

Pushed

{ A Sense Thieves Novel }

**Never reveal
your secrets...**

CORRINE
JACKSON



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Pushed

{ A Sense Thieves Novel }

*Never reveal
your secrets...*

CORRINE
JACKSON



BOOKS BY CORRINE JACKSON

If I Lie

The Sense Thieves series

Touched

Pushed

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CORRINE JACKSON



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To my dear friend, Kari—

*“Writing” at Starbucks, daily sanity checks, asthma-inducing laughter—
these are the things a lifelong friend is made of.*

*Love,
Me*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my agent, Laura Bradford, thank you for loving this series and kindly talking me down from the ledge of a deadline meltdown, tears and all. It helps to know that you'll be there when I freak out.

I was lucky enough to work with two editors on this book. Megan Records, thank you for enthusiastically climbing aboard when my plot jumped rails. My wide-eyed terror turned to outright laughter at your love of a certain character that would not stay where I'd assigned him. And to Martin Biro, you took over mid-series, and you made the transition seamless. I will forever be grateful for that and your dedication ever since. The team at KTeen has been amazing to work with, especially Vida Engstrand, Craig Bentley, Arthur Maisel, Alicia Condon, Colleen Andrews, and Alexandra Nicolajsen.

I wrote this book in my final semester at Spalding University's MFA program with the encouragement of my faculty mentor, Mary Yukari Waters, who had a way of seeing my plot holes before I fell in them. I was also lucky enough to workshop the first chapters in Italy with faculty mentor Lesléa Newman and fellow students Emily Smith, Lisa McShane, Cheri Thomas, Crystal Gold, Leah Henderson, and Kathie Wrightson.

Some readers proved invaluable in giving me feedback on various drafts. To Kari Young, Jay Lehmann, Stephanie Kuehn, and Karen Langford, you are the best critique group bar none. And to my beta readers, Gina Rosati, Kari Young, Debra Driza, and Jennifer Shaw Wolf, your notes and comments made a world of difference.

Lots of love to the Class of 2k12, Bookanistas, Apocalyp-sies, and YA Rebels groups for seeing me through a crazy year.

And last, but never least, Kym, my smart, generous sister, you manage my launch parties like Martha Stewart so I can fret about reading and having the right Sharpie. Steve, you always nag me for my next book, and that is the BEST compliment. Mom, you flyer parking lots like a pro. To all of my family, thank you for the love, support, and story fodder. I love you more than SpaghettiOs and llamas, though not necessarily in that order.

From Track 2 on Remy O'Malley's iPod:

Protectors found the key to immortality. If they killed a Healer, they absorbed her energy and became immortal. Her energy cured them of any possible sickness, including the greatest disease—aging. See, the war was never really about money. Oh yeah, the Protectors were greedy, too, but what they wanted was eternal youth.

But nothing comes for free. The Protectors got their immortality all right, but it cost them. When they stole a Healer's energy, they got more than they counted on. The surge of energy shorted out their systems, and the Protectors lost the use of most of their senses. Touch, taste, smell—all gone in the blink of an eye.

Can you imagine living forever and never being able to feel another person's touch?

It's ironic, isn't it? The Protectors are in a living hell of their own making, and the Healers are the only ones who can cure them.

Since the Protectors discovered what they'd done, they've been hunting the few Healers that remain. Those Healers caught have a single fate: death. It's your energy, see? It's like radiation for cancer patients: a full dose kills what makes them human while a small dose is therapeutic. It makes them feel alive again. They take their time to draw it out, keep a Healer like a pet to feel a little at a time, until the Healer is all used up. Dead. The sensations never last long, though, so they are always on the hunt for another Healer to feed on.

But some time ago, we made a discovery of our own. It's another reason why I kept you hidden all these years. Because of what you can do. You're not like other Healers.

Oh Remy, you have the power to make them mortal again.

It's what they want more than anything, and they'll kill you to get it. If you think they've found you, run. Because if they catch you . . . Don't. Get. Caught.

Now, the third track will tell you how to find your grandfather. I should've taken you to him long ago, but I couldn't . . . I ignored my instincts and we ended up . . . You're better than I am, kid.

Trust your instincts.

CHAPTER ONE

Gabe Blackwell never saw me coming.

In the tick of a hummingbird's wings, I had launched myself at his back, taking him down in a tangle of arms and legs. Our bodies hit the blue mat in the middle of the Blackwells' gym with a thud that shivered from my teeth to my backbone.

Gabe's breath hissed out when Asher, leaning against a rack of weights, laughed at his older brother's defeat at the hands of a gangly girl half his size. I took advantage of Gabe's distraction to wrap an arm around his neck, putting the whole of my weight into pinning him. My height rivaled his, with me close to six feet and him just over, but he had a good sixty pounds of muscle on me. Unwilling to loosen my hold for even a second, I considered biting him in retribution for the thousand times he'd insulted me. And then I wondered if I might have given away my abnormal speed. I really hoped not.

"What is it you're always yelling at me?" I pretended to think about it, enjoying my little victory over my boyfriend's brother. With his sculpted features, Gabe never lacked for company, and he never let anyone forget it. I savored any opportunity I had to take his ego down a notch. "Oh right. I remember now. Never turn your back on the enemy, Protector."

Gabe cursed and cut my amusement short when his muscles tightened and gathered under me. He might look twenty to my eighteen, but Gabe had lived more than a century, and his experience with our powers surpassed mine. Too late, I tried to strengthen my grip. The thought had scarcely occurred to me when I found my face planted in the mat with his knee bending my spine like a bow.

"I also told you to concentrate instead of getting cocky." The cheer in Gabe's proper British voice grated on my nerves. "Now, be a good little mortal, and say it."

His humiliating version of saying "uncle," he meant. Ten minutes ago I'd bet him that I could take him down in a fair fight, and he'd agreed with terms of his own if I lost.

"Come on, Healer. Say it. Tell me I'm the greatest Protector who ever lived."

His knee pressed harder, as he settled in with more of his weight. Grunting, I tested my range of motion and felt an electric storm of agony gathering inside my body. Powerful energy, but not enough to turn the tables. *Almost there, you smug jackass.*

"All right." Defeat colored my tone, and my body went limp. "You win. I'll say it."

I could picture the smirk on his carved, handsome face, and I used the anger to steel myself against the coming pain. In an explosion of movement, my body jerked backward, forcing his knee to dig in that little bit more I needed. A disk popped in my spine and slid sideways. The tempest exploded out of me, firing my pain into Gabe. Another *pop* and he collapsed with a *thump* next to me, his back now screwed up, too. Poetic justice. In the quiet that followed, I pressed my cheek into the cushioned mat and studied my nemesis, curled up in the fetal position next to me.

My voice came out weaker than I intended when I declared, "I am the greatest

Protector who ever lived.”

Asher choked on a laugh and came to kneel at my side. With his dark chocolate hair falling forward to cover the two-inch white scar cutting through one eyebrow, he looked like a less perfect, leaner version of Gabe. The concern in his dark green eyes almost made up for the pain. He hated watching Gabe pound me in these training sessions, but he’d tried training me himself and it had been a disaster. We’d been too afraid of hurting each other to take it seriously, and we both knew the training was necessary. I could choose to ignore the danger in the world I’d fallen into these last months, or I could do my damndest to be prepared for the day the other Protectors—the ones who were not like these two—found me. Was there really a choice when it came to protecting my new family? My dad, stepmom, and sister needed me to be ready.

“You okay?” Asher asked, looping a wayward strand of blond hair behind my ear.

Are you kidding? I shut Gabe up for once. I’m friggin’ brilliant. Except I think I need a chiropractor.

Asher smiled at my triumphant thoughts, more at ease with hearing my voice in his head than any person should be. Our bonding had its ups and downs. “Want my help?” he asked.

He meant to allow me to use his Protector energy to heal myself.

I shook my head. “Let me take care of Gabe first.”

Asher nodded and eased me closer to his brother.

“Would either of you care to explain what happened?” Gabe said in a tight voice.

He lay unmoving, his spine out of alignment in an injury that mirrored mine. Unused to the return of their sense of touch after a century of feeling nothing, all the Blackwells suffered when my power reminded them what it felt like to be human. Of course, Gabe rarely let me get close enough to use my ability on him, and I couldn’t really blame him. The two times I’d slipped through his defenses during training had resulted in my breaking his arm and dislocating his shoulder. And now this.

I didn’t particularly like Gabe, but pain humanized him. It tightened the corners of his green eyes, making him look vulnerable. For once, he reminded me of Asher, instead of his usual distant self. I fought the instinct to comfort him, knowing he would tear me apart before admitting to a weakness.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I answered, setting aside my pain. “I took you down. I wiped the floor with you. It was a WWF Smackdown, and I won. Twice.”

“Like hell you did.”

He breathed through his nose when I ran a hand over his spine. I couldn’t loan him my energy like the Protectors could do for Healers, but I could use my own to reorganize his insides. Gabe didn’t like my touch, or the sensations it brought with it, but he put up with it at times like these. Taking pity on him, I adjusted my ability to the workings of his immortal body. The racing heart, the sleek, oiled machinery that ran hotter and faster than any human’s; these things had to be accounted for when I sent my energy unwinding into his body. The *hum* of my power charged the air, and green sparks crackled where my fingers touched him.

“Twice,” I crowed, and Gabe groaned when his back snapped into realignment.

I patted him on the shoulder because the friendly gesture would annoy him, and then collapsed on my stomach, shivering with the near hypothermia that always set in

after a difficult healing. A warm hand stroked down my spine, and a little of Asher's familiar power seeped into me. Closing my eyes, I borrowed his energy to imagine my spine realigned and perfect. I winced when the slipped disk nestled back into place with a sickening *crunch*. Sighing, I rested a moment, enjoying the heat of his skin through my shirt. This was how Protectors and Healers were meant to work together. Before the War. Before the Protectors had nearly hunted the Healers into extinction.

A few moments later, I let Asher haul me to my feet. Both of my arms slipped around his waist to press closer to him, and his fingers caught the belt loops of my jeans to keep me there. He smelled of everything I loved—the woods, the sea, and him.

Gabe rose to his feet with easy grace and stared at us with open disgust. He couldn't figure out how I'd overpowered him, even for a brief moment. In our months of training, I'd never been able to match his speed or strength. Despite my height, I had no curves and most seven-year-old boys had more muscles than me.

My only defense against Gabe had been my ability to transfer my injuries to him, but I couldn't control that power and it only worked after he'd hurt me, and only if I could catch him. Odds had been against me 99.9 percent of the time, which meant a lot of bruises for me and scarcely a scratch on him.

But things had changed a month ago when my stepfather had arrived in Blackwell Falls, Maine. He'd kidnapped me from my new home and nearly tortured me to death. Dean had shot my half sister, Lucy, so he could see how my powers worked when I healed her. Asher had almost died, too, when he stepped in front of a bullet meant for me. To save us both, I had hijacked Asher's energy, using it to stop Dean. My stepfather had died that night, though only Lucy, the Blackwells, and I knew that.

I'd thought that I would die, too, when I'd healed Asher and returned his powers. Two days later I'd woken up in the hospital and discovered instead that some of his abilities had remained in my body. A tiny detail I'd hidden from Gabe with every intention of getting a little petty revenge for all the times he'd mocked and threatened me.

"Show him, Remy," Asher said, his accent falling somewhere between American and British.

I frowned into his T-shirt, the soft blue cotton warm from his skin. "Do I have to? I like him so much better when he's not acting like he's a god."

His voice hinted at a smile. "I know, *mo cridhe*, but it's time to come clean."

If we were together for fifty years, I'd never tire of Asher calling me "my heart" in Gaelic.

"Then I'll never stop saying it," he said, answering my thought. "Stop stalling, and show him."

Sighing, I stepped back from Asher and turned to face Gabe. "Remember when Asher was dying, and he forced his power on me?"

Asher winced at my description. He'd meant to allow me enough time to save myself from Dean, to heal my injuries. None of us had known that the immortality went both ways, or that I could become like them.

Gabe waited in watchful silence.

"Even though I returned his power when I healed him, it changed me."

"Changed you how, Remy?" His low tone reminded me how dangerous Protectors

could be. His rare use of my name sent the bad kind of shiver down my spine.

I sucked in a breath and let it out in a rush. “Like this.”

A heartbeat later, I’d done two laps around Gabe in a time that would have shamed an Olympic sprinter. The breeze of my movement still ruffled his wavy brown hair long after I’d returned to Asher’s side. To any stranger, Gabe’s stony expression remained inscrutable, but the tic in his left eye said there would be hell to pay for hiding this new ability from him.

Too calmly, he said, “This happened in May, and it’s now June. It’s been weeks. Neither of you thought to mention this?”

Asher took a not-so-subtle step in front of me, and I glared at his back. *Don’t do that. I don’t need you to protect me from your brother.* I considered slugging him when he ignored my thought, but that mental image had no effect on him, either.

“It didn’t matter before,” Asher said. “Remy’s been too weak to train until she recovered from her injuries. She’s better, so we’re telling you now.”

I tried to shove Asher to the side, but even with my increased strength, he proved immobile. Rolling my eyes, I moved to race around him. He heard my intention and grasped the waist of my shirt in his fist to keep me at his side.

Contrary to what you may think, you Neanderthal, this behavior stopped being attractive the first time you were eighteen.

Asher shrugged in response, and I scowled.

“Enough,” Gabe commanded, irritated. He hated it when his brother and I communicated silently, leaving him out of the conversation because he couldn’t hear my thoughts, too.

Giving up on the tug-of-war with my shirt, I told Gabe, “It was my idea. I wanted to try out my new powers in a fight with you. Learn my limits. And it worked. I learned something.”

“What’s that?” Gabe asked.

His curiosity sparked, temporarily overcoming his anger as I’d known it would. There had never been another like me with half-Healer, half-Protector blood that we knew about. Every time we thought we knew the limits of my powers, I surprised us all by breaking one of Gabe’s bones from across the room during training or causing all of the Blackwells to smell roses when they had traded their senses of touch, taste, and smell to become immortal long ago.

“You’ve been going easy on me all this time, you big softy,” I said. Gabe looked pissed at my accusation, and I laughed, adding in a singsong voice, “Come on, admit it. You *like* me.”

Hate would have been a better description of the expression on his face. Healers and Protectors were natural enemies. At best, Gabe put up with me because he loved his brother almost as fiercely as I did. We’d settled on an uneasy truce based on that fact alone. Yet, I could never forget that if not for Asher, Gabe might have killed me the first time our paths crossed. Or worse, I could have ended up bonded to him, the eldest brother, instead of Asher in the natural order of things between our bloodlines.

The idea of Gabe reading my thoughts and using his energy to heal my injuries, freaked me out. I loved Asher, and I’d only just grown used to our connection and the way he could read my mind, fighting it every step of the way since we’d met when I moved to Blackwell Falls to live with my dad three months ago.

Gabe knew the relief I felt bonding to his younger brother instead of him, and whatever he thought about it, he never said. He criticized and bullied me, and I retaliated by teasing him and shoving back. And Asher stood between us, ready to keep us from doing too much damage to each other in the process.

Gabe raised one dark eyebrow at my taunt. "I like you about as much as you like me, I suspect."

I grinned. "Too true."

If I believed Gabe had a sense of humor, I might have thought the corner of his mouth twitched up in amusement. Thank goodness that was impossible. I couldn't handle Gabe if he started cracking jokes. Swinging back toward Asher, I punched his arm, hurting my hand more than I hurt him.

"What was that for?"

"You could have told me that Gabe was holding back all this time." Even with my increased power, he'd taken me down with ease. No way had he been using his full strength in our training before now. Which meant I had more to worry about with the Protectors than I'd realized.

Asher shrugged again. "To what end? Would you rather I have let him break your neck to demonstrate our superior strength?" Before I could punch him again, he grabbed my hand and massaged the bruised knuckle, raising it to his lips. "I happen to like you the way you are, and I'd prefer not finding out what would happen if Gabe harmed you beyond repair."

Though he kept his tone light, the tension in his shoulders hinted at his true feelings. Despite his loyalty to his family and loved ones, he would fight anyone who hurt me. He'd proven that when Gabe threatened me long ago in a wayward attempt to protect their sister, Lottie.

Sighing, I curved my hand to his square jaw. His messy hair had grown past the collar of his shirt and begged my fingers to run through it.

Asher's full lips curved, and he opened my palm to press a kiss in it. "You're doing it again."

Doing what?

Leaning down, he whispered in my ear, "Thinking about how irresistible you find me."

Gabe snorted when he heard Asher. Damned superpower hearing. It was one ability that I hadn't kept when I'd returned Asher's powers.

"Could we get back to the matter at hand? I have things to do, if the two of you could unglue yourselves from each other."

Asher and I separated with reluctance. Seeing the way Gabe's body tensed, I realized the constant *hum* of my Healer power was hurting him again. Slowly, I raised my mental defenses to protect the Blackwells, blocking Asher from my mind in the process. Caving to the inevitable, I described in detail the increased strength and speed that had been added to my repertoire of healing and sometimes causing injuries. Not immortal like the Protectors or defenseless like the Healers, but something else.

Gabe shot Asher a meaningful look when I finished, and Asher nodded, rubbing his forehead as if a headache had formed there.

Before I could question them, two female voices sounded in the hall outside the gym. Lottie and Lucy were arguing from the sound of it.

“You can’t go in there!”

Despite her protest, Lottie had already given up the fight or my petite, powerless sister would have found herself deposited in the forest outside the Blackwells’ Victorian-style manor in five seconds flat. Lucy proved me right by shoving past her. My sister had not forgiven Lottie for threatening to reveal my existence to the type of Protectors who would have killed me. Neither had Asher, for that matter, and sometimes I felt bad for Lottie. She didn’t want anything to do with me, or the pain I caused her with my proximity. I couldn’t really blame her for that.

My half sister and I couldn’t have looked more different. Where I had my mother’s wavy, dirty-blond hair and our father’s height, blue eyes, and tanned skin, Lucy had my stepmother’s short red curls, petite frame, brown eyes, and pale skin. Her head skimmed my shoulder when we stood next to each other.

Our upbringings had been polar opposites, too. While Dean had started beating me at eleven, Lucy had been protected and safe, ignorant of Protectors and Healers. I’d wanted to hate her when my father moved me here from New York City, but my sister had made that impossible, accepting me even when she found out what I was. She’d even helped me hide the truth from our friends and parents to protect me.

“Seriously, Lottie, get the hell out of my way,” Lucy said.

She strode to Asher and me, ignoring Lottie and Gabe, who terrified her still. The only Blackwell she liked was Asher, and that was because of how I felt about him.

“Hey, Asher,” she said. “Sorry to barge in on you.”

“Not a problem. You’re always welcome here,” he said, acting like my sister showed up at his house every day.

“Remy, you finally got a response to the ad today,” Lucy said. “I thought you’d want to read it right away.”

She held out a sheet of paper, and my hand shook when I took it from her and traced the return e-mail address. My mother had told me that if I ever wanted to reach my grandfather, I should put a death notice for my grandmother in the *New York Times*. The contact information for a false funeral home would be the key to reaching out to the sender. She’d promised that my grandfather had taught her that code before she left home at eighteen and would respond, but I hadn’t really believed her. She’d lied so often. I’d run the obituary twice, and Lucy had been helping me wade through the e-mail we’d received at the anonymous e-mail address we’d set up.

“Is it from him?”

Asher’s quiet question prodded me to read the e-mail. I wasn’t sure what I’d expected, but the tears that came to my eyes surprised me. Stunned, I looked up to find Asher and Lucy staring at me with varying degrees of anxiety. Gabe watched from a distance with his usual blank expression.

“Remy?” Lucy asked, rubbing my arm. “What did he say? Does he want to meet you?”

“Not exactly,” I said.

Asher’s relief was palpable. He’d supported my decision to find my grandfather, but not without worry. For good reason. My mother had told me how my grandfather had watched Protectors kill my grandmother, a powerful Healer. I’d inherited my abilities from her, and the Protectors had stolen her energy, trading it for a moment of sensation. The death of a Healer in exchange for immortality, but at the cost of their

ability to feel, taste, and smell. The death of a Healer to feel human again for five minutes before the sensation faded, and it was on to the next Healer. Who knew how my grandfather would react when he found out I loved a Protector? That I was half-Protector?

Lucy sympathized with me. "I'm sorry, sis. He doesn't deserve you."

Asher's eyes met mine over Lucy's shoulder when she hugged me. Even though he couldn't hear my thoughts through my mental defenses, he knew me. Knew I hadn't said everything. His hand slipped into mine, his heat warming my chilled skin. The familiar touch sent my defenses crashing to the ground, and he knew the truth as if he'd read the e-mail.

"No," I repeated. "He doesn't want to meet me. He wants me to come live with him."

CHAPTER TWO

“Like hell,” Asher said.

Looking around the room, I could see that Lucy and Gabe agreed with him. They acted like they supported my decision to contact my grandfather, but when confronted with the reality of the meeting happening, they all wanted me to forget he existed.

The paper crumpled in my hand, as Asher proceeded to outline all the reasons why I should not contact my grandfather again—we had no way of knowing if my grandfather could be trusted outside my mother’s word, and she hadn’t exactly been the most trustworthy person.

Not only had she allowed my stepfather to beat the hell out of me while she drank herself into a stupor, she’d forced me to witness her own beatings. And when I was old enough to heal both of our injuries, she’d hidden what she’d known about me being a Healer, leaving me alone and terrified by my ability. It was only after she died that I’d discovered what she’d known when I found the recordings she’d left on my iPod. Too little, too late.

And my grandfather had no idea she’d passed away.

Nobody gave me the chance to explain that the e-mail had been written to my mother. It had never occurred to me that he’d mistake me for her, thinking she’d placed the ad, but it should have. On top of everything, I would have to tell him his daughter had died at the hands of my stepfather. I opened my mouth to tell everyone this, but then Lucy started in with all the reasons I should ignore my grandfather’s e-mail.

My phone rang, and I gladly answered it when my friend Brandon’s name popped up on the screen.

“Hey, Brand. What’s up?”

“You haven’t forgotten Crimson Chaos is playing tonight?”

Brandon’s band often played at the Underground. We spoke for a few minutes, and I promised to see him later that night.

Irritated and hurt, I told the others, “I have to go.”

“Remy?”

Asher sounded worried, but I just wanted to be alone.

“I’ll see you later.”

Lucy and I left the Blackwells and went home to get ready. The e-mail was tucked into one of the boots in my closet for safekeeping, though I knew my dad and stepmother would never snoop through my belongings. They had no idea what I was, and I couldn’t take the chance they’d discover the truth because I left a letter lying around for them to find.

A crowd of teenagers had already packed into the Underground by the time Lucy and I arrived. From the small stage, Brandon’s band churned out a raw, aching sound that brought everyone to their feet. Bodies crashed into each other on the fingernail-

sized dance floor, bouncing off each other in a sweaty mess. With graduation only a few days away, the seniors celebrated the end of the school year in a feverish frenzy, and the lowerclassmen couldn't help but join in.

I hadn't told anyone yet, but I'd been accepted into two of the three premed programs I'd applied to. It wasn't like my dad not to press me for my post-high school plans, but I'd moved to Blackwell Falls in March and we'd only known each other a short time. I think Ben assumed I'd missed my chance to apply for the fall semester. He didn't know that I'd mailed off my applications months ago. Long before I had to question if college even mattered when every day brought the Protectors closer to my doorstep.

Wanting to forget everything for five minutes, I snaked my way through the crowd with Lucy, until we found a spot next to Greg and Susan on the dance floor. They had their arms around each other, more lost in each other than the music. Lucy and I grinned, delighted that our friends had gone from "just friends" to full-fledged couple. The pretty brunette had crushed on Greg forever before he'd realized he felt the same way about her.

Marina Gilbert, the lead singer of Brandon's band, jumped up and down with the microphone in her hand. Her short blue hair stood on end, and her eyes looked glazed as if she'd been drinking. What her voice lacked, the rest of the band made up for. Brandon hammered out a solo on his guitar, the lights playing over his pierced ears and the tattooed vines inked on his biceps. Like Lucy and Asher, Brandon had made me feel at home in this oceanside town, even going so far as to teach me to swim so I would be comfortable near the water. Watching him hit his groove, I screamed like a groupie, along with the others.

Hearing my shout, Brandon looked up and grinned when he spotted me. I pressed a button on my phone to light up the screen and waved it over my head like an impromptu lighter. Brandon threw back his head in a laugh.

A body bumped into mine, and strong arms slid around my waist. Asher leaned down to yell over the music, "I should have listened to you. Forgive me for being a jerk?"

The words tickled my ear, and I leaned back into his embrace, letting him support my weight. The warmth spread wherever we touched, and I thought, *Of course* and *I love you* and *Kiss me*.

My feet left the ground, and I found myself anchored to Asher's side, as he carried me off the dance floor. He pushed his way through the crowd, and his size demanded that people part. I laughed at his urgency and waved to my amused friends. Then we were outside on the club's secluded patio, and he caught my laugh with his mouth. Asher's hands grasped my hips and pulled me on my tiptoes so my mouth came flush with his. Full lips pressed into mine, and I sank into the heat, my fingers arrowing through his hair.

Against my eyelids, a fireworks show exploded. I was lost in Asher, and it didn't register right away that the green sparks were real. We pulled away at the same time, our disappointed sighs mingling. We'd forgotten to put our mental walls up. A side effect of my powers, the green sparks meant my body had set to curing his immortality, a little at a time. Not painful to either of us in these short spurts, but definitely capable of freaking out the innocent bystander who discovered us lighting

up the night.

He rested his forehead against mine, a slight grimace curving his mouth down. This had happened before. For some reason—perhaps because of my mixed blood—I affected Asher like no other Healer ever had. He regained the use of his human senses the more time we spent together, the more frequently we touched. And he lost his immortality the more time my body had to heal him. The last time I'd cured him entirely, I'd nearly killed him when my Protector instincts had kicked in and I'd stolen his energy. Returning his immortality had nearly killed me. Kissing like this without our guard up was stupid and reckless and breathtaking.

Longing to diffuse the tension, I said the first thing I could think of. "Oops?"

It worked. His tense body relaxed and he laughed, the sound rumbling through his chest and my body where we touched.

"You are far too tempting for your own good. And mine, come to think of it." His lips returned to nuzzle the corner of my mouth. "I'm adding a new rule. No thinking 'kiss me' in the middle of a crowded dance floor."

I let my head fall back so he could trail kisses from my jaw to my neck. "Uh-uh. No adding more rules. We hardly touch as it is."

We had a multitude of rules restricting when and how we were allowed to touch. One of us had to stay guarded when we kissed, which left both of us frustrated. These little forbidden tastes of what it would be like to lose control only made things harder.

Asher's hand slipped from my hip to the middle of my back. His fingers tangled in the long hair at my back, wrapping the waving length around his palm. "Mmm. We always seem to be surrounded by people. This is the first time we've been alone in days."

I tipped my head to meet his gaze. "We'd better make it worth it then."

"You're right." The teasing light that entered his green eyes should have clued me in. His hand grasped mine, and he whirled me away from him in a dizzying spin. "Dance with me, Remy."

I know what you're doing, but I'll let you get away with it. This time. He meant to distract us, to distract me from what we couldn't have.

We'd never danced together before. Asher had grown up in Victorian England, and I expected his moves to be old-fashioned, especially when you added in the messy, grinding beat of the music drifting from inside the club. Of course, Asher surprised me. The boy could seriously move his hips. Breathless and laughing, I let him spin me about the patio, tugging me close and digging into the rhythm. When the music stopped, we swayed together, not wanting the moment to end, and Asher tucked my head into the curve of his neck.

The slamming of the patio door jarred us back to reality.

We stepped apart, glancing about. Marina stumbled onto the patio with Brandon on her heels. Unsteady on her feet, she tripped and had to catch herself on a nearby table.

"Damn it, Rina. You completely screwed up the vocals on that entire last set."

Brandon sounded furious, as he reached out to steady her. I'd heard rumors that the band was having problems, but he hadn't mentioned anything.

"Piss off, Brandon. I don't need you in my face."

Marina's words slurred, and I wondered how much she'd had to drink tonight. The club didn't serve alcohol, but that didn't mean everyone didn't find a way to get it.

“You’re drunk!” Brandon yelled at her. “Son of a bitch, Rina. Do you know what a cliché you are? You’re out.”

“You think I care?” she screamed. She stepped forward and raised a fist to hit him. She started when instead she found her wrist clasped in Asher’s hand. She began to sob into his shirt, her rage fading as fast as it had appeared.

I wanted to help. I really did. But something stopped me. The mascara caked beneath her eyes and tracking down her cheeks. The sloppy movements. The uncontrolled outburst of emotion. Marina reminded me of my mother on a binge, and I froze, watching her thin shoulders heave.

After a minute, her crying subsided into a silence filled with the echoes of my past. If I could have shed my skin and run away, people would have found nothing but my pink shell on the patio floor. Brandon sighed and stepped toward Asher. He looped an arm over Marina’s shoulder and tried to peel her away. Her body slackened, and Asher caught her before she hit the concrete.

“Rina!”

Brandon helped lower her to the ground. I knew better than both of them what had happened. The signs had been there when she stood on stage and when she stepped onto the patio. Red face. Dilated pupils. Dizziness. And now unconsciousness. She wasn’t just drunk. She’d taken something.

I didn’t remember moving, but I was at her side, reaching for her when Asher knocked my hand away.

“Don’t even think about it, Remy.”

“What the hell, man?” Brandon saw Asher’s violent move, but didn’t understand the panic behind it. His shoulders squared, and I thought he might shove Asher.

“Brandon.” I placed a hand on his arm to get his attention. He glared at Asher, but finally turned to face me when I yelled his name again. “Brandon, what did Marina take?”

He shook his head, confused. “I don’t—I don’t know. She’s not breathing.”

“She’s OD’ing,” I explained. “Asher, you need to get help.”

“Like hell.”

I couldn’t read his mind, but his obstinate expression said he’d guessed I would try to heal Marina the second he walked away. He would stop me if I tried to touch her again.

“What is your problem?” Brandon looked ready to punch Asher, and suddenly I was fed up with both of them.

“Stop it!” I shouted. *Asher, so help me, if you make me watch this girl die, I will never forgive you.*

I knew he’d heard me when his expression turned bleak. “I can’t,” he whispered.

It’s not up to you. I decide. You’re no better than Dean if you try to control who I heal.

He reeled back as if I’d slapped him. He knew Dean had planned to use my ability to make a profit once he’d figured out what I was, and Asher knew that I’d hated my stepfather.

“Brandon, go get the manager. Now.” My eyes never left Asher’s when I ordered Brandon to leave. I wasn’t stupid. If this could be done without a witness, it would be best for all of us.