

I

If Mom ever found out I was sitting outside of Foretoken, she would kill me. Like, legit hide-my-body-in-a-deep-dark-grave kind of kill me. And my mom totally had the means to do so.

When she went from Momma baking brownies in the kitchen to *Colonel* Sylvia Dasher, she put the fear of God and then some in me.

But knowing just how much trouble I'd be in if I got caught obviously hadn't stopped me, because here I was, sitting in Heidi's car, applying yet another coat of lipstick with a shaky hand. Shoving the lipstick wand back into its tube, I watched fat raindrops bomb the windshield. My heart threw itself against my ribs as if it were determined to punch its way out.

I couldn't believe I was here.

I'd rather be home, finding random things in my house to take pictures of and posting them on Instagram. Like those new gray-and-white vintage candleholders Mom had bought. They'd look amazing paired with the pale blue and pink pillows I had in my bedroom.

From the driver's seat, Heidi Stein sighed heavily. "You're second-guessing this."

"Nuh-uh." I eyed my final results in the little mirror in the visor. My lips were so red, it looked like I'd French-kissed an overripe strawberry.

Nice.

And my brown eyes were way too big for my roundish, freckled face. I looked scared, like I was about to walk naked into class twenty minutes late.

“Yeah, you are, Evie. I can see it etched into the five hundred coats of lipstick you just applied.”

Wincing, I glanced over at her. Heidi looked completely at ease in her strapless black dress and dark eye makeup. She had that cat-eye thing down, something I couldn't re-create without looking like an abused raccoon. Heidi had done an amazing job on my eyes before we'd left her house, though, giving them a smoky, mysterious look. I thought I actually looked pretty good. Well, except for the whole looking-scared part, but . . .

“Is the red lipstick too much?” I asked. “Do I look bad?”

“I'd be into you if I liked blondes.” She grinned when I rolled my eyes. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

I peeked out the window at the dark, windowless building squeezed in between a closed boutique shop and a cigar store. My breath hitched in my throat.

FORETOKEN was written in black paint above the red double doors. I squinted. On second thought, the name of the club looked like it had been spray-painted on the gray cement. Classy.

Everyone who went to Centennial High knew of Foretoken, a club that was packed every night, even on Sundays, and was notorious for allowing outrageously fake IDs to slide by.

And Heidi and I were most definitely seventeen and 100 percent in possession of some fake-as-hell driver's licenses that no one in their right mind would believe were real.

“Because I'm worried you're not going to have fun.” Heidi poked my arm, drawing my attention. “Like you'll get freaked out and call Zoe. And you know you can't call April to come get you either. That girl is not allowed within a ten-block radius of this place.”

I drew in a shallow breath that felt like it went nowhere. “I'll have fun. I swear. It's just . . . I've never done this before.”

“Done what? Gone somewhere you weren't supposed to? Because I know that's not true.” She held up a finger, and the nail looked like it had been dipped in black ink. “You have no problem breaking and entering when it comes to climbing around abandoned buildings to take pictures.”

“That’s different.” I dropped the lipstick into my little wristlet. “You sure these IDs are going to work?”

She shot me a bland look. “Do you know how many times I’ve been here and had no problems? Yes, you do. You’re stalling.”

I was totally stalling.

Looking out the window again, I could barely suppress the shiver tiptoeing down my spine. Puddles were forming in the vacant street and there was no one on the sidewalks. It was like once the sun went down and Foretoken unlocked its doors, the streets emptied of everyone who exhibited an ounce of common sense.

Foretoken also had the reputation for something entirely different than allowing fake IDs.

Aliens were known to hang out here.

Like legit extraterrestrial beings that had come from trillions of light-years away. They called themselves the Luxen, and they looked like us—well, a better version of most of us. Their bone structure was often perfect, their skin airbrush-smooth, and their eye colors were shades that we humans couldn’t achieve without contacts.

And not all of them had come in peace.

Four years ago, we’d been invaded, totally Hollywood-movie-level invaded, and we’d almost lost the war—almost lost the entire planet to them. I’d never forget the statistic that had dominated the news once the TVs starting broadcasting again: 3 percent of the world’s population. That was 220 million people lost in the war, and my father had been one of them.

But over the last four years, the Luxen who hadn’t been on Team Kill All the Humans and had helped fight their own kind had been slowly integrated into our world—into our schools and jobs, government and military. They were everywhere now. I’d met plenty of them, so I didn’t know why coming here freaked me out so much.

But Foretoken wasn’t school or an office building, where the Luxen were typically outnumbered and heavily monitored. I had a sinking suspicion that humans were the minority beyond those red doors.

Heidi poked my arm again. “If you don’t want to do this, we don’t have to.”

I twisted in the seat toward her. One look at Heidi’s face told me that she was being genuine. She would turn the car on and we’d go back to her place if that were what I wanted. Probably end the night gorging ourselves on those cupcakes her mom had picked up from the bakery. We’d watch really bad romantic comedies until we passed out from a ridiculously high caloric intake, and that sounded . . . lovely.

But I didn’t want to bail on her.

Coming here meant a lot to Heidi. She could be herself without worrying about people getting all up in her business about who she was dancing with or checking out, whether it be a boy or another girl.

There was a reason why the Luxen were comfortable coming here. Foretoken was welcoming to everyone, no matter their sexuality, gender, race, or . . . *species*. They weren’t a human-only establishment, which was rare nowadays when it came to privately owned businesses.

Tonight was special, though. There was this girl Heidi had been talking to, and she wanted me to meet her. And I wanted to meet her, so I needed to stop acting like a dork who’d never been to a club before.

I could totally do this.

Smiling at Heidi, I poked her back. “No. I’m fine. I’m just being stupid.”

She stared at me a moment, cautious. “You sure?”

“Yes.” I nodded for extra emphasis. “Let’s do this.”

Another moment passed and then Heidi broke out in a wide smile. She leaned over, throwing her arms around me. “You’re the best.” She squeezed me tight, causing me to giggle. “Seriously.”

“I know.” I patted her arm. “I put the *awe* in *awesome*.”

She snort-laughed in my ear. “You are so weird.”

“I told you I am.” I untangled myself from her hug and then reached for the car door before I could chicken out. “Ready?”

“Yep,” she chirped.

I climbed out and immediately shrieked as cold rain hit the bare skin of my arms. I slammed the door shut and then darted across the dark street, my hands forming the weakest shield ever over my hair. I'd spent way too much time curling the long strands into waves for the rain to ruin it.

Water splashed over my heels, and when I hopped up on the sidewalk, I was surprised I hadn't slipped and fallen face-first into the asphalt.

Heidi was right behind me, laughing as she rushed under the awning, shaking the mist of rain from her pin-straight crimson hair.

"Holy crap, this rain is cold," I gasped. It felt more like the rain that fell in October than in early September.

"My makeup isn't running down my face like I'm some chick about to be killed in a horror movie?" she asked, reaching for the door.

Laughing, I tugged on the hem of my strappy blue dress I normally wore leggings under. One wrong move and everyone would see the skull design on my undies. "No. Everything is where it should be."

"Perfect." She pulled on the massive red door with a grunt.

Violet light spilled outside, along with the heavy thump of music. A small entryway appeared, leading to another door, this one a deeper purple, but between that door and us was a man sitting on a stool.

A gigantic man.

A huge bald man wearing jean overalls and absolutely nothing else under them. Studs glinted from piercings all over his face—his eyebrows, under his eye, and his lips. A bolt went straight through his septum.

My eyes widened. Oh my word. . . .

"Hey, Mr. Clyde." Heidi grinned, completely unfazed.

"Yo." He looked from her to me. His head cocked to the side as his eyes narrowed slightly. That couldn't be good. "IDs."

I didn't dare smile as I pulled my ID out of the little card slot on my wristlet. If I did smile, I would totally look like I was seventeen and close to peeing myself. So I didn't even blink.

Clyde glanced at the IDs and then nodded toward the black door. I peeked at Heidi, and she winked.

For real?

That was all he was going to do?

Some of the tension leaked out of my neck and shoulders as I shoved my ID back into its slot. Well, that was exceptionally easy. I should do this more often.

“Thanks!” Heidi patted Clyde’s big, bulky shoulder as she went for the door.

I was still standing in front of him, like an idiot. “Th-thank you.”

Clyde raised a brow as he pinned me with a look that had me quickly wishing I’d just kept my mouth shut.

Heidi reached back, grabbed my hand, and yanked me forward as she opened the second door. I turned, and every one of my senses was immediately overwhelmed by, well, *everything*.

The thump of heavy drums poured from speakers, coming from every corner of a large room. The tempo was fast, the lyrics a blur as white light burst from the ceiling, shining over the dance floor for a few seconds before tossing it back into shadowy darkness.

People were everywhere, sitting at high, round tables and lounging on oversized couches and chairs under alcoves. The center of the floor was a mess of twisting, churning bodies, arms up and hair flying. Overlooking the throng of dancers was a raised stage shaped like a horseshoe. Rapidly flickering bulbs lit the edge of the stage, and dancers up there urged on the crowd below with their shouts and their hips.

“This place is pretty wild, isn’t it?” Heidi curled her arm around mine.

My wide gaze bounced from person to person as the scent of perfume and cologne mingled. “Yeah.”

“I so want to get on that stage.” Heidi grinned when my eyes widened. “That is my goal for the night.”

“Well, it’s always good to have goals,” I replied dryly. “But can’t you just walk up there?”

Her brows lifted and she laughed. “No. You have to be *invited* up there.”

“By who? God?”

She snorted. “Something like that—” She squeaked suddenly. “There she is.”

“Where?” Eager to see this girl, I scanned the crowd.

Heidi stepped into my side and slowly turned so our bodies were angled toward one of the large shadowy recesses behind the tables. “*There.*”

Soft candlelight lit the alcove, casting a glow over the area. I doubted candles were safe in a bar, but what did I know? More oversized chairs flanked a gold-trimmed, crushed red velvet couch that looked like an antique. Two of the chairs were occupied. I could see only profiles. One was a blond guy staring down at his phone. His jaw was clenched like he was trying to snap a walnut shell in two with his teeth.

Across from him was another guy with a shockingly blue Mohawk—like, Smurf blue. His head was thrown back, and even though I couldn’t hear him, I could tell he was letting out a laugh of the deep-belly variety. My gaze shifted to his left.

I saw her then.

Good Lord, girl was gorgeous.

Easily a head taller than Heidi and I, she had the most awesome haircut *ever*. Her dark hair was buzzed on one side and shoulder length on the other, showing off the sculpted angles of her face. I was so jealous of that haircut, because I didn’t have the courage or the face to pull something like that off. She looked a little bored as she eyed the dance floor. I started to turn back to Heidi, but then a tall figure cut in front of the girl and sat on the couch.

It was a man with sandy-blond hair cropped close to the skull. The haircut reminded me of what you saw from guys in the military. From what I could see of his profile, he appeared to be older than we were. Maybe in his midtwenties? A little older? He didn’t exactly look happy. His mouth was moving a mile a minute. My gaze shifted to who he’d sat down next to.

My lips parted on a soft inhale.

The reaction was startling and embarrassing. I sort of wanted to smack myself, but in my defense, the guy was stunning, the kind of beauty that almost didn't seem real at first.

Messy brown hair toppled over his forehead in waves and curls. Even from where I was standing, I could tell that his face knew no bad angle, the kind of face that needed no filter. Impossibly high and broad cheekbones were paired with a carved, square jaw. His mouth really was a work of art, full and tipped up on one corner, forming a rather impressive smirk as he eyed the man who'd sat next to him. I was too far to away to see his eyes, but I imagined they were just as striking as the rest of him.

But the allure went beyond the physical.

Power and authority radiated from him, sending an odd shiver curling down my spine. Nothing about what he was wearing stood out—just dark jeans and a gray shirt with something written on it. Maybe it was the way he was sitting, thighs spread and one arm tossed over the back of the couch. Everything about the lazy sprawl looked arrogant and somehow misleading. He appeared as if he were seconds away from taking a nap even as the man beside him became more animated, but there was the distinct impression in the way his fingers tapped along the gold trim that said he could spring into action at any given second.

“Do you see her?” Heidi asked, startling me.

Goodness, did I forget Heidi was there or something? I had, which meant I needed to get a grip. Dude was hot, but come on. I was here for Heidi.

I dragged my gaze from the guy and then nodded. None of these people, except for the blond guy and the one who'd just sat down, looked old enough to be anywhere near this club. Then again, neither did we. “Is that her?”

“Yes. That's Emery.” She squeezed my arm. “What do you think?”

“She's really pretty.” I glanced over at Heidi. “Are you going to go over and talk to her?”

“I don't know. I think I'm going to let her come to me.”

“Seriously?”

Heidi nodded as she sucked her bottom lip between her teeth. “The last three times, I approached her. I think I’m going to let her find her way to me this time. Like, see if it’s just a one-sided interest or not, you know?”

My brows rose as I stared at my friend. Heidi was not shy or patient, nor did she get nervous. That could only mean one thing. I clasped my hands together. “You’re really into her, aren’t you?”

“I like her,” Heidi said after a moment. A small grin appeared. “I just want to make sure she likes me.” She lifted a shoulder. “We’ve talked a little and danced, but she hasn’t asked for my number or asked to meet up outside of here.”

“Have you asked for hers?”

“No.”

“Will you?”

“Hoping she’ll make that move.” Heidi exhaled loudly. “I’m being stupid. I should just ask for hers and get it over with.”

“You’re not being stupid. I would be doing the same thing, but I think you should at least ask for her number tonight. *That* should be your goal.”

“True,” she replied, forehead creasing. “But that stage . . .”

“Stop with the stage.” I laughed.

The truth was, I wasn’t the best person to be dispensing relationship advice. I’d only ever been in one somewhat serious relationship, and Brandon and I had lasted a whopping three months, ending right before summer.

I broke up with him over text.

Yep.

I was that person.

As awful as it was to admit to even myself, I’d only gone out with Brandon because all my friends had been coupling off and, well, peer pressure was a bitch and I wanted to feel whatever it was they kept going on and on about every time they posted online or in their snaps. I wanted to be . . . I wanted to know what that felt like. I wanted to fall in love.

And all I did was fall into boredom.

I drew in a shallow breath as my gaze found its way back to the couch, the one with the guy with the messy bronze hair. He looked about my age. Maybe a year or two older. Instinct told me that anything to do with him would not be boring. “Who . . . who is that?”

Heidi seemed to know who I was talking about without my pointing him out. “His name is Luc.”

“Just Luc?”

“Yep.”

“No last name?”

She laughed as she spun me around, away from them. “Never heard his last name. He’s just Luc, but you see the blond guy who appears as friendly as a rabid porcupine?”

“The one looking at his phone?” I smiled, because that felt like a good description of the guy.

She started walking around the dance floor, pulling me with her. “He’s a Luxen.”

“Oh.” I resisted the urge to look over my shoulder to see if he was wearing a metal band around his wrist. I hadn’t noticed it when I saw the phone in his hands.

The band was known as a Disabler, a form of technology that neutralized the Luxen’s otherworldly talents, which were derived by what the Luxen called the Source. *The Source*. Still sounded completely made-up, but it was real and it was deadly dangerous. If they attempted to go all Luxen on someone, the Disabler stopped them by releasing shocks equivalent to being hit by a Taser. While that wasn’t pleasant for anyone, it was particularly painful and debilitating to the Luxen.

Not to mention, all public spaces were designed to immediately quell any incidents that may arise with the Luxen. The shiny reddish-black metal above every door and the specks in the ceilings of most establishments were some kind of aerosol weapons that had no effect on humans.

Luxen?

Whatever mist it dispensed supposedly caused extreme pain. I’d never seen it happen—thankfully—but my mom had. She’d told me it was one of the worst things she’d ever witnessed.

I doubted Foretoken had such a weapon installed.

Because I was nosy, I asked, "Is Luc a Luxen?"

"Probably. Never been close enough to him to tell for sure, but I'm guessing he is." Their eye color was usually a dead giveaway, as was the Disabler. All registered Luxen were required to wear them.

We stopped near the stage, and Heidi slipped her arm free. "But the guy with the blue hair? He's definitely human. I think his name is Kent or Ken."

"Cool," I murmured, curling an arm over my stomach. My wristlet dangled. "What about Emery?"

Heidi looked over my shoulder at Emery. Relations of the fun and naughty kind between humans and Luxen were illegal. No one could stop a Luxen and a human from getting together, but the two couldn't marry and they faced hefty fines if their relationship was reported.

"She's human," Heidi answered.

I honestly couldn't care less if a Luxen and human wanted to engage in a little bow-chicka-bow-wow. Not like it impacted me on any level, nor was it any of my business, but relief still swept through me. I was happy that Heidi wasn't trying to get involved with someone she'd have to hide her relationship with while also risking paying thousands of dollars or going to jail if she couldn't pay it. Heidi would be eighteen soon. The responsibility to pay such a ridiculous fine wouldn't fall on her family.

I glanced up at the stage again, spotting the girl dancing closest to us. "Wow. She's beautiful."

Heidi followed my stare and nodded. The girl was older with a head full of shimmery blond hair. She spun and twisted, her body snakelike in its movements.

Arms in the air, hands clasped together, the girl whirled, and her skin was . . . it was fading and blurring around the edges, almost like she was disappearing right in front of us.

Luxen.

The girl was definitely on the away team. Luxen had this wild ability to assimilate our DNA and look like this, like humans, but

that wasn't their true appearance. When they were in their real form, they glowed like a high-watt lightbulb. I'd never seen what was under all the bright light, but my mom told me they had skin that was nearly translucent. Kind of like a jellyfish's.

Heidi cast a grin over at me. "I'm going to dance. You coming?"

I hesitated as I looked at the teeming throng. I did love to dance . . . in the privacy of my bedroom, where I could look like a double-jointed Muppet. "I'm going to grab a water first."

She pointed a finger at me. "You better join me."

Maybe I would, but just not now. As I backed up, I watched her disappear onto the mass of twisting bodies, and then I wheeled around and moved along the edge of the stage. I made my way to the bar, squeezing between two occupied stools. The bartender was down at the other end of the bar, and I had no idea how to get his attention. Should I lift my hand and wave it around like I was hailing a cab? I didn't think so. That would look stupid. How about the three-finger Hunger Games salute? I'd just seen the movie on TV last weekend. A marathon of all four movies had been playing, so I felt like I could pull it off. *I volunteer for a glass of water.*

Luckily, the bartender was slowly making his way to where I stood. I opened my wristlet and tapped on the screen of my phone. There was a missed text from Zoe. A call from April and—

An odd feeling started at the nape of my neck. It was like a breath with no air. It traveled down my spine, raising the tiny hairs all over my body. It felt like . . .

It felt like someone was standing right behind me.

I zipped up my tiny purse and then glanced over my shoulder, half expecting to come face-to-face with someone, but no one was there. At least not creepily close or anything. I scanned the crowd. There were so many people, but no one seemed to be paying any attention to me. The feeling, though, it only increased.

I swallowed hard as my gaze tracked over to that alcove.

The guy who'd sat down was gone, but the big guy in overalls—Mr. Clyde—was inside. He was leaning over that old-looking couch, speaking to Luc, and Luc was—*oh God*—he was

staring straight at me. Anxiety burst open, spreading through my system like a noxious weed.

Did Clyde realize we had fake IDs?

Okay. Wait a second. He had to have known from the moment we came in that we had fake IDs, and even if he now had a problem with the IDs, why would he report that to Luc? I was being ridiculously paranoid—

“Yo. Need a drink?”

Twisting back to the bar, I nodded nervously. Bartender was a Luxen. Those bright green eyes were definitely not in the human color wheel. My gaze dipped. The silver band was tight around his wrist. “Just a, um, a water.”

“Coming up.” He grabbed a plastic cup, filling it up with water he poured from a bottle, and then shoved a clear straw into it. “No charge.”

“Thanks.” I took the cup and then slowly turned back around. What to do? What to do?

Sipping my drink, I ambled around the stage and stopped by a pillar that looked like a unicorn had puked glitter all over it. I stretched up on the tips of my toes and scanned the crowd until I found Heidi.

A wide smile broke out across my face. She wasn’t alone. Emery had come to her, and she was eyeing Heidi like I eyed tacos on most days.

That was what I wanted at some point in my life, for someone to look at me like I looked at tacos.

Heidi’s back was to me, her shoulders swaying as Emery’s arm swept around Heidi’s waist. I so wasn’t going to bust up their little dance party. I would wait until they were done. Meanwhile, I was going to do my best not to think about how I looked lurking by the edge of the dance floor. Since I knew I probably looked pretty dumb. Maybe even a little creepy. I took another drink. Wasn’t like standing here all night was a viable—

“Evie?”

I turned at the sound of a vaguely familiar voice. Shock splashed

through me. A girl from school stood behind me. We had had class together last year. English. “Colleen?”

She smiled as she tilted her head. The tops of her cheekbones glittered. She had the smoky eye thing going on, just like me. “What in the world are you doing here?”

I lifted a shoulder. “Just hanging out. You?”

“With some friends.” Her brows knitted as she tucked several strands of blond hair behind her ear. “I didn’t know you hung out here.”

“Um, this is my first time.” I took a sip of water as I glanced over my shoulder. I didn’t know Colleen all that well, so I had no idea if this was something she did every weekend or if this was her first time here too. “Do you come here a lot?”

“Sometimes.” She smoothed a hand over the skirt of her dress. It was a slightly lighter blue than mine, and strapless. “I didn’t know you liked to come—” Her head jerked toward the dance floor, and her flushed cheeks deepened in color. I thought maybe someone had called her name. “I’ve got to go. You’ll be here for a while?”

I nodded, having no idea how long I’d be here.

“Cool.” She started backing up, grinning. “We should chat later. Okay?”

“Okay.” I wiggled my fingers at her and watched as she turned, slipping past the churning bodies along the edge of the dance floor. I knew that people from school came here, but I guess I hadn’t been expecting to see anyone, which was stupid—

A hand landed on my shoulder. Startled, I jumped and water splashed over my hands and hit the front of my dress. Wrenching forward, I pulled away from the grip and spun around, prepared to throat-punch whoever had grabbed me, like my mom had taught me. I froze, my stomach dropping as I found myself staring into the studded face of Mr. Clyde.

Oh, this couldn’t be good.

“Hi?” I said weakly.

“You need to come with me.” The hand on my shoulder grew heavier. “Now.”