Chapter 1: Emer

 “No, wait, please!” *Click.* The elevator door shut softly, but firmly, in my face. And then it sped downward, the mechanical gears whirring and grinding, leaving me behind without a second thought.

 I sighed, hanging my head. “Typical,” I muttered to myself, “*So* typical.” My whole life had pretty much been a series of doors closing right before my eyes. Why I ever imagined it would be different after college, I had no idea.

 *I should have listened to my mother,* I realized. My mother had encouraged me from the very beginning to go into nursing because “you can always find a job as a nurse.” But listening to my mother had not ranked very high on my list of things to do during my school years, so there I was, wandering the streets of Boulder, Colorado with resumes in hand, attempting to find a job, an internship, something, anything, at one of the businesses downtown.

 I turned and trudged down the hall, towards the stairs. I could have waited for the elevator to return, but considering my luck so far that day, it probably wouldn’t come back at all.

 Of course, if I were entirely honest with myself, listening to my mother’s advice probably wouldn’t have made any difference. I’d never had any sort of good luck. Granted, I’d never really had any bad luck, either. I was just… ordinary. That would be the word that best describes me. Ordinary brown hair. Ordinary blue eyes. So ordinary that luck itself didn’t even acknowledge my existence.

 I plodded slowly down the steps, not in any particular hurry to face the next rejection on my list. I pondered my sad state of affairs as I went. It wasn’t like I was ugly, or anything. At least, *I* thought I wasn’t. But I wasn’t the girl that guys approach in bookstores or coffee shops. And it wasn’t like I was brainless, either. I was actually smart enough to make straight A’s… although, my favorite subject had been art class. I could be surprisingly creative at times, despite my outward boringness. So naturally, after an unexciting high school career, and an even more unexciting college tenure, I had graduated from the school of art and design at the University of Colorado. That, of course, explained why I couldn’t find a job: the concept that “simply having a college degree will get you a job” is completely obsolete.

*And let’s be honest,* I told myself. *The design field isn’t exactly wide open nowadays.*

 I sighed again, then pushed the main door open and stepped out into the bright sunlight. Luckily – the only bit of luck I’d had so far that day – the weather for mid- to late May in Colorado was actually quite nice. I took a deep breath in, willing the afternoon air to wash away the lingering traces of failure before heading down the sidewalk.

 It was late afternoon, so the streets were starting to fill up with cars heading for the highway and pedestrians heading for their bikes or bus stations. I made my way through the concrete jungle on foot. I didn’t have a car – got to have money to buy a car, got to have a job to have money, as the vicious cycle goes – so hoofing it had been my only option. As I walked, a couple of police cruisers whizzed past me, sirens blaring. They turned a corner ahead of me and were soon out of sight, their alarms fading into the more common sounds of traffic.

My mind wandered back to the dilemma that was my life. One would think, being born in the year 2000, one of the “new millennium” kids, that my life might have at least a *little* something extra to it. Such an extraordinary beginning should have foretold an extraordinary life, but that was not the case for me. Here I was, Emer Starling – relatively short and skinny with not enough curves to be of interest. I’d never even had a boyfriend. After all, would you count half a dozen notes and one phone call from Jake Billings in 9th grade as a boyfriend? I didn’t.

What was worse, I’d never even tried to go out looking for excitement. I’d never broken the rules, never missed curfew… Heck, I’d never done *anything*. My life would appear completely boring to any audience – even to me, and I was right in the middle of it!

I slowed down as I reached the intersection. A fire truck shot by, following the same path as the cop cars, but I paid it no mind. My hand rested on the metal cross-walk button as I reflected on my past.

If I was honest, there had been… moments. Like the deja vu that occurred more times than I would care to admit – but that probably happened to everybody, I’m sure of it. Or when I’d snatch something out of the air that no one, including myself, was expecting me to catch: pesky fruit flies, leaves in the wind, even the marble Peter Colton shot from a slingshot in third grade (actually, I wished I *hadn’t* caught that one – I had a bruise for a week). My quick reflexes would shock everyone, especially considering my dismal athletic abilities – though, again, probably not uncommon*.* Or the times when the radio would mess up: change volume, change station, go static, etc., if I got too close or even – and this made no sense at all – if I was concentrating very hard… All of which probably had logical, rational explanations had I bothered to look for them.

A couple more police cruisers flew past. I ignored them.

There were also the dreams. Very vague dreams – murky, almost. Like looking through shadows. Someone crying for help, the destruction of an ancient city, a battle against an unending army, and a boy, whose face I could never quite make out, that I desperately needed to save… Each one featured the same elements, but it was never the same dream twice. *Of course,* *everyone has weird dreams now and then, right?*

I frowned. It was just… The quality of those dreams, the way they lingered after I woke up, that really stood out. They all held that reminiscent feeling, as if I was watching the events take place through someone else’s eyes. As if I were watching someone else’s memories.

Screams and shouts a couple blocks down from where I stood reminded me that I was still out in the real world. I shook my head, banishing the weirdness back to the far corner of my mind where it belonged. Like I said before, I could be surprisingly creative at times. *Too bad none of the fantastical stuff ever makes its way into an area of my life that actually matters.* I turned and stomped along the street to my right, heedless of where I was going.

I pushed my way through a growing crowd, suddenly irritated that all my efforts this morning had gone to waste. I’d tried to appear professional. I had my nicest pair of dark blue jeans on, a cute maroon camisole topped with a navy-blue blazer, and a comfortable pair of black flats. I wasn’t sporting a huge purse filled with absolutely everything I could ever possibly need, just a little black clutch to hold my phone, keys, ID, etc. My ordinary dark brown hair – in sharp contrast to my ridiculously pale skin – fell down past my shoulders in waves, the way it always did, because I could never think of anything else to do with it. But at least it wasn’t dyed fuchsia or styled in some crazy up-do. I was as close to business-like as I needed to be (because let’s face it, no one wears a business suit when hunting for jobs anymore these days). I’d even printed out my resume on fancy paper.

And none of it had done me absolutely any good. I’d been in and out of a dozen offices, asking to speak with hiring managers and HR personnel, handing out my resume and references, reassuring all of them that I was willing to do anything, start anywhere, really – and I had nothing to show for it.

Suddenly I found myself jam-packed in the masses, unable to move forward. And at 5’2”, I couldn’t actually see what was going on ahead of me, although whatever it was certainly had some of the bystanders acting very nervous. I sighed for the third time, too engrossed in my own woes to really care. Not only was I unattractive to the opposite sex, but I was clearly not of interest to prospective employers, either. My feet were tired, my confidence was down, and the warm afternoon sun made wearing the business jacket impossible, so I figured it was a good time to shrug it off – both the day and the blazer – and head back to my apartment.

*Wait a minute,* I thought. *How do I get back to my apartment from here? In fact, where is here?* Peering through the sea of bodies, I spotted the police cars and fire truck I’d seen earlier. I had inadvertently followed them to the scene of some accident or whatever. *That would explain the crowd,* I added with a snarky attitude. I tried to push my way back out the direction I’d come, but the people around me wouldn’t budge. Just my non-existent luck. Now I was stuck here, no idea where I was, unable to get back to my own apartment.

*Hmm,* I mused internally, giving up the fight for the moment. *It really is MY apartment now*. My roommate – who clearly listened to her mother – had gotten her degree in nursing, so naturally she had an internship lined up the moment she graduated and had already moved back home to Texas. *Of course,* I reminded myself*, if I don’t find a job soon, it won’t be my apartment for much longer, either*. My parents, as generous as they were, could only afford to help so much; working for the church is not exactly a get-rich career.

I was contemplating my potential state of homelessness versus moving back in with my folks when it happened. One moment I was trapped in a horde of pedestrians, blissfully unaffected by the panic that was gripping those around me. Then *he* broke through the crowd, and I got a good look at the man who was about to change my life.

There wasn’t anything special about him. Long, stringy, light brown hair that hadn’t been washed in a while. Camo green cargo pants, black T-shirt featuring some band I’d never heard of, black boots, and an over-sized tan jacket. He was of average height and below average weight. He did, however, have a crazy gleam in his eyes. That, and the fact that he was waving a gun around in his right hand, seemed to be the only things that made him stand out.

I don’t remember what he was shouting about. I don’t remember if the cops yelled something like, “Stand back! Get out of the way!” although I’m sure that they did. I don’t remember much of anything in the chaos except that when my eyes met his, it occurred to me that this was the first time a guy had noticed me in a crowd, and it would also be the last.

I heard the trigger click, and the gun fired.

It wasn’t the way everyone describes it. My life didn’t flash before my eyes. In fact, only one thought went through my mind: *Please God make it stop.*

And then it did.

What happened was like a digital effects scene from a movie. The bullet slowed down and time stood still. My hands, of their own accord, rose up in the air, one on either side of the bullet’s trajectory. A sphere formed in between my hands, encapsulating the bullet in a glowing globe of electricity. For a moment I simply held it there. The relief was immense – I wasn’t going to die after all. Then I realized I was the only person on the planet who could stop a bullet, and suddenly death seemed like the safer option.

But the clock started ticking again, and the time for thinking was over. The sparkling ball of energy dissipated, and the bullet clattered to the ground, rolling away, forgotten. And as I registered the staring eyes around me, I knew the normal life I had been living thus far was over.

Conveniently, at that exact moment, I fainted.

Chapter 2: Enter the Boys, to the Rescue!

 I dreamt I was flying: soaring across the sky, the clouds beneath me, the wind rushing through my hair. I was completely and utterly free. But the wind grew stronger and stronger until I found myself blinking in the face of it as I awoke. Then I realized I wasn’t flying. Rather, I was being carried by a pair of strong arms; I assumed it was a man. The breeze whipping through my hair told me he was running *very* fast, especially for someone holding another person.

 *Wonderful*, I thought. *The last thing I needed today was to get kidnapped*.

 I tried to open my eyes, but we were travelling so fast that the wind strung bitterly, drawing tears. Everything around us was passing by in a blur. Feeling a tiny bit dizzy, and very much afraid of being dropped, I squeezed my eyes shut. My hands clutched at the shirt of whoever was carrying me, and I could feel – unintentionally – the solid muscles coiled underneath, strong and tense. This confirmed the theory that my kidnapper was indeed of the male persuasion. If I hadn’t been so distracted by the fact that I was being kidnapped, my heart might have skipped a beat.

 The man carrying me slowed down as we turned into an alley. “Dammit, where the hell did Alex park the car?” he muttered to himself.

 *Great – now there are two of them*, I grumbled to myself. Rather than find out my kidnapper’s name, or if a third party was involved, I decided it was time to go, and began to wiggle my way out of his arms. “Put me down!” I shouted.

 My kidnapper suddenly halted as I began to flail all my limbs at once. Despite my squirming, he was very careful not to drop me as he set me on my feet. “Alright, I’ll put you down!” His voice was surprisingly young. I didn’t look up to see if he had a face to match. The moment my shoes hit the pavement, I tried to run. I didn’t get very far. I had barely taken three steps before he caught me with one arm around my waist, pulled me back, and scooped me up in his arms again.

“Whoa, where do you think you’re going?” The rhetorical question was calm and mildly amused.

 “Let me go!” I yelled once more.

 “Look, I’m not going to hurt you, but I’m not letting you go, either.” His voice was warm and pleasantly rough. As I glanced up, I noted there was a soft smile on his face. And he *was* young. I was shocked to realize that he couldn’t be much older than myself. I stared at him, my breath catching in my chest at how attractive he was. His face was smooth and clean-shaven, as if he’d never used a razor in his life. His blonde hair was just long enough to be tied back at the nape of his neck, with a few strands falling out and framing the edges of his face. He was so handsome, I almost forgot that he had been kidnapping me. Almost.

 I made one last argument for my freedom. “You realize once I get down, I’m going to kill you.” I even narrowed my eyes in an attempt to seem fierce, despite my obvious disadvantage of being held captive in his arms.

 He chuckled. “That’s *if* you get down, sweetheart.” Then he actually had the nerve to grin at me! And it wasn’t a cheesy, sickening grin either. No, it was a blinding, gorgeous, mouthwatering kind of grin. Which pretty much melted away all of my resistance.

 Just then a police officer rounded the corner of the alley where we stood. He was shouting into his walkie-talkie: “Officer Williamson here, I think I may have caught up with two of the suspects. Requesting backup.” He clipped the device back on his belt clip, then as he approached he drew his weapon, which I thought was odd, considering we were unarmed. “You there!” he called out, clearly addressing the two of us. “Put your hands in the air! Both of you!”

 The boy holding me gave a short sigh, as if he wasn’t looking forward to what was about to happen next. Gently he lowered me back down, but his hand remained firmly at my waist, indicating that I should stay put. Not that I was planning on running anywhere with a gun pointed at me. *That makes the second one today*, I thought with a grimace.

 In the next instant, my kidnapper was beside the officer, and a millisecond later his fist swung and connected with the man’s right temple. The cop, who by all rights should not have even felt the punch, dropped to the ground like a 6’ 7” sack of potatoes.

 “You’ll have one helluva headache when you wake up,” the boy murmured, almost apologetically.

 I stared at him. The officer had at least a good six inches on him, and had been built like a tank. And this guy had just knocked him out flat with one punch, without even breaking a sweat.

 “Who *are* you? Batman?” He grinned in response to my question. Then I was swept up in his arms once more, and we were off at breakneck speed. I closed my eyes and buried my face in his chest – if he was about to run us into a brick wall, I didn’t want to know about it.

 A while later, his steps slowed again. I opened my eyes cautiously, uncertain of what to expect – today had been full of surprises so far – but it was only another deserted back alley. My kidnapper was peering around the corners of nearby buildings, muttering more curses under his breath. Most of them seemed to involve the aforementioned Alex and the location of a vehicle.

 Out of pure curiosity I inquired, “Do you always cuss this much?”

 He shrugged, not taking his eyes away from his search. “I’m a half-devil. It’s what I do.”

 *Okey-dokey, that’s a new one*. I considered his answer. I had been anticipating a myriad of possible responses to that question. That hadn’t been one of them.

 Finally, after no apparent success, he made a sound of frustration. Facing me, he inquired, “Look, if I put you down, will you promise not to run off again?”

 Perhaps I was just new to being kidnapped, but I didn’t think my compliance was to be expected. I folded my arms across my chest as best I could and arched my eyebrow at him. “Why should I?”

 He arched one of his brows right back at me. “Because I just saved your life!”

 “You wouldn’t have had to save me if you hadn’t been kidnapping me in the first place!”

 “I’m not kidnapping you! I’m rescuing you!”

 “Oh really? And what exactly are you rescuing me from?”

 His eyebrows rose even higher. “Honey, you’ve got the entire police force out looking for you right now.”

 “So what? They’re probably trying to save me from you!” I snorted with obvious derision. “Why would I run from the cops? I’ve done nothing wrong.”

 “Do you have any idea what the government will want to do with a girl who can catch bullets?” he asked, his voice suddenly soft. “And they aren’t the only ones who will want you, trust me.”

 He had a point. I hesitated, chewing on my lower lip. I had forgotten about that part.

 *But, still.* “Why should I trust you instead?” Lifting my head up, I looked him straight in the face.

 He wasn’t looking back at me. Instead, his eyes were looking down, and he seemed to be warring with himself over something. Choosing his words very carefully, he finally answered, “Let’s just say I’m different like you.”

“You can catch bullets too?” I raised the other eyebrow to match the first. *What is this, some sort of club?*

He gave a small snort of laughter. “In a manner of speaking... But it’s really not a conversation I’d like to have here.” He glanced around us at the garbage that littered the alley. “Can you *please* just trust me until I can get you somewhere safe?”

I could have fallen into his eyes and drowned, so deep was the look he gave me – a mix of concern and desperation.  *Huh,* I mused. *He’s rather emotional, for a kidnapper.* His eyes were actually a grey color… *Eyes like the sea after a storm*. I heard Buttercup’s voice echo inside my mind. I shook my head, reminding myself that this was reality, not a fairy tale, and this man was certainly not Westley. I had a decision to make.

I considered his first answer: “different like you.” Like *me*? All my life I’d been average, ordinary, plain-old-vanilla-boring. Never had I imagined that I was different. Until this afternoon, that is. For the past half hour, my life had been nothing *but* different. I was really not prepared for this! And this boy… I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something about him seemed familiar… Though I was certain I would have remembered meeting someone this gorgeous before. Still, he made a good case about other people coming after me – I didn’t doubt that was a real possibility – and he did say he wasn’t going to hurt me…

“Alright then, I’ve decided to let you kidnap me.”

My kidnapper rolled his eyes. “I am so *not* kidnapping you,” he muttered under his breath as he returned me to a standing position.

I ignored the remark and continued. “But you have to keep your word about protecting me, or the deal’s off.”

He leaned down towards me, until our noses were inches apart. His sea-grey eyes stared deeply into mine. “I promise,” he whispered. It felt as though this wasn’t the first time he had made such a promise, and I felt a sort of tingling sensation course through me.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the moment was over. He straightened back up to his full height, which, while not towering over me – I just came up to his broad shoulders – certainly wasn’t short. As he did so, he gave me a strange look. He reached out with one hand, holding it just over the top of my head, then pulled it straight back to his chest, as if measuring me.

“You’re taller than you used to be,” he said abruptly.

*What the…?* But before I could question his strange comment, he pressed me against a brick wall, motioning for me to be quiet. He leaned in close, so that neither of us could be seen around the nearby dumpster. The air was pregnant with tension and the smell of old cheese and stale beer. I felt my palms growing moist from fear of the unknown. A moment later, I heard sirens growing louder, then get softer as a squad car whizzed by the entrance to the alley.

Not only was he strong and fast, but clearly his hearing was pretty good, too. I waited quietly for him to indicate that the coast was clear. As we stood there, I tried to get a better image of the man who was “not” kidnapping me. I couldn’t see much with him practically on top of me. A dark grey fleece jacket, tan cargo pants, sturdy brown boots on his feet. Nothing that would stand out in a crowd. Of course, with a face like his, why would he need to dress up?

Suddenly he shifted his feet, and I found myself acutely aware of the fact that his hips and thighs were pressed directly against mine. This was the closest I had ever physically been to someone of the opposite gender… My heart was already pounding from the adrenaline of the “hide and seek” episode… I could feel my cheeks starting to blush as I thought about my current situation. Unconsciously I squirmed a bit.

The boy glanced down at me, concern written all over his face. “Am I hurting you?” he asked, pulling away from me a fraction of an inch.

“Um, no, not exactly… It’s just… This is a tad bit… uncomfortable.” My face turned three shades brighter as I stumbled over my words.

He continued to look at me, a puzzled frown on his face. Obviously he had *no* idea of the awkwardness of the situation. Finally, though, the light dawned in his eyes – with an “Oh” of realization he pushed away from me completely, his own face starting to turn pink as he did so.

Just then another figure appeared in the alleyway. I caught a glimpse of dark hair and pale skin; the light from the setting sun made it hard to see him clearly. A velvet voice called out, “There you are! Where have you been? What took you so long?” The figure – another man, obviously a friend of my “non-kidnapper” – took another look at the two of us, with our blushing cheeks and semi-compromised stance, and held up his hands. “Never mind, forget I asked. We need to move – now.”

 The next thing I knew, I was being pulled down the alley, desperately trying to keep up as the blonde boy held a death grip on my wrist while sprinting after the dark-headed fellow. When I stumbled over an abandoned bottle he caught me, and for the third time I found myself cradled in his arms as we hurtled down the empty back street at light speed.

 *Wow,* I thought to myself. *This day just gets weirder and weirder.*

 Another blurred dash later found the three of us in a half-empty parking lot. The two boys began to slow down, grinning and nodding victoriously to one another. “We should be safe now,” voiced the raven-haired one. He started to go through his pockets, methodically hunting for keys, as we approached a silver Charger at the edge of the lot.

 “You sure you didn’t lose them?” muttered the boy who was carrying me, eyeing his friend’s fruitless search. He gently placed me back on my feet as his co-conspirator grumbled what sounded like a rude response to the query. I didn’t catch the exact words – they didn’t sound like English to me.

 As the two of them located the missing keys, I looked down at my own state of affairs. My little black clutch was luckily still dangling from my wrist. Not so luckily, my jacket was now gone – must have gotten left behind at the scene where I fainted. The setting sun was taking the warmth of the day with it, causing the sweat that had been tickling my skin to cool. I shivered involuntarily in the growing shadows.

 Suddenly, a dark grey hoodie was being dropped around my shoulders. I glanced up to say thank you, but the blonde guy was already walking back to where his compatriot stood, triumphantly pulling the keys out of a hidden pocket in his own jacket. Without a word, my kidnapper snatched the keys from his hand and proceeded to unlock the car, then adjust the driver’s seat. The dark-haired fellow narrowed his eyes, but otherwise gave no response. Instead, he sauntered my direction, a charming smile gracing his face. I forgot how to breathe as I realized he was equally as gorgeous as his friend, in a more polished way.

 Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of the fair-haired one unstrapping a large item from his back to put inside the car. My jaw dropped as I realized it was a sword – and not a small one, either! The second boy, following my gaze, remarked in a whisper, “Ah. Yes… You should try getting on a plane with him.” He groaned in memory.

 “The security agent was very understanding,” countered the first one from inside the vehicle. How he heard the remark at all was impressive. *Definitely has good hearing, that one*.

“You threatened to decapitate him!” was the outraged answer.

 The blonde boy stood up, shrugging nonchalantly. “It helped him understand.”

 I was too busy wrapping my mind around the idea that this fellow had been carrying a broadsword on his back the entire time we were running through the alley. *Who carries a sword anymore, really?* I wondered. Yet, as I thought about it, there was something in his bearing that made the presence of the sword seem perfectly natural.

 Suddenly I recalled the cop he decked. “Wait a minute. If you had that sword with you, why didn’t you pull it out when that officer appeared?”

 Another shrug. “Didn’t need it.”

 I found myself indignant. “He pulled a gun on us! He was prepared to shoot!”

 That earned me a glare. “I don’t kill unless I have to,” he snapped.

 *Whoa.* I held my hands up in a gesture of surrender. I hadn’t meant anything about killing anyone.

 The raven-haired boy waved him away. Mr. I-Don’t-Kill-Unless-I-Have-To leaned into the backseat and started shuffling items around, one of which looked like a laptop. This movement unconsciously gave an excellent view, but my contemplation of how well his clothes fit was interrupted by his companion, who smiled gently in my direction. “Your name is Emer, correct?”

I nodded, not even considering the fact that he already knew who I was. I craned my neck a bit around the newcomer, in a not-so-subtle attempt to regain my previous perspective.

The second kidnapper misinterpreted my interest, and sighed. “You will have to excuse him – perpetual rudeness is a basic aspect of his personality. I, on the other hand, always remember my manners.” He gave a short, yet flourished, bow. “Allow me to introduce myself.”

 “You’re Alex, right?” I guessed, shaking the hand he offered.

 He grimaced. “Actually, I prefer Alexander.”

 Now it was the rude one who waved a dismissive hand. “Dude, you’ve been Alex for fourteen centuries now. Give it up already.”

I could feel my eyes widen. *Fourteen centuries?!*

 Alex sighed, defeated. “And you have already met Jesse,” he continued, gesturing back towards his partner-in-crime.

 *So that’s his name.* Jesse gave a curt nod in my direction. He was watching me intently, observing every tiny movement and reaction. Normally the intensity of such a gaze would have made me nervous, but with him I felt no fear.

 Alex was gauging my response as well. “He is the half-human son of Satan,” he added carefully.

 *Ah,* I remarked to myself. *That would explain his “half-devil” comment.* I nodded, trying to remain calm. As if this sort of thing came up every day. After all, he did just save my life, right? Surely there was no reason to panic.

 “And Alex is a vampire,” tossed Jesse from the car.

 Okay, so maybe there *was* a small reason to panic. I had been determined to hold it together no matter what happened, but a girl can only take so much strangeness in one day.

 “You’re a vampire?!” I heard my voice squeak. Alex rolled his eyes.

 Suddenly shots rang out from the other end of the parking lot as several police cruisers closed in. Alex’s eyes widened in surprise.

Jesse was beside me in an instant. “As much as I hate to interrupt, let’s save the name-calling for a later, okay? Right now, they’re trying to kill us.” With that, he swept me off my feet (literally, not figuratively) and tossed me in the backseat while Alex dove for the passenger side. As soon as I was in the door slammed behind me, and I saw Jesse shove Alex the rest of the way into his seat before sliding across the hood of the car, jumping into the driver’s side and peeling out, practically on two wheels. From my vantage point in the back, I could see Alex’s knuckles turn white as he gripped the edges of his seat, his entire body tense as Jesse recklessly (yet flawlessly) flew through traffic. Despite the seriousness of the situation, I snickered to myself.  *A nervous vampire – now there’s something you don’t see every day.*

The next few minutes felt like a round of a 3D car-chase video game at the arcade. Jesse drove like the devil (pardon the expression, but if the shoe fits…): squealing around corners, dodging other cars, always a hair’s breadth away from an accident but never actually getting into one. Although I couldn’t say the same for some of the other vehicles left in our wake. The police were persistent – every time we thought we’d lost them, lights and sirens would appear on the horizon.

After one particularly gut-wrenching turn, I could hear Alex muttering curses under his breath. I couldn’t make out what the actual words were – he was either speaking too softly, not using English, or both. Jesse glanced to the side with a smile. “You doing alright over there?”

“*No*,” Alex ground out through clenched teeth. This was followed by, “I *hate* it when you drive.”

Jesse chuckled but didn’t apologize.

Finally, we reached the interstate, and Jesse put the car into full throttle. The city rapidly disappeared behind us. As traffic began to thin, the car began to slow incrementally, until we were simply cruising along the open highway, the cops forgotten in the dust. The boys began to relax, and speak casually in a language I didn’t recognize. I didn’t want to be rude, but now that we were no longer in danger of being arrested, I wanted a few answers.

I decided to start with the obvious. “So, where are we going?” I inquired when their conversation reached a lull.

“*We* are not going anywhere. *You* are being kidnapped. Get the story straight,” came Jesse’s curt reply.

I gaped at him, then threw my hands in the air. “Back in the alley you were insisting that you were *not* kidnapping me!”

“Is that what he was doing?” murmured Alex quietly. I ignored him.

So did Jesse. Instead, he gave me a smirk. “I changed my mind.”

Rolling my eyes, I gave up. “Fine. So where are you kidnapping me *to*?”

“Away. Outside the city,” Alex answered cryptically. He reached into the backseat, and started to pull my phone out of my purse.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Really? Afraid I’m gonna call the cops and tell them I’ve been kidnapped? Because I’m pretty sure they already know.”

“Yes… Well… You see…” Alex fumbled for an explanation.

Jesse chuckled from the driver’s seat. “Relax, Alex. I think she’s decided to trust us for now.” He glanced back at me, giving me that smile that made my insides turn to mush.

It seems odd to admit it, but he was right. I really wasn’t panicking at all over the fact that I had just been snatched off the street, and then ran from the cops with two guys I had just met. Call me crazy, but I had the strangest feeling that I could rely on them.

Evidently, I really *did* trust them – between the lull of the car’s steady speed and the endless Rocky Mountains passing outside the windows, I drifted off. I must have been worn out from all the excitement, because I fell into a deep enough sleep that I actually had a dream. And not just any dream – *the* dream. The weird one that I always had. Only, this time, the two boys were present… Which was strange, considering that I had just met them. Clearly they had made an impression.

As I found myself returning to consciousness, I heard Alex babbling excitedly. “It all makes so much sense! A life-threatening event triggered the release of her latent magic. In London, the girl was weak, and the return of her gifts killed her instead of saving her life… But this one –” I saw him point in my direction here “– this one is strong.”

I froze as his words ricocheted inside my mind. *London? Killed?!*

“Well, I wouldn’t call her Hercules, considering that she passed out right after stopping the bullet,” remarked Jesse. Underneath the sarcasm I detected an edge of worry in his voice.

“She is not as weak as you think she is,” argued Alex.

“All humans are weak. God designed them that way so they would have to depend on Him.” Jesse’s words rang of bitterness.

“I do not believe either one of us thinks of being human as a weakness,” replied Alex, soft and steady.

Jesse shrugged but said nothing.

“You still want to become one,” Alex reminded him.

Jesse turned his attention back to the road. “I’d rather be anything than what I am,” he answered darkly.

I wasn’t sure what to make of all that – but it didn’t seem fair for me to keep listening while they thought I was asleep, so I made the effort to sit up. As I did so, Jesse’s eyes met mine in the rearview mirror, and the look I saw there was undefinable. There was pity, and there was something deserving of pity. There was longing, yearning, desperation for something forever out of his grasp… This poor soul – with eyes like that, he must have a soul – how long had he wandered the earth, searching for that which he could not find? Suddenly I blinked, and he looked away.

*Good Lord, what have I gotten myself into?*