



Earth Bound (Sea Haven-Sisters of the Heart Book 4)

By Christine Feehan

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The #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Air Bound* returns to the mysterious coastal town of Sea Haven where six sisters of the heart are bound by the elements, and one is stalked by an inescapable past...

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Lexi was discovered and threatened—only to be suddenly saved by a stranger. He is Gavriil Prakenskii, and he’s awestruck by the woman he’s rescued. She is destined for him. He can feel it in his soul. But how can Lexi find happiness with a man steeped in secrets and shadows, one intimately acquainted with violence, and whose very love could be the death of them?

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Christine Feehan and her Sea Haven Novels

“I love everything she does.”—J. R. Ward

“[A] dark and seductive paranormal romance series.”—Heroes and Heartbreakers

“The Queen of Paranormal Romance.”—USA Today

“A fan of Christine Feehan’s Drake Sisters series will love this...The story drew me in and would not let me go until it was finished and then I just want more. Waiting with bated breath for the next book.”—*Night Owl Reviews*

About the Author

In addition to her Dark Carpathian novels, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author **Christine Feehan** is the author of the Ghost Walkers series, the Leopard series, the Sea Haven series, and the Drake Sisters novels.

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FOR MY READERS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1

PAIN was a strange entity. It could live and breathe, existing in every cell in one’s body. It could cripple, rob one of breath, of dignity, of quality of life. Pain could be the first thing one felt when waking and the last thing one felt when falling asleep. It was an insidious enemy. Silent. Unseen. Deadly. Gavriil Prakenskii had decided some time ago to make pain his friend.

If he was going to survive, if it was even possible with pain as his companion, he would come to terms with it—and he had. Until this moment. Until pain wasn’t about the physical or the mental, but all about the emotional. That was an entirely different kind of pain, and one he was completely unprepared for.

His life was one of absolute discipline and control. He planned his every move, and his contingency plans had backup contingency plans. There was never a moment that he wasn’t ready for. There was never a time when anything shocked or surprised him. He stayed alive that way. He had no friends, and he thought of everyone he encountered as an enemy. The few people he had ever allowed himself to feel even a drop of friendship with had eventually betrayed him, and he simply counted those painful moments as important

lessons to be learned.

He was used to deceit and betrayal. To blood, torture, pain and death. He was used to being alone. He was most comfortable in that world because he understood it. He was thirty-seven years old and he'd been in that world since he'd been a child. He knew more ways to kill or torture a human being than he could count. It was instinctive, automatic and a natural part of him. He carried death with him the way others might carry their identities, because he *was* death. If he came out of the shadows, even for a moment, it was to deliver that killing blow.

Few ever saw him. He lived in a shadowy world, and moved through it like a phantom, a ghost in the night, leaving dead bodies in his wake. He wasn't real, was nothing more than a shadow someone might catch a glimpse of. Insubstantial. Without substance. He hadn't been human in years. Yet here he stood in the early morning, dawn streaking long rays of light through the velvet black of night with his well-ordered world crumbling around him so that he felt the earth actually move under him.

His palm itched. Not a small nagging itch, but a full-blown do-something-this-minute-to-alleviate-it itch. Gavriil pressed his hand tightly into his thigh and held it there, his heart suddenly beating hard in his chest. Life sometimes threw curves at the most unexpected times—yet he should have known this might happen.

He had walked into a place of power. Energy rippled in the air and came up through the ground. It was in the wind and in the very water he felt flowing beneath the ground. This place, this farm he had come to, was dangerous and yet he hadn't heeded the warnings—hadn't expected the danger would be to him or what form it would take. He had come, and now someone would pay the price.

A young woman came toward him through a field of corn, the stalks taller than she was. She moved with grace, a fluid easy manner, occasionally stopping to pull one of the ears down and inspect it.

He couldn't take his eyes from her or the way the plants leaned toward her, as if *she* were the sun, not that bright ball beginning its climb into the sky. She was dressed in vintage blue jeans, frayed, full of holes and faded light from many washings, and a carelessly buttoned dark blue plaid shirt. He knew she'd buttoned it carelessly because the top and bottom buttons were undone, and he had a ridiculous urge to slip them into the closures for her—or maybe open all the rest.

Her auburn hair was very long, probably past her waist, and very thick, but she had it pulled back away from her face in a careless ponytail. Her face was oval and rather pale, but her eyes, as they surveyed the cornstalks, were a striking cool, forest green. Even in the dim early morning light, he could see her intriguing eyes, surrounded by long dark lashes. Her mouth was full and luscious, her teeth white and small.

Even dressed in her working clothes, there was no hiding her figure. Full breasts and a small tucked-in waist emphasized the flaring of her hips. She was a pixie, ethereal, just as unreal as he was, and she was so beautiful it hurt.

He knew her. He had always known her. He'd known she was somewhere in the world waiting, and the itch in his palm and the pain paralyzing his mind told him this woman belonged to him and only him. How completely unexpected and unacceptable was that?

He'd come to the small town of Sea Haven off the northern California coast to warn his youngest brother, Ilya, that he was on the same hit list as the rest of the family and to see his other three brothers who had settled there. Seven brothers, stepping-stones, their parents had called them, torn apart when they were children. They'd been forced to watch the murder of their parents, and then they'd been taken and kept separated in the hopes that they would forget all about one another. Now, all seven were on a hit list. Gavriil

had known it was coming, he just wished they'd had more time to prepare.

He watched the woman as she continued toward him. He was deep in the shadows and utterly still so that there was no chance of drawing her gaze. She had just changed his entire plans. His entire existence. As she stepped out of the cornfield and the light bathed her face, he could see her flawless skin, the curve of her cheek and high cheekbones.

She looked far too young for a man like him. It had nothing to do with age and everything to do with who and what he was. Still. His palm itched, and that sealed her fate. He wasn't about to throw away the only thing in the world he could truly call his own. He didn't have much to offer her. He was hard and callous and damned cynical when it came to the world around him. He could be ruthless and merciless as well and he would be, he knew, if anyone tried to stand between this young woman and him.

He didn't even care in that moment, with the dawn breaking, spilling a fire of red into all that glorious hair, that he didn't deserve her. Or that he didn't even know her or she him . . . He didn't care that he was far older and as lethal as hell and had no business with a woman like her or that his body was in pieces and he looked like a rag doll sewn together. None of it mattered to him.

She belonged to him, this woman. She was created for him. She was the one woman he could bind to him. Gavriil pressed his thumb into the center of his palm. He was broken, and there was no fixing him. He was a killer, and there was no taking that back either. He didn't get a do-over—and that emotional insight, that pain, was far worse of a burden than the physical one he bore.

She was the youngest woman on the farm where his brothers lived. Lexi, they called her. She turned her head abruptly toward the back of the property and just as suddenly switched direction.

The moment he'd stepped onto the property, the large farm with his brothers and the six women living on it, he'd felt the ripples of power and knew the farm was protected, not only by his brothers, who were dangerous, but by elements. Earth. Air. Water. Fire. He even felt spirit.

Had he been less powerful in his own right, without his own gifts, he would have been far more cautious about following her through the thick foliage along a broken path. Nothing could deter him from his chosen course. He was stalking his prey, moving like the ghost he was through the heavy foliage as she made her way toward some secret destination.

Gavriil knew she was going somewhere important to her, and that she didn't want anyone to know. She moved stealthily and occasionally darted little glances around her, as if she suspected someone watched her. He knew he wouldn't set off her radar. He didn't give off enough energy to do that, not even when he was slipping up on his prey and about to deliver the killing blow.

He glided rather than stepped. He had learned to walk softly in his school as a young boy, but pain was an even better teacher. Taking heavier steps jarred his body. She was moving faster now, heading straight for a vehicle, a small open wagon, and she'd gone quite pale.

Something was wrong. He glanced around him, looking for wildlife, a bird, a squirrel, anything at all. The skies were suspiciously empty. He didn't trust it when a forest was silent in the early morning hours. Even the insects had ceased their continuous racket. Something was terribly wrong. He felt it with every step he took. He could tell she felt it as well, but she didn't believe.

Lexi Thompson hurried along the faint path leading to the back of the property where she'd left the little trail wagon parked. She wanted to take another look at the adjoining property that was up for sale—now in

escrow. Thomas and Levi had put a bid on it, and the owners had sold quickly without negotiating too long. She was very excited about the possibilities the acreage represented.

The farm was doing so well. The new greenhouse was already producing far more than she expected the first year out. The orchards were yielding large crops, and the fruit was fantastic. Her lettuce field had been ruined by a helicopter landing right in the middle of it when some men had come to kidnap her sister Airiana, but she still had managed to save some of the crop and Max had managed to save Airiana.

The bottom line was Lexi needed more space—and someone to help. All the other women had jobs away from the farm. In the beginning those other businesses had been necessary to support the farm, but this year they'd gone from running in the red to being comfortably in the black, and she intended it to stay that way. She worked hard every single day, from sunrise to sunset and sometimes more. She poured herself into the farm, and at times it was frustrating, backbreaking work. There was only one of her and she needed help if the farm was to continue to sustain them.

She sighed softly. The problem was her sisters loved living on the farm and eating the food, but each of them had their own business—ones they loved—outside the farm. She wasn't certain how to approach the others to tell them she needed more full-time help.

Lexi stuck her thumbnail in her mouth and bit down on it repeatedly, a long leftover habit she continually vowed she'd quit. When she realized what she was doing, she snatched her thumbnail from between her teeth and rubbed her palm down the side of her jeans.

She was suddenly uneasy, and she stopped and took a careful look around. She spent most nights sitting on her porch swing, apprehension growing in her. She knew she was paranoid, especially ever since her sister of the heart Airiana and her fiancé, Max, brought home four very traumatized children.

The children's parents and a sister had been murdered and the children abducted by a human trafficking ring. Had not Airiana and Max rescued them, they would have been killed.

Knowing children were on the farm, that they were vulnerable and at any moment something terrible could happen to them, had made her more paranoid than ever. She realized her thumbnail was between her teeth again and she blew out her breath in total exasperation.

She detested being the weak link on the farm with her panic attacks and paranoia. She tried to make up for her failings by working long hours and making a success of their family business. She couldn't sleep in her house, or bed. She'd tried, and she just couldn't do it.

To her everlasting shame, when she was so exhausted she knew she had to sleep, she would sleep in the porch swing, or in the sleeping bag she had stashed in the corner of the porch, out of sight. Sometimes she even slept on the roof. She knew it was silly, but the house didn't feel safe to her. Nothing felt safe.

Fortunately, she lived alone, so nobody knew how truly paranoid she was. There were weapons stashed all over her house, taped under tables and down the cushions of the furniture, so many she was afraid to have the children visit her home—but she wasn't actually certain she could harm another human being. Well—she had—but it had made her sick.

She lived on the farm with warriors, yet she, the most paranoid of all, felt powerless to harm others. She could barely kill a snail eating her precious crops. She felt weak beside the others, the weak link they all had to rally around and protect. Things were tense on the farm and it seemed as if they needed warriors more than breadwinners.

The trail wagon was right where she'd left it when she took her early morning walk through the gardens and various crops, the keys still in the ignition. She slipped inside the open vehicle and paused with her hand on the keys to take another long look around her. She was even more uneasy than usual.

Dread filled her. She could feel the emotion as if it was an actual being, pouring inside her like an insidious monster, robbing her of her ability to breathe, to think, to do anything but sit still, her mouth dry and her heart pounding too fast. She jammed her fist into her mouth for a moment—the absolute wrong thing to do.

When she was in a full-blown panic attack she couldn't even move. She was frozen to the spot, useless to her family. A liability. She worked out every single day. She went religiously to self-defense training. She could shoot a gun and throw a knife accurately at any target—even moving targets. What was wrong with her that she couldn't be like her sisters?

She swallowed a sob and forced her mind to work properly. *Nothing* was wrong. Nothing. No one could get on the farm with their warning system. Each of her sisters of the heart was bound to an element, and the three men residing with them were just as gifted. Should anyone wishing them harm come to the farm, Air would call to Max and Airiana. Earth would tell her. Water would summon Rikki. Judith, bound to spirit, would feel any disruption at all. Fire called to Lissa. And Blythe just knew.

No one could possibly slip through the power rippling throughout the farm, not with the men, Judith and Blythe amplifying it, she reminded herself.

She forced air through her lungs, always grateful her family rarely witnessed these moments of weakness. She'd been certain the addition of the men to their family farm as well as all the self-defense and weapons training would help her through the panic attacks, maybe even make them stop altogether. It hadn't happened.

“What's wrong with you?” she murmured aloud, and started the ignition. “You're such a freakin' baby.”

Straightening her shoulders, she drove determinedly toward the back entrance, the gate that led to the road that came into their property virtually through a forest. She felt as if the towering trees were guardians watching over those living on the farm. She loved that they were surrounded on three sides by forest. Some of their acreage remained part of a mixed forest, but behind them the trees were thick and untouched. She drove down the road to the entrance to the next property. She coveted that acreage—she had from the moment it had come up for sale.

Lexi turned off the engine and sat for a moment just drinking in the sight of all that beautiful soil, untouched. No one had ever lived on or worked the property, and she'd often pushed her hands deep into the dirt and felt the rich loam just waiting to grow something beautiful.

Usually when she came to this spot, any residual feelings of fear vanished, but it didn't seem to be happening now. She still felt as if she couldn't quite breathe, as if air was just out of reach. Her lungs burned and her stomach churned. She slipped from the trail wagon and walked to the gate of the property bordering hers, crouching down to push her hands into the rich soil—another trick that helped when her mind refused to calm.

The moment the soil closed around her hands the peace she so desperately needed slipped into her. She knelt there beside the gate, pushing her hands deep, feeling a connection to the earth that set her heart soaring free. She felt the ebb and flow of the water running beneath the ground, the heartbeat of the earth, the very sap flowing in the trees. The connection was strong—deep—and she knew it would always be her saving grace.

The ground around her hands shivered, and her eyes flew open in sudden alarm. She moistened her lips and looked down at the soil where she'd buried her hands. Her heart skipped a beat and her mouth went dry. She could see the boot prints stamped into the soft ground. Worse, on the gate was a symbol. She'd seen the symbol hundreds of times. It was burned into the wood, a brand, a sheaf of wheat tied with a cord. The same symbol was burned into her upper left thigh.

Bile rose and she fought it down. She would not lose it, not now when everything she had fought for was at stake. Levi, Rikki's husband, had told her not to leave the farm—that it wasn't safe yet. Her sister Airiana had a madman after her, so the farm was virtually on lockdown. Their combined gifts protected the farm itself, but not them if they went off the property.

“Did you think I wouldn't find you, Alexia?”

Her body froze. The air rushed out of her lungs. She closed her eyes briefly. She knew that voice—she would never get it out of her head. Sometimes when she rocked on her front porch swing in the middle of the night, wide awake, she would hear his voice—that hated, horrible, holier-than-thou voice commanding her to her knees. Commanding her to pray for forgiveness, commanding her to perform unspeakable acts to atone for her sins and then flogging the skin off her while demanding she thank him for saving her from her corrupt, disgusting body.

She lifted her head slowly, keeping her hands buried in the soil, trying to find her breath, her resolve. She'd trained for this moment, and yet now that it was here, just his voice alone had her body solidly frozen. Her mind refused to compute beyond terror.

“While you're there on your knees, you might consider begging forgiveness.”

She closed her eyes briefly, terrified to look up, but knowing she had to. A thousand plans were formulated and then discarded. Duncan Caine. He always made her feel so powerless. His punishments were the worst. He was enforcer to one of the branches of the cult the Reverend RJ had started. The Reverend, who had started the cult, and Caine were cousins and cut from the same depraved, sick cloth.

She swallowed hard, desperate not to give him the satisfaction of her being sick all over his polished boots. She was not going back with him. She'd told the police all along to look for Caine, that he was still alive, but they assured her he was killed in a shoot-out when they'd raided the farm and arrested several key members of the cult.

This man had crawled through her bedroom window in the middle of the night with her parents right down the hall. He'd held a knife to her little sister's throat and told her he'd kill her sister if she didn't come with him. She'd gone, and she was grateful she didn't struggle. Caine's men surrounded her home, ready to murder her parents, older brothers and her little sister. She'd gone quietly with him to protect her family.

She'd been eight years old, and her life had changed forever. She'd been beaten, starved and raped, forced to “marry” Caine and become his “wife.” The one saving grace had been the farm. He'd forced her to work from sunup to sunset, and she'd loved every second of her hands in the soil, coaxing the plants to grow. She could forget her life and pretend she was a girl on a farm with no endless nights of hell to worry about.

Caine and the other cult members had learned that with her working the farm, they prospered. That didn't stop the beatings or the cruelty; if anything, Caine wanted her cowered and completely under his thumb. He'd dug a hole in the ground and forced her into it several times after beating her senseless. The problem with the punishment, he found, was that she healed fast and didn't seem to mind being in the ground with the soil all around her, so he'd found a metal box and when he was especially drunk and feeling mean, would

force her into it.

“Did you really think anyone could keep you from me? Your betrayal has brought God’s wrath down on you and you will be punished. I’ve searched for you, a cheating, betraying wife. Jezebel. God sent me to save you in spite of yourself.”

He reached down and grabbed her ponytail, yanking her head up so that her eyes were forced to meet his. He wore his beard bushy to cover his weak chin and his eyes blazed fire like a madman’s. He’d been the demon in every one of her nightmares. He was the devil, evil incarnate.

He leaned close to her, pressing his foul-smelling mouth next to her ear. “I killed them all, one by one. I told them you wanted them dead in order to be with me. I knew that’s where I made my mistake. You didn’t cleave to your husband as you should have because the sins of your former life were too great for you to overcome as long as those sinners lived. You had to be shown the way. You had to be punished.”

He slapped her face hard, knocking her backward, bringing tears to her eyes. When she would have been driven back by the blow, his hand holding her ponytail kept her from falling. He rained blows on her, using his fist as well as his open hand.

Lexi barely felt the attack after the initial slap, managing to kick out with her legs, as she’d practiced over and over in the gym with her brothers-in-law. She hit him hard in one knee and a thigh with the heels of her boots. He cursed at her as he fell into the gate. She rolled, astonished that the move actually worked.

Slamming her fists as deep as possible into the soil, she directed the seismic energy straight at the man who had turned her life into a living hell. She put every ounce of fear and anger, helplessness and despair he’d made her feel into the blow. All the pain. The grief at the loss of her family. All of it went into the terrible strike directed at him.

The earth shook beneath her fists, the ripples spreading out, rushing beneath the ground straight at its target. Caine struggled to his feet, dragging himself up using the fence post.

“You bitch. You’re going to pay for that.” He winced when he tried to take a step, and his knee crumpled out from under him.

A vein appeared in the ground, zigzagging like a snake, widening as it approached Caine. Her eyes widened in horror and she pulled her fists out of the earth fast, but it was too late. The crack became an abyss, opening directly under Caine and the gate, dropping them both into the fissure. The crevice wasn’t extraordinarily deep and it slammed closed on Caine’s legs, crushing them, trapping them in the ground. He screamed and screamed.

Horrified, she stumbled backward. Two men raced toward her from the other side of the fence, leaping over it, one breaking off to try to aid their leader while the other rushed her. He held a very large knife in his fist. She recognized both men. They had been training under Caine, doing enforcing and punishing of members who committed any infraction against the cult when she’d been there.

Peter Rogers was the man desperately trying to dig Caine free while Darrin Jorgenson came at her with a knife.

“Kill her. Kill the bitch,” Caine screamed over and over, tears running down his face. His upper torso flopped over the ground, his face suddenly buried in the dirt.

She tried to make her brain work, tried to remember what Levi had told her to do, but she couldn't think, couldn't move. She stood waiting for the death blow, thankful that at least she'd managed to stop Caine from taking her away with him.

There was no sound. None. Later, when she thought about it, she felt as if the very earth had taken a breath. Time slowed down. She saw each step Darrin took as if he was in slow motion. She literally could see every breath he drew and the lines of fanatical hatred on his face.

She didn't take her eyes from him, watching him come closer and closer, waiting for him, relieved now that it was over.

A hole blossomed in the middle of Darrin's forehead, a bright red crater that knocked him backward, the blow hard enough to jerk his head back and send his body flying through the air to land in a heap on the ground.

Lexi stared at the body, uncomprehending. A hard arm circled her waist and dragged her backward, thrusting her behind a man she'd never seen before. He was tall, with axe handle shoulders, a thick chest and shaggy hair. At first she thought it was Levi, Rikki's husband, but he moved differently and he was . . . bigger. More muscular.

He strode toward Caine and Rogers, covering the ground as if he moved above it rather than on it. He was smooth and fluid and something out of a movie with his long coat swirling around him. He raised his hand as he approached the two men and squeezed the trigger of his pistol just once. Peter Rogers dropped to the ground like a stone. Lexi jammed her fist into her mouth to keep from making a sound.

Gavriil crouched down beside Caine, lifting his head by his hair, staring into his eyes. Evil stared back at him malevolently. Caine's legs were crushed, but Lexi had managed to keep the crevice from killing him. Caine looked past Gavriil to Lexi and spat on the ground.

"You whore. You're dead. I'll kill you slow. Your devil won't save you. No one can save you. Your name is written in the book of the reaper in blood."

"Save it for your parishioners in hell." Gavriil kept his voice soft, so there was no way Lexi could hear. Deliberately he dropped Caine's head harder than necessary so that his face landed in the dirt. He leaned down, putting his mouth close to Caine's ear. "I'll be coming back without her, and I know more ways to make you welcome death than you can possibly imagine. Stay alive for me, will you?"

Gavriil rose, turning back to Lexi. Her face was stark white, her eyes enormous. "Are you all right? Any broken bones?"

She still couldn't move, not even when he reached her, holstering his gun in the shoulder harness and reaching out to run both hands over her, searching for damage. Terrible tremors wracked her body and she couldn't catch her breath. She didn't dare look at him or she'd cry. If she looked at Caine or the two dead men, she'd throw up.

"Lexi, talk to me. Look at me. Look at my eyes." His fingers smoothed over a bruise already marring her cheek. The pad of his thumb removed a small trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth.

There was something commanding, compelling in his voice—not at all like Caine, but more in a velvet soft, mesmerizing, *worried* tone. As if her health was the most important thing in this man's world. Lexi forced her gaze upward, over his broad chest where the thin black shirt he wore beneath his open coat was stretched

tight over well-defined muscles. Her gaze continued upward, past his strong, shadowed jaw and straight nose until she found herself staring into eyes as dark as midnight. Beautiful eyes. Eyes she was certain she'd seen before. Her breath caught in her throat.

She let herself fall into his dark blue gaze, her only refuge. The world around her receded until there was only this man and his amazing eyes holding her safe.

"Do you know who I am?" His voice was infinitely gentle. A wisp of sound with no impatience, no threat, only concern.

She shook her head mutely. She couldn't find her voice. Her hands trembled, and she twisted her fingers together to try to get the shaking under control. She was definitely in shock. Violence was abhorrent to her, although she *had* defended herself. She just couldn't look at the dead bodies, or Caine, still alive, still a threat.

Her gaze, in spite of it all, began to shift toward him.

"Have you heard the name Gavriil before? Or Prakenskii?"

Gavriil deliberately spoke softly in a Russian accent as he framed her face with his hands. "Look only at me, *angel moy*, nowhere else. Only at me."

He watched her eyes widen. She nodded, some of the shock receding. "I'm here, and I'm going to take care of this. Don't look at them. Don't look at him. I need to know if you're hurt."

She swallowed hard, her breath still shallow and labored, her eyes still bouncing a little, but she didn't pull away from him and her gaze was steadier on his.

"No. No broken bones. He's very good at beating up a woman but making certain she can work the next day."

"You know this man?"

"I'm the whore's husband," Caine shrieked. "She's a Jezebel. Look what she's done to me. She made a deal with the devil. She's a witch, worshiping Satan, holding him hostage between her legs."

Her face went completely white. She looked as if she might faint. Gavriil held her head firmly to prevent her from looking at the man claiming to be her husband. "Don't look at him. He's nothing. He can't hurt you, not ever again," Gavriil said, keeping his voice as gentle as ever. "I need you to go sit in your wagon there for a moment. I'll be right with you. Can you walk?"

She nodded, and Gavriil turned her around, away from Caine and the obscenities he continued to shout in between screaming and crying and desperately digging at the dirt holding his legs captive. Gavriil waited until she had crossed the road to slip into the trail wagon before once more crouching down beside Caine. He gripped Caine's hair in a vicious grip, dragging his head up.

"We'll have a conversation very soon, you and me, but not right now. Never call yourself her husband again. Not out loud and not in your mind." As he held up Caine's head by his hair with one hand, the other took a fistful of dirt, shoving it in, packing it tight and then holding his hand over his mouth and nose. "I don't have soap with me, so this will have to do."

Gavriil was strong and he made certain Caine could see the casual way he cut off all air one-handed before

he dropped the man's head on the ground again and left him to try to pry and spit the dirt from his mouth. He kept his body between Lexi and Caine so she couldn't see the man or what he'd done to him. He leaned into the trail wagon.

"He's not my husband. They told me the marriage wasn't legal. I was eight years old and he kidnapped me. He's not my husband," she denied, tears shimmering in her eyes. A few trickled down her face.

"I'm well aware of that," Gavriil said, and used the pads of his fingers to brush the tears away. "I don't want you to think about him ever again. He's totally insignificant. A worm. Less than that."

"He'll never stop coming after me. He won't. I have to call the sheriff right away and tell him what I've done," Lexi said. "They'll send me away from here and I don't know what I'll do. I can't start all over again. I just don't . . ." She trailed off, tears swimming in her eyes.

"There's no need to call the sheriff," he said gently. "I want you to let me take care of this. You go back to your home and call Levi, Thomas and Max. Tell them what happened, but don't let anyone overhear. I know Max has children. We don't want to frighten them after all they've been through."

"They'll make me leave," she whispered again, her hand going protectively to her throat.

"Who? No one can make you leave," Gavriil assured her, struggling to understand.

"I'm in witness protection. I'm supposed to call a number and they'll come and get me. They'll take me away from everyone, and I'll never get to see my sisters or the farm again." Tears tracked down her face. "He's got followers, others who will come for me. They kill entire families. They killed mine."

Gavriil felt everything in him go still. It took control not to look back at the man who had kidnapped a child and then murdered her family, forcing her to become his "wife." "Look at me, Lexi. Right now. Don't think about anything else. Just look at me."

Lexi's tear-drenched eyes met his. He smiled at her, more a showing of his teeth than an actual smile, because he wanted to kill the son of a bitch right then. He watched her take a deep, shuddering breath.

"We'll handle this. You'll never see these men again. We'll figure out how they found you and we'll make certain it doesn't happen again. The farm is safe. They couldn't get on the farm without any of you knowing."

She frowned and looked around her, back toward the farm. "But you did, didn't you?" she asked suddenly, comprehending. "You were following me."

"I belong on the farm," Gavriil said, keeping his voice as gentle as he could. Caine was back to shouting obscenities at Lexi, clearly not learning his lesson. "The warning system already in place recognized me—recognized that I belonged here." He reiterated it, wanting her to begin to accept it as fact.

She nodded slowly. "Thank you for saving my life. They would have killed me."

"I'm sorry I was slow getting here. I don't move quite as fast as I used to." His body was screaming at him, protesting every step he took, every move he made now.

Lexi's frown deepened and she leaned toward him, her hand smoothing over his jaw. "You're hurt."

He stilled inside. No one ever saw his physical pain. He didn't allow it to show on his face or body, in his

eyes. Only someone who saw into him, saw beyond the surface, could have seen pain in him. There was no doubt this woman was his. He took her hand and pressed his palm to hers. "Wait for me at your house. I'll come to you. Send my brothers to me and don't think about this anymore. Don't call or talk to anyone else until I've come to you."

"But my sisters . . . We made a pact to tell one another everything."

"We'll tell your sisters," Gavriil said. "But I'll be with you. Remember, I'm the one who did all the damage here, not you."

"Caine has to go to the hospital," Lexi pointed out. "The cops will know for certain then." She looked down at her hand, still enveloped in his.

"Let me worry about that. You go get my brothers and wait for me."

"Gavriil, they'll all come to my house. They'll know. We always know when one of us is in trouble."

He nodded. "That's okay. Just don't allow any of them to call the sheriff." His gaze was steady on her. "Will you do that for me?"

Lexi's eyes clung to his. "That's the least I can do after you saved my life." She started to look past him to Caine, but Gavriil blocked her view.

"Don't. Don't give him that satisfaction. He's nothing to you. Just look at me and then go." He tightened his fingers around hers. "Don't see him. Only me."

Lexi pressed her lips together and nodded. Reluctantly he let go of her and watched as she drove away. He turned back toward Caine, and there was nothing at all left of the warm, gentle man. The one striding toward Caine was utterly stone cold, inside and out.

2

"THEY'VE been gone a really long time," Lexi said, looking anxiously around the circle of women gathered on her porch. These five women had become family to her. They weren't bound by birth, but in every other way they had become sisters.

"Do you think something happened to them?" She pushed her thumbnail between her teeth and frowned, looking toward the back part of the property. "I shouldn't have run away like a coward. This was my mess."

"You're not a coward, Lexi," Rikki Hammond assured her. "Stop worrying so much about them. I'd know if something happened to Levi."

Married to Lev Prakenskii, whom they now called Levi Hammond, Rikki was both autistic and bound to water, an element of great power. She loved the ocean and captained her own vessel, diving for sea urchins with Levi to help provide cash for the farm.

Rikki leaned over and brushed a kiss against Lexi's cheek, a rare gesture of affection from her. "I'll go make tea. It seems longer than it really has been."

Airiana nodded. "Same with me," she agreed. "I'd know if something happened to Max."

“Where are the children?” Lexi asked, suddenly aware that if Max was gone and Airiana was with her, the four children Max and Airiana were adopting were alone.

“I thought it best to leave them at the house. Lucia and Benito know what to do, and they’re watching over Siena and Nicia. They know something’s wrong, so I’ll have to keep an eye out for Benito. He has a tendency to spy.”

That made them all laugh. Benito took protecting his sisters seriously and had become Max’s shadow ever since Max had saved them all from a human trafficking ring. He walked like Max and had begun to take on his mannerisms, and he’d been on the farm less than two weeks.

“It’s all right if you need to get back,” Lexi assured Airiana. “I wouldn’t want them to be afraid. Being alone after losing their parents and going through what they all did can’t be good.”

“Lexi,” Airiana reminded softly, “they’re in their new home. They’re aware of all the security we have, and they know we’re at your house. They’ll be fine. The entire farm is their home. *I* need to be with *you* right now.”

Airiana was bound to air, and Max appeared to be as well. The Prakenskiis had a number of gifts, but Max was an element, just as Airiana was, and that made them a very powerful couple.

Lexi blinked back tears. “I’m glad you are. I should have let the earth swallow Caine.” The admission burst out of her unexpectedly and she clapped her hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.” But she did. She knew she did. She was terrified that with Caine alive, he would eventually come for her. He wouldn’t stop. Nothing would ever stop him.

Her stomach rebelled at the idea of ever being alone with him again. She touched her ponytail, the one he’d yanked so viciously. “You once asked me why I never cut my hair, Airiana. I grew out my hair after I escaped because Caine cut it off repeatedly to humiliate me when he punished me. He shaved my head once. I promised myself I would wear my hair long if I ever escaped.”

There was a collective gasp from the other women. She didn’t want to see the sympathy on their faces—she’d break down. Falling apart wasn’t going to help. She didn’t understand why she couldn’t stop thinking about Gavriil and feeling guilty for leaving him there alone to deal with her mess.

She turned away from her sisters, wrapping her arms tightly around herself. The memories were too close—on top of her now—and she wanted to vomit, to curl up in the fetal position and hide away. All of her hard-won armor had deserted her and all she could do was feel like a helpless child.

“Of course you would wish the earth had swallowed Caine,” Lissa Piner said. “Who wouldn’t? That man was . . . is . . .” She broke off, looking at the other women sitting on Lexi’s sprawling porch, annoyed at such a mistake. She was bound to fire, and sometimes her passionate nature rose to the surface when she wanted to protect her youngest sister.

Lissa had no doubts that the man who had abducted Lexi from the safety of her home and forced her into a life of rape and terror by night and work by day wouldn’t ever make it to the hospital.

Hastily she changed tactics. “What’s Gavriil like? I’m amazed that he would actually use his own name so openly, almost as if he was daring Uri Sorbacov or Uri’s father to come after him.”

Lexi frowned again, a little distracted, trying to follow what they were all saying. She knew they were trying

to divert her attention. She tried to remember who Uri Sorbacov was. He was the son of the man who had murdered the Prakenskiis' parents and abducted all seven brothers, separating them and forcing them into schools to become covert operatives and worse. He also had been the one to order a hit on most of the Prakenskii brothers and had tried to abduct Airiana. He had a litany of sins to answer for, but was safe in Russia, far from retaliation.

"Aren't they all on a hit list?" Lexi asked, suddenly worried about why Gavriil would use his real identity. Her thumbnail found its way back between her teeth—exasperated, she pulled it out.

"Not Ilya," Blythe Daniels said. "He's the youngest Prakenskii brother, and for some reason he seems to be able to live out in the open with no threat."

Lexi found Blythe's voice incredibly soothing. She was always the one who calmed every situation down. She wasn't bound to an element, but she had incredible gifts of her own and always was the voice of reason in the middle of a storm. She had brought them all together and had found the farm for them to purchase. Lexi would be forever grateful for that alone.

Judith Vincent swung her feet up onto the wide railing of the porch. "Tell us about Gavriil. When Thomas or Levi talk about him, it's always with this sort of reservation in their voices. A tone."

Married to Stefan Prakenskii, Judith was bound to spirit and could amplify all the other elements. Stefan had taken the name Thomas Vincent and the two of them were never far apart.

Airiana nodded. "Almost as if they're in awe of him—or afraid of him. I can't imagine Max, Levi or Thomas afraid of anyone, but they definitely talk differently about him."

Lexi scowled at them. "He was gentle and kind to me. He had no choice when he shot those two men. They were going to kill me. I'm sure he didn't want to kill them, but if he hadn't, I'd be dead. And he was hurt. I could see it."

"Hurt?" Judith asked. "You didn't tell us that. Was he shot? Stabbed? Should we have told Thomas to take him to a hospital?"

Lexi shook her head. "I think he came here with some injury."

"That's right," Airiana said, snapping her fingers. "Gavriil was stabbed like seven times guarding my dear old dad, Theodotus Solovyov. Gavriil nearly died."

Judith sat up straighter. "Thomas told me about him. He should have died. It was really bad. And Sorbacov put out a hit on him because he didn't die, and according to Sorbacov, Gavriil was useless to them. But that was a long time ago, his injuries should have healed."

"He worked for their government all those years and they just threw him away, threw all the Prakenskiis away. That's so wrong." Lexi's sympathy was entirely with Gavriil and had been from the moment she felt his pain.

"If he's using his own name, and he knows Sorbacov put a hit out on him," Blythe said, "he came here to say good-bye to his brothers. He's planning to lead them away from Thomas, Levi and Max. That's the only reason he would use his real name."

Rikki came through the front entrance bearing a tray with a teapot and cups on it. The women turned to her gratefully. They had met one another in group therapy. Each of them had gone as a last resort. It was a

special group for women who had relatives murdered and in some way felt they were to blame for the death of their loved ones. They had grown close and realized that together they were far stronger and more powerful than apart.

“Thank you,” Lexi murmured, taking one of the cups and pouring a little milk into it. She turned back to her sisters, her small frown still very much in evidence. “Maybe he just told me his name to reassure me.”

“Whatever the reason, honey,” Judith said, “we’re grateful to him for saving your life.” She put her teacup on the railing and looked out over the farm. “We have to be more careful about listening to the men. We’re always rolling our eyes when they give us orders on where we can go and how we’re supposed to get there, but we all have too many enemies to pretend we’re always going to be safe.”

Lexi sighed. “I may as well tell you the truth. I’m in witness protection. The things I told you about the cult and the kidnapping and the murder of my entire family is all true, but I testified against several key members of the cult and the rest scattered and were able to get away, including Caine, the man who forced me into being his wife. My real name is Alexia Wilson, not Lexi Thompson.”

“I suspected as much,” Blythe said. “It was all over the news when it happened.”

“You weren’t his wife,” Lissa said fiercely. “You were a little girl he beat and raped. There was no marriage, no sacred vows. He was no man of God, and anyone who would perform a ceremony uniting an eight-year-old child and a grown man is certainly no ordained minister.”

Lexi ducked her head. “I know. That’s what they told me. The point is, if Caine found me, other members of the cult probably know where I am as well. It was just luck that Gavriil had come here. I saw my family for about three hours, and the feds moved me into a safe house before the trial. While I was there, these people went into my home, murdered my parents as they slept, went down the hall and killed my two brothers and my baby sister. We have children here.” Her eyes met Airiana’s. “Your children. They’ve been through far too much already.”

“No.” Blythe said it firmly. “You aren’t leaving.”

Airiana leaned forward and took Lexi’s hand. “I had to ask myself the same question about coming back here. I’m working for the government now, and everyone wants my work. Sorbacov tried to take me to Russia. I’ve got Evan Shackler-Gratsos trying to kidnap me, and if it hadn’t been for Max, I’d be with one of them right now.”

Evan Shackler-Gratsos, Lexi remembered, was a billionaire who had inherited not only a major shipping company from his brother, but his brother’s side of human, arms and drug trafficking as well. Lexi hugged Airiana tightly. “I’m so glad Max was there.”

“I am terrified of allowing Evan to get anywhere near the children, after what they’ve been through—and he was responsible,” Airiana admitted. “But, and you have to listen to me, baby, we’re better and stronger together than apart. Even if you disappear, they would still come here to us. You know that. You were in protective custody and they went after your family. They’d still come after us.”

Lexi shook her head. “I froze. After I trapped Caine in the ground, and realized there were others, I couldn’t move.”

Lissa hugged her tightly. “You saved yourself. Caine obviously beat you. Look at you, all covered in bruises, but you still saved yourself. You executed the moves Levi taught us in class, and you broke away from him

just like you were supposed to.”

Lexi chewed on her thumbnail, wishing she could be more like the rest of them. They all had confidence in themselves in spite of the things that had happened to them. “If it hadn’t been for Gavriil, I’d be dead right now. I don’t want to be the weak link. What happens if I’m here alone on the farm with Lucia and the younger children and they come?”

“I have no doubt that you would protect the children,” Airiana said. “No doubt at all. Max said women often are much more willing to fight for their children than themselves.”

“Do you really want to take that chance?” Lexi persisted, terrified that they couldn’t see inside of her.

She was a mess—a terrible, unholy mess. No amount of practice in the gym or on the gun range made her feel any different. She was afraid all the time. Now, she feared, she would always remember that she’d nearly killed a man with her most precious, sacred gift. She felt inadequate and more terrified than ever.

She’d stopped being afraid for a moment when she’d looked into Gavriil Prakenskii’s eyes. She secretly hugged that moment to her. She’d felt—alive. For the first time she really felt she could breathe. She could see the world in his eyes. She could see herself there, strong like she wanted to be.

It was peculiar and a little crazy—he was a complete stranger—but maybe she’d connected with him because she sensed he was as broken as she was. All she knew for certain was that she wasn’t going to allow Gavriil Prakenskii to throw away his life, and she was fairly certain that’s what he’d come here to do.

“Yes,” Airiana answered the question firmly. “Absolutely yes.”

“I think your Gavriil was right,” Lissa said. “I don’t think we need to call anyone over this little incident. The boys can handle it, and we’ll just keep working on security and watch you a little closer.”

“Maybe Gavriil will stick around and help you with the farm,” Judith added. “He was your guardian angel. Maybe he won’t mind being your bodyguard.”

Lexi shook her head. “I don’t want him in danger. He really has something physically wrong with him. If I can get him to let me take a look, I might be able to help, and if I can’t, Libby Drake is back in town. I can ask her . . .” She trailed off when she realized the other women were staring at her in astonishment. “What?”

“You’re going to take a look at him?” Blythe echoed. “Honey, you don’t even talk to people let alone take a look at them.”

Airiana gave a little snicker. “Presumably without clothes. You know, just for an inspection.”

Lexi felt her color rise, her skin turning bright red. “Well, if I’m going to help him, I’ll need to see the problem, won’t I?” She glared at them, daring them to contradict her.

“Of course,” Lissa soothed. “We’re only teasing you.”

“But honey,” Judith reminded, “the stabbing was some time ago, and it may be impossible to help him after all this time. In any event, he’s no wounded creature for you to look after.”

“Of course he is,” Lexi said. “You didn’t see him.”

“We’re about to,” Blythe said. “The men are coming back and your Gavriil is right in the middle of them.”

Lexi stood up, slowly putting the teacup down. Gavriil moved over the ground with a dancer's fluid step rather than a fighter's, which was how she always saw Levi and Thomas. Max was just out there for the world to see, a tough, rough man anyone would think twice before messing with. But Gavriil . . .

"Oh, my God," Judith whispered, her hand going defensively to her throat. "And I thought Levi was frightening. Airiana, are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

Airiana touched Judith's hand to quiet her. She saw the aura, dark and dangerous and extremely violent, surrounding Gavriil Prakenskii. The thought of him ever being alone with their little fragile Lexi was almost shocking. Truly horrifying. What made the situation so much worse was the fact that he was walking with his brothers, all very dangerous men, and yet his aura was fully colored in violence, outdoing every one of theirs.

Gavriil Prakenskii wore his cloak of darkness as casually as another man wore a coat. Airiana wouldn't have been surprised to see him sprout horns. He was the coldest, hardest man she'd ever seen in her life.

Judith nudged her and indicated Lexi with her chin. The other women had fallen silent as well, staring at the newcomer as if he might be the devil walking up to them in his blue jeans and long, swirling trench coat.

"He's got a million weapons inside that coat," Rikki murmured. "Maybe more than a million. He's just scary."

Lexi didn't seem to hear her. She didn't seem to see anyone other than Gavriil. His dark gaze fastened on hers, and she had the strange sensation of falling into him. She didn't like strangers, especially men, yet he didn't feel like a stranger. No one else could see the pain in him, which surprised her. Normally, Lissa and Airiana were very good at using healing energy when it was needed.

That didn't matter to her. She wanted to go to him, take his hand and lead him to a chair to get him off his feet. He needed to sit down. She was fairly certain he hadn't slept in days, and she hated the exhaustion she could feel pouring off of him.

"Is there any tea left?" Levi asked, and leaned down to brush a kiss over Rikki's upturned mouth. His hand slipped into hers. "I'm sorry about having to miss a dive day."

"Oh no, Rikki," Lexi said instantly. "I didn't realize I kept you from diving. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have called you, Levi," she added. "I could have just asked Thomas and Max."

Levi put his arm around her and gave her a brief, rare hug. "You did exactly what you were supposed to do. And Gavriil tells me you used the kick we worked on like a pro. I'm proud of you."

Gavriil moved up the stairs straight toward them, and scowled at his brother. Levi instantly dropped his arm and stepped away from Lexi.

Gavriil ignored the others and went to Lexi, taking both her hands in his. "Are you all right?"

Lexi nodded and patted the porch swing, feeling sick with his pain. She couldn't understand how the others didn't see or feel it. His pain was so severe it was nearly tangible. She couldn't help stroking a hand down his arm, silently urging him to sit.

Gavriil allowed Lexi to coax him into the swing, knowing her sisters were horrified that she was standing so close to him. They'd be even more horrified if they realized just what she was to him. He didn't care. Nothing mattered to him but this young woman, so fragile and broken, but with a heart of gold and a steel

spine she didn't even know she had.

He read the compassion in her eyes easily, and knew that was his best "in" with her. She would run at the first hint of interest, of a takeover, but she would be drawn to him if she thought he needed her help.

He sank into the swing and tugged her hand so that she slowly, almost reluctantly sat beside him. Clearly she wasn't used to being with a man, a stranger, but still, she was more worried about him than about herself in that moment, and he had no compunction against capitalizing on her compassionate nature.

Her shoulder fit beneath his. His thigh was tight along hers. He wanted to close his eyes and rest, to just sit with her on the porch swing, something he'd never done in his life, but suddenly it was the most important thing in the world to do. He allowed her to feel his exhaustion, even his pain, although he sensed she did so on her own, that she saw far more than he would ever want another human being to see.

"Did you take Caine to the hospital?" Lexi asked.

Levi and Thomas exchanged a long glance with Max. Caine had been in no shape to go to the hospital or anywhere else for that matter. He'd been long gone by the time they'd arrived and probably begged for death long before he'd ever seen it coming for him. Gavriil hadn't even broken a sweat. He'd straightened up slowly, looking at them, not with the eyes of a long lost brother, but rather the eyes of a killer, a man long lost to the world of humanity.

"I'm sorry, honey," Thomas said. "Well, maybe I'm not. He was dead by the time we got there."

"But . . ." she protested. "He was yelling at me, calling me names. He was alive . . ."

"He bled to death, Lexi," Max said.

"I *murdered* him then." She started to cover her face with her hands, but Gavriil caught her one hand and brought it to his chest.

"Self-defense isn't the same as murder, *solnyshko moya*, and you acted in self-defense," he said. He opened her fist and pressed her palm over his heart.

Max exchanged a quick look with his brothers. Gavriil was using a very tender version of "my sun," in Russian, an unusual endearment to call a woman he'd just met. "It isn't any different than when we fought off the men coming to take Airiana away," Max added. "We used every means possible to defend ourselves and those we love."

"I wanted him dead," Lexi confessed in a little rush. "I hit the ground too hard because I wanted him dead."

"He was an evil man," Gavriil said. "Believe me, Lexi, I know evil when I see it. I've come across it enough in my lifetime."

That brought her attention immediately back to him. She tilted her head to look up at him. "You need to rest. You were up all night, weren't you?"

He nodded his head. "I traveled a long way to find Ilya and to see all of you. Sorbacov put a hit out on Ilya."

"I didn't expect that," Levi said.

Thomas shook his head. "Sooner or later one of us is going to have to kill that man. There's no reason to go

after Ilya other than pure spite.”

“Why are you using your real name?” Max asked. “That’s a beacon for Sorbacov. You know that. Unless you’re just using it because you’re with family.”

Gavriil shrugged. “I want him to know where I am after I leave here. Once I’m well away from all of you, I’ll establish a trail. He’ll send someone after me, and I can lead them away from Ilya and this farm.” That had been his plan all along. But now there was Lexi. What did a man like him do about a woman like her? He sure as hell had no intention of giving her up, or leaving her to Caine’s cult.

His admission was rewarded with Lexi’s swift intake of breath and a quick shake of her head. He felt a spark of energy from the center of her palm through his shirt, straight to his heart.

“No.” A single word. Softly spoken. Just *no*. He wasn’t even certain anyone else had heard her. Her green eyes drifted over his face, and she shook her head.

His heart reacted as if she’d used an electrical charge on him. He didn’t have physical reactions to anything or anyone unless he allowed it. He hadn’t given his body permission to feel—not in the middle of so many people—yet there was no denying the almost painful response of his heart to her.

He had never expected to find himself in such a position, and he needed a plan of action. For that he needed a clear mind, and right now he was exhausted. He was seventy-two hours without sleep and needed to lie down for a short while. He didn’t release Lexi’s hand, although he made certain there was no pressure, just his hand lightly over hers, pressing her palm gently against his heart.

“I don’t want you to worry anymore about losing your farm,” he said, allowing his lashes to drift down as if he might be falling asleep right there.

What the hell are you doing? Levi demanded. *Gavriil, there’s no way you’d fall asleep in the middle of this group. Don’t play her. She’s off-limits. No woman on this farm is to be used for whatever reason.*

Go to hell, Lev. He didn’t lift his lashes or look at his brother. His voice said it all.

“You’re welcome to stay with Rikki and me,” Levi said aloud, his tone a low whip. There was so sharp of an edge that his brothers and the women looked at him.

Rikki didn’t speak, but she looked as if she might faint. She rocked back and forth, her fingers twisting together in agitation. She had difficulties with strangers, particularly anyone entering her home. It was significant that Levi didn’t soothe her or retract his invitation.

“Levi,” Lexi said, “what in the world is wrong with you? You know that wouldn’t work.”

Gavriil remained motionless. Absolutely still. Just waiting.

“Perhaps it would be better if you stayed with us,” Airiana volunteered, putting her hand gently over Rikki’s and frowning at Levi.

“You have four children,” Lexi protested. “He’d never get any sleep there.”

Gavriil let the talk swirl around him, leaving them to debate where he should stay. At least they were giving him an opening to remain on the farm. He studied his brothers through hooded eyes. All three looked fit and happy. All three were happy to see him and yet wanted him gone—away from Lexi. It was very clear to him

that they all protected her.

“It’s logical to come to our place,” Thomas said. “We have plenty of room, right, Judith?” He put his arm around her.

“Yes. That would be lovely. Of course you should stay with us, we’d love to have you,” Judith said, almost painfully.

Gavriil shifted his weight slightly, bringing his thigh tighter against Lexi’s. Her security and safety was his job now, and he wouldn’t be staying at any of their houses. He was staying with Lexi, right where he was. He waited, tempted to suppress a slight groan to galvanize her into action, but Levi might take out a gun and shoot him. The idea was a little amusing.

“That’s just silly,” Lexi said. “I’ve got a huge house and it wouldn’t be inconvenient for him to stay here. He needs rest, and I’ll feel much safer with him close. Gavriil, if you want to stay here, you’re welcome. You’ll have plenty of peace and quiet.”

He’d noticed the sleeping bag rolled up in the far corner, tucked against the railing. He was fairly certain she spent most nights on the porch and not in her house. In her mind, she figured she would just let him have the house. He let her think it. “If it would make you feel safer,” he said, opening his eyes and looking directly at her, “of course I’ll stay. I don’t want to be any trouble though. A couch is good.”

Levi snorted, and Max made a growling sound deep in his throat.

Gavriil, she’s very fragile, Levi said again. What the hell are you doing?

What the hell was he doing? He didn’t know. He didn’t even care. He sent his brother one hard look telling him without words to back off. He couldn’t reassure Levi that he’d leave Lexi alone because he didn’t know exactly what he was going to do with her. He only knew he couldn’t leave her. She belonged to him, and nothing, not a single person, had ever belonged to him.

More than that, he’d never had anyone look at him the way she did. Or see inside him the way she saw him. Her safety was paramount to everything else now. He’d never had anything in his life he cared about. That was dangerous. He didn’t get attached. He didn’t have a home or an expectation of one.

His life consisted of hotel rooms and apartments that had nothing in them. He stashed money and passports all over for emergencies and never stayed long in any one place. No matter how grave an injury, he moved locations every few days, not leaving so much as a fingerprint behind. Until now. Until Lexi. He was going to stop here—at least for a while.

Lexi stood up abruptly, taking matters into her own hands. “I know you’ve all got work to do. If we’re not calling the sheriff and I don’t have to leave, then we need to let Gavriil rest. I have plenty to do.”

The others had no choice. Airiana gathered up the teacups and took them inside while the women started down the steps, clearly reluctant to leave. His brothers hadn’t budged.

I’ll need some kind of answer, Gavriil. She’s family.

I’m your family. And you know you’re treading on very thin ice.

Levi shrugged but he didn’t move, and Gavriil admired him for that. Levi was well aware Gavriil could kill them all from his position, just sitting there on the swing, but he didn’t so much as flinch. He stared at

Gavriil with steady, watchful eyes.

Gavriil reached out almost lazily and caught Lexi's wrist, tugging until she turned. She smiled at him. Innocent. Sweet. Her green eyes soft and too trusting. She had no idea that he was a monster rocking gently back and forth on her porch swing. She saw him as her broken bird and she was determined to make certain he was safe and secure. He lifted her palm into the air facing him. Her small, delicate hand, roughened from so much work.

Gavriil lifted his own palm and pressed it toward hers. His palm pushed energy against hers and he felt a rise of power from his deepest core, the very essence of who he was. It was strong, extremely so, his spirit, his will, the man he was forged in hell. Electricity leapt between them, sparks dancing like fireflies in the air around their palms. It hit her hard, a jolt that sank through flesh to bone.

"No," Levi and Thomas both said simultaneously. Max took a step toward him and halted abruptly when sparks arced in the air between the two palms.

Lexi yelped, pulling her hand back, pressing it tightly against her body as if she'd been injured. "You zapped me." There was a mixture of laughter and tears in her voice, telling him it hurt more than she wanted to let on.

It was too late for all of them. Gavriil had no idea why he gave into the compulsion to answer his brother in such a way. He hadn't thought about it, he hadn't even considered or planned for it. Energy rose from somewhere deep inside him. That onetime gift that couldn't be taken back and was never given lightly.

A commitment. A vow. Binding brands, embedded deep, more than bone deep, sinking into flesh, sinking into his soul, her soul. They would be forever bound together. That rise of energy from a Prakenskii to the one woman he claimed as his own, weaving that connection tight from his soul to hers.

"Let me see." He tugged at Lexi's wrist until she reluctantly allowed him to examine her palm. Satisfaction rose when he saw that faint brand, two circles intertwined, embedded into her palm, under her skin, already disappearing from prying eyes. It was an intimate, private mark that was for no one else to see but the two of them.

He lifted his gaze to his brothers. He knew what they saw, and it wasn't going to give them much reassurance. He wouldn't pretend he was anything but who and what he was. But they'd better heed his warning. He wouldn't give them another, not now that they knew.

Levi cursed under his breath and turned away abruptly. He'd been on the farm the longest and he clearly loved Lexi as a sister. Thomas scowled at him but didn't say a word. He turned on his heel and took the steps two at a time.

Max stood there looking at him. "I hope you know what you're doing, Gavriil. I really do."

Gavriil didn't bother with a reply. Of course he didn't know what the hell he was doing, he was in brand-new territory, but he'd figure it out. He had time. Ignoring Max, he pressed his mouth to the center of Lexi's palm, brushing his lips over the wound in a brief kiss.

"I'm sorry, *solnyshko moyu*, I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Lexi," Levi commanded her attention, forcing her to look at him. "If you need anything at all. If you want help, just call."

She smiled at him. “I may be asking for you to cook after a day or two. You’re awesome, and I’m sort of mediocre in that department.”

Clearly she didn’t comprehend the danger she was in. Gavriil realized she was still thrown by what had happened earlier. He’d already dismissed the incident, clearing his mind of Caine and his associates. They were dead and gone and no one would ever find the bodies, but Lexi hadn’t dismissed them.

Levi shook his head and reluctantly followed his brothers and Airiana, leaving them alone.

Lexi stared after her brothers-in-law, realizing for the first time that her safety net was gone and somehow, without knowing how or why, she’d insisted Gavriil Prakenskii stay with her. She turned away from him to give herself a moment to think. Her sisters were frequently at her house, running in and out, and lately, Airiana’s children often did the same thing. But no one stayed.

She spent long hours alone and wasn’t certain she knew how to talk to anyone without being awkward.

“Lexi.” Gavriil spoke softly. “If you don’t want me to stay, I can find somewhere else to sleep. I’m not really picky about where. I’m a stranger to you. You don’t owe me anything, and I’d never want you uncomfortable.”

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