

Radiants

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Chapter 1

The first time I did it, my mom, who is about as chill as any parent anywhere, hit me. Slapped me across the face. This was after I confessed. She never would have known if I hadn't told her, and still she hit me. That's how pissed off she was.

She told me it was a violation, which I didn't even understand at first. I thought she meant it was against the rules—like a violation in sports—and I had pretty much figured that out when she slapped me. But no, she meant *violation* in a way I'd never heard the word used.

An invasion. A rape of the mind. She called it that, too. Her slap shocked me. When she called it a rape, I started to cry. I swore I'd never do it again, and she made me promise on my dad's grave, something she hadn't ever done before. I did, and I meant it.

I was twelve at the time. About the age my brother is now, and you just know Mom is aware of that. Hyper-aware.

I honored the promise I made that day. I had been tempted in the weeks and months and years since. Many, many times. But never once did I break my vow. Not until today.

#

Being a student at Mossdale High School sucked. I was a junior, and I guess I had it easier than some—the freshmen in particular—but the improvements from grade to grade were

marginal at best. It wasn't a function of age; it was this place. Mossdale High was too small, too old, too mean and sad and closed-minded. I suppose it was an accurate reflection of the entire town, but that didn't make it any easier to deal with.

It was hard enough for someone like me—boring, plain-looking, okay at a lot of things, but great at none of them. For my best friend Kyle, though, school was torture.

I had known Kyle since they were Sarah, since we were kids in pigtails—the two of us and Megan Galloway—riding our bikes through the misting rain that always seemed to fall on this part of Oregon. When we were thirteen, maybe a year after that incident with my mom, Kyle came out to me. By that time, we had been super close for so long that either of us could have come out as a zombie, and the other would have been fine with it.

The rest of Mossdale, though... Let's just say that zombie would have been easier. Most of Kyle's other friends, including Megan, were ready for gay, but not so much for non-binary. Friends shunned them. So did members of their family. Their mom and dad, who were super religious and conservative, totally freaked.

At Mossdale Middle School, the bullies and assholes swarmed out of the woodwork, and even though we'd moved on to high school, they hadn't gone away. It wasn't always the same ones. Sometimes I thought they took turns, like they had a chore calendar somewhere and could sign up. "Wednesday a.m.—Harass Kyle Reid."

Today, it was Grant Nelson's turn.

Kyle was beautiful. Their father was white, and their mother was Korean; Kyle had rich amber skin and these gorgeous, dark eyes. Their hair was silky black, shaved close on one side of

their head, short and wavy on the other side. Their face was roundish and perfect. The truth was, I'd been crushing on them since freshman year, but hadn't yet worked up the nerve to act on those feelings. We had joked for some time now that they were inconveniently curvy—their phrase—which made the non-binary thing harder for them than it might otherwise have been. They weren't especially tall or short; they were normal-sized, solid—not tiny by any means.

Next to Grant, though, they looked like a little kid. Grant was on the school football team. He was tall, broad—muscular from hours spent working out in the weight room with his buddies.

Kyle, on the other hand, had been studying jujutsu for years, since even before they came out to their family. Their father thought all kids, boys and girls, should be able to protect themselves, and Kyle was into it from the start. Maybe they knew even then that they would need the training; maybe they knew all along they were different and would put up with all sorts of shit because of it.

Late this morning, in between third and fourth periods, Kyle and I were walking from English to the math rooms, where they had algebra and I had geometry. As we started up the stairs to the second floor, we spotted Grant coming down with a couple of his jock pals. Kyle spotted them first, but kept talking, unwilling as always to be frightened into silence or timidity. We met them on the landing halfway up the stairway, where the flow of students narrowed to two single-file streams. As he passed, Grant threw his hip into Kyle, the way one hockey player hits another.

Kyle bounced off him like a pinball, slammed into the wall, and fell, dropping their books. Grant and his friends laughed. Kyle scrambled to their feet, and glared up at him, fists

clenched.

“Watch where you’re going,” Grant said. “Fucking tranny mutant.” This drew more chuckles from his idiot followers. The other students around us said nothing, made no sound. They watched, though, smelling blood.

“You should watch out yourself, shit-for-brains. You been forgetting to wear your helmet again?”

Grant’s face reddened. He shoved Kyle hard, hands hitting both their boobs. They stumbled into the wall again, but kept their feet.

“Got it in the tits,” Grant said. “I didn’t think it was supposed to have any.”

More laughter. The other students backed away, clearing a space on the landing. Kyle eased into their fighting stance, one I had seen them use at their dojo, and also in some of the short films they had made about their training. On top of everything else, Kyle was really good at making movies.

“I dare you to try that again,” they said.

“Kyle,” I whispered.

They flicked a glance my way. “It’s all right.” To Grant, they said, “C’mon.” A pause, and then, “Pussy.”

I held my breath.

Grant didn’t shove them again. He took a short step and threw a punch. Kyle ducked under it, lunged, grabbed Grant with both hands, and threw him down over their extended leg. At least that’s what they appeared to do. It all happened pretty fast. What I know is, Grant landed

hard on his back, breath leaving him in a *whoosh*. And while he was still down, Kyle hammered one punch into his face.

Blood spurted from Grant's nose. The kids around us gave a low, "Whoa" in unison. Except Grant's friends, who could only gape.

I had to keep myself from cheering.

Kyle gathered up their books. "And just so you know," they said, glaring down at Grant, who hadn't yet moved. "I'm enby. I'm not trans. Come on," they said to me, starting up the stairs. "We'll be late for math."

I stared at Grant for another moment, watching as he blinked and dabbed at the blood covering his lips and chin. Then I followed Kyle.

"That was amazing."

"Pretty basic move, actually."

"Well, I couldn't do it."

I grinned. They did, too.

Kyle went into Mr. Gentry's classroom for algebra. I walked to the next room, Ms. Gill's, and took my usual seat near the back beside the window. From there, I had a clear view of the white board, the door, and the clock above it. I pulled out my notebook as the bell rang to start fourth period, and soon was fighting my way through a blizzard of theorems and corollaries.

About ten minutes into class, raised voices echoed in the hallway outside the classroom. All of us stared at the window in the door, craning our necks to see. Even Ms. Gill, cat-eye glasses perched on her nose, paused to glance that way. I knew immediately the commotion was

about Kyle. That awesome display they put on in the stairwell was bound to bring trouble. Grant would make sure of it.

I stood, drawing a frown from Ms. Gill.

“Miss Preston, please sit down.”

“I need to use the bathroom.” I met her gaze, the lie coming easily.

“Class just started. You had your chance in passing period.”

“I have English before this. It’s too long a walk.”

The teacher’s frown deepened. “I think—”

“I really have to go,” I said, crossing to the door. She called after me, but I didn’t slow.

As soon as I was in the hallway, I saw Kyle walking beside a small, silver-haired woman I assumed was Mrs. Bryant, the principal’s secretary. I followed. After a moment I spoke Kyle’s name and hurried to catch up with them.

Both turned. Kyle gave a small shake of their head. Mrs. Bryant eyed me, lips pursed in disapproval, the loose skin at her neck shifting with the mild palsy that kept her head moving.

“Go back to your class,” she said, her voice as dry as dead wood.

“I saw what happened. There should be a witness when they talk to Mr. Perry.”

“Mr. Nelson has already told the principal what happened.”

I chuffed a laugh. “Yeah, I’ll bet he did.”

“Go back to your class.”

I crossed my arms, raised my chin a little.

Her lips flattened into a hard line, but she twitched a shoulder. “Fine,” she said and

walked on.

Kyle shot me a look and shook their head a second time. I ignored them, and we fell in step a half pace behind the shuffling secretary.

Upon entering the suite of administrative offices, I spotted Grant sitting on a bench outside Mister Perry's door. Blood stained the front of his T-shirt and his nose was swollen and red. He glared at me and wouldn't even look at Kyle. I could imagine the story he'd told. Lie layered upon lie to distort the basic truth: that Kyle, a foot shorter and a hundred pounds lighter, had beat him bloody.

Mrs. Bryant waved a hand at two chairs opposite Grant's bench and let herself into Mr. Perry's office. Kyle and I sat, both of us angling our bodies away from Grant.

"They're never going to let you in there with me," Kyle said. "You're just going to sit out here."

"No, I'm not." At their look, I added, "Let them try to stop me."

I'll admit that I was already thinking then about my ability, about what I could do. If I had to, I could use it to force my way into the office, to stand with Kyle as they faced whatever punishment the principal had in mind. I didn't say anything, because even Kyle didn't know. That's how deep a secret it was.

The door opened again.

"You can go in, Miss Reid."

Kyle stiffened, but didn't correct her. We both stood.

"Miss Preston—"

“I’m going in, too. Kyle wants me with them.”

“That’s right. I do.” Their voice sounded tight. They tucked a strand of hair behind their ear with a shaking hand.

“Very well.” Mrs. Bryant regarded us both as if we were radioactive, like if she got too close, we’d make her sick. It was a look I’d seen others give Kyle. I wasn’t used to dealing with it myself, but that was all right. It made me feel closer to them. We walked into the office.

As Mrs. Bryant pulled the door closed, I heard Grant mutter, “Fucking mutants.”

Mr. Perry leaned back in his desk chair, his elbows on the arm rests, his fingers steepled as he watched us take our seats. Even sitting, he looked tall, elongated, like a shadow in late afternoon. A swoop of steel gray hair hung over a steep forehead and small brown eyes. Diplomas and photographs covered the walls of the office, including a picture of him in his Air Force uniform standing beside a fighter jet. He’d fought in the desert long before either of us was born. He talked about his war days every chance he got—assemblies, graduation ceremonies, introductions for other speakers. It had become something we all laughed about, even knowing that we shouldn’t, that his service was something we should honor. He had turned it into his own private cliché.

He glanced my way, but didn’t appear surprised that I had come in with Kyle. Probably Mrs. Bryant had prepared him. An instant later, he speared Kyle with his glare.

“I assume you know why you’re here.”

“Because Grant was bullying me and I had the guts to fight back?”

The corners of the principal’s mouth drooped. “That is not—”

“That’s what happened,” I said. “I was there. I saw the whole thing.”

His eyes shifted to me. “You may sit and observe, Miss Preston. That’s all. Miss Reid can speak for herself.”

I returned his glare. “Their name is Kyle. And it’s themselves.”

After another moment, he turned back to them. “I see no bruises on you, no blood. Mister Nelson came out of your confrontation in far worse shape. Would you care to explain that?”

“Yeah. He shoved me in the tits. Want to check them for bruises?”

Perry’s face reddened. “Miss Reid—”

“It’s Kyle,” they said. “He shoved me, called me something I won’t repeat. And when I dared him to try to push me again, he threw a punch. I defended myself—I know how—and he wound up on the floor with a bloody nose. That’s what happened. There were a lot of people watching; you can ask any of them.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“What do you—”

He silenced me with another hard glance.

“Mr. Nelson admits that he said something he shouldn’t have. But that doesn’t excuse violence.”

“He shoved me!”

And in that moment I understood.

“He doesn’t care,” I said, ignoring another silent warning from Perry. I faced Kyle. “He’s not going to do anything to Grant. We play Fairlea on Friday, and they wouldn’t want to go up

against a rival without their split end, or whatever the hell he is.” To the principal I said, “Isn’t that right?”

Perry’s expression turned shrewd, but he didn’t answer. Addressing Kyle again, he said, “I’ve told you before...” He faltered, and I know he had to bite his tongue to keep from calling them *Miss Reid*. “You’re a disruptive influence. More, you admit that you struck him. That’s an automatic suspension. Three days.”

Their mouth fell open. “Three...” They swallowed, eyes welling. “That’s not fair.”

“I might reduce it by a day, if you’d be willing to amend your recent behavior.”

A tear rolled down their cheek. They left it to me to ask, “What do you mean by that?”

This once, Perry didn’t seem to mind me intervening. “I think you both know. As I say, *she*’s disruptive, and it needs to stop.”

It was the pronoun that finally did it, which I know is ridiculous, but it’s the truth. After all of it—Grant’s bullying, Mrs. Bryant’s contempt, the injustice of Mr. Perry’s punishment—that snide *she* was what pushed me over the edge.

I had only done it that one time, to my mom, but I remembered the feeling the way I remembered waking up this very morning. I knew how to access the power, how to peel open Perry’s mind. And I was angry enough that I didn’t give a damn whether or not it was a violation.

Chapter 2

In between telling me it was wrong and wringing out of me that promise not to use my ability again, Mom told me next to nothing about how it actually worked. I didn't know where the power came from or what kind of damage I might be doing to myself by tapping into it. I heard what Perry said and I acted. Probably not the smartest thing I'd ever done.

To say it was a weird sensation—well, that was like saying Grant Nelson could be unpleasant.

The moment I decided to act, a flush of heat spread over my face, and a fine sweat broke out on my upper lip. I remembered this from the first time years before. A side effect of my ability.

For a split second, between the instant my consciousness left my own body and the moment I entered Mr. Perry's, I felt oddly free, detached. I was flying. Then I was in the principal's mind and I might as well have been weighed down with lead. Upon stepping into his brain, I took control, robbing him of... everything. I didn't have to think about it. He was mine, to do with as I pleased. It was a queasy feeling, not one I wanted to consider too much.

The principal felt as warm as I had. His face started to sweat as well.

I looked at myself—my real self—from across the desk. Kyle and me both. Kyle stared back, stricken still, and also enraged. It hurt to have them glower at me with such venom, even if they didn't know I was now in Perry's mind, thinking for him, prepared to act for him as well.

The other me—the real me—sat unmoving, slumped in her chair. My face had gone

slack, my eyes dull and empty, as if all the feeling and intelligence and will had been sucked out of me. Seeing myself that way disturbed me and I turned away, back to Kyle.

The weirdest part of this was that I had access to Perry's thoughts and memories. He was married, which I suspected, and he had two grown sons. One was a lawyer up in the Portland area. The other died in a car wreck a few years ago. I didn't need to know that. I didn't *want* to know it.

I stood too abruptly, nearly knocking over the principal's desk chair. Kyle flinched back in their seat. The other me didn't move or even glance up.

I took a lumbering step—stiff and awkward, like the Tin Man from *Wizard of Oz*—then braced a hand on the desk. My second step felt less clumsy than the first. By the time I reached the office door I had started to grow accustomed to moving in the principal's body. I pulled the door open and poked my head out.

"Mrs. Bryant, come in here please." Leaving it ajar, I returned to Perry's chair.

When the secretary came in, I motioned for her to shut the door.

"Yes, sir."

"After speaking with... with Miss Reid and Miss Preston, I have decided that suspending... suspending her would be unjust." I knew the gendered language was insulting to Kyle, but what I was doing would make Mrs. Bryant suspicious enough, without suddenly yanking Mr. Perry into the twenty-first century, where he clearly didn't belong. "Instead, Mister Nelson will be suspended. Four days I believe."

For several seconds the secretary simply stared. At last she heaved a breath, glanced at

Kyle and the real me, and gave a palsied shake of her head. “Well. I suppose if you’re certain—”

“I am. Please prepare the necessary documents.” I hoped that sounded official enough.

“And you’ll wish to speak with the superintendent. Of course.”

Not even a little. “Yes,” I said. “Of course.”

Mrs. Bryant’s forehead creased. “Are you all right? You’re all flushed.”

My gaze flicked to Kyle, but they had leaned forward to peer into the face of the real me.

I needed to end this.

“I’m fine. Thank you. Please take care of that paperwork.”

As soon as the secretary closed the door behind her, I released my hold on Mr. Perry’s mind. For the briefest of moments I felt weightless and free again. Then I was back to myself.

My body jerked and I weathered a second or two of dizziness.

“Are you—”

“I’m fine,” I said, eyes on Perry.

He roused himself more slowly, staring first at his door, and then at the papers on the desk in front of him. Finally, he faced us again, wiping a hand over his lips.

“So you’re going to suspend Grant and not Kyle?” I asked.

His nod came slowly. “Yes, that’s right. It’s... That would be fair, I think.”

“But—”

I kicked Kyle’s ankle. They frowned my way, but they stopped talking, which was the point.

“Thank you, Mr. Perry.” I stood and motioned for Kyle to do the same. “We should

probably get back to our classes.”

“Yes, I suppose you should.” The principal sounded groggy, the way he might if he had just woken from a nap. His cheeks were still red, and beads of sweat shone on his forehead.

I steered Kyle to the door, thanked Mr. Perry again, and left the office.

Grant had followed Mrs. Bryant to her desk, and was on the phone, probably with Mommy or Daddy. The tears glistening in his eyes made me giddy.

“What the hell happened in there?” Kyle asked once we were in the hallway.

“It’s a lot to explain,” I said. “We’ll talk after school.”

They grabbed my arm, forcing me to stop. “Now, Dee.”

Those dark eyes held mine for a heartbeat, and another.

“All right.”

With a tip of my head, I indicated that they should follow me. We left the building through the nearest exit, emerging into the back parking lot.

Kyle watched me as we walked, their lips pressed thin, their cheeks drained of color. At last we stopped, under the shelter of a small cluster of spruce. The piney scent of the trees mingled with motor oil and stale cigarettes and rain.

“You did something to him. Perry. You... you made him say that stuff.”

I had fully intended to tell them, but the words wouldn’t come. I’d clung to this secret for a long time.

“How could I have done that?”

“You tell me? You were, like, in a total daze. I couldn’t get you to look at me or say

anything. And Perry was saying stuff he would never say. And he was sweating and moving weird.”

Kyle crossed their arms, hugging themselves. They were shaking and I thought they might cry.

“Kyle—”

“Just tell me. Whatever it is, it’s got to be better than what I’m thinking.”

I almost asked. Almost. But I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“You’ll think I’m crazy.”

“I already do.”

Reflexive smiles.

“You won’t believe it.”

They raised an eyebrow.

“All right. I have... this ability. I think my dad had it, too. At least something like it. I can...” I frowned, groping for the right phrasing. “I can jump into other people’s minds. Not for a long time. But I can make them do and say things that I want them to. That’s what I did to Perry.”

“That’s impossible.” They said it without thinking, another reflex. “Nobody can do that.”

“I know. But I can.”

Their brow furrowed. “That’s like movie stuff. *Star Wars* or something. ‘This is not the enemy you’re looking for.’”

“I know how it sounds. But I’m not making this up. You were there. You described it.

Can you think of any other explanation that fits what happened?”

Kyle faltered, frowning again in concentration.

“All right. Playing along: Did you do it to Mrs. Bryant, too? Is that how you got her to let you come along?”

I shook my head. “No, that was all me.”

“Can you do it to me now—so that I can see?”

The blood rushed from my face, leaving it cold, clammy. “No!”

Their eyes narrowed in misinterpretation. “Have you ever done it to me? Some other time maybe?”

The question was like a knife in my heart. I shook my head, unable to speak. A tear slipped down my cheek.

“I wouldn’t,” I said, my voice shaking. *A rape of the mind*. “I swear I wouldn’t.”

Their face twisted with regret. They took a quick step forward, threw their arms around me, and held me close.

“I’m sorry,” they whispered. “I shouldn’t have asked that. Of course you wouldn’t.”

I stood rigid, stung, barely returning the embrace.

Kyle released me. “I really am sorry, Dee.”

I nodded, wiped my eyes dry.

“I’ve only done it twice,” I said when I could speak again. “Once to my mom, a long time ago. And then today.”

Their eyes widened. “You did it to your mom?”

“I wanted to sleep over at your house, and she wouldn’t let me. We fought, and before I knew it, I had... done it to her. Then I told her what I’d done and she hit me.”

Kyle recoiled, as if my mom had slapped them, too. “She hit you?”

“Only time.”

They dipped their chin, looking thoughtful. “So this power—where does it come from?”

“You mean aside from my dad? No idea. My mom told me just enough to scare me, and we haven’t talked about it since.”

Their face fell, and they glanced back toward the school doors. “Damn. So now that you’re not in Perry’s head anymore, I’m screwed.”

“No, you’re not. Like I said, I don’t know much about it. But that first time, my mom was ready to let me go to your house, even after I was out of her head. It’s like I become part of their consciousness. I can actually change minds. That’s what makes it so...”

“So cool.”

I shook my head. “So evil. I would never have done it today if Perry hadn’t been such a jerk. I couldn’t let him punish you. But I don’t like doing it. It feels wrong.” I hesitated before going on in a whisper. “My mom called it rape.”

Kyle had no answer for that.

“So do you believe me?” I asked after a pause.

“Are you telling me the truth?”

“As Yoda is my witness.”

A faint smile. “Then I believe you.”

We stood another moment, then at the same time started back toward the doors.

“Thanks, Dee,” Kyle said, voice low. “For doing that for me.”

I took their hand, gave it a quick squeeze, and let go.

#

I would have done anything for Kyle, and basically had. Mr. Perry had been wrong and there was no way I could let Grant get away with being an asshole. But through the rest of the school day, and soccer practice after, guilt ate at me like termites in old wood. By the time Mom came to pick me up, I was nauseous and on the verge of sobbing. Most days I would have insisted on driving—I had my permit and intended to take my driver’s test next month, finally. Not today, though. I didn’t want to drive, or talk, or anything else. I answered questions about my day with head shakes, nods, and grunts. After a few minutes, Mom gave up on me and directed all her questions at Miles, who was chatty as usual.

I was out of the car before Mom turned off the engine and in my room before she and Miles had closed the garage door. I flung myself onto my bed and stared at the ceiling, wondering if I was going to throw up. Tears might have helped, but they wouldn’t come.

I heard Mom’s slow steps on the stairs, and was expecting her knock when it came.

“Honey?”

“Come in.”

She slipped in, shut the door quietly, the way she might if I was sleeping, and sat beside me on the bed. I still had on my sweaty workout uniform, and I knew she hated that I was lying on my comforter, but she kept her objections to herself.

Mom still wore her work clothes—business jacket, pale purple blouse, dark skirt. She looked elegant and beautiful as always. People said we looked alike. I should be so lucky. She had brilliant green eyes and perfect skin and shoulder-length brown hair that was frosted with gray at the temples. My eyes were similar, and my hair was the same color, but otherwise...

“You didn’t say much in the car.”

I twitched a shoulder, stared at the ceiling.

“Bad day?”

A harsh laugh escaped me. “You could say that.”

“Want to tell me about it?”

I tried to answer, but before I knew it I was sobbing, tears streaming after all.

“Honey—”

I lifted a hand, stopping her. “You can’t get mad at me,” I said, voice thick. “You have to promise.”

“Well, if you did something—”

“No. You have to promise. You can’t get mad or judgmental or any of that. You have to listen and that’s all.”

She let out a measured breath. “All right. I promise. What happened?”

I took several breaths, blowing out air, trying to compose myself.

“DeDe?”

“I did it again.”

“You did what?”

I turned my head, fixed my gaze on hers. “I did it again,” I repeated, enunciating each word.

I watched as comprehension broke over her. She gaped at me, turning pale. After a few seconds, she exhaled and her entire body sagged. “Oh, honey.”

“I’m sorry. I—” I was going to say that I had to, but of course that wasn’t true. I chose to. Because allowing that particular injustice would have been worse. “I did it for Kyle,” I said instead.

“Tell me.”

I did. All of it. Every detail. Mom listened, intent on me, at least as much sympathy as disapproval in her expression.

“Is she all right?” she asked when I finished. “Kyle, I mean.”

“They, Mom. ‘Are they all right?’”

“Of course. I’m sorry.”

In her defense, Mom had no problem with Kyle. She never judged them, and had adjusted quickly to the name change. The pronouns, though... It was a grammar thing. I’d told her more than once that she had to get over it, but she hadn’t yet.

“They’re fine,” I said. “Better now that they’re not going to be suspended.”

“That was... You shouldn’t have done it.”

“You think I should have let Perry suspend Kyle? After what I told you?”

She inhaled and I readied myself to be truly angry. But she let out the breath without a word.

“I was wrong to do it,” I told her. “But I would have been every bit as wrong to let him suspend Kyle.”

“Yes,” she said, surprising me. “To both.” She leaned forward and gently brushed a tear off my temple. “I think it’s time for you to know more about this ability of yours.”

I turned onto my side, astonished again. “You do?”

“You’re nearly seventeen. I can’t expect you to ignore it forever. And like any Radiant power, yours can be dangerous. You need to learn how to use it, how to control it.”

“Radiant...?”

“That’s what your father called it. It was a name he heard others using. Apparently, when you use this talent, you can actually radiate heat.”

I thought of the way both Perry and I had sweated and turned red. “Yeah, I do. And so does the person I’m controlling.”

I saw her shudder, and it occurred to me that she was a little afraid of what I could do. Not quite afraid of me, but close enough to make me uncomfortable.

“I’ll never use it on you again, Mom. I promise. And not on Miles either. Seriously.”

“I believe you.” She stood and crossed to the door. “There’s someone I want to call, someone who knows more about this than I do. We can talk about it again after. All right?”

“Yeah, okay.”

She eased out of the room, pausing to peek back at me as she closed the door. I saw concern in her bright eyes, and melancholy. But beneath it all, the fear lingered. Of me. For me. I couldn’t say which.

In that moment, I'm not sure she could have either.