

Also by T.M. Franklin



MORE - Ava Michaels used to think she was special. As a child, she fantasized about having magical powers . . . making things happen. She felt different from others her age, and just knew she was meant for something important. But, like most kids, Ava grew up and eventually accepted the fact that her childish dreams were just that, and maybe a normal life wasn't so bad after all.

Now a young college student, Ava begins to wonder if there were more to her childhood fantasies than she thought. She's haunted by terrifying nightmares of a frightening man chasing her, determined to catch her, to take her—a huge hulk of a man with one blue eye and one green. Even during daylight hours, there are moments her hair stands on end with an uneasy prickle of awareness . . . and she just can't shake the feeling that she's being watched.

Unable to decide if she's imagining things or just plain crazy, Ava finds an unlikely ally in Caleb Foster, a brilliant and mysterious man who comes to her rescue as a Physics tutor, but in reality has another mission in mind. What he shows Ava challenges her view of the world, shaking it to its very core.

The thing is, Caleb's not quite what he seems. In fact, he's not entirely human, and he's not the only one.

Together, the duo faces a threat from an ancient race bound to protect humans, but only after protecting their own secrets—secrets they fear Ava may expose. Now they're after her, bent on her capture or maybe even her extinction.

Fighting to survive, Ava has to depend on Caleb to lead her through the strange new world opening up before her. A world of magic and mystery, where she learns she's not actually normal . . . she's not even just special.

She's a little bit more.

The Guardians

Book 2 in the MORE Trilogy

By
T.M. Franklin



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Glossary of Terms

First Race/The Race – Ancient people who've lived alongside humans throughout history. They are more advanced technologically than humans, have superior physical and mental abilities, and devote themselves to helping humanity grow and evolve. They are considerably fewer in number than humans, so maintain secrecy above all else in order to protect themselves.

Guardian – Race member who has broken away from the Council. Guardians disagree with the Council's stand on Half-Breeds and devote themselves to helping Half-Breeds escape the Council, learn to control their abilities, and live peacefully either in a Colony or back in the human world.

Guardian Colony/Colony – Group of Guardians living together in hiding from the Council. A Colony is a safe haven for Half-Breeds.

Half-Breed – A person of mixed human and Race heritage. The Council sees them as a threat to Race secrecy because they are often unable to control their Race abilities.

Heterochromia/HC – A difference in color in two structures that are usually alike in color. In the *MORE* trilogy, HC refers to the Race trait of having two different colored eyes.

The Law/Race Law – The highest governing force of the Race. The primary tenet of the Law is to aid in the development of humanity, but to never endanger the Race or compromise its secrecy.

Mimic – person capable of imitating a Race imprint after only brief contact with the subject.

New Elysia – Race city in the Rocky Mountains, approximately fifty miles from Kalispell, Montana. Seat of the Race's Ruling Council.

Protector of the Race/Protector – Race member entrusted with enforcing the Law, primarily through hunting down Rogues and Half-Breeds under orders from the Council.

Pyrokinesis – The ability to set objects or people on fire or to supernaturally project fire from one's own being through the concentration of psychic power.

Race Imprint – A kind of electric shadow left behind by a Race member. Also known as a Race Signature.

Rejuvenation cube/R-cube – A small, grey, gelatinous cube that helps restore Race power when it's been depleted by use. An R-cube is a supplement made up of, among other things, vitamins, protein, and electrolytes. It tastes like plastic.

Rogue – Race member who rebelled against the Council and lives for pleasure. Rogues don't care about keeping the Race a secret, and in fact often flaunt their abilities and use them to gain power. The Council sees them as the greatest threat to the Race.

Shifter – Race member with the ability to teleport.

The Ruling Council/The Council – The five-member ruling body of the First Race. The Council is charged with maintaining Race Law, protecting the Race, and resolving conflicts within the community.

Telekinesis – The ability to move objects with psychic power.

Tracker – Race member with an enhanced ability to follow even a minimal trail.

Veil – Camouflage that hides a Race member's true appearance, making them appear ordinary so they can fit in among humans.

Chapter 1

A loud crack overhead was the only warning. Ava's head snapped up, and she caught a glimpse of black and blue before a thick branch fell toward her. She threw out a hand—more reflex than out of any real need—and the branch shifted its trajectory, landing several feet away on the spongy forest floor.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” she said quietly, well aware he could hear her.

She continued down the path, every sense on alert. The call of a crow in the distance obscured the faint crunch and splinter of debris underfoot.

Is that—

A rustle of movement to her left had her ducking behind a tree trunk, peeking around the edge into the thick forest. She caught the faint whooshing sound behind her and spun just in time to stop the large rock hurtling toward her. She smiled, bouncing the rock up and down a bit in the air, testing the limits of her telekinetic ability.

Show off, she heard whispered through the trees.

With a smirk, she sent the rock shooting back through the forest in the direction of the voice, laughing at the surprised yelp in response.

“Come on!” she shouted. “You going to hide in the trees all day or fight like a man?”

Ava stood with her feet braced apart and head thrown back, listening intently. For a long moment, only the quiet sounds of the forest met her ears. She closed her eyes, focusing on her enhanced hearing, listening deeper . . . farther.

There.

The faint in-and-out of breathing grew louder as she focused on it, and she opened her eyes, turning in the direction of the sound. Pushing her

eyesight beyond normal human levels, she spotted him hiding behind a tree—a peek of denim, a glimpse of pale blue cotton.

She ducked behind her own tree, heart pounding as she considered her next move. There was no way she could catch him. She wasn't fast enough. She could try to throw something, though.

She glanced around frantically for something—pinecones were useless, the scattered sticks too small. A boulder several feet away was too big—she wasn't sure she could even lift it, let alone force it between the trees. She'd need to try something else.

Ava took a deep breath and closed her eyes, focusing her mind as Caleb had taught her. She pictured the tree where she saw him hiding and tried to will her body to shift to that very spot.

Visualize your body . . . your very cells dissolving, dissipating into the air. See them coming together where you want them to be.

Easier said than done.

You'll feel yourself growing lighter, almost floating, and before you even realize what's happening, it's like you're there . . . but you're not.

Ava frowned. Caleb didn't always make much sense.

She forced herself to breathe slowly and evenly, blocking out the sounds around her and focusing on her own heartbeat. She pictured herself floating, coming apart in the air. A tingle worked its way across her skin, now easily recognizable as her Race power coming to life. Her pulse quickened. Maybe she could do this.

Strong arms imprisoned her—one across her neck, another at her waist—not tight enough to cut off the air supply, but she was definitely immobile.

Ava cursed under her breath.

“So what now?” a low voice growled in her ear. “You going to try and push me? Throw some rocks at my back?” His arm tightened slightly, making her gasp. “I've got you right where I want you.”

“You cheated.”

He laughed, loosening his hold to step back. “I did not!”

Ava turned and leaned back against the tree, glaring at the sight of his bright blue eyes sparkling with mirth. She crossed her arms over her chest. “You did, too.”

Caleb grinned and reached out to tweak her earlobe. “And how exactly did I cheat?”

“Well, I'm sure there's a rule against . . .” Ava scrambled for an answer, then smiled smugly. “Distracting me. It's very dangerous to distract me when I'm trying to shift. I could end up inside a tree or something.”

He laughed. “That wasn't going to happen.”

“You don't know that.”

“Yes, I do.” He stepped toward her, toying with the strings on her hoodie. “You weren't going to shift, Ava. I would have felt it.”

She deflated, knowing he was right. “Why can't I do it?”

“Not everyone can.”

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Ava exhaled heavily. “It would just be so cool, you know?”

He smiled and leaned in to kiss her lightly.

Ava felt the familiar tingle of his power meeting hers.

“You can do lots of other cool stuff,” he reminded her.

She could. Since her, for lack of a better word, *breakthrough* at the Rogue lair, Ava’s telekinesis had proven to be a powerful gift, and one she was getting better about controlling. The same could be said for her enhanced senses, another Race trait that was becoming second nature to her. She no longer had to concentrate quite so hard to access her superior vision and hearing. If anything, it had become more instinctual. She had tuned in to conversations across campus, for example, before she’d even realized what she was doing. She felt kind of bad about that, to be honest. Just because she was a superhuman being didn’t mean she had a right to be rude.

But shifting continued to elude her. Caleb made it look so easy, disappearing and reappearing without breaking a sweat. Long distances were more challenging, but Ava was still a little jealous of his innate gift. It would be so handy on those mornings she overslept and was late for class.

Caleb was quick to remind her that not everyone was the same, and although Race members all shared certain traits, things like shifting and telekinesis were hit and miss. She knew she should be happy with what she *could* do, especially since she seemed to be more powerful than many others already. The face-off with the Council had proven that.

It wasn’t that she wanted more, really. She simply wanted to be prepared—prepared if the Council came after her again or if the Rogues staged another attack. She knew, deep inside, that it wasn’t over, and Caleb agreed, even though he’d never said as much out loud. He’d been true to his promise to train with her, pushing her limits and working to develop her gifts. He could also become easily distracted, however—as he seemed to be at that moment.

Caleb propped a hand on the tree behind her, nuzzling along her neck and placing a soft kiss behind her ear.

“We’re supposed to be training,” Ava said, a little breathless and maybe a bit distracted, as well.

“Too much training isn’t good for you.”

She laughed. “Oh, and where did you hear that?”

He trailed kisses down her neck, sucking lightly at her collarbone where it peeked out from under her shirt. “Common knowledge,” he said into the hollow at her throat. “All work and no play . . . blah, blah, blah.” Caleb waved an idle hand as he scraped his teeth lightly against her skin.

Ava gasped. “You make a valid point,” she said, her voice trembling, revealing his effect on her.

He lifted his head with a victorious smirk. “I knew you’d see it my way.”

“Cocky.”

His response was muffled because Caleb chose that moment to kiss her properly.

It had been months since the first time Caleb kissed her, but Ava still had yet to get used to the electrifying sensation. It wasn't only the physical act, the press of lips to lips, which was *spectacular*—all hot and wet and demanding and . . . *hot*—but kissing Caleb also sparked a mingling of their power. She recognized it now, the electric tingle of Caleb's Race gift sizzling along her skin, penetrating into her very center, and slowly—*deliciously*—wrapping itself around her power, the two weaving together in a sensual dance that left her dizzy once he pulled away. It was why she always fought it when he tried to stop.

She felt a little pathetic about it, as though she had absolutely no control over her own body. She didn't, at least when it came to Caleb. Still, it was more than lust—more than simple physical attraction. Ava was relatively sure she was in love with Caleb, although she had yet to say the words out loud. Maybe it made her a coward, but she was an old-fashioned girl and wanted him to say it first. Or maybe old-fashioned had nothing to do with it. Maybe she just didn't want to make a fool of herself.

It was possible.

She couldn't complain, though. They'd only grown closer since they had returned from the Race city of New Elysia three months earlier, even with Ava's newly tapped power still wild and erratic and both of them unsure what the Council's next move would be. He'd succeeded in his goal as her tutor to help her pass physics, and even though she no longer had need of him in that capacity, he was just as patient when it came to helping her with her Race skills. Even if most training sessions eventually devolved into make-out sessions.

Not that Ava fought it too much. Kissing Caleb was incredible. The way he touched her, and that thing he did with his—

A vibration in her pocket brought Ava out of her thoughts.

Caleb pulled back slightly but kept his body pressed up against hers as she took her phone out of her pocket.

"My mother." Her head fell back against the tree as she groaned, thumb hovering over the *Ignore* button.

Caleb laughed. "You know if you don't answer, she'll just call back."

Ava shrugged, punching the button and stuffing the phone back in her pocket. "Maybe not. Maybe she'll leave a message." She wrapped her arms around Caleb's neck, tugging him closer and twisting her fingers in the dark hair at his nape.

He smiled against her lips, his warm breath sending a shiver down her spine.

The phone rang again and Ava grumbled, tugging Caleb forward stubbornly when he tried to pull away.

"You might as well answer it," Caleb said, untangling himself to reach into his inside coat pocket and pull out his glasses.

He didn't need them, but they helped him fit in at school and made him less noticeable. Also, Ava liked them, to be perfectly honest. They were

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cute.

He took her free hand in his. “We should be heading back anyway. It’ll be dark soon.”

Ava frowned, but answered the phone and allowed Caleb to lead her down the path to the edge of the woods. “Hi, Mom.”

“Sweetie, I wanted to check and see what you’ve decided about spring break,” her mother said, a little distracted, as if she was doing something else at the same time. It wasn’t unusual. Sarah Michaels was nothing if not a multitasker. “You know we’d love to see you. And Caleb, of course.”

Her voice had softened on Caleb’s name, and Ava couldn’t help rolling her eyes.

Caleb smirked, obviously hearing it as well.

Her parents adored Caleb and had since they first met him over Christmas break. She hadn’t actually *intended* for them to meet, but Caleb had insisted on accompanying her home to Oregon for her own protection. With wide, innocent eyes, he’d promised he would keep his distance if she wasn’t ready for him to meet her parents yet. Of course, Ava couldn’t very well tell him the idea terrified her, so she’d shown up on her parents’ front porch with Caleb by her side. The smile on his face had been more than a little smug, if she hadn’t been mistaken.

In the end, it had been a blessing having him along. In addition to the obvious benefit of having him sleeping down the hall in the guest room and unlimited access to him during the day, he’d helped her investigate some of the questions that had come up after she’d learned of her Race blood. She’d always known she was adopted—abandoned nineteen years earlier at a local church when she was only a few days old—but being back home had given her the opportunity to try and find out more about what had happened.

One afternoon, they’d visited the priest who had found her. He’d long since retired and moved to Coos Bay, but with Caleb’s shifting ability, they’d made the distance in an afternoon, and with his power to push—a mild compulsion gift that helped him get what he wanted—they’d talked their way into the retirement home and sat with Father Gallagher for about an hour.

Unfortunately, he hadn’t been able to tell them much. He said that night he’d been at the hospital, counseling Ava’s parents, who’d just lost their own baby. He’d returned to the rectory, and a noise had drawn him to the front of the church, where he found Ava bundled in a blanket inside a cardboard box—no note, no identification of any kind.

The box, of course, was long gone, but the blanket had been stored in Ava’s attic along with other baby clothes. She’d dug it out, trying her best to reassure her mother that she was simply curious about her past, nothing more.

The adoption itself hadn’t been exactly official. No paperwork had been filed with the state. Not even the police had been notified about Ava’s

abandonment. The priest had simply tapped into his connections at the hospital, and the infant who had died became a Jane Doe, and Ava had become her parents' daughter.

Ava realized, as the truth had come out, that someone Race had had a hand in keeping the adoption under wraps, not to mention influencing her adoptive parents to leave behind their own lost biological child. Ava had never questioned how they could essentially replace one baby with another, like in some bad soap opera. Her mother had always called Ava a gift from God and left it at that. As she had spoken with the priest, however, Ava realized that someone had most likely helped her mom and dad with the transition, perhaps even blurred the memory of the loss so they could more easily accept their new daughter. The thought made Ava shudder.

In the end, Sarah had been supportive in the way that only a mother could be—after all, now that Ava was an adult, there was little chance the authorities would step in and take her away—and Ava had felt another wave of guilt about concealing her Race identity from her mother. It was something she constantly battled—wishing she could tell her parents everything, but needing to protect them from the truth for their own good.

Unfortunately, the investigation had proven fruitless anyway. The only tie Ava had been able to find to her past was that blanket—soft, white flannel with white stitching around the edge and a stylized H with curved sides embroidered in one corner. She and Caleb had tried to track down the image, thinking perhaps the H referred to a nearby hospital or even a women's shelter, but they could find no connection to anything within several hundred miles.

Another dead end.

She'd taken the blanket with her back to Allenmore College, though. It was the only connection to her other life, the life before she became Ava Michaels. She kept it tucked away in the bottom of a drawer, somehow comforted by its presence—proof that all the incredible things she'd been through over the past few months were real and not the figment of an overactive imagination.

“Ava, are you listening to me?”

She took a deep breath, shaking off the memories to focus on the phone call. “Yes, Mom.” Caleb squeezed her hand, and Ava smiled sheepishly in response. “I don't know about spring break. I'll have to see.” Caleb snickered, and she shot him a nasty look.

They had been planning a trip of their own, just the two of them, but she'd yet to work up the courage to tell her mother that. Caleb had teased her about it to no end, saying she was brave enough to face the Council and a room full of Protectors, but her mother made her want to run and hide. It wasn't really that she was *afraid* of her mother, though. It was just that Sarah Michaels had considered Ava and Caleb all but engaged since he'd come home with her at Christmas. Telling her they were going on vacation together would kick-start the wedding plans for sure.

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They neared the edge of the forest and Caleb released her hand, popping a couple of R-cubes in his mouth to prepare for the shift.

She wasn't sure exactly where they were—somewhere in western Wyoming, on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River valley. They generally had to shift a half dozen times or so to find an isolated spot to train, and Caleb preferred the protection that a forest provided. That meant either the woodlands and ravines of Wyoming or the Badlands of South Dakota, both equidistant from Allenmore College in northwestern Missouri. Shifting took a lot out of Caleb, especially long distances, but he seemed to be getting more comfortable with pushing himself to even fifty miles at a time. A couple of cubes before and after, fifteen minutes of rest, and he was ready to go again. Apparently, she wasn't the only one getting stronger with practice.

He turned to her, hands tucked in his pockets and brow raised in question.

“Look, Mom, I've got to go,” she said. “I've got a big test tomorrow, and I'm almost to the library, and they really don't like you to talk on the phone in there because it . . . you know, disrupts everyone—” She glared at Caleb's amused chuckle. She never had been any good at lying.

“All right, honey,” her mother replied. “Let me know about spring break, okay? We thought it might be fun to have Uncle Bobby and everyone over to meet Caleb.”

Ava fought back a groan. That was something she would never subject Caleb to. Uncle Bobby had a habit of pulling out his teeth so he could click *The William Tell Overture* on his gums. “Okay, Mom. I'll let you know. Love you.” Her mom returned the sentiment, and Ava hung up.

Caleb snorted.

“Shut up,” she muttered.

“You need to tell her sometime.”

“I know. I will.” She moved toward him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“When?” he asked.

“Soon.”

Caleb held her close, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “Just think. You and me, alone . . . traveling the country, seeing the sights.”

“You sure you can handle all that shifting?”

“I'll be fine,” he said. “I can't wait to show you the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls . . .”

“Times Square.”

“The Met.”

“Disney World.”

Caleb laughed. “Of course, we can't miss Disney World. I'll even get you one of those Mickey Mouse hats with your name embroidered on it.”

Ava sighed. “It's going to be perfect.”

“Yes, except for one thing.”

She peeked up at him. “What?”

“Your mother filing a missing person’s report when we don’t show up at her house.” Ava made to shove him away, but he only held her tighter, chuckling slightly. “I’m kidding,” he said. “I know you’ll tell her when you can.”

“I will.”

“I know.” He bent to kiss her once more. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

Ava closed her eyes and pressed her face into Caleb’s chest, knowing better than to try and watch as they shifted. She’d done it once—only once—and ended up on her knees throwing up all over Caleb’s shoes once they’d landed. It was an experience she had no desire to repeat. So instead, she held on tight and inhaled deeply, Caleb’s warm and spicy scent instantly calming her as the ground fell away and the wind whipped around them in a swirling vortex.



Tiernan Ross leaned against a tree and cracked his knuckles then his neck before sighing heavily. The sun had just disappeared over the horizon and the spring evening was warm, a slight breeze rustling through the trees, but Tiernan couldn’t enjoy his surroundings. He sighed again, impatiently tapping his fingers on his thighs.

He hated waiting.

He especially hated the ridiculous assignment he and Katherine were currently shackled with, courtesy of the blasted Council, thank you very much. Monitoring Caleb Foster’s little girlfriend wasn’t only mindless duty, it was unnecessary, as far as Tiernan was concerned.

And boring. He couldn’t forget boring.

Ava Michaels obviously wasn’t going to talk. In the months since she returned to Allenmore, she’d said nothing to anybody about the Race nor given any indication she was tempted in the least to do so. But that wasn’t all the Council was concerned about. Her power definitely made them more than a little nervous, and Tiernan couldn’t blame them. He’d experienced it firsthand himself, and it stung—not to mention annoyed the hell out of him—when he remembered the helplessness of being strung up like a Christmas goose in front of the Council and all of his fellow Protectors.

Yeah. He still held a bit of a grudge about that. Even though he had to admire the girl’s guts. To stand up to the Council like she did? To say no to Madeleine Foster and the other suits? Tiernan smiled a little at the memory. It was something he might have done himself—if he’d had the power to back it up. He’d never admit it to Caleb or Ava, of course. He could barely admit it to himself.

“Anything?”

His sister’s voice drew Tiernan out of his thoughts, and he turned to see

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her approaching from across the campus. She smiled when she reached him, smoothing back her straight, black hair when the wind blew it across her face. His would match if he didn't keep it closely shaved, but that was where the resemblance between the siblings ended. Where Tiernan was immense and intimidating, with his mismatched blue and green eyes and a fierce scar running down the right side of his face, Katherine was tall and willowy, with unmarred porcelain skin, one blue eye, and one lavender. She wore the contacts many Race preferred to hide the heterochromia. Katherine being Katherine, she chose lavender instead of blue. She'd always tended toward more exotic tastes.

Tiernan shrugged. "Not yet. They should be back soon, though."

Caleb was nothing if not predictable. When he left on these training sessions with Ava, he always shifted from the isolated spot behind the library, and reappeared shortly after dusk. He sometimes wondered if Caleb did it on purpose, to show Tiernan he had nothing to hide.

As if on cue, Caleb appeared in the shadows, holding Ava close and stumbling a little as they encountered solid ground. Ava pulled his arm over her shoulders and supported his weight as she handed him something he popped into his mouth—R-cubes, Tiernan assumed. After a few minutes, they walked slowly away toward Ava's dorm.

"You want to follow them this time?" he asked Katherine.

She laughed slightly. "Nope. It's your turn, little brother. I'm off until tomorrow night." Without another word, she turned to walk away, waving over her shoulder in response to Tiernan's soft curse.

Sometimes family was a real pain in the neck.

He started after Caleb and Ava, staying back far enough that Caleb wouldn't detect him. It was more out of protocol and habit, though. It wasn't as if Caleb didn't already know he was being followed.

He did, of course. Which was one more reason this assignment was absolutely ludicrous.

Tiernan's cell phone vibrated as he took up his usual spot across from Ava's dorm. He frowned at the screen, wondering why Andreas Petrov, of all people, would be calling him. It was rare that an actual Council member contacted him, and when it did happen, it was usually Rafe.

He answered the phone, trying to keep the hesitation out of his voice. "Ross."

"There's been a change of plans," Petrov said in his smoothly accented voice.

"A change?" Tiernan could only hope he was being pulled off babysitting duty and put to work at something useful. Even hunting down Half-Breeds was more interesting.

"The Council has decided to assign another Protector to keep tabs on Miss Michaels."

Tiernan smiled in satisfaction. "Do you want me to come in? Or are you sending me out right away?"

“Slow down. Slow down, Ross,” Petrov said, chuckling lightly. “Who knew you were such an eager beaver?”

Tiernan bit back an annoyed retort and took a steadying breath. He tried to relax his clenched jaw but ended up speaking more through his teeth than around them. “Just trying to do my job, sir.”

“Yes, well, be that as it may, I will be e-mailing you the brief on your new assignment. It’s highly classified, Ross. That means your eyes only on this. Not a word, even to your sister.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Katherine will remain on the team watching Miss Michaels. You’re to tell her nothing.”

“I understand.” It wasn’t the first time he and Katherine had been ordered to keep secrets from each other. “If I may, sir. Where will I be going?”

“Nowhere, at least for now.”

“Sorry, sir?”

“It’s not that complicated, Ross, try and keep up,” Petrov snapped. “Your assignment is there at Allenmore. Review the brief, and we’ll be in touch.”

The call disconnected, and Tiernan’s phone pinged with the arrival of a new e-mail. He thumbed at the screen, waiting for the decryption protocols, and opened the file sent by the Council. He flipped through the pages, eyes widening with confusion and downright shock when he read the information within.

What in the . . .

His eyes snapped up as Caleb stepped out of Ava’s dorm, flashing a mocking salute in Tiernan’s direction before he headed off toward his apartment. Tiernan hesitated, his gaze flicking up to Ava’s window briefly before he turned to walk away.

She wasn’t his mission anymore.

What he couldn’t wrap his mind around, however, was why the Council had apparently decided that Caleb Foster was.

Chapter 2

Caleb was getting annoyed. Or perhaps *frustrated* was the more appropriate word. It wasn't only that the Council was watching Ava, it was the fact that they'd sent *Tiernan Ross* to do the watching—the Race's best tracker—as if Ava was a flight risk.

Where was she going to go? It had been months, and she'd given the Council no reason for concern. Still, his contacts told him she was on the radar, still considered a threat, both because of her strong gifts and the fact that she was raised as human. It was unheard of—a member of the Race hidden in the human world for so long with no idea who or what she was. And for the Council, the unknown was always perceived as a threat.

He spotted Tiernan as he left Ava's dorm, although he knew the Protector wasn't trying to hide. Tiernan had no love for Ava, but Caleb knew he thought his current assignment was beneath him. To Caleb's surprise, instead of staying at the dorm, Tiernan approached him, matching his pace.

"Evening," Caleb said with a questioning lift of his brow. "Something I can help you with?"

Tiernan shrugged. "Just out enjoying the fresh air."

Caleb smirked. "Yeah. I always took you for a nature lover. I assume Katherine's taking over?" He waved a hand back toward Ava's dorm.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure, you don't," he said with a tired sigh. "So to what do I owe the honor?"

Tiernan was silent for a long moment. "The Council isn't letting up on her."

It was a statement, not a question, so Caleb didn't bother responding.

Tiernan glanced at him sidelong. "It's been months. Why do you think

they're so worried?"

Caleb took a deep breath. This was . . . odd. "You know why. She has a lot of power."

"Yeah." Tiernan rolled his shoulders as if remembering how she'd used that power against him. "But that's not all. You think it's the Rogues?"

Caleb came to a stop, turning to face him. "Why do you care all of a sudden?"

"Just curious." He looked away with another shrug. "*If* I'd been watching a girl for months, and *if* she'd given no indication of betraying the Race, I might wonder why the Council wasn't calling off the dogs."

"*If*." Caleb eyed him carefully before turning to continue toward his apartment. "I have no idea what the Council's thinking, Tiernan. If you have any insight, I'd love to hear it."

Tiernan walked alongside him and appeared to be deep in thought. He kicked a rock and tucked his hands in his pockets. "You have any interesting assignments lately?"

Caleb started a bit at the change of subject. "You know I can't discuss that."

"So you *have*."

"I didn't say that."

"Come on. I've been bored out of my mind. Entertain me."

Caleb's eyes narrowed. It wasn't like Tiernan to be so talkative or to express interest in someone else. "What's up with you?"

Tiernan stiffened and stopped abruptly, looking up at Caleb's apartment building. "Nothing. Just making conversation." He shuffled on his feet before jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "I should go." He started to leave but glanced back. "Why do you walk?"

"What?"

"From Ava's to here. Why do you walk instead of shifting?"

Caleb shrugged. "I like to walk."

Tiernan nodded once before he turned to slip away, melting into the shadows. Caleb went into his apartment building as the Protector took up a post outside, far enough away that Caleb couldn't sense him unless he was trying, but close enough to he could monitor his movements.



Early the next morning, Caleb was jolted out of a deep sleep by the vibrating of his cell phone on the nightstand. He glanced, bleary-eyed, at his alarm clock, groaning when he saw it wasn't quite six o'clock. He didn't have class for three hours. Caleb was not amused.

He fumbled for the phone, sighing heavily when he recognized the number on the screen, and answered the call with a barely intelligible, "Foster."

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“Good morning, sunshine,” a cheerful voice responded.

“Bel.” Caleb sat up against the headboard, rubbing at his eyes. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Oh, don’t give me that. If I recall correctly, the last time you called me, it was the middle of the night, and you dragged me out of a rather comfortable bed.”

Maribel Castro had been the first person Caleb had turned to when he’d gone on the run with Ava the previous fall. Although a trusted associate of the Council, Bel was also involved with a splinter group called the Guardians—former Protectors who took issue with the way the Council handled Half-Breeds. The result of a forbidden union between a human and a member of the Race, Half-Breeds were considered unstable—unable to handle whatever Race gifts they might inherit—and a potential threat to Race secrecy. The Council sent out Protectors to track down such people for containment and, in some cases, extermination. So when Caleb had been sent to detain Ava—then deemed a potential Half-Breed—he’d turned to Bel and the Guardians to protect her. The plan had been simple—get to a safe house and then on to the Guardian Colony in Ontario.

Ava, however, rarely stuck to plans.

“Caleb? You awake?” Bel’s prodding jerked Caleb out of a near-doze.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m here,” he mumbled. “What’s up?”

“We need your help. Nothing fancy. Just transport for a Half-Breed up to the Colony.”

Caleb yawned but slid out of bed and grabbed a duffle bag from his closet. “When? Where?”

“You’re to rendezvous with Balaam in Milwaukee tonight, six o’clock your time for the handoff.” Bel paused, and Caleb could hear the shuffling of papers over the phone. “Balaam will lead any Protectors south while you shift the Half-Breed, Evan, north.”

Caleb nodded even though Bel couldn’t see him.

He was familiar with Balaam’s ability to mimic any Race member or Half-Breed. Because of their individual mental capabilities, each gave off a unique electrical signature. Balaam was able to imitate that.

Caleb frowned. Correction. Not *every* Race member gave off the signature. Ava didn’t, and Caleb wasn’t sure why. She’d been fitted with a psychic block as a baby, which blocked her Race abilities; it was possible that parts of the block were still in place and that was why she didn’t give off a Race imprint. It was just one more mystery among a host of them where Ava was concerned.

He yawned, his jaw cracking as he threw some clothes into the duffle bag. “Six o’clock. Evan. Milwaukee. Got it.”

“Don’t be late.”

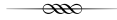
Caleb tossed the phone onto the bed and finished packing. He needed to meet Ava for coffee and tell her he was leaving for a few days. Caleb didn’t like it, but it actually helped that he knew Tiernan would be watching her.

Even if he was sent to protect the Council *from* her, he knew that if push came to shove and any Rogues showed up, Tiernan would protect *her* from *them*.

Not that she really needs it.

He smiled. Ava had become a formidable opponent, her powers growing every day. In truth, he couldn't blame the Council for being nervous.

If he didn't know she was on his side, he might be, too.



Ava smiled when she saw Caleb waiting for her outside the campus coffee shop, balancing two cups as he adjusted his backpack. He gave her the vanilla latte with a quick kiss to her cheek, and she took his hand as they set off across campus toward her English literature class. It always filled Ava with a little bit of glee that she got to start her day with Chaucer and Bronte instead of Pascal and Bernoulli. Sure, physics had brought her Caleb, but she couldn't say she missed the class.

Without warning, Caleb yanked her into the shadows between two buildings and pulled her against him, wrapping his arms tightly around her.

She barely had enough time to clench her eyes shut when, with a dizzying whirl, the ground dropped out from beneath her. When she opened her eyes, she stumbled, blinking uncertainly until she realized he'd shifted them to the top of the bell tower. The campus was spread out before them in a grid-like pattern of green and brown, the town of Witteville sparkling in the morning sunshine just beyond.

When Caleb released her, she smacked his arm, and his coffee sloshed out of the hole in the plastic lid. "You need to warn me before you do that!"

Caleb grinned. "Then it wouldn't be a surprise."

She shook her head but couldn't keep from smiling herself. Taking a sip of her coffee, she crossed to the low brick wall circling the huge bell at the top of the tower and dropped her backpack at her feet. "You do realize if we ever get caught up here, we're going to be in a lot of trouble."

He shrugged, lowering his own bag to the ground. "I like to live dangerously."

"Mm-hmm." She faced him and leaned on the wall, setting her cup down next to her. "I do have class, you know?" Not that she was that worried about it. Spending time with Caleb was always more fun than bonding with Chaucer.

"I know. I needed to talk to you alone for a minute."

Ava didn't like the sound of that. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just have to leave town for a few days."

Ava fought down a rush of concern. "For the Council?"

"Guardians."

Ava nodded, turning back around to look out over the campus. She knew

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Caleb had been secretly working with the Guardians on occasion, unbeknownst to the Council. The Guardians operated in the shadows, and if the Council knew he was helping them, he'd not only lose his position as a Protector, he could be tried as a traitor to the Race. She couldn't blame him for wanting to get involved, though. She knew firsthand how frightening it was to be hunted by the Council and the appalling way Half-Breeds were treated. Still, it *was* dangerous. And she couldn't help being worried.

"I could go with you." She kept her back to him, not wanting him to see exactly how much it meant to ask, how much she really hated to be apart from him.

"You know that won't work," he said quietly. "I can't shift you and him."

She nodded. "Well, be careful, okay?"

He drew closer and set his coffee cup next to hers before reaching out to rub her shoulders lightly. He pulled Ava back against his chest, his arms crossed over hers and their fingers tangling. "I'll be fine. And you know Tiernan and Katherine are around if you need them."

She smiled wryly. "You really think Tiernan would help *me*?"

Caleb laughed. "Well, maybe Katherine. I think she likes you."

"I doubt that."

"Here," he said, untangling one of his arms to fumble in his coat pocket. "I have something for you." He reached around and held his open hand in front of her, a small, polished wooden box lying in his palm.

She glanced up at him over her shoulder. "What is it?"

He shrugged, a hint of pink creeping up his cheeks. "Open it and find out."

Ava took the box as Caleb loosened his hold on her, his arms falling slowly to his sides. Absently running her fingers over the smooth wood, she turned around to face him. "It's not my birthday."

"I know when your birthday is." He smirked, and Ava laughed lightly. Caleb knew pretty much everything about her, actually. Having been assigned to her, knowing every detail about her had been part of his job, at least until their relationship had developed into something more.

"So what's the occasion?" Ava couldn't resist prodding a bit, since Caleb was so adorably embarrassed.

His face flushed a little more as he shook his head in exasperation. "No occasion. Just . . . something to remember me by while I'm gone."

A rush of warmth raced through Ava at that—the idea that Caleb *wanted* her to think about him, *wanted* her to miss him—and she looked down at the box, her own face heating rapidly. She lifted the lid of the box, and her heartbeat sped a little then seemed to stop altogether when she saw its contents. A hammered pewter pendant hung on a black leather cord, and she brought it closer to examine the design: two linked circles, and where they overlapped, a woven knot, obviously Celtic in design. Two gleaming stones were set in the larger circles, one blue and one green. Ava smiled, realizing the stones were the color of Caleb's eyes—his true eyes, when he wasn't

wearing his contacts.

“It was my mother’s,” he said quietly. “The only thing my father gave her that she kept.”

Ava blinked back tears, rubbing her thumb over the green stone. “It’s beautiful,” she said. “But I can’t accept this. It’s too important to you.” She held it out, but he wrapped her fingers around the pendant, holding her hand tightly.

“You’re important to me.”

“But . . . your mother . . .”

“She wants you to have it, too,” he said, swallowing thickly. “I think it’s her way of letting you know that even though she has to fulfill her duties to the Council *officially*, she’s glad you’re in my life, *personally*.” He leaned in to kiss Ava, their clasped hands pressed against his chest.

Ava melted against him, the feel of his power familiar yet not diminished in its intensity. When he reluctantly pulled away many minutes later, they were both breathing heavily.

“Here, look,” he said, his voice raspy as he opened her hand. “The two circles are a symbol of both our worlds, the two stones representing humanity and the First Race. My father added the knot in the middle for my mother—a symbol of unity.” He traced the twisted metal with a fingertip. “Actually, it became a symbol for the Guardians later on, so she could no longer wear it, for obvious reasons. But she always kept it close. Even after he left. And now . . . now, I want you to have it.”

Ava examined his features, seeing nothing but sincerity there, and looped the necklace over her head before kissing him again. “Thank you,” she said softly. “I love it.”

“You’re welcome.”

They stood there for a moment, wrapped in each other’s arms, before Ava looked up at him again. “You never talk about your father.”

He shrugged. “There’s not much to tell. He wasn’t around.”

She fingered the necklace. “But if your mother kept this, she must have missed him, at least a little.”

Caleb pulled away, sighing heavily. “That’s a long story,” he said, checking his watch. “And one we probably can’t get into right now. Not if you’re going to make it to class on time.”

Ava wanted to protest, but Caleb had taken on that stiff look that always accompanied any mention of his father. He only moved back a fraction, but in that moment, it felt as though he was miles away. His jaw twitched with tension, his eyes hard, and she recognized the look of him getting lost in thoughts of the man who’d abandoned him and his mother. Ava could push it. She’d tried to before, but the closest Caleb had ever come to opening up about his feelings on the topic was to say that he didn’t know much about his father and didn’t feel the need to.

She left it alone and simply reached up to touch his cheek, waiting.

She didn’t have to wait long. He looked down with a soft smile and

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pulled her close, getting ready to shift. “I’ll tell you everything once I get back,” he said, the promise clear in his eyes.

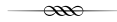
He seemed almost nervous at the prospect, but she didn’t mention it, instead asking, “Which will be?”

“Soon,” he said with a laugh. “Few days. A week at most.”

“Okay. I can do a week.” She tucked her face against his chest and closed her eyes. “But any longer and I’m coming after you.”

Caleb laughed.

Little did he know, she wasn’t kidding.



That evening, Caleb waited at the rendezvous point, a nondescript coffee shop on a street corner in Milwaukee. He checked his watch again, impatient to get this assignment over and done with. He’d pushed himself, shifting rapidly and wolfing down R-cubes so he could get where he was going and back home again.

Of course, he hadn’t taken into account having to wait for the Half-Breed. All he could think about was getting back to Witteville and to Ava. He didn’t like leaving her alone, both for personal and professional reasons. Despite his reassurances to her that she would be looked out for, he felt a lot more comfortable when he was the one doing the looking.

He felt a telltale prickle up the back of his neck, indicating a Race presence nearby, and turned to watch the door to the coffee shop, sipping a cappuccino as he waited for Balaam and the Half-Br—*Evan*, he corrected—to appear.

After a few minutes, the two men walked in, Balaam raising a hand in greeting as soon as they were through the door. They joined Caleb at his table and took a seat as Evan looked around nervously.

Caleb smiled and held out a hand. “You must be Evan. I’m Caleb, your ride north.”

Evan looked at him in confusion, and Caleb was forced to reevaluate his initial impression. He wasn’t a man, but a boy—a teenager, at most—all spiky blond hair and wide, innocent eyes, with a sprinkling of freckles across his nose.

Caleb glanced at Balaam, raising an eyebrow in question.

Balaam, however, turned to the boy, resting a comforting hand on his shoulder. Despite the man’s large and rather intimidating frame, thick black dreadlocks, and curling tattoos around his muscular, dark-skinned arms, he had a way of soothing frightened Half-Breeds. “Caleb is going to make sure you get to the Colony safely,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “I’ll lead anyone following us away.” His dark eyes were intent, reassuring.

Evan nodded and turned to Caleb smiling hesitantly. “It’s nice to meet you. Thanks . . . for helping me.”

“That’s my job,” Caleb said lightly, offering his hand again.

This time, Evan shook it.

“You two should get going,” Balaam said, getting to his feet. “I think we have Protectors about half an hour away. Luckily, no shifters, as far as I can tell, so I should be able to keep them busy long enough for you to get away.” He reached out to touch Evan again, closing his eyes and breathing deeply for a moment.

Caleb knew it was how the man focused in on Evan’s unique signature so he could mimic it, and he waited patiently until Balaam stepped back with a nod.

“Good luck,” he said before stepping out the door without another word.

Caleb got to his feet and tossed his empty cup into the trash. “Come on,” he said to Evan. “We need to find someplace less . . . busy.”

They left the coffee shop, and Caleb led him down the street and into a dim alley he’d scouted when he first arrived in Milwaukee. “Did Balaam tell you how this works?” he asked.

Evan swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing as his gaze darted toward the slimy walls and down to the littered ground. He finally focused on Caleb and seemed to square his shoulders. “He said you could . . . teleport us?”

He’d said it more as a question than a statement, and Caleb grinned. It wasn’t the first time he’d had such a reaction. “Yeah. We’re going to have to get close, I’m afraid.” He waved the boy over and turned him around. Men generally tended to be more comfortable if they weren’t face-to-face. “Cross your hands over your chest,” he said, folding his arms over Evan’s firmly. “This will be quick, only a few seconds, but take a deep breath and close your eyes. It can be a little disorienting.”

Evan nodded.

Caleb could feel his heart racing under his arm. “It’s okay,” he said. “Try and relax and it will be over before—” Caleb stiffened at the familiar tingle of a Race presence nearby. He cursed under his breath.

“What is it?” Evan asked.

“Someone’s coming,” he whispered, his hold on Evan tightening in urgency. “Brace yourself; we’ve got to go now.”

They shifted, reappearing in an empty field. Evan staggered as Caleb’s knees buckled and he leaned into him.

“Sorry,” Caleb said, his voice cracking as he reached into his pocket for some R-cubes. “That was a long one. I need a minute.”

“Are you okay?”

Caleb chewed and swallowed with a nod. “Yeah. You?”

Evan nodded, still looking a bit stunned. He turned around in a circle. “Where are we?”

“About fifty miles north of—damn.” Caleb shot to his feet. “They’re here.”

“Who?” Evan paled. “How?”

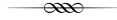
“I don’t know. Balaam was wrong. They must have a shifter . . . and a

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tracker of some kind.” He reached for Evan. “I won’t be able to get us far, but we need to shake them. I’m going to try several short shifts instead of a long one.” He popped another cube. “Ready?”

Evan closed his eyes, his hands trembling under Caleb’s. “Ready.”

Caleb took a deep breath and shifted, beginning to wonder if this was one mission he would fail.



They made it to the Guardian Colony, Caleb dead on his feet and leaning heavily on Evan as they approached the gate. He remembered little of the next twelve hours, spending them sleeping, for the most part, and waking only to consume some cubes and water, and a little soup on occasion, before exhaustion took him again.

When he finally woke, Bel was there by his bed, waiting to ask him about what had happened. Unfortunately, Caleb didn’t have any answers. He hadn’t seen who’d pursued them as far as the Canadian border before they had apparently lost him, or *them*, and although they’d waited anxiously for Protectors to close in, there had been no attack.

Someone, somehow, had tracked him, and Caleb couldn’t fight the fear that he and Evan hadn’t *escaped* that person, but that he or she had let them get away.

“But why?” Bel had asked when he expressed the thought out loud. “It doesn’t make any sense. If it was Protectors, why wouldn’t they have taken you, or even followed you here?”

Caleb didn’t know, and at that point, he found he didn’t care. All he wanted to do was recover and head back to Allenmore, perhaps utilizing more conventional travel options for the trip home. He wasn’t anxious to shift again.

Three days later, he left the Colony, happy to see Evan fitting in well with some of the others his own age. He’d learned the boy had been orphaned by a car accident, leaving him miraculously uninjured. The fact had led the Protectors to close in on him, but at least this time, the Guardians had won. The boy was free. Caleb had succeeded in his mission.

He hugged Bel, nodding to Gideon in farewell, but still not comfortable with a more demonstrative gesture where the Guardian leader was concerned.

Perhaps in time.

Rebuilding that relationship, or rather, *building* it, would definitely take a lot of time. He turned quickly and shifted away from the Colony without looking back. He planned to take a train from Winnipeg, then possibly a bus once he got across the border. He preferred not to fly if at all possible, since shifting wasn’t the best option when he was miles above the ground.

Caleb stopped to rest in a thick forest about thirty miles from Winnipeg,

sitting on a fallen log as he chewed on some R-cubes and a protein bar. He took comfort in the quiet around him, the faint rustling of leaves or chirp of a bird overhead. He smiled as his mind wandered, as it often did, to Ava and her reaction to his gift of the necklace. He knew he had to tell her more about his parents. It was essential that she know what she was getting into before their relationship progressed any further.

And he definitely wanted it to progress. He'd known that for a while.

But Ava was still learning what it meant to be Race, and there were things she needed to know about him—about *herself*—and sooner rather than later. He just hoped it wouldn't scare her away because, although it terrified him, he didn't know what he'd do without her.

A branch snapped, and Caleb jumped to his feet, eyes scanning the surrounding trees. He swallowed the rest of his R-cube and held his breath, listening for other signs of movement. A rustling drew his attention, and he almost laughed out loud when a squirrel darted across the ground in front of him and bounded up a nearby tree.

"Not cool," he muttered.

It stopped on a branch, scrutinizing Caleb with a tilt of the head before darting higher up the tree.

Then he felt it; that telltale tingle up his spine that he'd come to recognize as he'd raced to the Colony with Evan. He knew, somehow, whoever had been chasing them had found him again. Whoever it was wasn't after Evan at all, but after him.

Caleb warred with himself, half wanting to run and half wanting to confront whoever was tracking him. The problem was he was relatively certain it was more than one person, and he had to assume they had a nefarious purpose. Why else would they stay in the shadows? Perhaps the Council suspected he was working with the Guardians. Or, even worse, maybe the Rogues had tracked him down in an attempt to get to Ava.

He stiffened as they came closer.

Not two . . . three, possibly more.

There was no way he could take on that many, so Caleb used the seconds he had to reach out with his Race gifts, trying to gather as much information as possible about the approaching group. He would relay it to Bel—or to Gideon—and together they could try to determine who was out to get him.

He closed his eyes, focusing until the last possible moment, and popped another cube into his mouth before starting a series of shifts toward home.

It was going to be a long trip.

Chapter 3

Caleb was gone for five days, sixteen hours and twenty-seven minutes, not that Ava was counting. He appeared on her doorstep late Thursday evening, his face drawn and haggard, but smiling as he pulled her close for a sweet kiss.

“Hey you two, get a room!” Ava’s roommate, Lucy, called as she passed by on her way to the bathroom.

“I have one,” Ava said with a flippant toss of her hair as she pulled Caleb inside.

“Yeah, but you *share* it,” Lucy said, poking her head back around the corner and holding up a finger as if she was making a brilliant observation. “And some of us spend our Friday nights alone and lonely and don’t need to be reminded of what we’re missing.”

Ava laughed.

Lucy may have lacked on the long-term-relationship front, but she hardly spent all her weekend nights home alone. Tall and slender with sleek blond hair and gorgeous blue eyes, Lucy Matthews never wanted for male companionship. She just hated to commit, saying there were a lot of fish in the sea, and it was her job to throw back the tiny ones.

Ava wasn’t sure what that meant, exactly, but it seemed to be Lucy’s motto. And who was Ava to dispute her best friend’s motto?

Caleb stopped a few steps in the room, lacing his fingers with hers. “Come on,” he said, kissing her again. “Let’s go for a walk.”

“A walk?”

He grinned. “Well, maybe not a *walk* so much.”

Ava tried to look skeptical, but it was difficult when she would follow Caleb anywhere. She let him pull her back out of the room, ignoring Lucy’s

catcalls of “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” as they raced down the stairs and out the back door of the dorm into the fenced area housing the dumpster.

“Romantic,” Ava said with a wry smile.

Caleb snorted, glancing around carefully to ensure they weren’t being observed before pulling her close.

“You sure you’re up for this?” Ava asked as he popped an R-cube into his mouth. “You seem kind of tired.”

He swallowed, smiling as he brushed a finger over her cheek. “We won’t go far. Ready?”

Ava nodded and tucked her head against his chest, smiling at the feel of his heartbeat under her cheek. She hadn’t truly realized how much she’d missed him until he was back, warm and strong, and wrapped around her, his scent familiar and comforting as she nuzzled against him.

The ground dropped away beneath her feet and her grip around his waist tightened in reflex, wind whipping her hair about her face as she clenched her eyes shut against the whirling dizziness that accompanied shifting. She focused on her breathing, in and out, counting to herself until the wind died down and they landed on firm ground. Ava took a deep breath and opened her eyes to find they’d shifted to the grasslands on the banks of the Missouri River. It was one of Caleb’s favorite places to visit, especially at night, when the campers and fishermen went home, and they could lie in the high grass and stare up at the stars.

He pulled her down beside him on the ground, and she lay back on her elbow, Caleb’s head pillowed on her stomach and the moon casting the planes of his face in shadow. With training and school and Caleb’s assignments, it was rare to have these quiet times, times to simply enjoy being together, touching each other. Ava brushed her fingers through his thick dark hair, twisting it a little, and he sighed contentedly, his eyes drifting closed behind his glasses.

He looked a little thin, his tall, lean frame spread out in the grass—a disguise, of course, the Veil that kept the world from seeing his true form. Ava had seen it—the perfection of him, all golden skin and corded muscle—although she didn’t look through Caleb’s Veil often, and never without asking. It was rude, she’d learned. And she actually liked Caleb’s Veiled body. It was beautiful in its own way and familiar to her while the other was otherworldly and a little bit intimidating.

“You sure you’re okay?” she asked after a while.

“It’s been a tough few days,” he replied. “Lot of shifting.”

“Did everything go all right?”

Caleb hesitated—only briefly, but it was enough for Ava’s instincts to kick in. “What happened?”

He sighed again and opened his eyes enough to glance at her sideways. “Sometimes it would be easier if I could lie to you.”

She tugged his hair lightly. “Yeah, but then I’d have to hurt you.”

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“You’d have to catch me first.”

“You think you could shift before I could bind you?” she asked with teasing grin. “Didn’t you see Tiernan hanging upside down in the Council chamber?”

Caleb shook his head and closed his eyes again with an amused half smile. “Show off.” He turned onto his side, throwing an arm across her stomach.

“Tell me,” she said quietly, laying her hand on his arm.

Caleb was silent for a long moment. “Someone followed us. Well, followed *me*.”

“Followed you?” A lump formed in Ava’s throat. “Who? Why?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t stick around to find out.”

“I don’t understand.”

Caleb sat up, turning to face her as she did the same. “Someone was able to track my shifts. I lost them when we got to the Canadian border, or at least I thought I did . . .” His eyes took on a faraway look, and he furrowed his brow as if trying to solve a complicated puzzle.

“Caleb?”

“Sorry.” He shook his head, blinking rapidly a few times. “Anyway, they picked me up again when I left the Colony.”

“How do you know it was the same person?”

“I know. And not person . . . *people*.”

Ava scooted closer to him, wrapping her arms around his bent knee. “How do you know you lost them this time?”

When Caleb looked up, he couldn’t hide the worry in his eyes. “I don’t. Not for sure. All I know is I don’t feel them now.” He tilted his head. “Do you?”

Ava closed her eyes, reaching out with her Race senses. For whatever reason, her gift seemed more intense than his—more intense than most, according to Caleb—and she was often able to sense Race presence from much greater distances. She breathed slowly and deeply, focusing as Audrey had taught her at the Guardian safe house all those months ago, searching for the faint tingle to alert her one of her own kind was nearby.

“No,” she said with a heavy exhale as she opened her eyes. “I only feel you. Maybe you should go to the Council. Tell them what happ—”

“I’m not going to the Council.”

“But it could have been Rogues.”

“It wasn’t Rogues,” Caleb snapped. “I don’t know who it was, and I’m not telling anyone until I know more.”

“But—”

“Ava, let it go!” Caleb moved away from her, his back stiff. After a moment, he glanced back, and the frustration on his face softened when he saw her shocked expression. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to yell. I’m just tired. It’s been a long few days and I really want to relax for a bit, you know?”

Ava was still a bit stunned by his reaction. Caleb was always patient with

her, sometimes agonizingly so, and it was unlike him to snap at her like that.

He reached out and took her hand, rubbing his thumb over it lightly. "I'm sorry."

She nodded, licking her lips nervously. "It's okay."

"It was difficult," he said after a moment, "being away from you."

Ava moved closer until they were sitting side by side, shoulders touching. "It was hard for me, too."

"You felt it, then?"

Caleb watched her carefully, as if the question was some kind of test, as though her reply was important. She thought very carefully about exactly *how* she felt.

"I . . . missed you," she said slowly. "But it was more than that. It was like . . ." She looked up and searched the sky as if amidst the stars she could find the right words. "It was like something was wrong. Something missing. I don't know. That probably doesn't even make any sense." She blushed and drew her knees up, wrapping her arms around them, and rested her chin on top.

"It makes sense," Caleb said quietly.

She looked up, but he was gazing out over the horizon, lost in thought.

He took a deep breath. "When we—Race—are . . . involved with someone, we form a bond, not just on a physical and emotional level. You've felt it, right? When we're close?" He looked at her, a small smile on his face.

Ava thought of all the times she'd indulged in that feeling of their gifts mingling, their power twisting back and forth between them, and nodded slowly.

He swallowed, taking her hand, and she felt it once again. "It only gets stronger over time," he said, lifting his free hand to trace the curves of their joined fingers with the tip of his own, sending sparks of awareness over her skin everywhere he touched. "And even stronger the more . . . *intimate* . . . the connection."

He let the words sink in for a moment, and Ava shifted nervously as what he was saying hit home.

"It can be overwhelming," he said, his gaze on their interlocked fingers as he rubbed his thumb gently over hers. "The bond can be . . . addictive. It's why we have to be so careful." He looked into her eyes. "It's why we have to take things slow."

Ava tried to absorb his words, his intense gaze. "Are you saying we could become addicted to each other? Like a drug?"

"The bond is very powerful. We're taught from a young age to respect it." He cleared his throat, rubbed at the back of his neck, and he focused on their joined hands once again. "But this life is all new to you, so you need to know what's in store if we stay together. The intensity of our connection will grow to be more than you can imagine."

“I don’t mind,” Ava said quickly.

Caleb looked up in surprise, a bark of laughter escaping before he could stop it. Ava blushed, of course. He reached out to graze the color with his knuckle. “I don’t either,” he said quietly, his hand dropping to cup her cheek. “But we *should*. The bond is not something to be taken lightly.”

They sat in silence for a moment, then Caleb smiled and his gaze dropped as he reached out to touch her necklace. “You’re wearing it.”

“Of course. I never take it off.”

He slid his hand around it, rubbing the stones with his thumb. “It’s said to have power, you know.”

“Power?”

“The necklace.” He fingered the blue stone. “Azurite stimulates mental activity.” Then the green one. “Fluorite grounds excess energy and is supposed to promote clarity and peace. Together they’re supposed to help focus your abilities. I thought it might help you in your training.”

“Really?” Ava said with a skeptical tilt of her head. “You really believe all that stuff—crystals and magic stones?”

Caleb shrugged. “It’s all electrical impulses. Everything.” He released the necklace and waved his hand in a broad sweep. “The world around us, the air, the ground, you and me. It’s how we’re able to do what we do, by manipulating cells and molecules and electricity and magnetism. The stones are a part of that. It’s not out of the realm of possibility that they could help.”

“Huh.” Ava tried but failed to hide her doubt. “If you say so.”

“You’re a telekinetic with a boyfriend who can teleport, and you’re having trouble with this?” Caleb laughed, getting to his feet and holding out a hand to Ava. “Come on, let’s give it a try.”

Ava narrowed her eyes, barely able to make out Caleb’s tall frame as a cloud passed over the moon. After five days, sixteen hours, and twenty-seven minutes without him, training was the last thing on her mind. Still, she was intrigued and gripped his hand as he pulled her to her feet.

“You think it will help me shift?” she asked.

Caleb laughed, pulling her in for a quick kiss. “Couldn’t hurt. But let’s try something else first.”

She glanced around the dark clearing. “No rocks to throw.”

“I was thinking we might try something more physical.”

Ava raised an eyebrow, intrigued, and ran a finger over his stomach. “Oh, really?”

He snorted. “Not *that* kind of physical. I swear, you have a one-track mind.” He kissed her again to soften his words, but gave her a stern look. “Work first. Play later.”

“Spoilsport.” She frowned then clapped her hands and rubbed them together, ready to try whatever Caleb suggested. “All right, then, what do you want me to do?”

“I still can’t figure out why your strength and speed are so lacking,” he

replied.

“Thanks.”

“Oh, now, don’t take it so personally. You know what I mean,” he said, shoving her shoulder lightly. “For some reason, those gifts are still blocked for you. I’ve been thinking it’s the same with your electrical imprint and the Veil, for that matter.”

No matter how hard Ava tried, she was unable to lift the camouflage that presented her as an ordinary human—average height, slender, pale skin that freckled in the summer, and long, light brown hair. The only visible evidence of her Race heritage was her mismatched brown and hazel-gold eyes, but those were easily hidden, thanks to her colored contacts. While Ava could see through the Veil of others, and others were able to lift their Veil with enough focus, she couldn’t. No matter what she did, she looked human. Normal.

“So you think the block’s still there?”

“Well, at least some of it. It’s the only thing that makes any sense,” Caleb said, searching the area and settling on a grove of cottonwood trees. He started leading Ava toward them. When they reached the trees, he scrutinized them carefully, testing them with a hand before settling on one with a trunk about a foot in diameter. He waved her forward.

“Try to push it.” Ava closed her eyes, and he touched her shoulder to get her attention “*Without* telekinesis.”

She stared at him for a moment, and he extended an arm toward the tree with a slight bow. Tentatively, she approached the tree and placed both palms on it.

“Try to clear your mind . . . focus,” he said quietly. “Think about how it felt when the block came down back at the Rogue lair. Picture it in your mind, crumbling brick by brick.”

Ava took a deep breath, Caleb’s voice fading to a low rumble in the background as she focused on her own power. She called it forward, feeling the familiar tingle winding through her, radiating from deep within. She searched for the block keeping it at bay, tried to picture it flowing through her bloodstream and into her muscles. A warm vibration heated her chest, and Ava gasped, one hand flying up to touch the pendant around her neck. She could feel it vibrating under her fingers, and it seemed to intensify her power somehow.

“Now push it,” Caleb said.

Ava tensed and took three quick breaths before leaning into the tree, every muscle tightening as she shoved with all her strength.

Nothing happened.

“Again.” Caleb’s voice was tight, and she felt him touch her arm, boosting her power with his own.

She focused on that feeling, envisioned the block falling down—breaking apart—and pushed again.

And again.

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Finally, she opened her eyes, glaring up at the stubborn tree, her fingers digging into the bark.

“Nothing’s happening,” she grumbled, leaning against the tree in defeat. “I can’t do it.”

“Come on. Try again,” Caleb said, a hint of irritation in his tone.

Ava turned to glare at him. “I can’t do it.”

“Of course you can’t if you don’t even try.” He stepped away, turning to another tree and pushing it with all his might. The tree shuddered with a low groan before bending under Caleb’s power, falling to the ground with a crash as the roots popped up from the ground, and spraying dirt in all directions. He brushed off his hands, turning to her with a challenging look. “See? You just have to *try*.”

“I *did* try.” Ava was more than a little annoyed at his superior attitude. “What is wrong with you?”

Caleb threw his head back, rubbing his hands over his face before he stalked a few steps away from her.

Ava watched him warily. “Caleb?”

He looked back over his shoulder, but didn’t meet her eyes.

“What is it?” she asked, her irritation vanishing as concern twisted in her stomach. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head slightly, as if to clear it, and turned to walk back to her. He reached out to touch her cheek gently. “I’m sorry. I . . . I’m just tired. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

Ava took a step closer, sliding her hands under his coat and gripping his shirt as her anger evaporated. “Maybe we should head back? So you can get some rest?” She hoped he’d argue the point, but Caleb only nodded sadly.

“Yeah . . . yeah.” He pulled her close and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I’ll take you home.”

Ava clung to him as he shifted them back to campus, held his hand as he walked her back to her dorm, and tried to ignore the uneasy feeling that something was very, very wrong.



Late that night, the ringing of a phone roused the occupant of a lavish home in New Elysia, the Race city hidden on a mountain about fifty miles from Kalispell, Montana. With a groan, the man disentangled himself from the naked limbs of his bedmate, who rolled over, taking the sheets with her as he fumbled for the phone.

“Yes?”

“He’s back at Allenmore,” a familiar voice reported.

“Any problems?”

“None. Everything went according to plan.”

“Good, that’s good.” The man swung his legs over the side of the bed,

leaned forward onto his knees as he yawned, and scrubbed a hand over his face. “What about the girl?”

“No change.”

The man stood and padded quietly out of the bedroom and down the hall, crossing the darkened living room to pour himself a drink at the bar. “We will have to help that situation along, it appears. What of the Protectors?”

“No indication they were aware of our presence,” the voice said, a hint of smug satisfaction in his tone.

“Don’t underestimate the Ross siblings.” The man took a gulp of his whiskey and winced as it burned on the way down. “Tell your men to watch themselves.”

“They always do, sir.” He cleared his throat. “So what’s next?”

The man sighed, years of planning weighing down his shoulders. They’d come so far, their goal finally within reach, but the timing of all of this was crucial. Any mistakes could be devastating.

“We proceed according to the timetable,” he said. “I want daily updates on Foster. No one makes a move until all the pieces are in place, understood?”

“What about Elias?”

Elias. A critical piece of the puzzle.

“Protectors are closing in on him as we speak. He should be in Council custody within the week.” He finished his whiskey and sucked on an ice cube before letting it drop back into the glass. “I don’t have to tell you what’s riding on all of this.”

“No, sir.”

“Don’t let me down.” He hung up without another word and crossed to the window, looking out at the darkness.

His home sat on a slight rise overlooking New Elysia, and his gaze flitted over the sleeping city, drawn to a light here and there. He wondered if the people below realized that their lives were about to change. That their whole *world* was about to change.

No. No, they have no idea.

But one day very soon they would, and they would no doubt thank him for it. He closed the curtain, smiling at the thought, and turned to head back to the bedroom, leaving his empty whiskey glass on the hall table.

He still had a few hours to sleep. The sleep of the righteous.

And then, with the morning sun, he’d get back to work.



Ava sat up in bed, unsure of what had awakened her, but unable to shake an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. She’d had an odd dream but couldn’t recall the details of it, only fleeting glimpses of familiar faces—Caleb, Madeleine, Tiernan—and a sensation of running and panic.

She shuddered, drawing the blankets up over her shoulders as she hugged her knees. She hadn't had such dreams in months—not since the psychic block crumbled at the Rogue lair—and had assumed that the dreams were a result of her Race instincts trying to get her attention. Once she'd connected with them more fully, the dreams had disappeared, but for some reason those instincts seemed to be on high alert recently.

Ava glanced at Lucy's bed, hoping she hadn't disturbed her, but her roommate lay huddled under the blankets, breathing evenly. Ava slipped out of bed and made her way to the window to peer through the blinds. It only took a moment for her to spot Katherine standing in the shadow of some trees.

Although different Protectors appeared throughout the day, including Tiernan, on occasion, Katherine generally preferred the night shift. It amplified her gift—an unusually strong Veil that could render her nearly invisible to humans, as well as most Race when she wanted—but Ava was always able to see her clearly, something that both irritated and impressed Katherine.

The Protector looked up, obviously feeling Ava's presence, and waved a hand in greeting. Ava rolled her eyes but waved back before letting the blinds close. She turned to go back to bed and stopped abruptly, that uneasy feeling suddenly growing stronger. She closed her eyes and focused her thoughts, reaching out with her Race gift. She could feel Katherine clearly, but there was also something more.

Someone . . . more.

Ava slipped back to the window, parting the blinds enough to peer through. Katherine looked up again and tilted her head in question, obviously wondering what her charge was doing. Ava ignored her, heart pounding as she searched the shadows for whatever—*whoever*—had triggered her instincts. Her power sparked as she narrowed her eyes, looking deeper, farther—into each dim doorway and along each shadowed corner.

Just like that, the feeling evaporated, and the only Race presence she felt was Katherine's.

Ava blinked in surprise, reaching out again in a fleeting attempt to recapture the sensation, but it eluded her like water trickling through her fingers. She looked down at Katherine, but the Protector was thumbing through her phone, seemingly unperturbed. Obviously, if there was someone out there, it was someone who didn't overly worry Katherine.

Ava frowned.

She had been on edge lately, nervous, and she couldn't figure out why. Her encounter with Caleb earlier had left her uneasy, verging on paranoid. He'd seemed *off* somehow, like something was bothering him, but when she had questioned him about it, he'd simply said he was tired and she was reading too much into his foul temper. Combined with the return of her strange dreams and whatever had just happened, Ava felt off-kilter.

She sighed and got back into bed, pulling the covers over her head. Perhaps she *was* being paranoid. Sure, the Rogues were out there, and the Council still wasn't convinced she wasn't a threat, but she had Caleb watching her back—and Protectors as well. Not to mention that if she'd proven anything lately, it was that she could take care of herself.

She wasn't writing off her instincts yet, though. Caleb had told her time and time again to trust them, that they had the potential to save her life. But until she could figure out what they were trying to *tell* her, Ava decided she'd keep her concerns to herself. There was no point in panicking until there was something to actually panic about.

One last time, Ava closed her eyes and searched for that unknown presence, just to be sure.

Nothing.

Well, if there was someone out there, Ava would be on the lookout for him. Until then, she had to get some sleep. She had an English quiz in the morning and a full shift at the diner after. On top of all of that, spring break drew closer with every passing hour and she still hadn't told her mother she wasn't coming home.

Tomorrow. Definitely tomorrow. Everything can wait until then.