided by a granite counter fronted by comfy stools, and a hallway led to three bedrooms beyond.

As Claire and her visitor walked in, she noticed a teapot and two teacups on the coffee table. Helena, sipping from her own cup by the fireplace, flashed a Martha Stewart smile.

"Hello, Zachariah. I've been expecting you."