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MORE



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Chapter 1

He was close.

Ava pressed back against the tree trunk, trying to hold her breath but only able to manage it for a moment or two before her lungs gave out, air sawing out and in again desperately against her will. Rough bark rubbed at the skin of her palms where she gripped the tree . . . scraped her cheek as she turned her head to try and catch a glimpse of him.

Darkness mocked her.

Nothing to see. No one to help.

She eyed the entrance to her dorm frantically, the lit doorway calling out like a beacon on the other side of the concrete bridge.

If she could only get there . . .

If she could only get behind that door—lock it fast—she would be safe.

Safe.

The word echoed through her panicked brain, foreign and twisted.

Could she ever really be safe while he was out there?

“Do it,” she muttered, inhaling sharply as tension rippled through her. “Just go.”

With a shove at the tree, she ran for the bridge, heels clacking loudly on the path as her muscles screamed. She glanced over her shoulder, catching a flicker of movement through the trees.

No!

Ava willed her legs to move faster, arms pumping in desperation—reaching out and pulling at the air, as if she could yank herself forward.

Her breath caught. She could hear him. Footsteps chasing after her . . . No—footsteps beside her—now ahead of her.

Where was he?

The better question seemed to be, where wasn't he?

He surrounded her—harsh breaths and pounding feet—a low, mocking laugh as she leapt from the bridge back onto the path.

Only a few more feet to the door.

Almost there.

She reached out, aching to wrap her fingers around the gleaming brass doorknob.

Then with a blur of movement and a gust of a swirling air, he stood in front of her, blocking the way. Huge, hulking, and shadowed by the darkness, he laughed as she recoiled in fear, falling backward in her haste.

“Did you really think you could escape?” he hissed, reaching toward her.

Fingers ripped at the icy ground as she rolled over, trying to crawl away, rocks digging into her knees and her palms, a bit of glass slicing neatly into the meat of her thumb. She winced, lifting it to her mouth to suck at the blood, feet kicking back as he grabbed at her ankle.

He laughed again, jerking her back with one strong pull and dragging her effortlessly across the ground. He bent down, wrapping a meaty fist around her neck, and she clawed at it desperately, unable to breathe.

Lifting Ava off her feet, he glared at her, a flash of light catching his angry, mismatched eyes—one blue, one green.

For a moment, she was almost mesmerized.

Then his lips curled in derision and he squeezed, cutting off the scream curdling in her throat.



Ava awoke with a start, fingers still scraping desperately at her neck, her skin clammy with sweat and fear.

“Ava?” Her roommate, Lucy, sat up in her bed across the room, flipping on the dim light by her pillow. “Are you okay?”

Ava inhaled deeply to get her racing heart under control. “Yeah . . . sorry.”

“Another bad dream?” Lucy sat up, shoving her pale blonde hair back off her forehead. Ava took a moment to resent the fact that even when woken from a sound sleep, her roommate looked impeccable—long, shiny hair which managed to stay untangled even in bed, cornflower-blue eyes, and flawless skin with a touch of pink on her cheeks and lips, even without makeup. It was only the slight crick in her nose that kept her from being too beautiful . . . too perfect.

And the only thing that kept Ava from automatically hating her on sight when she first met her. Well, that and the fact that Lucy Matthews was arguably the nicest person on the planet. Ava had taken one look at that perfect face, the tall, lithe frame, and automatically felt short and squat. Insecurity set in, even though she'd never been fat, and at five foot four was considered about average height. Ava often saw herself as Lucy's non-mirror image—Rose Red to Lucy's Snow White. Not ugly or even unattractive, just shadowed by the near perfection of Lucy's glowing beauty. But underneath Lucy's ethereal appearance beat an unselfish heart, and a rather dark and twisted sense of humor. It was only about five minutes after she walked into the dorm room on the first day of freshmen orientation two months earlier that Ava knew she'd met her best friend. Before the heat of summer melted into the cool of fall, she'd been proven right. Everyone loved Lucy. It was impossible not to.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” Ava said finally, yawning as the dream finally faded. “Sorry to wake you.”

Lucy shrugged, glancing at her clock. “It's okay. The alarm was about to go off anyway.” She stretched, slipping out of bed and into her purple fuzzy slippers. “You want to talk about it?”

Ava shrugged. "The usual. Creepy man chasing me in the dark and choking me to death."

Lucy grimaced. "Why can't you dream about Duncan Johan like a normal person?"

Ava smiled. Lucy had discovered the BBC series Robin Hood over the summer and was obsessed about the actor who played the title role.

"He's too skinny," Ava said, purposely taunting her.

Lucy gaped in shock and threw a pillow at her. "How dare you! You know he's perfection personified and will one day be the father to my rather gorgeous children."

Ava giggled, getting out of bed and gathering her things for a shower. "Skinny children," she said, earning another pillow. "At least that's one thing about my dream attacker," she said wryly. "The guy is seriously built."

"Well, that's something you look for in a crazed killer, I suppose," Lucy deadpanned.

"At least he's nice to look at."

"While he's strangling the life out of you."

"Well, yes . . . there's that." Ava smirked, throwing a towel over her shoulder.

Lucy's laughter followed her down the hall to the bathroom. It was almost enough to chase the chill from her skin.



After a long, hot shower, Ava's nightmare began to fade, and she started to feel a little ridiculous for overreacting to a simple dream, as frightening as it might have been. She dried her hair, applying a little makeup and popping her contacts in with a practiced hand.

Ava swept aside her dishwater bangs and frowned at her reflection, tired eyes staring back at her—brown, boring . . . normal.

She shrugged. Normal was good. Tired, not so much. She really needed to get more sleep.

Dreamless, preferably.

With a defeated sigh and one last brush of lip gloss, she gathered her things and left to start her day.

Ava stopped by the campus coffee shop on her way to physics class and once again wished she could wave a hand to cut a path through the line. She smirked at the thought, one she hadn't had since she was a child, at least not that often.

There was a time, long ago, when Ava thought she was special. No, not in the of course you're special, you're my child way that every parent wished their child would believe, but in a unique, different way she couldn't quite put her finger on.

It started when she was five, and she'd seen a Disney movie about a little girl who could talk to animals with her mind and move things with just a thought. She'd watched in awe as the girl's dolls danced around her bedroom, turning cartwheels and spinning in circles.

Ava was convinced she could do it, too.

For hours, she'd sit staring at her Baby Cries-a-Lot (which she'd inexplicably named Eleanor), willing her to get up and crawl or dance or say "I love you" in a singsong voice like her little friend Emma's baby doll. She never got discouraged, convinced that with the right amount of concentration she could make it happen.

Eleanor never danced. The dog next door never stopped barking. The little boy who used to throw rocks at her on the way to school never got the chicken pox.

But she kept trying.

Then, when she was eight years old, something happened.

Ava had been tasked with the job of caring for the classroom hamster, Herman, over the Thanksgiving weekend. Swollen with pride at the honor,

she'd carefully carried him home on the school bus, balancing his cage on her lap, his food and toys tucked away in her lunch box. She begged her mother to allow her to keep Herman in her room instead of on the washing machine and gleefully placed him on her little desk after her mom succumbed to her pleading.

She sat for hours watching him run on his little wheel, making sure his water bottle was always full, and cleaning up the wood shavings religiously.

After wolfing down her Thanksgiving dinner, she'd raced up to her room to feed Herman his ration of kibble and nuts.

And it was gone.

Frantic, she'd searched high and low for the little bag of food, digging through drawers, crawling under the bed, even removing every book from her bookshelf and shaking it out in desperation. She'd thrown herself on her bed, sobbing, sure that Herman was going to starve and it would be all her fault.

Looking back, Ava often wondered why she didn't go to her mother with the problem. Her mom had always come through before—baking last-minute cupcakes for the bake sale, running around town to find all the parts for a science project, even getting her contact lenses so she didn't feel so self-conscious around the other kids. It was obvious, through the eyes of an adult, that it wasn't a dire emergency. All it would take was a trip to the corner store for some sunflower seeds, or she could probably find something sufficient among the Thanksgiving leftovers.

But to eight-year-old Ava, it was a catastrophe of monstrous proportions. So, as she huddled on top of her pink and purple comforter, she'd watched Herman run on his little wheel, murmuring over and over, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

The hamster had hopped off the wheel, scurrying over to the side of the cage to sit up on his hind legs, beady eyes blinking. Ava had sniffed, staring at the little animal, and felt a strange warmth creeping over her body. After watching him for a long moment, she'd closed her eyes, unsure of what she was doing, but under an odd compulsion to do it.

In her mind, she'd seen the little bag of seeds, floating in a field of blackness. She watched it for a moment, almost smelling the salty tang through the plastic. Without thinking, she'd reached out for it, wrapping her fingers around the bag. Her eyes had flown open, and suddenly, she knew. She'd gotten up from the bed, hurried to the window over her desk, and drawn back the curtain with trembling fingers.

The bag of food sat on the windowsill, as if it had been there the whole time. Even though Ava knew she had checked that very same spot not a half an hour before.

When Ava had breathlessly told her mother about it, when she'd insisted she could make things happen, her mom had just smiled indulgently, patted her head and sent her out to play.

Ava hadn't lost faith, though.

At least, not for a long, long time.

For years, she'd continued to try to replicate what had happened with the hamster, staring at a fork or a spoon or a book to try and make it slide across the table, picturing an A on her latest book report, or willing John McCaffrey to ask her to the sophomore dance.

It had never happened again, though. And eventually, her memory of the Herman the Hamster miracle started to fade, growing fuzzy around the edges until she began to wonder if she'd imagined the whole thing, after all.

"Miss?" The barista interrupted Ava's thoughts, an expectant look on her face. "What can I get for you?"

Ava smiled and ordered.

There was nothing wrong with being normal, she decided, even if it wasn't nearly as much fun.

She sipped her coffee as she wandered through the bustling campus of Allenmore College. Mid-October in northern Missouri was cooler than she was used to, having grown up in the rather temperate climate of the Pacific Northwest, and she reveled in the stray beams of sunlight peeking through the

trees and warming her skin as she passed under them. Ava loved college, for the most part. She had found a place there that had eluded her back home.

She'd always felt a bit awkward—which probably contributed to her desire to be some kind of wizardly telekinetic—left out of the popular group, too smart to hang out with the outcasts, too shy to fit in with the brains. As a result, Ava spent the bulk of her teenage years alone, with the exception of her best friend, Arthur, who lived across the street and was as much of a loner as she was. They bonded over a combined love of the classics—both in literature and on television. (Although they differed a bit on what constituted a classic, at least where TV was concerned—Arthur insisting *Star Trek* in all its incarnations fit that role, Ava leaning more toward sitcoms of the 1960s.) Ava knew they'd made an odd-looking pair—tall, thin Arthur with his dyed-black hair and multiple piercings, and Ava with her sweet, innocent, girl-next-door looks—but somehow, they seemed to fit.

Arthur was the only one who, thanks to a late night confession fueled by cheap wine when her parents were out of town, knew of Ava's experience with the hamster. To her surprise, Arthur didn't mock her. Instead, he quoted some statistics about the percentage of the brain human beings used as well as numerous theories regarding what we would be capable of if we could only access the unused portions.

Of course, Arthur was also convinced he saw a UFO while camping with his parents at Yosemite, so Ava took it all with a grain of salt.

Ava smiled at the thought, missing Arthur desperately. He was a genius and, as geniuses often were, was accepted to M.I.T., leaving Ava to fend for herself at her little liberal arts college in the sleepy town of Witteville. They spoke regularly, exchanged texts and e-mails, but she felt a little sad when she thought about him. The distance between them wasn't only physical. Ava knew that sometimes absence didn't make the heart grow fonder. Sometimes absence was just absence, a hole eventually filled by something, or someone, else. She knew in her heart that they were growing up, growing apart. It was a bittersweet realization, and she found all she could do was hope that Arthur had found his place, as well.

Ava gulped down the last of her latte, chucking the cup in the trash as she entered the science building and dodged between bodies on her way upstairs.

Whipping off her hat, she swept her static-crackly hair up into a ponytail, securing it with the elastic she always kept around her wrist.

“How do you think you did on the test?” her lab partner, David, asked in a low voice as Ava slipped into a desk at the back. Unlike Ava, David actually understood physics, and it was only because of him that she was passing the class. Unfortunately, your lab partner couldn't take your tests for you.

Ava shrugged with a frown, and David winced. “That good, huh?”

“I guess we'll see,” she replied as the professor called the class to order.



Ava tried her best to concentrate during the rest of class, scribbling notes amidst constant worry about how she did on her exam. Once the professor finally handed them back, Ava kept hers facedown on her desk for a long moment, dreading the inevitable.

“Oh, come on,” David said, reaching for the test and pulling on the stapled corner. “It can't be that bad.”

Ava slapped her palm down over the exam, but David just raised an eyebrow, quirking his lips in amusement, until she huffed in irritation and finally let him pick it up. He glanced at it briefly, and Ava couldn't miss the slight wince.

“What?” she asked, afraid of the answer.

David gave her a wary look and handed it over.

Ava stared down at her physics exam in depressed resignation. At the top, above various red slashes, circles, and angry scrawls along the edge glared a bright red sixty-eight. Sixty-eight percent. Which couldn't even be stretched to the lower regions of a C no matter how hard you squinted. It was definitely a D. And absolutely not what she needed when she was already in danger of failing physics.

Ava sighed, folding the paper in half and stuffing it in her backpack. David patted her shoulder pityingly.

“Want to go get some ice cream?” he asked.

“Ice cream? Really?” she said sarcastically, but she couldn't help smiling. Maybe ice cream wasn't such a bad idea.

“Miss Michaels?” her professor called as the rest of the class rose to leave.

“May I speak to you for a moment, please?” He shuffled through some papers while she made her way to the front of the room, casting David an apologetic look over her shoulder. He just mouthed “rain check” as he walked out the door.

Professor Andrews looked up at her over his glasses, his bald head reflecting the lights from the fluorescents.

“I assume you're aware that you're not doing so well in my class.”

Ava snorted, despite herself. “Yes, I'm glaringly aware of that.”

His lips twitched slightly. “I understand that in order to keep your scholarship, you must maintain a three-point grade point average. According to the Dean of Students, if you can't manage to pull at least a C in this class, you will not be able to do that.”

Ava dropped her backpack on the floor, leaning forward on his desk. “I'm trying. Really. I study all the time. I just can't seem to get it.”

Professor Andrews nodded. “It's not an easy subject.” He leaned back in his chair. “Is it required for your major?”

“No, I just need a science credit for my basics.”

“Have you considered transferring into Biology . . . maybe Anatomy?”

“I've asked. There's nothing open right now. I'd drop it, but that would put me under fifteen credits, and I'd lose my scholarship anyway.” She smiled nervously. “It looks like you're stuck with me.”

The professor frowned, tapping a pen against his lips, then sat up and fumbled in his messenger bag to pull out a leather-bound address book. Ava wondered that anyone still used an address book anymore.

“In that case, I think your best bet is a tutor,” he said, flipping through the pages.

“A tutor?” She shifted nervously. “I . . . don’t know if I can afford a tutor.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think you can afford not to have one. But in this case, money won’t be an issue.”

He scanned the book, his finger selecting an entry as he scribbled on a post-it note. “This is one my graduate students. He’s required to tutor at least a few students as part of his duties, so it will be of no cost to you.” He handed her the yellow slip of paper. “All I ask is your commitment to work hard and not waste his time.”

Ava glanced at the paper. Caleb Foster, it said, followed by a phone number and e-mail address.

“Thank you, Professor Andrews, really. I promise I won’t let you down.”

She folded the paper and tucked it in her pocket.

He nodded. “I’ll let him know to expect your call. If you do well on the midterm, you should be able to pull a high C, maybe even get a low B.”

“That would be amazing.”

“Caleb is good,” he said, piling his files into his messenger bag. “He has a way of explaining complex concepts in an easy-to-understand way. I think you’ll like him.”

How bad could it be? Ava smiled. “I’m sure I will,” she said.

Chapter 2

Ava wasted no time e-mailing Caleb to ask for help. She knew this was an opportunity that was too good to pass up—and one she really couldn't afford to let slip away. Without her scholarship, college would no longer be an option. Her parents struggled to make ends meet as it was, sending whatever they could to help her out, and her job at the diner barely filled in the cracks. She could take on a second job, perhaps, but that would mean cutting back on credits, taking a class here and there as she found the time. It would kill her dad, who she knew would take on extra work himself to keep her in school full-time—and with his declining health, that would not be a good idea.

It was also a matter of pride, she had to admit. College was something she wanted—no needed—to do on her own. She would be the first member of her family to get a degree, and she felt the pressure of that goal, that dream—not only her own, but that of her parents. She wanted to give this to them, to make them proud.

Fortunately, Ava was doing well in her other classes. English was a given. She'd always loved to read and write, and expressing her views in an essay or class presentation was like second nature to her. World history was also a passion, her quick mind and nearly photographic memory making it simple to recall important dates and events. But the complex equations and mind-blowing theories of Physics 101 left her spinning. Just when she thought she'd almost grasped a concept, it would drift away, dangling out of her reach and taunting her.

God, she hated it. All she could hope for was that her new tutor would be able to pound enough knowledge into her non-scientific brain to enable her to pass the class with a decent grade. After that, she'd head off into the land of liberal arts, poetry, and eighteenth century English literature, and never look back.

Caleb replied quickly, saying Professor Andrews had filled him in on her situation and he was prepared to begin right away. They arranged to meet in the library that evening, and Ava felt a spring in her step at the hope that she might actually be able to salvage her grade.

The rest of the day passed quickly in a blur of classes and her afternoon shift at the diner. She nabbed a sandwich from the kitchen and wolfed it down as she hurried to the library, making her way to the third floor to meet Caleb.

A dark-haired man sat at a table in the center of the room, leaning back in his chair with his legs extended, crossed at the ankles. Since he was the only one in the study area, Ava assumed he was the guy she was looking for. His eyes were closed behind a pair of black-framed glasses, his head tilted back and hands tucked in the pockets of his hoodie. A pair of bright green wires snaked out of the hood, and Ava realized he was listening to music. And possibly asleep. His mouth drifted open on a slight snore.

Okay, definitely asleep.

Unable to resist the opportunity to indulge her curiosity, Ava stepped quietly across the carpet so as not to disturb him. Professor Andrews had said he was a genius—and not a figure of speech kind of genius, but one with an actual I.Q. so high he'd give Einstein a run for his money.

Like Arthur. She felt a glimmer of hope that maybe she might find a kindred spirit in Caleb Foster.

She took a moment to study him, creating a mental checklist cataloging what she saw. Tall. Skinny. Needs a haircut. Too lazy to shave. Kind of cute in a bookish, nerdy way. Still, he didn't look extraordinarily intelligent—not that she knew what that should look like, anyway.

“You're late,” he said, not opening his eyes.

Ava jumped in surprise, her cheeks coloring hotly. She looked at her watch. “Just one minute,” she said, forcing a bit of sass into her voice to cover the embarrassment at being caught sizing him up. “Besides, isn't time an illusion, anyway? An . . .” She searched her memory for the word. “. . . Urgent concept.”

He cracked an eye open, lips lifting in a smirk. “I thought you didn't like physics.”

“It's not that I don't like it. I just don't get it,” she replied, exasperated. He sat up, his gaze narrowing on her for a moment before he held out a

hand. "Caleb Foster," he said.

She took the offered hand tentatively, his grip firm, skin smooth and warm. "Ava Michaels."

"Well, Ava, have a seat," he said, pulling a book out of his bag as he shoved his glasses up absently. "Let's get to work. By the way, it's emergent."

"What?" she said, sitting down and ruffling through her backpack for her notes. "What's emergent?"

"Time," he said with a grin. "It's an emergent concept. It has to do with the theory that the passage of time is essentially an illusion—that the past and future don't really exist and that the present is a fleeting moment, confined to an infinitesimal narrow point on the time line."

"Oh," Ava said dumbly. Then, after a moment, she smiled. "If that's true, then I wasn't really late at all . . . since it's all an illusion anyway."

Caleb laughed, blue eyes crinkling behind his glasses. "You know what? I think you're going to do just fine," he said.



"So, is he hot?" Lucy asked bluntly, shoveling a mound of spaghetti into her mouth. The girl had the body of a supermodel, but ate like a linebacker. "Tell me everything," she mumbled through her food.

"God, Luce, take a breath," Ava said, shaking her head as Lucy munched on her garlic bread. "Where do you put it all, anyway?"

She shrugged. "I have a fast metabolism. And I like food. Sue me." She twirled some more pasta on her fork. "You're avoiding the question.

What's up with the sexy new tutor?" she asked, wiggling her eyebrows.

Ava rolled her eyes. "First of all, his name is Caleb . . . and he's not sexy," she said firmly, taking a small bite of her own dinner. "He's . . . cute, I guess, in that skinny, nerdy, brainiac kind of way."

“Cute, huh? Well, you can work with that,” she said with a shrug.

“For heaven’s sake, Luce, it’s not about that. He’s helping me get a decent grade in physics so I can keep my scholarship. That’s all.”

“Mmm-hmmm.”

“Seriously!”

“Okay,” she said, wiping her mouth and holding her hands up defensively. “It’s tutoring. I get it. I just don’t see why you can’t have a little fun along the way. You work too much.”

“College isn’t all parties and cute boys, Luce.”

She gasped, pressing a hand to her chest. “Sacrilege!”

Thankfully, Lucy let the subject drop as she started on her apple pie . . . and her chocolate cake. Ava nibbled at a chocolate chip cookie and conversation dwindled into the more comfortable realm of classes and mutual friends. The sun had dipped below the horizon while they’d been in the dining hall, and they shivered in their coats when they walked out into the evening chill.

“Feels like snow,” Lucy observed, fisting her hands inside her gloves and leaving the fingers flopping empty. “Tell me again why I didn’t go to the University of Hawaii?”

Ava laughed. “Maybe we can transfer.”

They hurried along the icy sidewalk, huddling close to share body heat.

“Oh!” Lucy said suddenly. “Did I tell you about the hot exchange student in my anthro class?”

“The French one? Pierre?”

“Philippe,” she corrected. “I nabbed him to work on our midterm project. Très splendide.” She kissed her fingers dramatically. Lucy chattered on about Philippe’s accent, his tousled blonde hair, and his dimples. “Droolworthy, Av—I swear, they make my mouth water.”

Ava smiled and let her talk, her eyes wandering, and then her mind. Every time she found herself out on campus after dark, she couldn't help but think about her strange and frightening recurring dream. She was on edge, alert to every odd noise or quick movement, and she wondered if she might be the slightest bit paranoid.

Okay, she really didn't wonder. She knew.

Lucy was describing the round fullness of Philippe's backside when the hairs stood up on the back of Ava's neck. She stiffened, suddenly certain that someone was watching her.

“. . . and he calls me Mademoiselle Looseey,” Lucy gushed. “I ask him to translate random phrases just to hear him speak French . . .”

Ava forced a chuckle, glancing back over her shoulder nervously. Other than a few students rushing here and there, trying to beat the cold on their way wherever they were going, she saw nothing out of the ordinary.

“. . . who knew ‘Where is the library?’ could be so freaking hot?”

A flash of movement drew Ava's gaze to a squat, brick building to her left—the administration building, abandoned as it was after business hours. She drew in a breath, searching—seeking—something.

There.

There, in the shadows, leaning against the wall, stood a woman. Dressed in black from head to toe, her trench coat fluttered around her knees in the slight breeze, mimicking the movement of her long, razor-straight hair. Ava couldn't make out her face in the dim light, but it was definitely turned in her direction, and she was convinced if she could see the woman's eyes, they would be focused intently on her.

“Ava?” Lucy shook her arm slightly, drawing her attention. “What is it?”

“Um . . .” Ava turned back to the administration building, but the woman was gone. She searched the shadows, her gaze flickering along the brick walls, the high bushes separating it from the pathway beyond.

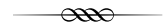
Nothing. She'd vanished.

"I . . . I thought I saw something," she said to Lucy, turning back and forcing a reassuring smile. "I guess I was wrong."

She took too many risks.

It was probably all part of her overly active imagination, a reaction to the strange dreams she'd been having. Why would a mysterious woman in black be watching her anyway?

"So," Ava said, linking her arm with Lucy's, "does Philippe have a brother?"



Caleb frowned as he watched the girl walk through the darkness, arm-in- arm with her blonde friend.

Ava Michaels. The girl was a complication that just kept getting more . . . complicated.

He felt the eyes on him from every side—the Council waiting to see if he could deal with the situation. Other Protectors ready to take it out of his hands. The Guardians itching to jump in at a moment's notice. But Caleb still didn't believe all of that was necessary. He could handle it on his own, he was certain. He'd already managed to infiltrate her life, keeping an eye on her and planting the idea with Professor Andrews to recommend him as a tutor.

Caleb smiled a little. The girl was smarter than he thought. Although she had difficulty with the subject, it wasn't due to a lack of intelligence on her part. He'd seen it before; a mental block when it came to a certain aspect of math or science, usually in an individual with a more creative personality. But once that block was chipped away, it almost always came tumbling down—and like a key in a lock, the understanding clicked into place and it suddenly all made sense. He felt confident that he could help Ava unlock the mysteries of physics.

Of course, that was not his primary goal.

Caleb stepped out of the shadows, keeping pace with the girls as they huddled together. He wished she'd stop venturing out after dark—for his own sanity, if nothing else. He didn't believe the Protectors or the Council would act without telling him first, but, in his opinion, she was asking for trouble.

There were Rogues out there, after all, and they ignored the Council as well as Race Law.

A shiver of awareness ran down Caleb's spine, alerting him to the presence of another nearby. He saw Ava react as well, looking hard into the shadows of the administration building.

It wasn't good, her reaction. It lent credence to the Council's suspicions. Caleb's eyes narrowed at the dark figure in the shadows. He spoke, so

low most people wouldn't be able to hear him, but he knew she would.

"Katherine," he said.

He heard her irritated huff a moment before she appeared at his side, the two of them melting into the shadow of the trees.

"Caleb. Fancy meeting you here."

"What are you doing, Katherine?" he asked gruffly, ignoring her playful tone.

She shrugged. "Just out enjoying the evening air. It's so refreshing, you know."

"Did the Council send you?"

Katherine ignored the question, as he knew she would. Instead, she lifted a hand and ran a long, red fingernail slowly down his chest.

"Why so cranky, Caleb?" she asked with a pout, looking up at him from under her lashes. "You used to be a lot more fun."

He grabbed her wrist, pushing it gently but firmly down to her side. "Ancient history."

She shrugged, twisting out of his grip. “Your assignment seemed a little nervous tonight. Almost like she knew I was there. In fact, I could swear she looked right at me. Strange, isn’t it?”

Caleb’s jaw clenched. “It doesn’t mean anything. Perhaps you were being sloppy. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Katherine narrowed her eyes, all teasing abandoned. “You better watch yourself, Caleb. The Council won’t put up with your antics for long.”

“I can handle this.”

“You better, because your little girl is raising a lot of questions, and it’s only a matter of time—”

“I said, I can handle it.” Caleb ground his teeth in irritation, his angry gaze locked on Katherine’s.

She raised a perfect eyebrow, her lips puckering slightly. Caleb felt almost nauseous when he remembered how he once craved those lips. They split into a wicked smile, and he knew she’d followed his train of thought.

“See that you do,” Katherine said with a wink, before she turned and disappeared into the night.



Two weeks later, Ava sat across from Caleb at what had become their table on the third floor of the library, pointedly avoiding his gaze. They’d been meeting three times a week and had been making a little progress, although Ava felt it should have been a lot more. Caleb, for his part, remained patient but determined—a determination that Ava sometimes found grating, mostly because she felt as if she were failing him.

“Okay.” He sat up straighter, peering over the top of his glasses. “Wave-particle duality.”

Ava groaned, laying her head down on her crossed arms.

"I hate this," she muttered, turning away to focus on the pathetic orange and black streamers draped across the library reference desk. Halloween was still a couple of days away, but obviously, the librarians were a little eager for the holiday. The jack-o-lantern sitting next to the copy machine had been in position for more than a week and was looking a little worse for wear, the electric candle flickering lamely behind its withered mouth.

"Come on," Caleb said firmly, poking at her head with the eraser on his pencil. "You have to at least try."

"I am trying," she mumbled into the cool wood, turning her head to peer at him through the tangled strands of her hair. "You don't understand what it's like, what with you being a genius and all."

Caleb just rolled his eyes. "Wave. Particle. Duality."
She sighed, sitting up and pushing her hair back from her face with an undetermined look. "Okay, what about it?"

"Give me the properties of light."

"Ummm . . ." Ava tapped her fingers on her lips, thinking. "Reflection and refraction . . . diffraction and interference . . . energy transport . . ."

"Yes," Caleb said encouragingly. "One more . . ."

"Damn," she murmured. "It's on the tip of my tongue. Something to do with weather."

"Weather?" Caleb looked at her blankly.

"Yeah." Ava began to doodle little clouds and lightning bolts on her notepad. "The weatherman on the news when I was a kid used to talk about some kind of radar. Oh!" She snapped her fingers. "Doppler! The Doppler Effect!"

"Excellent," Caleb said with a grin. "And what exactly is the Doppler Effect?"

"A change in the observed frequency of a wave as a result of relative motion between the observer and the source," she recited.

“Which means?”

Ava frowned. “You’re relentless.” “I’m trying to help you.”

She sighed again. “I know.” Ava swirled her pen in absent circles on her notepad, adding a tornado descending from the clouds. “It’s like when you hear an ambulance go by and the pitch of the siren changes as it gets closer, then changes again as it drives away.”

“Good. And what does that have to do with wave-particle duality?”

Ava’s brow creased as she thought back over what she’d read. “Those four properties point to light being a wave, but Einstein suggested that light existed in a particle-like state as photons. The photoelectric effect demonstrates a dualism to the nature of light, a concept in modern physics that light has both a wave and particle state . . . although not at the same time.” She took a deep breath, daring to glance at Caleb. Who was staring at her as if she’d grown a third head. “Or . . . something like that,” she grumbled after a while.

“That’s . . .” Caleb shook his head in wonder. “That’s absolutely right.”

“It is?”

“Well, don’t sound so surprised.” Caleb laughed. “You have an excellent tutor. Something was bound to rub off.”

Ava snorted and crumpled up a scrap of paper to throw at his head.

Caleb dodged it easily. “Now read the rest of chapter three and we’ll discuss the practice questions.” He rubbed his eyes behind his glasses, and pulled his phone from his pocket, tapping away to check his messages. After a moment, he slipped in his ear buds and leaned back, breathing deeply.

“Don’t you have any homework?” Ava asked grumpily, turning a page. Caleb smirked, his eyes closed. “Nope. Part of being a genius and all.” “You so suck.”

Caleb chuckled and they lapsed into a comfortable silence, the only sounds the occasional turning of a page and the slightly tinny tinkle of the music through Caleb’s ear buds.

“So,” he said after a while, still lounging back but tugging one of the ear buds out and tucking it into his collar, muffling the sound. “Big plans for Halloween?”

Ava glanced up absently. “Oh. No. I’ll probably be studying. Not as much fun since it’s on a Sunday night.”

Caleb laughed. “Don’t think that’ll stop many people around here from celebrating.”

“No, probably not.” She turned back to her book. “Did you grow up around here?”

Ava glanced up absently. “No. Oregon.”

“Ah,” he said. “Family still there?” “Mmm-hmmm . . .”

“Brothers and sisters?”

“Nope. Only me.” Ava looked up at him, curious. “Why do you ask?”

He shrugged. “Just wondering.”

Ava went back to her text, contemplating red and blue shifts in the light spectrum. She could feel Caleb watching her, though, and after a few minutes she huffed in irritation.

“What?” she asked. “How am I supposed to concentrate on this stuff with you staring at me?”

“I’m not staring.”

“Did you need something, Caleb?”

He sighed, fishing his ear bud out of his shirt and tucking it back into his ear. “No. Nothing.”

Ava shook her head, mystified and more than a little annoyed. She liked Caleb. He was nice, funny, and definitely a good tutor, but sometimes he was just plain . . . strange.



Caleb forced his expression to a complacent mask as the boom boom boom rhythm from his iPod pounded through his body. He'd thought getting information from Ava would be simple, that he could ask a few questions, and she'd open up to him like a long lost friend, spilling all her secrets.

What an idiot.

Katherine's warning echoed in his mind, mingling with the vibrating bass of the music, and he hazarded a glance Ava's direction from under his lowered eyelids. Her brow creased as she focused on the physics text, a finger following along as she read, and jotted down notes with her other hand.

He sighed. He was running out of time and unsure how to proceed. He knew if he couldn't get the answers the Council sought, within an increasingly dwindling amount of time, Ava's fate would be out of his hands, no longer his concern. The thought bothered him more than he cared to admit.

He reached out to her mentally, probing and poking along the edges of her psyche and seeking for some clue how to proceed, how to lead her down the trail of thought that would give him something—anything—he could use for her defense.

Nothing.

He needed to get her talking about her background, her childhood. Something personal that he could latch on to, to prove she was . . .

Well, what she believed she was, and not what the Council feared she might be.

But Caleb was quickly learning that it wasn't quite as easy as he'd thought it would be. Ava was irritatingly tight-lipped about herself, and he had a feeling she only opened up to those very close to her. Probably not completely, even to them.

The friend, he thought. The roommate. She could be the key. If he couldn't get what he needed from Ava, perhaps Lucy Matthews might be more forthcoming. He'd observed the two of them together enough to see they were close, and Lucy was definitely the more talkative of the two.

An idea began to form. In his time watching Ava, he'd heard Lucy encourage her numerous times to have more fun, often followed by a suggestion to hit that—usually accompanied by a leering wiggle of her eyebrows in the direction of a man nearby. Perhaps a few subtle hints sent Lucy's way might get her matchmaking juices flowing, and a few drinks might loosen her tongue enough for Caleb to gain the information he needed.

If not, he wasn't sure what he would do.

“Done!” Ava said brightly, looking up from her textbook. “Want to talk Kirchhoff's Laws?”

Caleb sat up, tugging out his ear buds and leaning forward on the table. “Sounds like a plan,” he said.