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HE'S TO DIE FOR...

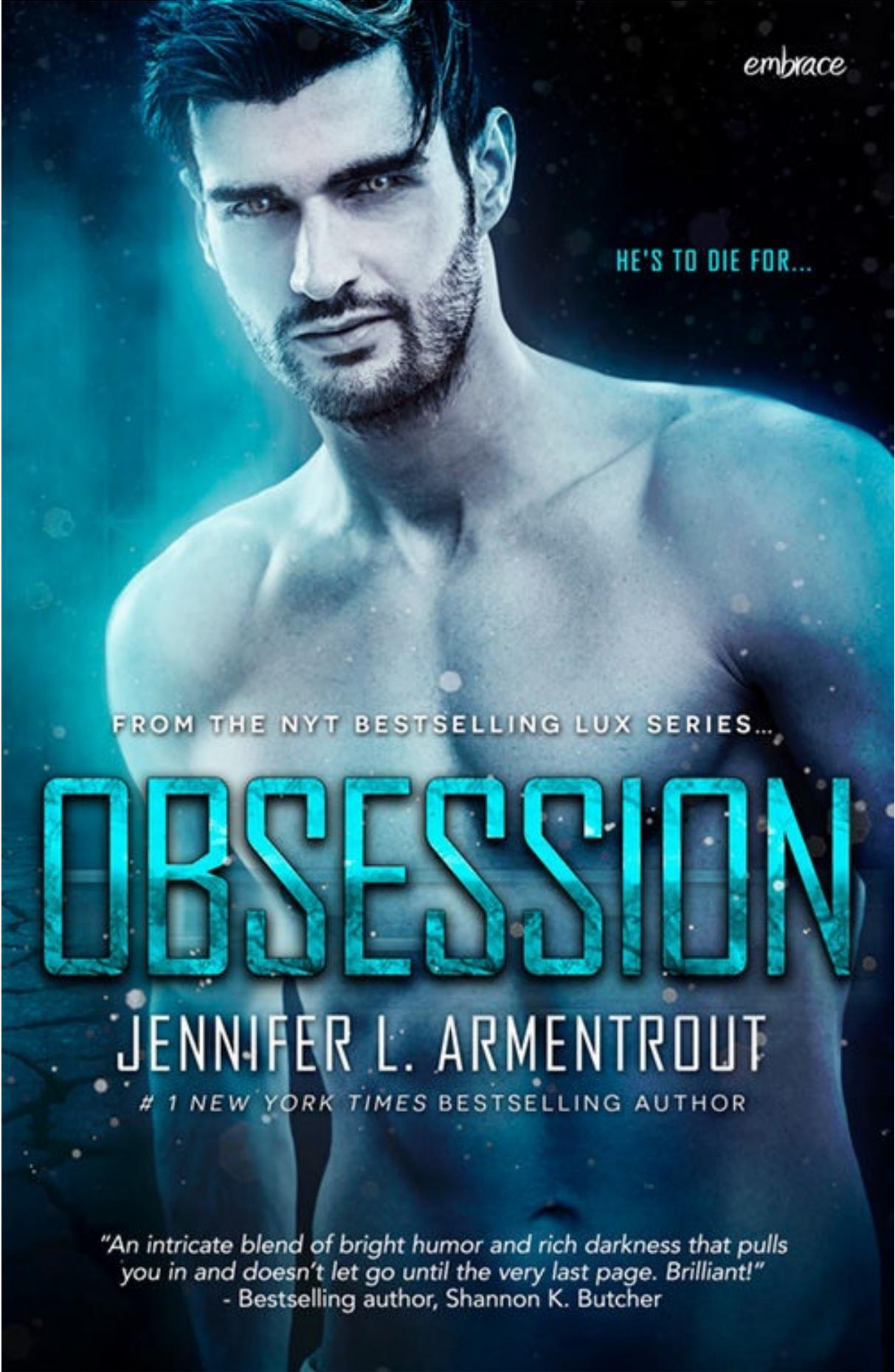
FROM THE NYT BESTSELLING LUX SERIES...

OBSESSION

JENNIFER L. ARMENTROUT

1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

"An intricate blend of bright humor and rich darkness that pulls you in and doesn't let go until the very last page. Brilliant!"
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He's to die for...

Hunter is a ruthless killer. And the Department of Defense has him firmly in their grasp, which usually doesn't chafe too badly because he gets to kill bad guys. Most of the time he enjoys his job. That is, until he's saddled with something he's never had to do before: protect a human from his mortal enemy.

Serena Cross didn't believe her best friend when she claimed to have seen the son of a powerful senator turn into something...unnatural. Who would? But then she witnesses her friend's murder at the hands of what can only be an alien, thrusting her into a world that will kill to protect their secret.

Hunter stirs Serena's temper and her lust despite their differences. Soon he's doing the unthinkable breaking the rules he's lived by, going against the government to keep Serena safe. But are the aliens and the government the biggest threats to Serena's life...or is it Hunter?

Previously released on Entangled's Covet imprint—May 2013

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Table of Contents

[Dedication](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Chapter Twelve](#)
[Chapter Thirteen](#)
[Chapter Fourteen](#)
[Chapter Fifteen](#)
[Chapter Sixteen](#)
[Chapter Seventeen](#)
[Chapter Eighteen](#)
[Chapter Nineteen](#)
[Chapter Twenty](#)
[Chapter Twenty-One](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Thirty](#)
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)
[About the Author](#)
 [Obsidian](#)
 [Opal](#)
 [Onyx](#)
 [Origin](#)
 [Opposition](#)
 [Oblivion](#)
 [Daimon](#)
 [Half-Blood](#)

[Pure](#)

[Deity](#)

[Apollyon](#)

[Cursed](#)

[Tempting the Best Man](#)

[Tempting the Player](#)

[Wait for You](#)

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[No Kissing Allowed](#)

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Previously released on Entangled's Covet imprint—May 2013

Entangled Publishing, LLC
2614 South Timberline Road
Suite 109

Fort Collins, CO 80525

Visit our website at www.entangledpublishing.com.

Embrace is an imprint of Entangled Publishing, LLC.

Edited by Liz Pelletier and Karen Grove

Cover design by Louisa Maggio

Cover art from iStock

ISBN 978-1-62266-160-2

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition May 2013

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To those who begged and pleaded to see this world all grown up. This is for you...

Chapter One

In the dim, almost but-not-quite seedy bar lights, I stared openmouthed at my best friend in what had to be the most unattractive manner. Mel was rocking the crazy pants tonight.

It was the only reasonable explanation.

That or Mel's drink was a hell of a lot stronger than mine.

We'd been peanut butter and jelly since I shared my chocolate cupcakes with her in the first grade. A rattlesnake and a bunny had more in common than we did. Mel was the crazy one, always into something, while I was mostly comfortable reading a book or watching a movie. Throughout our lives, no one could figure out how we were so close, but when friendships begin with cupcakes—chocolate, at that—no truer bond develops.

I took a huge gulp of my rum and coke, wincing at the burn. "Mel, this sounds—"

"Insane? I know. I *feel* insane. I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes, and these blue peepers have twenty-twenty vision thanks to Lasik." Mel jabbed at her eyes with two fingers. Both had chipped nail polish, which was so unlike her glamour-loving nature. "But I know what I saw, Serena, and I'm telling you Phillip isn't human."

There. She said it again. Not human. I peeked at Mel's half-full glass. Had she been drinking before we met up? Or toking on the crack pipe? If the frantic voice mail I'd received from Mel while I'd been at the school and the subsequent conversation was any indication, maybe meth was involved. Mel liked to party, but she stayed away from the harder stuff. Hopefully. I was beginning to wonder.

I leaned forward, stretching the fit of my suit jacket as I folded my arms on the round table. Damn, I wished I'd had time to run home and change. I needed more comfortable clothes for this stuff. Nothing made crazy easier to accept than lounge pants and flip-flops. "Mel, most guys aren't human."

Mel's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, well most guys don't turn into a freaking light bulb! But Vanderson's sons did. Both of them!"

A couple glanced over at us curiously. Wanting to crawl under the table, I grabbed Mel's hand and squeezed gently. "A light bulb?" I kept my voice down even though it was pointless. Mel was always a loud talker. And it was election season, so Senator Vanderson's name being dropped was bound to get attention.

"Yes. He lit up like a freaking glow stick or—or you remember those toys that you squeeze and they light up?"

"A Glo Worm?"

"That!" Mel pulled her hand free and thrust it through her chin-length, raven-colored hair. "He was like a Glo Worm but only brighter."

Oh dear. She was definitely rocking the crazy pants. "Were you guys drinking or possibly smoking something—"

Mel's hand smacked the table, rattling our glasses. "There is nothing in this world that I could drink or smoke that would make me see that."

"Okay." I held up my hands in surrender. "I just don't understand this, Mel. Don't bitch-slap the table. It's not its fault."

She let out a long breath. "I'm just so—so freaked out. He saw me. His brother saw me. I know they know I saw them."

I didn't know what to say. I recognized how freaked out Mel truly was. Granted, Mel got excited over things like grasshoppers in the house, branches that looked like snakes in the yard, and...butterflies flying around, but I'd never seen her like this. This was different.

Something had really scared her.

"I knew Phillip was bad news," I said, tucking a strand of wavy hair behind my ear. "Being the senator's son had to have messed with him. He's probably—"

"He's probably one of them, too—the senator!"

Oh my God, if Mel kept yelling that, we were never going to be able to show our faces around here again. I wished they'd turn the music up louder and maybe turn the lights off, too. Fast Times bar wasn't too packed on a Monday night, so conversation had a tendency to travel.

Mel took a healthy swallow of her drink. "I was at his apartment, not back in Grandview, when it happened."

Grandview was where the Richie Rich of Boulder lived, an exclusive, gated community at the foothills of the Flatirons that the senator and other important people kept residency in. The gate was like a ridiculous twenty feet high. Absurd. Did they think Russia was going to invade them?

"When he did the light-bulb thing?" I asked, fiddling with my straw.

Mel nodded. "We were hanging out in his living room, having drinks. Nothing

serious. And then we went back to the bedroom, had sex—it was great, as usual. Phillip has stamina like no other guy in this world does.”

My brows rose.

“Then his brother showed up—Elijah.”

“While you two were having sex?”

“As hot as that would be considering they’re twins, no, not while Phillip and I were having sex.” She plucked at the button on her blouse. “Anyway, they got into some kind of argument outside on the balcony. The two of them are always bickering and, you know me, I’m perpetually nosy, right?”

I smiled. “Yes.”

“So I went to the door and listened. They were talking about something called Project Eagle and Daedalus—”

“Daedalus? Isn’t that some Greek thing?”

“That doesn’t matter, Serena. *Listen* to me. They were arguing about this. Elijah was pissed because their father was going to ruin things with the Daedalus and that this Eagle thing was a bad idea, but Phillip didn’t care or whatever. He told Elijah to mind his own business and to let it go. That it wasn’t their place.”

“Okay.” I wondered how this turned into Phillip becoming a light bulb.

“But Elijah was really upset, saying it was all going to blow up in their faces and that this Eagle thing was wrong and dangerous. He said something about Pennsylvania and where the kids were kept and if the Daedalus ever discovered what they planned, it would all be over. And at this point, I’m like, wow, what’s going on?” Mel’s blue eyes were wide and dilated. “Elijah said something too low for me to hear and it must’ve really upset Phillip, because he pushed his brother and then his brother pushed him back. Two grown men fighting like that? I thought one of them was going to push the other over the railing. But then...then it happened.”

“The light-bulb thing?”

“Yes.” She pressed her palm to her forehead, squeezing her eyes shut. Her normally tanned skin was pale. “At first, it was like he faded out. His clothes, body, everything just faded out like he’d vanished. And then he was there, but he wasn’t human, Serena. He was *encased in light*. Head to toe, Serena.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “What did you do?”

“I flipped out like any normal person would do! I got the hell out there, but...” She cursed, lowering her hand to the table. “I dropped the damn bottle of beer. They heard me. I looked back and they were at the balcony door, both of them glowing...” Mel trailed off, lower lip trembling. “They know I saw them. I mean, obviously, since I ran out of the building like it was on fire. I don’t know what to do. I haven’t even gone

home. I've been driving around waiting for you to get off, which took forever, by the way. I wrote it all down while I was in my car just in case...."

"Just in case what?"

"I don't know. I just felt like I needed to write it down before I forgot things, and I know I already have. *Shit.*" She groaned as she bounced on her seat. "I was trying to waste time and I ended up leaving it in my post office box when I checked my mail, because I was so out of it."

I sat back on the bar stool, still having no idea what to say. Mel was obviously worked up, so something had to have happened. Probably not what she thought, but something, and I felt for her.

"I'm too afraid to go home. Phillip knows where I live." Mel finished off her drink.

"When did this happen? This morning?" I asked, frowning.

Mel nodded.

Then it hit me. "Have you gone to work?"

"What? No! How could I go to work after that?" Mel shuddered. "And besides, Phillip knows to find me there, too."

My chest tightened. Dear God, what if something was really wrong with Mel? Not just an overactive imagination, but something more serious? My training kicked in, spewing out possible ailments like I was doing a mental grocery list: psychotic break with reality, schizophrenia, anxiety attack with hallucinations, or a brain tumor? The possibilities were endless. "Mel..."

"Don't 'Mel' me." Her voice wobbled. "I know I sound crazy, and if I were in your shoes, I'd be thinking the same thing, but I know what I saw. Phillip isn't human. Neither is his brother. I don't know what he is—maybe a government experiment or, hell, an alien. I don't know."

An alien. Okay. It was time to definitely get out of the bar. "How about you come home with me?"

Hope sparked in her eyes. "Really? You're cool with that? I know you probably think I'm bat-shit crazy and all."

I waved her off. "Honey, what are best friends for? This is a crisis situation and I know how to help. I have ice cream and leftover lasagna. We can stuff our faces and try to figure this out."

"I haven't eaten all day. I've been too nervous." Mel smiled, but it was weak. "You're the best, Serena. I really mean it."

"I know." I gave her a cheeky grin. "Stay here and I'll take care of the tab."

When Mel nodded and started digging around in her purse, I grabbed my own and hopped off the stool. Squeezing between the tables, I ignored the WTF looks I was

getting from those around us.

I quickly took care of the balance—a thing I was accustomed to. Mel had expensive tastes and rarely stayed at one job long enough to make a decent salary. Made no sense to me, because Mel was smart and had the education, but she just didn't apply herself. Mel was only twenty-three, the same age as me, so I figured there was more than enough time for Mel to settle down a little, stay away from crazy rich guys, and use the degree in education she'd worked so hard for.

I reclaimed Mel by threading my arm through hers. "You ready?"

Mel nodded but didn't say anything as we headed out into the dry evening air of early May. We passed a group of men coming in, their jackets off, ties loosened. One of them, a tall blond, whistled under his breath, doing a "Hey girl, hey" that fell on deaf ears. And if everything else wasn't an indication of how wiggled out Mel was, her ignoring a man looking in her direction sure was.

Concerned about her, I steered her toward the parking garage. If Mel didn't change her tune by the time she was stuffed with lasagna and ice cream, I was going to have to convince her to talk to someone—anyone other than me. Our friendship wouldn't allow for an unbiased diagnosis and I had never really diagnosed anyone before. Being the high school guidance counselor sort of limited the kinds of disorders I was exposed to on a daily basis.

It was cooler and darker in the parking garage. Most of the entire back row, where I had to park, was completely in the shadows. Luckily Mel was parked in the first row, near the exit.

We stopped by Mel's red Audi. As she dug out her car keys, she turned to me. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"No! Of course not," I answered immediately.

Doubt crossed Mel's face. "Really, because you have that look—like you're compiling a list of mental disorders I'm suffering from."

"I am so not doing that." I flashed a quick grin. "I did that earlier."

Mel laughed and then quickly hugged me. "Thank you. I mean it. I really don't want to be alone right now."

I squeezed her back. "It's all right. Like I've said, we'll figure this out together."

Letting go, Mel opened her car door. "I'll wait for you."

Sending her a reassuring smile, I hurried through the maze of cars as fast as my noisy heels allowed me, anxious to be out of there. I always hated parking garages. There was nothing creepier.

Well, talk of glowing senator's sons was pretty creepy, too.

My chest tightened. Mel had never looked more...vulnerable than she did this

evening. I didn't know how I could truly help, but no matter what was going on in Mel's head, I was going to be there for her. Just like Mel had been there for me when my mom had been killed in a botched robbery attempt my freshman year of college. Without Mel, I would've had no one, having never been close to my absentee father. We'd supported each other countless times over, from the small stuff to the major crises.

This time would be no different.

Stopping at the front of my gently used Honda, I fished out my keys. The strap of my purse slipped, jerking my arm, and the keys hit the dirty pavement.

"Great," I muttered, dipping down as far as my pencil skirt would allow. Snatching my keys off the ground, I stood. Movement out of the corner of my eyes drew my attention. My head swiveled toward it. The parking garage wasn't huge, so I could make out the form of Mel's head through the back window of her car.

Thinking that's what had caught my attention, I started to turn back, but then a tall male walked out from behind one of the beams near the wide doors lining the opening of the garage. His purposeful strides carried him into a beam of light.

Holy hot guy...

I was struck by how good-looking the man was: tall and with sandy-blond hair, he looked like he stepped off the pages of a fashion magazine. The jeans appeared tailored, cut to fit his long legs. Where I stood in shadows, I wasn't worried about being caught checking out the fine specimen of a man. There was no way he could see me, so I looked...and I may've drooled a little.

Or a lot.

I was admiring how the jeans framed his perfect ass when he passed the overhead light and—what in the hell?—vanished. He just vanished! Like he just blinked out of the space or was sucked up into a black hole. He was there one second and gone the next.

Alarmed, I took a step forward. A chill snaked down my spine. Was this a dream? Or was Mel's hallucination contagious, because this was really like what she had said in the bar, but—

But then I saw him behind Mel's car, off to the right. There was absolutely no way he could've gotten there without me seeing him. Impossible, but there he was, head cocked to the side.

A certain, bone-deep dread settled like stones in my stomach, weighting me to the cement beneath my feet. The keys dangled useless in my hands. Suddenly, I was back in the bar and Mel's words were replaying over and over in my head.

He's not human. He's not human.

Shocked and absolutely stupefied, I watched the man raise his arm. At the same time, the driver's door opened and Mel's head popped out, as if the man had called out to her, but I hadn't heard him over the pounding of my heart. I opened my mouth to yell out to Mel, but the air filled with electricity, raising the tiny hairs all over my body. Overhead lights flickered and then in a rapid succession, they blew one after another, showering sparks like raindrops. Each mini explosion was like a gunshot, silencing my shriek as I jumped back, knocking into the hood of my car.

Darkness descended, but it only lasted a second. An unnatural, intense whitish-blue light lit up the front part of the parking garage and—*oh God*—it was coming from the man. Like lightning, it came from within him, radiating from his shoulder and spreading down his arm, twisting and crackling until it reached his palm.

Mel screamed in the same instant I yelled for her.

The pulse of light shot from his hand, arcing like lightning. It struck the back of her car. My heart stopped. The keys fell from my hands.

Whitish-blue light swallowed Mel's car. For a second, the air stilled and everything went silent. Heat rolled back in violent waves and the light flared, blinding for a second before the explosion rocked through the parking garage.

Chapter Two

The call came in seconds before I was to board the private jet bound for the backwoods of West Virginia. I almost ignored it, because when the goddamn cell rang, it was always a load of shit I didn't want to deal with.

But "didn't want" and "had to" were never in agreement.

Yanking the damn thing out of the duffel bag, I didn't look at the caller ID before I answered. Not like it could be a lot of people. "What?"

There was a pause on the other end, and I could picture the stick-up-his-ass officer displaying his pissy face. "That's a very impolite way to answer the phone," Officer Zombro said.

"And here's another impolite thing for you." I leaned against the wall, eyeing the plane on the tarmac. "I don't give a fuck."

Officer Zombro bit out the next words. "I don't know who you think you're talking to, but let—"

"I know exactly who and what I'm talking to. Get to the point. I have a plane to catch."

"You can say good-bye to your travel plans, because we have a job for you."

My hand tightened around the cell phone and I heard the fragile plastic groan. Son of a bitch. With great effort, I forced my grip to loosen. I'd lost many of my cells in the past this way.

Zombro took my silence as submission. "One of the satellites picked up a high-frequency blast of energy over Boulder."

Tipping my head back, I closed my eyes. "What does that have to do with me?"

"Early evidence is indicating that this was an unsanctioned display of the Source. Since there is a community of Luxen in that area, we will be in need of your assistance."

I opened my eyes slowly. Off in the horizon, the last of the sun dipped over the mountain, casting an orangey glow over the flat, sandstone rocks. Tiny bits of the rock gleamed in the fading light. Fucking beta quartz.

“Hunter? Did you hear me?”

Zombro’s voice grated on my self-control, something I never had a really good handle on in the first place. I kicked off the wall. “Yeah, I hear you.”

“You’re the closest one to Boulder. The pilot has been given instructions. Get there and await further contact.”

Before I could say “Fuck off,” Zombro disconnected the call. The little rat bastard liked doing that. Being the one to end the call gave the fucking twerp some kind of sense of power. Annoying, yes, but seriously laughable. In Zombro’s wildest dreams, he could never be as ruthlessly strong or deadly as me, and the officer knew it.

I shook out my shoulders, but the tension lingered deep in my muscles. Casting a glance back at the hangar, my eyes narrowed in a clear, potent warning.

Another of my kind drifted further into the shadows, backing off so quickly I had to think he was clever and valued his life. Making sure the other wasn’t going to try anything, I didn’t turn my back until I was confident the other remained where it hid.

My hands curled into fists as I itched to shed this skin. I was partial to this human form, but this was one of those moments where I just wanted to be in my true form, free of assholes calling me in because the government had to keep up appearances. As if they really were able to maintain control over the Luxen population. If that were the case, there’d be no need for me.

I’d most likely be dead or locked up in a lab somewhere, getting probed—and not in the fun way.

Instead, I was this—whatever *this* was.

This whole new lease-on-life bullshit was getting old quick. Sitting around, behaving, and being the Department of Defense’s bitch was not in my nature. Somehow it was in Lore’s, but my brother had always been a bit...different or touched, depending on how I looked at it.

And that was how I ended up here, ready to do this job, because Lore had asked me to step away, to get out of the war, and Lore had begged. Our kind never begged. But that plea had come as we stood over the body of our sister.

And so here I was.

The pilot stuck his head out the loading door, visibly swallowing. Humans were always uncomfortable around our kind. A sixth sense warned them that they were coming as close to death as possible just by being in our presence.

Could be worse, I thought, as I grabbed my duffel bag. If I wasn’t going home, at least I was getting to kill a Luxen.

“I’ve told you everything I know—and it sounds crazy, I get that, but it’s not going

to change no matter how many times I repeat it.”

Detective Jones sat back, readjusting the tie around his thick neck. The man’s jowls had gone from pink to code red since he walked into the room. “Miss Cross, I know you’ve had a traumatic experience—”

“I saw my friend get blown up in her car!” My voice caught. I cleared my throat, but my eyes still burned. “So, yes, that was pretty damn traumatic, but it doesn’t change what I saw tonight.”

“And this man—what did he look like again?”

Exhausted, I placed my hands on the deep brown table. “I’ve told you and the officers before you. He was tall—”

“How tall, Miss Cross?” Detective Jones leaned forward, his stomach sucking in his belt in the process. “You’re pretty short, so a lot of people may seem tall to you.”

What the hell? I shook my head, too frustrated to be offended. I gave him a description once more and he scribbled in his little notebook. I was sure he was just doodling. I had been at the police department for over five hours, recounting everything I had seen and heard tonight. Part of me was numb, couldn’t process what had really happened, because Mel...Mel couldn’t be dead. The other part was hyperaware of every creak of the chair when the detective shifted his weight, of the flickering fluorescent lights that reminded me of those horrifying moments in the parking garage, and of every sore muscle and bruised skin that had taken the brunt of my fall.

I couldn’t believe I was alive.

The explosion had knocked me flat on my ass and any extra cushioning I had down there hadn’t softened the blow. My ears had rung for a straight two hours and I could still smell the burned scent of twisted metal...and skin.

Oh God...

I shuddered and reached for the plastic cup of water. Gulping it down, it did nothing to get rid of the metallic taste in the back of my throat. Taking a deep breath, I looked up and met the aging detective’s eyes. “I’m telling you, the man blew up her car. I don’t know how he did it, but he did. And before that, Mel...” I pressed my lips together. “Mel was afraid.”

“And you’re saying that she was afraid of Senator Vanderson’s sons?” A dubious look crossed his heavy face. “That she witnessed him doing something abnormal that morning. Can you tell me exactly what she told you?”

I stared at him, furious that they were making me go through all of this again. Like they were trying to catch me in a lie, which was insane, because who would make something like this up? I sat back, thrusting my hands through my hair. The only thing

keeping me here was the hope that I could somehow help find the people responsible for Mel's death.

I had overheard the officers earlier, when they'd left the door cracked open. There had only been *pieces* of Mel left. That was it. An entire life reduced to pieces.

Sick to my stomach, I told the detective everything Mel had told me, adding in the panicked phone calls and how nervous she'd been at the bar. "I'm a guidance counselor at the high school—"

"You don't look old enough." His bushy brows furrowed.

"I graduated two years ago and I've been working at the school for about a year," I explained tiredly. "I know this sounds crazy, but I'm telling you the truth."

"I believe you," he said, and surprise shot through me like an arrow. He rose, picking up his notepad. "I believe that you're sincerely convinced of what you saw and I want to help you. And I'm going to help you, but maybe after a few days, when everything has had a chance to sink in, you'll be able to think about things more clearly."

Anger tore through me like a barb-tipped chain. I shot from the chair, surprised that I could even move that fast after everything, but fury gave back some of my waning strength. "What I'm telling you isn't going to change! No matter how many days have passed."

Ignoring the outburst, he gestured for me to sit. "It's just going to be a few more minutes and we'll have an officer take you home, okay? The garage is still shut down. We hope to be able to let people reclaim their vehicles in the next day or so."

A burst of defiance hit me and I briefly considered bum-rushing the out-of-shape detective. There was a good chance I could take him, but the urge seeped out of me like air leaking from a balloon. I collapsed on the chair, too angry and too tired.

The detective stopped at the door, frowning. "I do have one more question for you, Miss Cross."

I glanced at him, doubting it would be anything relevant.

"You mentioned a name—started with a D? Did your friend say anything else about that?"

"You mean the Daedalus?" When the detective nodded, my shoulders slumped. "She said something about that and Project or Operation Eagle, but I don't remember... I don't think so. When can I leave?"

Detective Jones stared at me hard for a moment and then forced a tight-lipped smile. "It will only be a few more minutes."

He left, closing the gray door behind him. In the silence that followed, I almost broke. Using whatever strength I had left, I closed my eyes and started counting back

from one hundred. Losing it here wouldn't help my cause. The officers already thought I had a screw loose. By the time I reached thirty, I opened my eyes. They stung.

Reaching for the purse I'd been lucky to find in all the chaos, I dug out my cell. Tapping on the screen, I realized that the thing was dead. Couldn't have been the battery because I had charged it earlier at work. I tossed it back in the bag with a sigh.

Time crept by and I was tortured by a thousand what-ifs. What if I took Mel more seriously? What if we had stayed in the bar? What if I insisted Mel ride with me? Sitting up, I smoothed my hands down my face. Pressure built in my chest, ripping open old wounds from when Mom had been murdered for the twenty dollars that she carried in her purse, and slicing deep, fresh ones.

The door opened and I jumped a little in my seat. I expected either the officers who had responded to the garage or the detective, but I didn't recognize the two men who walked in.

Both were dressed in black suits. The first one was older, his face heavily lined and pockmarked. Patches of gray colored his temples. The one behind him was younger, baby faced, and probably no more than a few years older than me.

"Miss Cross?" The older officer spoke first, pulling a badge out from the breast of his jacket, flashing it quickly. "My name is Officer Zombro. We're from Homeland Security."

I sat a little straighter, but wasn't surprised. Cars blowing up usually brought out the feds.

Officer Zombro sat in the seat the detective had kept warm. "I know you're really tired and this has been a long, terrible night, but we're going to need to take a few more minutes of your time, and then we're going to take you home. Okay?"

I wilted in the uncomfortable metal chair, but nodded.

The younger officer strode around the table, sitting on the edge closest to me. He smiled, and the skin around his eyes crinkled. "My name is Jonathan Richards. My partner and I would like to express our sincerest sympathies for the loss of your friend tonight."

"Thank you." I choked on the words.

The smile was compassionate, but never quite reaching his eyes. Probably due to the job. How many times have they sat in a room like this, speaking to a witness of a horrific crime?

"And we know you've been over the events of tonight many times, but we really need you to do it again." The somber expression on Officer Zombro's face hadn't changed from the moment he walked in. "We like to hear things firsthand."