



Flame (Elemental Men #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: "I didn't actually accuse the guy of being an arsonist."

My job is to put out fires, so the people who set them on purpose make me mad. There's one arsonist we've been after for years, but finding him is harder than you'd think. So when I see the same sexy redhead hanging out at fire after fire, what am I to think except that he might be our guy?

He sure does like playing with fire... just not the way I thought.

Total Pages (Source): 10

CHAPTER ONE

FLAME

The wildfire is fighting me hard. This is the worst part of my job: reining in my element. The deepest, most instinctive part of me rejoices in the flames and wants to set the world alight. But the sentient part of me, the part that is incarnated only when instinct is raging out of control, knows that balance is essential.

If the whole world burns, then eventually there will be nothing left, and even fire will die.

Balance. Fire plays its part in the well-being of the planet, just as my brother elements do. Just as life itself does. But when fire goes unchecked and balance is disturbed, everything is endangered.

This fire is taking too much. It's burned too long and grown too powerful.

I don't care about the houses and towns. I don't even care about the humans caught in the path of the flames—not really. Saving individual lives and human possessions isn't my job—that's what they have their firefighters for. My ultimate job is the welfare of this planet, and my immediate job? To save humanity . If I—we—fail, humans will become extinct a whole lot sooner than they should. Because the ultimate goal remains the same, and if keeping this planet healthy means saying goodbye to another species, well... I'll throw them a heck of a bon voyage party.

“Are we doing this, or are you just going to stare lovingly into the flames all day?”

George demands impatiently, and I sigh. I brought him along because I had a feeling I'd need the help, and it's easier for people to talk themselves into believing that a wildfire caused disruptions to dirt and rock than it is that rain just miraculously blew in out of nowhere. Plus, ever since Aqua got all loved up a few months back, he's kind of a pain to deal with. Anytime he's separated from River, he gets all mopey. Mopey-water-loving himbo means rain. A lot of rain. More than I'd need to help me get this fire under control.

The last thing any of us want to deal with right now is flash flooding.

So I brought George instead, which means asshole grump instead of mopey himbo. I love my brothers, but why am I the only normal one among us?

Well... normal-ish. I am still an incarnated element, which makes me an oddity compared to the billions of humans on the planet.

"We're doing this," I concede. I've been trying to discreetly hold this fire back for two days, to no avail. Now it's time for drastic action.

Casually, trying not to look like we're doing anything wrong—which we aren't, but try explaining that to humans—we slip away from the crowd of onlookers being held back by police and drift toward a rocky outcropping that will give us a better view. Not that I need it—I can feel every ember in my bones—but when we work together, it's easier if we can see what the other is doing. The sheer face of the outcropping discourages people from using it as a vantage point, but I'm with George: hand and footholds appear exactly where we need them.

Near the top, we find a shallow ledge and hug the rock to avoid being seen. It's unlikely anyone will look up here with the fire consuming all their attention, but there's no point tempting fate. I really don't want to be arrested again.

“Are you ready?” I ask George.

He nods. “Hold it back.”

I push my will onto the flames, hemming them in, forcing them back on themselves, even as George disrupts the earth within the heart of the fire, smothering it from the inside. For a moment, it seems as though we might be making headway, and the shouts of the firefighters below reinforce that belief even as they redouble their efforts to control the blaze.

Then the fire pushes back, raging against our attempts to quell it, and I swear even as George growls in fury.

“Fuck this,” I mutter. “I’m going down there.” Discretion is all well and good, but there’s only so much I can do from the outside looking in. This fire has had enough—its time is done.

“Try not to let anyone see you this time,” George calls after me as I begin the downward climb. I’d flip him off, but unlike him, I need both hands to keep from falling. The ground doesn’t love me or try to ease the impact when I hit it.

Once my feet are safely back on solid earth, I circle to the north, trying not to be seen, moving over rough, uneven ground that would discourage humans, until I’m out of sight. Then I turn and run for the fire.

It welcomes me home.

My body may look human, may be human for all intents and purposes, but when it comes to fire, it’s not. The heat that would sear away all moisture feels like a soothing balm to me, and the flames that would crisp skin and flesh to ash are a delightful tickle. Finally, I am warm. Finally, I feel complete.

Strolling deeper into the inferno, I enjoy the wash of pleasure that comes from being immersed in my element. The falling trees are no hindrance, merely a distraction. I understand why Aqua goes into the ocean every day—if I could do this all the time, I would. The time apart from fire is torture of?—

The earth erupts ahead of me, bringing me back to reality. That's George, not-so-subtly reminding me that I'm here to stop the fire, not encourage it. Damn him.

Reaching my arms out, I call the flames to me. At first they resist, but not for long—they can't, not with me deep in their heart.

I am fire.

Slowly, the intensity of the inferno lessens. Here at the center, the flames rage on, the heat searing still, but as I draw the blaze into myself, I feel it losing its hold on the edges. Bit by bit, I pull it back, allowing the firefighters to regain control, until I have to stop or risk giving away the secret of my existence. Already, there are going to be news reports about the “miraculous stroke of luck.” But it's enough; I can tell.

Sighing, a little sad, I give myself a few more minutes to bask before forcing myself to leave. If I stay, there's too much chance of discovery—and it's not easy to come up with a reason for being in the middle of a previously out-of-control wildfire. It would also mean being here when the last of the flames are snuffed out, and I hate that. Sure, this fire might have had more than its time, eaten up more than its share, but it still doesn't feel good to sense the life being smothered out of it. The farther away I am, the better.

I go back the way I came, away from the firefighters, keeping an eye out for anyone who might see me. George meets me on the rocky, uneven, unhospitable ground where I turned toward the fire. Good. His presence will make the walk back to our car smoother—literally.

“Nice work,” he says. “After you pulled your head out of your ass.”

“Easy for you to criticize when your element is literally at your feet.” I gesture toward his bare feet. The flip-flops he usually wears to keep from attracting too much attention are in his hand, but away from prying eyes, there’s no way he’s not going to let his skin touch the earth. “How’d it look from out here? Too suspicious?”

“Nah.” He shakes his head as we begin making our way back to where the onlookers were gathered. “You really did do nice work—it just looked like the firefighters finally got a decent foothold. They’ll be at it for hours yet, but they’re definitely in control.”

“I know.” Even I can hear the despondency in my voice. George slings an arm around my shoulders.

“Cheer up. When we get back to the house, we can light the firepit out back. Let’s piss Aqua off by having a cookout for dinner.”

That does cheer me up. Aqua whines a lot about “charred meat not having enough moisture” and always wants to eat soup. Ugh. Soup is so fucking wet . And every time I light a fire, Zephyr wrinkles his nose and sighs, because the smoke disrupts his beloved air. Never mind that I was the one who suggested we buy a house at the beach, where Aqua can play in the ocean and Zephyr can listen to the sea breezes—they still complain about the teeniest fire. Next time we incarnate, we’re gonna live on the slope of a volcano. At least that way, when they complain, I’ll have comforting rivers of lava to drown them out with.

Not literally, though. I do love them.

“Sounds good. I like cooking with fire.”

George snorts. “Yeah, I know.”

As we get closer to the vacant lots at the end of a half-completed development that are currently functioning as a staging area for the fire crews and a parking area for nosy onlookers, George sighs and pauses to shuffle his feet back into his flip-flops. I look down at myself.

“Any stray embers?” I ask. I’m usually pretty good about hiding my inner flames, but sometimes, especially after I’ve been in the middle of a big fire, they get away from me.

“Turn,” George orders, and I do. “Nope, you’re good. Not even a singe mark.”

I scoff. “I should hope not.” There’s no scientific explanation for why my clothes don’t burn up when I walk into a fire, but they don’t. It would be inconvenient, so I just... circumvent that. It’s been driving River, the newest member of our group and a scientist—even if it is marine biology—crazy. He keeps coming up with these whacked-out theories and then disproving them even as he says them out loud.

Fun to watch.

We rejoin the thinning group of bystanders—people lose interest when it’s less life-endangering—just as some of the firefighters rotate in for a water break.

George nudges me. “Isn’t that your fireman?” he murmurs.

“I don’t have a fireman,” I reply, but I don’t have to look to know who he means.

I look anyway. It’s impossible not to.

“My” fireman, as George and the others call him, would be the perfect human... if he

didn't spend his life putting out fires. Even covered in soot and sweat, he's gorgeous, and his air of assurance and command is something that's drawn my eye since the first time I saw him nine years ago. That was at a wildfire in Idaho that was so out of control, personnel from other states were sent to assist. It was right before Aqua incarnated, and the guys don't know this, but "my" fireman is the reason we live here. I still don't know his name—I've forcibly stopped myself from finding out—but I could see where he was from based on his gear and truck, and I convinced my brothers that Southern California was the best place for us to be solely so I could see him some more.

Aether calls me a stalker, and the others don't know how accurate that is.

To be fair, though, this really is one of the better places in the world for us. It's on a fault line for George, by the ocean for Aqua, gets plenty of fire action for me, and is reasonably central for all Zeph's windy needs.

"Pretty sure you do, and that's him," George insists, and I look away before he can accuse me of staring or leering or something. "Uh-oh, he's looking this way."

I deliberately don't turn my head to see. "We should go."

"Because last time he saw you, he told his captain you might be an arsonist? Yeah, we should go." George snorts as we head for the car.

I don't bother to tell him that I've seen "my" fireman since that time. There's no proof I've started any fires, of course, so he got told to keep his accusations to himself, but there's no point feeding his suspicions.

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CHAPTER TWO

brAN

By the time I finally get home, I'm so exhausted, I can barely see straight. My shift ended I don't even remember when, but with a wildfire so out of control, it's not like you can just clock off and say, "See ya tomorrow." We need everyone we can get, for as long as it's safe for them to stay. There have been times when I've been rotating in and out for days on a fire, only getting enough time off for sleep and food. Thank fuck this fire didn't turn into one of those situations.

"Cody?" I call, kicking my shoes off in the tiny cupboard we call the utility room. "You home?" He'd better be—I've gotten enough calls from his teachers lately about him not turning in homework assignments.

"What?" he yells.

He's home, then. Good.

"Just letting you know I'm back." I pad through to the kitchen in my sock feet. All I really want right now is to collapse and sleep, but I know if I don't eat something, my stomach will wake me up later. "What are you doing?" I grab a portion-sized container of lasagna and send up mental thanks to whoever came up with the idea of meal prepping... and made my teenage brother someone who likes to cook.

Still not sure where he got that gene from.

Cody appears in the doorway just as I sit at the counter with the container and a fork. “Jeez, aren’t you even going to heat that up? You’re such a caveman.” He snatches it from me, and I make a sound of protest.

“Cody! I’m starving.”

“This’ll take two minutes. Eat an apple.” He tosses me one while putting the lasagna into the microwave one-handed. “Cold lasagna is gross, bro. The cheese is all solid and blech.” He shudders as the microwave kicks on, and I take a bite out of the apple, wishing it was lasagna.

It’s probably not a bad thing for me to eat some fruit, though.

“So,” I say between bites, “how was school?”

He shrugs one shoulder, face turning sullen. “Boring. Fine.”

Guilt stabs at me. He’s too smart for that school—all his teachers have said so. He should be somewhere that caters for gifted kids, but that’s expensive, and the schools we looked at that were able to offer him even a partial scholarship were too far away for him to live at home. I did consider letting him board, but he point-blank refused. He won’t leave me and Mom.

Even though Mom doesn’t even know who we are anymore.

I also looked into moving us all closer to one of those schools, but not only was that way more expensive than I could afford, all of Mom’s doctors also advised against it. She’s settled well in this facility, and she has a routine and people she’s kind of familiar with. Moving her would cause a lot of stress for her. Cody said not to bother, and he’s been doing online college classes to stretch his brain, but still, I feel guilty.

I'm supposed to be looking after him. I'm all he's got in the way of responsible adults. It's not fair that he's not getting the opportunities he deserves.

"You know," I start, "if you graduated early, you could?—"

"Stop, Bran. We've talked about this. I don't want to be the freak sixteen-year-old college freshman who makes half the class look stupid."

"Modest, much?" It's true, though. The college credits he's been working on prove that.

"I'd rather finish school on time and get to experience college when I'm legal and my classmates won't be afraid to date me in case of felony charges."

Can't argue with that point. "Then we need to find you a project." I've said it a billion times, but neither of us has thought of anything yet. All the stuff that would be great for him needs cash to get started—not a lot, but more than we have to spare.

"I'm good," he promises me. "And I'll try harder to do homework so the teachers don't bug you." The microwave dings, and he goes to get my dinner while I try not to feel bad about making him feel bad. I know the reason he doesn't hand in homework is because he forgets to do it, not because he can't. The teachers know that too—it's why he hasn't failed a class yet. Once we remind him and he gets it done, he hands in A+ work. He's just so bored with the assignments that he puts them out of his mind until it's too late.

A plate of steaming pasta is put in front of me, and I snatch up the fork. "Thank you," I say gratefully. As far as teenagers go, he's such a good kid.

He slides into the chair beside me. "No biggie. I heard you finally got that wildfire out," he adds, trying to sound casual.

I nod and swallow my food. “Yeah. Thank fuck. Second shift is dealing with the rest of the cleanup and the paperwork.”

“It’s early for such a big fire, isn’t it? That’s not a good sign.”

I automatically rap the surface of the table to ward off bad luck. “Don’t put that out there,” I warn him. “We’re not borrowing trouble.”

It’s his turn to nod. “Yeah. Sure.” The words are steady enough, but he can’t hide the worry on his face, and for the millionth time, I wonder if I should look into changing jobs.

I don’t have enough brain cells still awake to think about this again. “Listen,” I say, desperate to change the subject. “I need to ask you a favor. It’s... kind of weird. Okay, so it’s very weird, and if my boss finds out, he won’t be happy.”

Cody immediately perks up. “Oh yeah? What is it?”

God, am I really about to do this? “Remember that guy I told you about? The one who always seems to be turning up to the big fires? The one I thought I saw walking out of a fire that one time?” Even I have to concede that was unlikely—probably the result of too much smoke, not enough sleep, and dehydration. It happens. But the guy was definitely there that day.

“Sure. The redhead you think might be an arsonist.”

I wince. That theory didn’t go down well with my captain or the chief when we had the guy arrested and then he was freed due to lack of evidence. For the record, I didn’t actually accuse the guy of being an arsonist. I just said he’d been seen at a lot of the really out-of-control fires, regardless of location, and that it might be worth keeping an eye on him. I’m pretty sure there’s some stuff the chief was told that he’s

not sharing, but I've basically been told to stay away from the redhead. "Yeah, that's him."

"What about him?" Cody's definitely interested. When I first mentioned the guy to him, years back, he spun this huge conspiracy theory that the redhead might be setting fires to hide the bodies of his murder victims. That led to a pile of research that probably set off some kind of FBI crime alert while he poked holes in his own theory, and now he's interested in any scrap of information I can give for his "profile" on the guy.

Which means this is probably a really bad idea.

But... the guy was there again today. And yesterday, and the day before. Today, though, there was another guy with him, and something about the two of them... I don't know. It just felt off.

Which is why I sneakily took a photo of him when nobody was paying attention.

"I got a picture today. Is there any chance you can?—"

"Yes! Send it to me." Cody whips out his phone and looks at me eagerly.

This was a mistake. "Cody?—"

"C'mon, Bran. It's fine. I'll do a reverse image search and find his social media or something. I'll have a look, find out he's a perfectly respectable guy who likes hiking and hates that fires destroy so much, and we can all let this go. That's it."

I hesitate. "You know, fires can be destructive, but they're actually really good for the forest in the long run. They?—"

“Bran! I don’t need your conservationist lecture right now. Send me the photo, then go to bed. You showered at the station, right?”

“Believe me, you’d know if I hadn’t.” Reluctantly, regretting the decision that led me to this point, I pull out my phone and send Cody the picture I took earlier. “Do not do anything that could get you charged with stalking... or any crime.”

Cody holds up his hand. “Scout’s honor.”

“You were never a Scout.” I pick up my empty plate and take it to the sink while he laughs.

“Bran? Bran, bro, c’mon. It’s been nine hours, and now you gotta wake up.”

Groaning, I pull myself from the warm depths of sleep and blink through the dimness at my little brother. “What the hell?”

“Listen, wake up. You normally get up for work in a couple hours, so it’s not that early, and I need to talk to you.”

Huh? “What time’s it?”

“Just after three. Are you awake?”

Huffing, I haul myself up to sitting and lean over to switch on the lamp. “Cody, why are you waking me at three in the fucking morning? Are you sick?”

“Nah, listen?—”

“Did the care facility call?” I’m pretty sure they didn’t—they’d have tried my cell first, which I can see from here, and there are no missed calls on it.

“Bran, listen ! I found your guy.”

I blink slowly at him, my brain still not finished sleeping. “What?”

“Your guy, the redhead! I found him.”

Staring at my brother, I wonder if the social services people were right and I should have considered placing him with a foster family. People who could have raised him in an environment that was more normal than what he’s got now. “Have you been to bed yet? Please tell me you haven’t been up all night.”

“For fuck’s sake, Bran, that’s not important! I found him.”

His barely leashed excitement gets through to me, and I square my shoulders. “I’m guessing he’s not a hiker.”

Cody shrugs. “He might be. I didn’t see anything about that.”

“Is he supposed to be in prison or something?” God, please don’t let me have pointed my baby brother in the direction of an escaped serial killer.

“No. He’s a conservationist... I think.”

“He’s... what?” That makes no sense.

“Listen, this guy has zero social media presence. Nothing . He doesn’t look old, so there should be something—it’s almost impossible to grow up in this day and age and not have someone tag you in a photo online.”

It doesn’t sound that impossible to me. I don’t have social media either—not really. Just the accounts I set up so I could monitor Cody’s online presence.

“Like, he’s not even on any hookup apps,” Cody continues, snapping my attention back to him.

“How would you know?” I can’t be that bad of a stand-in parent, can I? “Show me your phone.”

He rolls his eyes. “Relax. I checked from your phone. Oh, and I might have accidentally matched you with some guy.”

I moan. “It’s too early for this. I’ve had no coffee.”

“It’s good that you’re bisexual, because otherwise I would have had to change some of your settings,” he continues blithely while I contemplate how much more peaceful my life would be if I’d been an only child.

“Do you have a point, and can you either make it or go away? It’s my day off,” I beg.

“I’ve been trying to tell you. I finally found a picture of the guy online, and it’s a recent one. He was in the background, in profile, with a bunch of other guys, which is why it took so long, but that hair is hard to miss.”

“Uh-huh.” My eyes start to drift closed.

“The photo was from a press conference at Krills Institute about research that proves pollution here in North America can affect seaweed or something in Asia. I didn’t read the article properly—I was looking for names.”

“Mmm. Find them?”

“Not your guy, but I got the name of the marine biologist who did the research... and I found another photo of him with one of the guys who was in the background. The

caption said it was his boyfriend.”

“That’s great.” I can probably get a couple more hours?—

“ Bran! The boyfriend had blue hair and was hanging out with our guy! This marine biologist probably knows him!”

That gets my attention, and I open my eyes. “Okay, so... what? You’re probably right about him being a conservationist.” Weird as that seems.

Cody scoffs in disgust. “Why are you this way? We can go talk to the biologist and find out who our guy is.”

“That sounds like stalking, Cody. Do we need to have a talk about not doing illegal things?”

With a dramatic sigh, my brother says, “Dr. Peters—the biologist—is giving a talk at Krills this Saturday about his research. Let’s go. If the chance comes up to talk to him, we can maybe ask some leading but not stalkerish questions. That’s all I’m asking.”

Somehow, I doubt it’s that simple, but he’s giving me big, sad, “I’m practically an orphan and not getting the mental stimulation I need” eyes, so I nod.

“Fine. Now let me sleep.”

CHAPTER THREE

FLAME

“Why are we here, again?” George mutters as we take our seats toward the back. We have to sit near the back because even though we arrived fifteen minutes early, the lecture hall is already nearly full. Apparently there are a lot of people who care about sea life epidemics.

Which is great; really, it is. That’s the goal: for ordinary people to care enough about the environment that they influence the corporations and policymakers that cause issues and can implement change. I just don’t understand why so many of them are interested in water and fish. Water’s so... wet.

“We’re being supportive,” I remind George. “Shit, where did Zeph go?” It’s always a mistake to bring him to things like this. With so many people and so many voices, he gets distracted and wanders off in search of the source of whatever stray thing the air tells him.

George looks around, then elbows Perry, who’s on his other side. “Where’s Zephyr?”

“Fuck.” Perry pops up like a meerkat and cranes his head around. “Aether, help.”

Aether, who’s studying the leaflet that was being passed out at the door even though he knows more about today’s talk than anyone other than River and Aqua, waves in a vaguely left direction. “Over there.”

The three of us look, searching for Zephyr's distinctive floaty white-blond?—

“Shit!” I drop back into my seat and slump down.

“What?” Perry demands in alarm. “Do I need to... ohhhhh. Isn't that your fireman?”

“What's he doing here?” I hiss. “And why is Zephyr talking to him?”

“That's the part that concerns me more,” George admits, still blatantly staring in that direction. “Zeph's not exactly the king of discretion.”

Perry, being slightly less obvious than George, is back in his seat but has his head angled to look. “There's a teenager with them. Maybe he's just bringing his kid to the talk? And Zeph just happened to... nah. I'm gonna go get him before he says something and Flame gets accused of arson again.”

“Is it arson if you're the embodiment of fire?” Aether wonders aloud. “We never really answered that question.”

“It's not at the top of my priority list right now,” I grit out as Perry steps on my foot trying to get out of the row. “Has anyone got a hat I can borrow?”

Both George and Aether turn to look at me as though I've asked a stupid question. “You want to cover your hair? You?” George reaches out to pinch me. “You feel real enough.”

“Ow.” I smack his hand away. “That's for when you think you're dreaming, and you're supposed to pinch yourself.”

He shrugs. “That sounds a whole lot less fun. But to answer your question, no, we don't have any fucking hats.”

It was a long shot. None of us consider it necessary to hide our hair—especially in this incarnation. Nobody thinks it’s unusual in SoCal for people to have “dyed” hair in vivid colors.

So I stay slumped down in my seat, hoping not to be spotted—even though I’m not actually doing anything wrong. There’s no reason why I shouldn’t be here, right? It might even be a good thing for him to see me somewhere that’s not a fire.

Perry comes back with a firm grip on Zephyr’s arm, and I get both feet stepped on this time. I’m really tempted to set them both on fire. I mean, come on... how hard is it to not step on me?

“Your fireman’s name is Bran,” Zeph tells me happily, even though his gaze is distant, as though he’s not really paying attention. I seriously don’t know how he manages to keep two streams of consciousness running at the same time. “His brother is Cody. I like them.”

“He’s not my anything,” I insist. “What were you talking about, anyway?”

Zephyr shrugs. “I’m not really sure. Cody came up to me and asked if I knew River. He was talking about River and Aqua’s research for a while, and then he asked if all our friends were marine biologists, and that’s when Perry came.”

George and I exchange glances. “That sounds like a fishing expedition,” he mutters.

Zephyr shakes his head. “No, he didn’t mention fishing, only fish.”

“Sweet baby Jesus,” Perry moans.

“There’s a typo on this leaflet,” Aether adds, just as River steps up to the lectern at the front of the room. I can see Aqua sitting in the front row—probably beaming

because all these people are here to listen to his River. It's kind of sickening... and sweet.

I'm not sure where the fire—sorry, Bran , and damn Zeph for telling me his name—and his brother have sat, but I don't look around. Instead, I listen intently to every word of River's presentation, even though I've heard it several times before. I even try to look like water fascinates and delights me. Not sure if I'm successful there.

The applause when he wraps up is heartening, though, and the Q and A that follows is lively and intelligent. There are the expected marine biology undergrad and grad students here, since this presentation was designed for them, but River insisted on making it open to the general populace as well, and I'm pleasantly surprised by the number of community members who've come along. Several of the questions come from people who identify themselves as owners of dive schools or independent fishing companies, and there are a fair number of high schoolers too. River might have been right when he said we were underestimating who would care and want to get involved.

Finally, he says, "I'm sorry, everyone, but this room is booked for another group later and the staff need time to prepare, so we're going to have to clear out. But if you have more questions, there's an email address on the leaflet that was handed out at the door, or you can reach me through the Institute. We'll be publishing further findings over the next year, so definitely subscribe to the newsletter and keep an eye on our socials." He smiles when everyone claps again, and then the noise level in the room increases as people begin talking to each other and making their way toward the exits.

We stay put. For one, we don't want to risk losing Zephyr in the crush—Perry's already had to pull him back into his seat three times—but also, once this lot clears out, we can leave through the back door with River and Aqua.

Eventually, the crowd thins enough that we get up and start making our way toward the front of the room. It's not until we're halfway there that Perry says, "Uh-oh," and I look up instead of glaring at the slowpokes around me.

"Fuck," I hiss. "What are they doing?"

My f— Bran and his brother are down the front, talking to River and Aqua, who are both smiling and nodding.

"Maybe they have questions," Aether says. "We should join them."

I grab his elbow and haul him back when he takes a step forward. "We should not ! I was at a fire the other day. If he recognizes me, what are we supposed to say?"

"I didn't start the fire?" George suggests, smirking. "Wait and see if he says anything before you freak out."

"That's not helpful."

"We can't just stand here, or they'll notice us anyway," Perry insists. "Come on. You haven't done anything wrong, so even if he does recognize you, it's going to be fine."

I highly doubt that, but I seem to have been outvoted—much like on soup night—so with one last longing look toward the exit behind me, I follow them to the front of the room.

Aqua looks over at us and his face brightens. "Wasn't River amazing? The guys will tell you how awesome you were, River."

"You really were," Perry says, "but I don't think you need us to tell you that."

“It’s appreciated all the same,” River says dryly, then adds to the newcomers, “Aqua has recently decided that affirmation from friends and family is important.”

“That’s sweet,” m— Bran says. Honestly, I don’t know why my brain keeps trying to refer to him as “my fireman.” It must be George’s fault. “You’re lucky to have a supportive partner.”

“I am.” River smiles adoringly at Aqua, then adds, “Our friends are pretty great too. Let me introduce you.”

“They met Zeph earlier.” Perry gives River and Aqua a meaningful look, but while River immediately clues in that something’s going on, Aqua seems just as clueless as usual. “I’m Perry. It was Cody and Bran, right?”

“Yes,” Bran replies. His gaze is glued to Perry’s face. Am I just imagining how obvious he’s being about not looking at me? And what’s with the brother? He’s staring at us all like we’re celebrities. “I’m Brandon Fennick, and this is Cody, my brother.”

“This is my boyfriend, Aether,” Perry says, “and our friends, George, Flame, and Zephyr.”

Bran blinks at the names but pastes on a smile and says, “It’s nice to?—”

“Fuck,” Cody blurts, getting all our attention.

“Cody,” Bran chides. “That’s?—”

“Oh my god. It’s you! You’re real . It really is... oh my god !”

Okay, I might have been worried about Bran for no reason, but Cody is giving me

new things to worry about. His gaze is darting between us all, mouth agape.

“Cody, you’re being rude. And weird. What are you talking about?” his brother asks with a hint of laughter in his voice. That’s nice. I like that he’s not snapping at Cody.

“It’s them, Bran. I thought it was a legend, but look at them.” He gestures to Aqua. “He’s water.”

My gut freezes, and beside me, I feel George go still. The kid can’t mean...

“And he’s air. I don’t know how I didn’t realize before—he’s got the floaty hair and everything.” He looks between George and Aether even as my gaze meets Perry’s suddenly panicked one. “Green hair... you’re like the life essence, right? Which would make you earth, because obviously”—his eyes come to me—“you’ve gotta be fire.”

“What?” I croak, trying to sound like I have no fucking clue what he’s talking about.

“It all checks out.” He turns to his brother. “Of course he’s always at wildfires; it’s his job to keep them from getting out of control. And oh my god, water has hooked up with a marine biologist—that’s like a match made in heaven.”

Shit. Shit, fuck, motherfucking shit ! How does this kid know so much about us?

Luckily, Bran is looking at his little brother like maybe he’s had too much sun. “Cody, let’s talk about this later. We’ve taken up too much?—”

“You don’t believe me. Yeah, that’s cool. I didn’t think it was real. But these guys are actually superheroes. Let me show you.” He whips out his phone and starts tapping and swiping while we all look at each other and wonder what the fuck we should be doing right now. “I found it like, two years ago, when I first started looking for your

fire guy.”

To a man, even Zephyr, my friends all glare at me. I give an aborted half-shrug; how was I supposed to know a firefighter would suspect me and tell his little brother to hunt me down?

“Here, this is the best site. It was set up by this guy who inherited journals and stuff from his great-something grandfather, and he’s put photos of the pages online along with the transcripts. His family has spent, like, the last eight hundred years searching out stories about these guys and putting them together. It started when the earth guy—George, right?—stopped a boulder from falling on this one guy, saving his life. After that, he tried to find out everything he could about the stranger who rescued him, and it kind of snowballed.” He’s showing Bran his phone, and I take the opportunity to narrow my eyes at George.

He makes a sheepish face.

Bran is reading the information on the screen, frown lines between his brows, but when he looks up, he shakes his head. “Cody, it’s just as likely that these nice people have seen the same site as you and thought it would be fun—given their own interest in conservation—to dye their hair and use some cool nicknames.” He aims a smile around the group, inviting us to join in on the joke, and I smile back. This is our out, thankfu?—

“Actually, Cody’s right,” Aether says, and Perry makes a strangled noise. “You should come back to our house to talk. They need this room.”

CHAPTER FOUR

brAN

It's completely against my better judgment that I turn into the driveway of an expensive-looking house across the street from the beach in an upscale neighborhood. No way can conservationists afford to live like this... I think.

"We should have gone home," I say for the thirtieth time, and once again, Cody huffs and rolls his eyes. He's the only reason I'm here—his insistence that we follow the... I don't know what to call them. The people he thinks are superheroes but most likely are just messing with him? Worst case, they're scammers, but Cody and I don't have anything for them to scam us out of. There's about thirty-seven dollars in my bank account right now, and payday isn't until Thursday.

I just really don't want to see Cody get hurt. He's been so excited the whole drive here, telling me more about the legends and stories on the website he found. It's inevitable that his excitement is going to be shattered, but if I don't let that happen now, I'm worried that he will get scammed by these men. I work a lot, and Cody's a smart kid. He could easily find a way to stay in contact with them if I just refused to hear them out at all.

That doesn't mean I can't prepare him for what's coming. "Codes," I begin, turning to face him. He stops with his hand on the door handle and shoots me an impatient glance. I can see the other men getting out of their cars, but they can wait a minute. "I know this all seems pretty compelling, but chances are, these guys aren't really superheroes. You know that, right?"

He shrugs, his expression turning superior. “Sure. There’s a good chance that it’s exactly like you said: they found the website, too, and decided to adopt a schtick to help promote their conservation work. But if that’s what they’re doing, not only is it a terrible idea, they also suck at it.”

Uh. “What?”

“C’mon, Bran. Would you consider a conservationist credible if they claimed to be the embodiment of an element, here to save the world? Of course not. Nobody would. So that’s a stupid idea if they genuinely want to make a difference.”

He’s right, and I nod slowly, not understanding why we’re here if he doesn’t believe it’s true. “Yeah. I agree.”

“The second possibility is that they’re not claiming to actually be elements, but they want to use that schtick for promotion. In which case, why haven’t they set up a billion social media pages and gotten a media agent or PR company involved? Dyeing your hair and using a nickname isn’t going to attract attention to your cause if nobody knows about it.”

It really bugs me sometimes that my sixteen-year-old brother has a better grasp on logic than I do. “True.”

He continues. “Option three is that they’re setting up a con of some kind. In which case, they’re shit outta luck with us, because we’re smart and have nothing to give them. Unless they want information from someone in prison, in which case I’ll give them Dad’s details, but since he hadn’t been in contact for six years before he got convicted, I’m not sure that’ll do them any good.”

I hide my wince. Dad left when Cody was four, but he wasn’t a great parent to either of us in all the years before that. He definitely didn’t move on to better things.

Logically, I know it's no great loss that he's not in our lives, but I wish Cody had a better origin story than "raised by clueless older brother because dad is a deadbeat even before he went to prison for assault with a deadly weapon and mom has early onset Alzheimer's and doesn't remember she has children."

"The last possibility," Cody concludes, "is the least likely: that they're actually superheroes. Gotta be honest, I'm hoping for this one. But I know that's just because I'm the kind of person who wants to believe there's a chance I won't have to live in a bubble one day because we've destroyed the air quality and the ambient temperature is too hot to be livable."

I pull a face. "I think we all want to believe in that chance." Though I'll probably be dead before it gets to that, there's a chance Cody might have to live the last years of his life that way.

"So, hoping for number four, really hoping it's not number three, but I think number two is the most likely. In which case, I can help."

Crap. "Which was number two again?"

"The one you need toilet paper for." He laughs at his own joke, and I grin. I love it when he acts like a typical teenage boy. "It's the situation where they need a marketing team."

"Oh. And you want to help?" I'm not sure how comfortable I am—

His face lights up, and I hold in a sigh. "Yeah! I mean, I'm not an expert, but I can set up a website and run some socials for them. I could do it from home after school, and technically, it's volunteering and work experience, so it'll look good on my college applications."

It's not like I can argue when he's being smart and sensible. "Okay, so here's the plan." I try to sound reasonable and encouraging. "We go in there and find out which of your options is the right one. If it is number two"—I ignore his snort—"then I want to hear more about what these guys are working on and their plans before you're allowed to offer help. Agreed? I don't want you involved in anything shady."

He nods. "Agreed. But I don't think it'll be shady." He's out of the car before I can protest his youthful naivety.

I follow, almost chasing him up the front steps to a fucking amazing deck. It looks out over the ocean and spans the width of the house. It's also deep enough to be a room of its own, and it's furnished comfortably with the kind of outdoor setting that costs more than the furniture we've got in our living room. No way does conservation pay this well.

Despite the fact that this whole setup is screaming "rich people," the deck, at least, looks comfortable and lived in. There's a couple of pairs of shoes abandoned by the front door and a giant purple beach towel draped over the railing.

Trying not to look like I want to grab my brother and run, I join them and perch beside Cody on one of the wicker sofas. The cushion underneath me is surprisingly comfortable for being one of those waterproof outdoor fabrics. I thought it would be plasticky.

"So," I say, determined to maintain control of this situation, "I'm not sure I understood what you were trying to say back at the Institute."

"Because it sounded insane?" the one who was introduced as George says. "Yeah, we get that. That's why we don't usually tell people ." He glares at the green-haired guy whose name I'm not sure I can say properly. Either? Ethan? Probably not Ethan, since that's a little on the normal side... but then, there's George. And Perry.

“I told you when we found River that this had never happened before,” Etherton says. No, that’s definitely not it—too many syllables. “Now it’s happened before. Once.”

“Aether, I love you, but sometimes I really hate you,” Perry declares, and I mentally repeat Aether , trying to commit the sound to memory.

“Flame, tell the story,” Aqua says, then turns to Cody. “Flame tells it best. George gets annoyed if you don’t understand right away, Zeph gets distracted, and I go on too many tangents.”

“What about Aether?” I ask, more because I feel like I should than because I care. “Or Perry, or River?”

“I’ve never told it before,” River says. “I’m new here.”

Perry nods. “Same. That I’ve never told it before, I mean. Usually it gets told to me. I guess I’m also kind of new here? This time, anyway.”

I look at my brother and am relieved to see skepticism on his face.

“Let’s take a minute,” the redhead known as Flame, aka my possible arsonist, says. “Aether, are you really sure about this?”

Aether looks surprised. “Of course.”

Flame takes a deep breath and mutters, “Of course.” He looks at Cody. “Okay. So I have no idea what that website says, exactly, but from what you mentioned before, it sounded pretty accurate. We just didn’t know that man was so obsessed with George that he... documented it.” He glares at George. “Or that his descendants would hunt down other sightings and document them.”

“Am I in there?” Aqua asks. “I’ve saved some people. Sometimes.”

“No tangents,” Flame says immediately. “We can check the website later. Until then, be happy that you’re the reason merpeople myths exist.”

Aqua grins. “I’m not a merman,” he assures us. “They have tails.”

“Are they real?” Cody asks, eyes wide, and Aqua pulls a face and shakes his head.

“No. At least, I’ve never seen one, and the ocean never told me about any.”

“Tangents,” Flame interrupts. “We’re tangenting.”

George scoffs. “That’s not a word.”

The glare he gets from Flame this time is almost incendiary. “Do you want to tell the story?”

Immediately raising his hands in surrender, George sits back, and Flame turns to face us, pinning what I think is supposed to be a pleasant smile on his face. It looks more like a grimace.

“The short version is, whenever one of the four elements becomes unbalanced, the corresponding one of us is incarnated to bring it back under control. That means that sometimes there will be none of us alive, sometimes one, sometimes more. When things get really unbalanced and all four of us are already here, Perry is born, and some time later, if things still aren’t better, Aether incarnates.”

I blink three times fast. What?

“Wait,” Cody says slowly. “I’m not sure I’m following all of this. You’re not

immortal superheroes?”

Flame shakes his head even as Aqua says, “I wish. That would be awesome .”

River pats his arm. “Honey, you’re already the embodiment of water. Don’t be greedy.”

“So... wait. Did you say Perry is born ? But the rest of you ‘incarnate’?” Cody’s fascinated, but I’m still not sure which of his four options this is... or if it’s a fifth “in need of psychological assessment” option.

“That’s right,” Flame says. “Aether is the essence of life itself. His presence gives us a power boost, but it also starts a clock ticking. Sometime after he incarnates, he and Perry will find each other. They’re fated mates—opposite halves of a soul, if you will. Perry isn’t an elemental at all. He’s born into the dominant species of the time—humanity, right now. It gives him a perspective that we lack.”

Huh? This is so confusing. Can’t they just say they’re immortal superheroes so I can take Cody home?

“What do you mean, it starts a clock ticking?” Cody asks. Shit—I missed that completely.

“Our purpose is to restore the elements to balance so the health of the planet can be maintained,” Flame explains. “The thing is, the planet has its own hard reset button, so to speak. Eventually, it will restore balance on its own... but the species currently alive may not survive the process. We do everything we can to fix things before it gets to that point, but in some cases, there’s a time to stop fighting.”

I pinch myself. Am I dreaming this?

“Oh my god,” Cody whispers. “Perry’s born human because he knows what humans can handle. What we can come back from. And he’s the opposite half of Aether, who’s life. Perry decides when it’s time to stop fighting.” He turns to Perry. “You’re the angel of death.”

CHAPTER FIVE

FLAME

Perry winces. “That’s not my preferred title. But... yeah. I’m born without knowledge of any of this”—he gestures around the group—“until one day, I’ll meet Aether. The guys will tell me this story, and then bam , the memories of my past lives come back.”

“We get drunk after that,” Aqua adds. “It helps Perry let go of his old life.”

“That’d take a truckload of tequila,” Bran mutters.

George chuckles. “Vodka is currently the drink of choice. Or Aqua’s usually got a spliff around somewhere. It helps take the edge off for him when he’s not in water.”

Bran doesn’t look impressed by the idea that we’re stoners who get drunk all the time. I’m a little tempted to lean into that scenario and hope it pushes him into writing us all off as unreliable and leaving, never to be seen again. It would make things a lot easier.

But Aether seems to think Bran and Cody need to know this... and I can’t help but be curious. Last time, with River, it was because River is Aqua’s “person.” We’re working with the theory that they’re fated, almost like Aether and Perry are. That’s never happened before, but then, we’ve never had to deal with humans before, not with things this bad. The industrial revolution was a snooze compared to the last fifty years.

So... whatever's happening, I have to trust that Aether knows what he's talking about.

"Perry is the one who gets to decide when it's time to give up," I interject, trying to get the conversation back on track. "He tells us when what we're doing is no longer going to make a difference for good but merely prolong the agony. That's when we stop, live out the course of a human life, and wait for the hard reset." I try not to cringe at that analogy. I thought it would help a teenager relate if I used a technology term, but it feels so wrong. "Sometimes it takes hundreds or even thousands of years more," I add. "So... just because Perry's going to make the decision before he dies doesn't mean humanity will become extinct in your lifetime."

There's a little silence while they digest that, then Bran slaps his knees and stands. "Well, this has been fun, but I?—"

"Sit down," his brother orders. "I have questions still."

Bran hesitates. "Cody?—"

"Please?"

Sighing, the burly firefighter gives in to his teenage brother. Something weird happens in my chest. Do I have heartburn? I've never had it before—didn't think I could have it—but I'm not sure what else this could be.

I lean toward River and whisper, "What does heartburn feel like?"

He looks at me like I'm crazy.

"My first question," Cody declares, drawing my attention back to him, "is, will you confirm that you absolutely are the elements incarnated and have elemental powers?"

It's okay if this is a marketing gimmick—I won't get mad."

Hiding a smile at the patient way he phrased that, like a TV parent talking to toddlers, I reply, "This isn't a marketing gimmick. Though, if you could not tell anyone else, that would be good. We don't want attention." I glare at George again. Goddamn him—what was he thinking, saving a human's life so obviously? Did the man even have a bump on the head after, so people could assume he imagined it?

"So you're claiming to be elements personified?" Bran's skepticism is clear. "That's... interesting. And so unprovable."

"I can prove it!" Aqua volunteers.

"No!" George, Perry, River, and I exclaim.

"No tidal waves," I add, and Aqua rolls his eyes.

"I wasn't going to. But I can make it rain." He looks over at Cody. "Would you like some rain?"

Cody and Bran both look out at the clear blue sky. "Rain?" Cody asks. "Really? When?"

Aqua shrugs. "Now. It'll only take a second."

Bran laughs. "Got sprinklers on the roof? Are they controlled by your phone?"

I turn to Aether. "Really?" Why are we trying to convince him of this when we usually spend so much time trying to stay hidden from humans?

Aether smiles at Bran. "What about a fireball? You tell us where and how big, and

Flame will create a fireball. Then Aqua will make it rain over the fireball only.”

“I’m a firefighter ,” Bran explains with heavy-handed patience. “I don’t like fireballs all that much.”

“I don’t like having Aqua rain on my fire .” I glare at Aether and his damn plan to make it rain.

“I wanna see a fireball,” Cody argues. “Bran, you get to pick where. Somewhere that’s not flammable. No forests.”

Bran looks like he wants to argue, but after a second, he stands and looks around. “Over there.” He points to the entrance of the driveway. “It’s paved, and a small fireball, the size of my fist”—he holds up a clenched fist to demonstrate—“should be easy to put out.” From the look on his face as he locks eyes with me, he doesn’t expect that to be necessary anyway.

Without looking away, I create a fireball exactly where he asked for it to be. It takes some effort to keep it suspended in the air, unmoving, but not so much that I feel any strain.

“Holy crap!” Cody exclaims, and I smirk at Bran right before he whips around to look.

“Is it time for rain?” Aqua asks, and a second later, both Bran and Cody are out of their seats and racing down the steps from the deck.

The rest of us follow at a more leisurely pace. I say goodbye to my lovely fireball as Aqua’s damn rain extinguishes it.

“It’s wet,” Cody’s saying as we reach them. “The ground is wet.” He bends over to

touch it, then looks up at the still-cloudless sky. “There’s water here.”

Bran turns to look at me, his face a little pale. “Do it again.”

I raise a brow. “I’m not a performing monkey, you know.” But nevertheless, I produce another fireball.

“That’s warm,” Cody whispers. “It’s giving off heat.”

Bran slowly reaches toward it, and just when I think he might burn himself, pulls his hand back, digs in his pocket, and pulls out a scrap of paper—an old receipt, maybe. He feeds that to the fireball, and he and Cody watch as it falls to the pavers and burns to ash.

“Do we want more rain? Let’s have more rain!” Aqua declares, and in the next moment, we’re all backing away from his not-so-controlled shower. “Oops! Sorry, I got excited.”

Shaking the horrid droplets off me—he’s lucky I only caught the edges—I sigh as yet another perfectly good fireball is sacrificed to water.

Bran lowers his gaze from Aqua’s tiny dissipating cloud and looks around. He squats down and inspects the paving, pressing on some places and tapping on others. He stands again, then begins prowling around the driveway, peering into the garden beds and studying the house.

“Is he okay?” Zephyr asks suddenly, tuning in at last.

I pat his arm. “Yeah. He’s trying to find a hidden blowtorch or something.” But I’m getting bored with this, so I cross to stand beside him and hold out my hands. “Wanna pat me down? Or I can strip, if you want. We can go across to the beach, or anywhere

you choose. I'll conjure all the fireballs you want so you can see it's true."

He shakes his head. "Be reasonable. Surely you can understand why I'm having difficulty with this. I thought you were the arsonist we've been chasing down for the last five years, and you do start fires."

"He also puts them out," George points out helpfully. "That's why you see him so often at wildfires. He doesn't start them; he gets them under control so you can put them out."

Bran doesn't seem convinced. "But?—"

"Firepit," Perry says decisively. "Come on. Aqua, go get the matches."

Aqua's taken three steps toward the house before he stops and turns around. "We have matches?"

I shrug. "Don't look at me. I don't need them, and you leeches are always asking me to light the firepit and your candles."

"We have matches for when Flame's not home," Perry explains. "In the junk drawer." Aqua nods and takes off, and Perry turns his attention to our guests. "The firepit is around the back. You can light it the old-fashioned way, and then Flame will put it out."

I really dislike this whole thing that's happening today, where fires are being extinguished.

Cody bounces on his toes. "Personally, I don't need convincing. But I wanna see Flame suck up a fire." He makes a sound that closely resembles something being sucked into a vacuum cleaner, and I smother a grin. We rarely get to hang around

with strangers, and never with teenagers. This kid is fun. He practically leads the way around the house.

His brother, on the other hand, hangs back, looking over his shoulder to where the fireballs and rain were. He's not ready to believe it yet. If Aether wasn't so dead-set sure they needed to know, I would have preferred he not believe it.

My stomach does that weird thing again. I'm going to need to find out what heartburn is, exactly.

Aqua meets us, proudly waving a box of matches. "I can start fires too!" he announces, then grimaces. "Though I don't know why anyone would want to."

I ignore him. It's enough of a battle to keep him from splashing his disgusting water all over the place; I can handle a few insults. Besides, if he thought he was hurting my feelings, he'd be crushed.

River kisses his cheek and takes the matches, then hands them to Bran and gestures to the firepit. "All yours. Wood's over there—do you want some help with that?"

Bran's smile is polite but not at all trusting. "Thanks, but Cody and I will do it."

Cody scrunches up his face. "We will?" His brother gives him a look, and he sighs. "We will."

The firepit is just a hole we dug and lined with bricks—no need for anything fancy when I'm around, and sometimes the old-fashioned way is the best. We built the bricks up a little above ground level so we can put a metal grill on top if we want to cook out. When you can control the intensity of the flame, you don't need more than that.

It doesn't take them long to bring over the wood and kindling they need, and the rest of us sit comfortably around the firepit, enjoying the afternoon. I can tell Zeph's in some kind of mood, because the breeze is doing all sorts of weird things. I especially like when he flips Aqua's hair into his face and leaves him sputtering.

Soon, the first tiny tendrils of fire lick along the kindling, and Bran stands protectively over it, feeding it progressively larger sticks until the flame is established enough to take a solid log. It's too warm of a day to need a fire, so the others draw their chairs back a little, but I bask in the heat and the crackling sounds. The tinge of woodsmoke that reaches me makes my nostrils flare, and I suck it in greedily.

It's not until the fire is roaring away that Bran looks my way, a smirk on his face. He knows what I do—this is a good fire in full force. It'll be about an hour before it burns down to embers, and until then, it would take a hose (or Aqua), a few buckets of sand (or George), or a fire extinguisher to put it out.

Or me.

"Please, be my guest," Bran invites. "Perry said you'd put it out... using your 'elemental' power."

I smile at him. "How long would you say, in your professional opinion, that fire would take to die down on its own?"

Bran gives the merry fire a smug glance. "Anywhere between sixty and ninety minutes."

"And you're satisfied there are no tricks here? You inspected the pit thoroughly?"

"I did. Stop stalling and just admit you can't do it." He pauses. "And then show me how you did the fireball thing. Do you have a permit for that?"

George laughs.

I don't bother to get up. He's standing on the other side of the pit, so he can see me and the fire clearly—there's no way he can accuse me of doing something while he wasn't looking. A little wistfully—it's such a good fire, and so new—I draw the power out of the flames, going slow so Bran can see the change. His smugness turns to confusion, then shock, until he's staring at the embers and blackened, partly burned log with a blankness that makes me wonder if we broke his brain.

CHAPTER SIX

brAN

I stare in disbelief at the remnants of what was a blazing fire just seconds ago. What the fuck?

No, seriously... what the fuck ?

Cody makes a squeaking noise. “Number four. Oh my god, Bran, it’s option four!”

“Option four?” a voice asks, but I’m too busy having an existential crisis to care. Flame just... And the fire... He’s actually the living embodiment of fire. Everything they’ve told us is true.

“Is he okay? Do we need to get him to a hospital or something?” I recognize that voice. It’s the guy I thought was an arsonist but isn’t. Is it weird that, even though this means there’s an arsonist running around unchecked and unidentified, I’m relieved? Now I don’t have to feel guilty about the attraction I was pretending not to feel when I thought he was setting wildfires.

Though, since he’s not human , that attraction can just get back in its box.

Wait, was that bigoted? Am I a bigot for thinking nothing can happen between a human and a...

I blink slowly, then pull my gaze away from the smoldering wood in the firepit. Cody

has a ridiculous grin on his face, but the other... people? Are they people?

“Are you people?” I blurt.

George laughs. I don’t think it’s all that funny, myself.

“Get the vodka,” Flame tells Perry, then glances at me. “Wait, did you say you prefer tequila?”

“I’m not getting drunk,” I declare. I have a teenager to look after and drive home. I have responsibilities... Fuck, now that I know the end of the world is coming, am I obligated to do something?

“He’s fine,” Cody says blithely. “Sometimes he just needs processing time. Here, Bran, sit down and do your thing while I talk to the guys.”

That jerks me back to reality. I’m supposed to be looking after him, not the other way around.

“I’m fine. It’s all fine. Just... a surprise.” I take a deep breath. “Okay. So Flame isn’t an arsonist?”

Flame shakes his head. “No. Every time you’ve seen me at a wildfire, it’s because I was keeping an eye on it and sometimes helping.”

I remember the way we suddenly got the blaze from the other day under control, even though we’d been seriously worried we wouldn’t be able to. It was like the fire just... gave up. None of us thought it was weird—sometimes it just happens that way.

Though now that I think of it, those times are usually when I or someone else has seen Flame hanging around.

“Can you tell how the fires are started?” I ask hopefully. “If you’re not the arsonist, we don’t have a goddamn clue who is.”

“What arsonist?” River asks. “I haven’t seen anything about arson in the news.”

Cody holds up both hands. “Stop. Please. Before we change the subject to arson, can we talk about everything else?” He flops down into one of the chairs around the firepit—the last empty one. I sit on the arm, because I recognize that tone. This could take a while.

“What do you want to know?” Aether asks. “You’re part of our group now.”

River and Perry both wince. “Could you make that sound less cult-ish?” Perry asks, then glances at me. “It’s not a cult,” he adds reassuringly.

“This is probably freaking you out. I only learned everything a few months back. I thought I was having a tumor-induced hallucination... or drowning,” River puts in helpfully. “Aqua swam up to me while I was scuba diving sixty feet deep, wearing only a smile and flamingo board shorts.”

That makes me feel a lot better. “What convinced you?” I ask, and he shrugs.

“They were either telling the truth, or I was in a coma dreaming the whole thing. That might still be true, but at least in my coma, I’ve got a hot boyfriend and am helping to save the world.”

“I don’t think I’m in a coma,” I mutter. Though it’s possible smoke inhalation... No. I haven’t been close enough to that kind of danger for a year, and I doubt I would have dreamed the mundanity that the past year has been. Or at least I hope I haven’t—talk about a lack of imagination.

“You’re not in a coma, because it’s true,” my baby brother declares gleefully. “Okay. So, you’re not using your advantages to your benefit,” he instructs.

Six adults who don’t know him well stare blankly. The seventh—Zephyr—does too, but he was already doing that before, so I don’t think it’s Cody’s fault.

“We’re not?” Flame asks. “What advantages are those?”

George nods. “What he said. And what’s the benefit?”

Cody holds up his hands in a “picture this” gesture. “You’re incarnated elements here to save the world, but you’re trying to do it without help. There’s billions of humans on this planet, and fuck knows how many corporations that only care about profit. They’re the real enemy. You can’t stop them without law changes, and since politicians take money from these companies, you can’t change the law without voter pressure. For that, you need awareness.”

“Yes,” Flame says. “We know. We’ve been?—”

“Blah blah,” Cody interrupts, his enthusiasm drowning out manners. I open my mouth to chide him, then see the amusement—and attention—on everyone’s faces and decide to let it slide this one time. “Whatever you’ve been doing, it’s not enough. I didn’t know about it, and I live in the same area as you, have an interest in the environment, and am chronically online. I’ll also be eligible to vote in a year and a half and have a voting adult in my home who cares about the same things I do. I’m one hundred percent a part of your target audience, especially because I’ll share things online and boost your reach... but I didn’t know you existed. You can’t beat them on your own. You need help.”

“We have help,” Aether says brightly. “That’s why you’re here. We needed help, and we got River, and now you and Bran.” He smiles, and somehow I find myself smiling

back, even though my brain is thinking what the fuck?

“Ignore him,” Flame says. “He’s been saying stuff like that lately but has no explanation for it. The thing is, you keep saying you didn’t know we existed, and that’s for a reason. You saw how your brother reacted when he heard what we are. Other people will do the same, and then anything we say will get ignored because they think we’re crackpots.”

“Or worse, someone will think it’s a good idea to target us to ‘prove’ we’re not what we say we are,” Perry adds. “Flame’s already been arrested once.”

Flame looks over at me. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

I wince. “Uh... yeah. Sorry. I really thought you were the arsonist—a lot of us did.”

“I’m not saying you need to announce that you’re superheroes,” Cody says, doggedly dragging the conversation back to what he wants to talk about. “I’m saying you need better PR. Although, yeah, you could use the whole elements thing as a gimmick. I said that to Bran before. But I’d do it as like a specialty thing—Aqua took on that name and dyed his hair blue because he works most closely with marine conservation. Make it your marketing plan, not your identity.”

“Oh my god,” River says with dawning awareness.

“Fuck me,” Perry declares at the same time. They exchange glances. “Why didn’t we think of that? We’re the humans. We grew up in this world.”

River shakes his head. “We’re millennials. We don’t like interacting with people. This is the domain of younger generations.”

I laugh out loud, and Cody shoves me off the arm of the chair. We’ve had that exact

conversation before when he tried to get me onto whatever the newest social media platform is. I barely keep up with my Facebook profile... and whatever Twitter's called now. I still haven't updated the app, even though it keeps telling me I have to.

"I like YouTube," Aqua declares apropos of nothing. "I can watch ocean videos."

Cody grins at him. "Right? YouTube is good. And TikTok—you'd love that. You guys don't even have a website. You need to be a go-to source for people looking for information. You need to be promoting conservation charities. If you're not reaching everyone in your local area, how're you gonna reach everyone in the world?"

I fold my arms across my pride-puffed chest. My kid brother is awesome.

"That could work," George muses, looking at Flame. "Right? We're making some headway, but the kid?—"

"Hey!" Cody protests.

"—is right. We're not reaching enough people fast enough, and the ones we're reaching were already on our side. We need some kind of widespread education."

"I'm not disagreeing," Flame says. "He is right. But unless Perry and River want to?—"

"No," the two humans—wow, never thought I'd refer to anyone like that—chorus.

"Hard pass," Perry adds. "I like my Insta, but only because it's not work."

Flame looks at George. "Do you want to volunteer to learn PR and online... stuff?"

The expression on George's face is answer enough. Although... "Is that a tremor?" I

ask. “Please tell me you’re not?—”

“It’s fine,” George assures me. “Totally under control... as long as nobody tries to make me do online stuff.”

“Of course we won’t,” Aether proclaims, his tone implying that’s the stupidest thing he ever heard. I don’t know George well, but I’m inclined to think he might be right. “Cody’s going to do it.”

“Yes!” my brother exclaims.

“Excuse me?” I shake my head, even though I know he was hoping for this opportunity. “Cody has school. And—” And what? I don’t approve? Because I do. I’m just worried about... something. Him working with nonhumans? Maybe I am bigoted, after all.

“Bran.” The crestfallen look Cody gives me would have changed my mind even if I wasn’t already on the fence. “I could do this and school. Setting up a social media presence for a non-profit environmental group will look so good on my college applications.” He gives me big eyes. “Please?”

I sigh. “Yeah. But it can’t?—”

“Interfere with school, I know.” His grin is back. “It won’t; you know it won’t.”

I do. He can do this and school easily—I’ve been worried about how bored he’s been lately. Still, I can’t help looking worriedly at the other adults.

Crap, are they even adults? Did they have a childhood, or did they just appear one day as full-grown humans?

I watch Cody and Aqua high-five and do some kind of fist-bumping thing and decide I don't really want to know the answer.

"Before anybody gets too carried away," Flame says, "maybe Cody can tell us what he has in mind. Aether?—"

"It doesn't matter if you don't like it," Aether tells him with a happy smile. "It's the thing that's supposed to happen. Bran and Cody are meant to be here to help us. So wonderful."

Sure. Wonderful. "Me too?" I double-check. This guy might be the essence of all life, but he's a little loose on solid details, and I'm the kind of man who likes plans and routines. "I'm not so good with the online stuff." I slide a glance at George. "See how I can say that without causing an earthquake?"

The whole group laughs—Perry practically cackles—and George raises a brow. "Pretty brave for a human. You know I can make the ground open up under you, right?"

"Yeah, I don't know why I got so mouthy," I admit. "I don't usually tease people I just met."

Aether beams at me. "It's because you're family now," he says. "We're not people you just met. We're all in this together."

Perry winces. "Babe, seriously, less with the Kool-Aid vibe. We're trying to convince Bran that we're safe people for his teenage brother to hang around with."

"Bran knows it's true," Aether counters. "He's meant to be here with us." His eyes flick toward Flame, and I involuntarily follow his gaze.

Lust and something else begin to stir in me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FLAME

Bran's looking at me with a dumbstruck expression, and I'm not sure what to make of it. I'm not sure what to make of any of this, except that now I don't need to worry so much about being arrested for arson. Bran will vouch for me.

That's not the only good thing about it all, though. Cody's right; we need more awareness if we stand any hope of winning this fight. The issue Aqua and River uncovered when they met was resolved only when we were able to prove—with River's research—that the manufacturing plant was causing ecological damage that might have international implications. Even then, I think if it had been an expensive issue to fix, the company might have dragged things out in the courts.

But that's part of the problem. It was such a small thing, causing a huge amount of damage, and the executive responsible for that area preferred to hire someone to “stop” River's research and cover it all up rather than admit it existed and take the ding to his professional reputation. The cost of rectifying the problem was, for a company of that size, not all that substantial, but it was still a loss of profit that he didn't deem necessary. How many more problems like that exist? It's hard enough for us to fight the big ones we already know about—we're on a sinking ship with a million slow leaks we can't even find. Despite what Aqua might say, that's not a good thing.

Having more help, and better still, the kind of help that knows how to raise awareness on a broad scale, can only be a good thing.

Bran being part of that... well, I'm starting to wonder if it's not heartburn I've got after all. My chest is still doing that weird thing, but the thought of Bran hanging around here all the time, knowing who and what I am, not thinking I'm a criminal... That seems to have been the green light my cock needed to let its attraction to him—my attraction to him—take over. He was always off-limits before, what with the whole firefighter-who-thinks-I'm-an-arsonist thing. Now, though, that ban has been lifted.

Is there any chance Bran could find me as attractive as I find him?

And... the last time this happened, when Aqua met River, Aether said he was meant to join us and be Aqua's. Could I have been so strongly compelled by Bran's presence all these years because he's meant to be mine?

I can't deny that the idea of having somebody is... wonderful. We're not human, and I guess we technically don't have human feelings, but when you live in a body for long enough, it influences you. Throughout all my lives, that's happened. It's why we've had sexual encounters with natives—but always casual, no commitment wanted. After all, how do you have a relationship when you can never disclose who you really are?

I didn't think it mattered. I had my brothers for company when I needed it. But after all these lifetimes seeing Aether and Perry, the connection they have, sometimes I've wondered what that might be like. When Aqua met River... Well, it doesn't seem fair that he should get someone of his own and the rest of us don't.

Of course, it also doesn't seem fair that entire species become extinct, so really, I don't have a lot to complain about. Humans are going to die out, and millions of other dominant species will come and go before this planet ends and takes me with it.

So I pushed aside the niggle of jealousy—me! Jealous of water —and got on with the

job.

Now, though... I can't stifle the little flame of hope within me.

Fuck, unless Bran's meant to be someone else's?

My horror at the thought must show on my face, because Bran flushes red and looks away. Dammit. I don't know what to say to get his attention back and reassure him that I'm not horrified by him. The opposite, in fact.

"Uh," Bran stammers. "I-I don't know about me being meant to be here. But if I can help, I'm happy to." He pulls a face. "I guess I can start by telling the guys I work with that Flame's not an arsonist."

"That would be helpful," I manage. Does he not want to be here? "Let's go back to this arsonist you mentioned that's definitely not me. Can you tell me more?"

He nods, his expression settling into lines of determination. "We thought it was you—well, mostly I did—because I've seen you at so many of the wildfires that were started by arson. But if it's not you, there are no suspects. Someone's been setting fires up and down California, and even into Oregon and Washington, for years."

Rage burns inside me. I understand the attraction of fire. Nobody can understand that better than me. But how dare some asshole make my job here harder? It hurts every time I need to curtail a blaze and see it snuffed, and this jackass is deliberately prolonging my agony? Not to mention the damage being done to our overall efforts.

Whoever it is will burn.

"You can't set fire to them," Perry says, reading my mind. "Aether, tell him he can't burn the arsonist."

Aether nods solemnly. “What Perry said. We have to try to live by human rules. Mostly.”

Bran looks from them to me and back. “Wait, you’re not serious, right? I want this arsonist in prison for a long time, not murdered.”

“Hmm.” George taps a finger against his mouth. “Is it murder if he sets a fire and it accidentally burns him to death?”

That right there is why George and I get along, even though his dirt does nasty things to my fire. I point at him for emphasis. “What he said. Anyway, what I might or might not do doesn’t matter, since we don’t know who the arsonist is.” I’ll find out, though. The next time he lights a fire, the flames will give me clues. For the first time ever, I regret that fire can’t be a little more like water, which is a single entity. Every drop of water in the world is recycled over and over again, and because of that, it shares a universal consciousness. The water in a river in South America knows the same things that the snow in the Arctic Circle does, because at one point, one was the other and vice versa.

Fire’s not like that. Each one is unique and has a beginning and an end. The only eternal flame is the core of the planet, and that’s not so much pure fire as it is molten rock. It’s why I get along better with George than Aqua—we have that commonality. Aqua and I are complete opposites.

Zephyr and I have a commonality, too, but he’s so busy listening to the air that it’s hard to have a conversation with him most of the time.

The bottom line is, I can’t connect with fires that have already been extinguished to learn details about who set them. Once a new fire is born, though, I’ll be able to get some details. A description, at the very least. I give Bran a determined smile. “Next time this person sets a fire, I’ll be able to describe them to you. Will that be enough to

get started?”

I could get used to having him look at me with that kind of gratitude. “Yes! That would be amazing—we can use a description to keep an eye on the onlookers. Lots of arsonists like to hang around to admire their handiwork. It’s more than we have now.”

There’s a good chance the fire will see a car as well, which will have more identifying features. Or maybe luck will be shining on us and the arsonist will be wearing a nametag from their job—weirder things have happened.

Regardless, my goals for the immediate future have changed a little. Top of the list: Find the arsonist. But connected to that, and in close second place: Make Bran happy with me all the time.

To that end, I smile regretfully and say, “I’m sorry there isn’t a faster way to do this.”

He looks surprised, but it quickly changes to gratitude. “That’s okay. Any help is welcome. Although...” He winces. “We might need to come up with a way to tell the investigators how we know. I’m not sure ‘the fire told me’ is something they’d accept.”

I laugh.

CHAPTER EIGHT

brAN

Six weeks Later

“This morning’s video already has fifty thousand views,” Cody says with a lot of satisfaction. He’s staring at his phone as I drive us to the beach house for dinner and what he’s declared is going to be a “mega strategy session.”

“That’s good, right?” Even after more than a month, I have to check. Some of the places do better than others, so depending on where he posted this video, it could be awesome or it could be terrible. And when I get it mixed up, he goes all hormonal teen and yells at me. I can’t wait for that phase to end.

“It’s great,” he confirms. “Lots of comments and saves, too, which helps. Finally, we’re getting some traction.”

“You’re doing a good job.” I tell him that a lot, and I’ve noticed the guys do too. This project has made a big difference for him—even his teachers have noticed. I got an email last week congratulating me on getting him involved in this. He’s more focused at school, and because I’ve told him his continued participation depends on his grades and homework being done on time, he’s paying more attention to that too.

All around, this is a huge win for us. I knew I wasn’t giving him the attention he needs, but I didn’t realize how bad the situation was until I saw how much he’s settled with more adult supervision. The responsibility he’s been given and the

oversight he now gets, especially when he goes to the beach house from school when I'm working. He's asked—and I've agreed—if we can talk to the guys about him staying nights at their place when I'm on shift. He's never liked staying over with our neighbor because her spare room is crammed with junk, but I haven't quite been able to let him stay overnight alone. Not when social services made such a big to-do about my job not giving him appropriate supervision. He's older now, but the terror I felt after that conversation is hard to shake.

“We're all doing a good job,” he corrects absently, making me smile.

“We're trying,” I agree. There hasn't been a lot I can do outside of my actual job, but last week, when the captain asked for volunteers for the community outreach program, I put my hand up. Talks on personal fire safety and the difference between controlled burns and wildfires can be tedious, especially when your audience is a group of teenagers who don't want to be there and think they know better, but I can do my part to build awareness. I also admitted sheepishly to the captain and the rest of my division that I'd met Flame in person and he's actually a former fire investigator and current forestry conservationist, which explains his presence at multiple wildfires. When I told them Cody is now working with him and his friends to raise awareness, I got heckled thoroughly, and then they all got online to follow the new accounts my brother set up. I love my teammates—they've all been so supportive of me raising Cody. Though some of them think the brand name he came up with, Conservation Kings, is hokey.

It is, but I still like it. It goes with their hokey “screen” names.

“Yeah, about that whole trying thing,” Cody says, putting his phone down. I give him as much attention as I can spare from the road. It has to be important if he's taking his eyes off the screen. “When are you going to?”

Ouch. “Excuse me? I thought I was doing pretty good.” I try not to sound as hurt as I

feel, but he makes an impatient noise.

“No, not like that. I mean, when are you going to make a move on Flame?”

The car swerves slightly before I get it under control. Luckily, it stays in our lane.

“Um, when am I what now?” I swallow, fully aware of how unconvincing I sound. The tiny little crush my “is he an arsonist” obsession turned into has developed into full-blown unrequited... something. I’m not ready to say love, but I have the strongest suspicion I’m just fooling myself.

It’s too soon to be love. That would be ridiculous. So what if I think about him all the time and count down to when I’ll see him next? So what if I go out of my way to talk to him when I’m at the beach house? So what if I pounce on my phone every time it rings, because it might be him? And when it is, I get a rush of joy? None of that means I’m in love.

Right?

Cody sighs. “Seriously, Bran? Come on. You’d think that meeting the guys would have brought home to you how short our time on this planet is. If you want something, including happiness, you have to go after it.”

I shoot him a sideways glance as I turn onto the beach road. “Thanks, Mr. Miyagi.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, come on. I made you watch that movie with me!” When Cobra Kai first started streaming, I went back to where it all began. I was too young when the movies first came out and never actually saw them before.

“I can’t believe you’re talking about movies right now. This is important, Bran. Why haven’t you hooked up with Flame yet?”

God, I wish I wasn’t driving so I could get out of this car and walk away. This is even more uncomfortable than when I had to talk to him about safe sex. “Cody?—”

“That was a rhetorical question. There’s no answer you can give that isn’t a cop-out.”

“What if I’m not interested that way?” I challenge. I am, but that’s not the point. There are some arguments with my sixteen-year-old brother that I’m determined to win.

He scoffs. “Please. You get jittery if we go too long without seeing him, and the second we get to the house and you lay eyes on him, your whole body relaxes. If it weren’t for the unique situation, I’d be worried that you were being drugged or something. Instead, you’re just fated to be with him.”

I sputter. Actually sputter. In fact, I sputter so long and hard that I’ve parked the car in the driveway of the beach house before I can get another word out. Cody watches me patiently.

“That’s not true! Fated? What even is that? You’re too old for fairy tales.” The second the words are out of my mouth, I regret them. Nobody should ever be too old to dream, and that’s not the message I want to give my kid brother.

Based on the withering look he’s giving me, it’s not the message he got and he thinks I’m an idiot. “It all makes sense, Bran. Until recently, they’ve never told anyone but Perry the truth about themselves, not in all their lifetimes, but they told us. Because we’re meant to join them—that’s what Aether said. This is supposed to happen. You’ve been obsessing over Flame for years, and then suddenly we get this perfect opportunity to track him down and meet them all right at the best possible time for

me to start helping them.”

“That doesn’t mean?—”

“Right after Aqua met River and it turned out they were destined to be together. And now you, who are the most sensible, down-to-earth person ever born, so much that you’re boring?—”

“Gee, thanks.”

“—you’re suddenly getting butterflies when you think of a certain redhead.” He shakes his head. “It’s so obvious. You and him are meant to be together. He never looks away from you when you’re in the room.”

“I do not get butterf— Wait, really? He doesn’t look away from me?” My stomach does excited somersaults at the thought, and that more than anything else tells me Cody’s right. I have to make a move.

“He really doesn’t. It’s sickening.” He folds his arms and raises his eyebrows pointedly. “So... what are you going to do about it?”

For a second, I sit there in frozen indecision. Then I undo my seat belt and scramble out of the car. The only reason I know Cody’s following me is because he cusses me out as he races to catch up.

Inside the house, I head for the kitchen. It’s where Flame’s most likely to be at this time of day, if he’s home—the kitchen or the firepit out back. He’s the best cook of the lot of them, probably because they have a gas stovetop and he’s the master of fire.

He and George look up from the island as I burst inside, and because I’m looking for it, I see the way his face lights up. How did I miss it before?

“You.” I point at him as I cross the room. “We need to deal with this. Are we gonna fuck, or what?”

The delighted laugh that erupts from George would distract me—George, laughing?—if I wasn’t so focused on Flame. Hot color stains his cheekbones, and I can see his answer on his face even before he grabs my hand and hustles me back into the hallway. “Order takeout!” he calls over his shoulder to George, who’s still laughing.

We’re followed up the stairs by a wolf whistle that I have a strong suspicion came from my brother, but I don’t look because that would creep me way the hell out. He knows nothing about this, and George is going to tell him that Flame and I left through the back door to go to the grocery store.

Yep. That’s my delusion, and I’m sticking to it.

The bedroom Flame leads me to is spacious and south-facing. At this time of day, it’s fucking hot in here, but I’ve already noticed that he tends to prefer warmer temperatures. I’m planning to get naked, so the heat in here isn’t a problem.

In fact, why don’t I work on that? I tug my hand free from Flame’s.

“Please don’t say you changed your— Oh,” he finishes as I yank my T-shirt off. “Good idea.”

“Got any preferences?” I ask, working on my pants as he joins in the “who can get naked fastest” game.

“Sex with you.” He pauses to consider. “Actually, today I want to be topped.”

I grin. “Perfect. Lube?”

The look on his face would be funny if it didn't mean bad things for my plans. "It's... somewhere." He looks around wildly as if it might magically appear. Shit. "Rim me instead."

My cock, already half-hard, perks up the rest of the way. "Will that be enough?"

Flame nods. "Not human, remember? And I have really good muscle control." He gets onto the bed on his knees and elbows, legs apart enough to give me excellent access, then casts an enquiring glance over his shoulder. "What are you waiting for?"

I don't need an engraved invitation. I scramble onto the mattress behind him, take a second to ogle his naked body. I take pride in keeping my body strong, and Flame obviously feels the same way, because he's jacked. From the breadth of his shoulders to the perfect peach of his ass, he's all rippling muscle, and I like it.

A lot.

Bending my head, I get to work on his ass, not bothering to start slow. I'm sure we'll be doing that at some stage, but it's not what today's about. This is the time for us to take the edge off so we can both think and decide how we want our relationship to proceed. For that to happen, we both need to come. Fast.

So I make it sloppy and thorough, promising myself I'll savor him next time, and it's not long before I feel his muscles loosening.

"Fingers," he demands, his voice a little breathy. "Fuck, you're good at this."

Smirking, I give him one last lick before pulling back and replacing my tongue with a finger. He's relaxed enough that it slides in easily.

"More. Bran, c'mon. They'll interrupt us soon."

Shit. I forgot that Cody and the others are waiting on us to have the strategy meeting. That makes this weird, so I push the thought away and focus on adding a second finger to Flame's ass, and then, when he whines, a third.

"Okay, that's enough," he says shortly after. "Now your dick. Make it hard and fast."

"You're not the boss of me," I retort, bending down to bite his tight right ass cheek. His body jerks.

"Hey!"

"I wanted another taste." I withdraw my fingers and survey the stunning gape of his hole. "Man, you're pretty down here."

"Less admiring, more fucking," he orders, and if I weren't hard and leaking for him, I might be tempted to make him wait longer.

Instead, I jack myself once, then press my cock to his opening. He pushes back eagerly, and we both moan as the head pops past the ring of muscle.

"Hard and fast," he repeats, and I mindlessly obey.

I don't know how many thrusts later, we're both panting, groaning, sweaty messes, and I'm so, so close. "Want me to finish you?" I gasp, then give a choked-off shout when he rears up onto his knees in response, changing the angle of my penetration.

"I'll do it." The deep throatiness of his voice is almost unrecognizable. I did that to him, and my chest puffs with pride. His arm begins to move, and even though I can't see what he's doing, I can imagine it: his big hand wrapped around the equally impressive dick I glimpsed earlier, stroking, stroking, maybe catching on the head?—

His shout is the only warning I get before his whole body tightens, his ass clamping around me, hot and tight, and I follow him into blissful orgasm.

We're definitely doing that again.

CHAPTER NINE

FLAME

I stretch lazily. Bran's just gone to work, and I need to get up and do something productive myself, but first I'm going to bask in the glory of having my very own mate.

It's fucking amazing.

If you'd asked me a year ago, I would have laughed off the idea. Not only was it impossible, but what would I want a mate for? Someone I had to think about and consider all the time? Someone who would need my attention and make demands of me? Only one sexual partner for the rest of this lifetime?

Pah. No, thanks.

Thankfully, destiny or whatever knows better than me and didn't ask before providing, because Bran is the best thing that's ever happened to me in all my lifetimes, and I will cut a bitch who tries to take him from me. (Cody taught me that phrase, and it really fits with my life motto. Having a pseudo little brother is another bonus I didn't think I wanted.)

The last few weeks since Bran decided to forget his cautious human mindset and instead leap into bed with me have been utterly amazing. The sex, sure, but also the time we can just be together. I can't count how many nights we've stayed up late talking, learning everything about each other. Nobody told me having a mate meant

having someone who so perfectly understands me.

I still haven't convinced him to move in with us, but I'm close. He's got this bee in his bonnet about Cody and social services, but Cody's already practically moved in. He sleeps here more than Bran does, since he stays when Bran's on shift, and anyway, I can't see how social services could have any objection to him living in an excellent neighborhood with plenty of adult supervision. Cody just rolls his eyes and tells me not to worry about it, Bran will get over himself soon enough.

I hope it's sooner rather than later. Even though he spends almost all his time off here, I'll still feel better when all his things are here too.

With a happy sigh, I roll off the mattress and stretch again, basking in the warmth of the room. Bran only comes in here to sleep, and I've had to compromise and open the window for him at night so he doesn't overheat—humans really are very delicate—but the rest of the time, this is my sanctuary, and I keep it as hot as the sun can make it.

I pull on some clothes and reluctantly step out into the much cooler hallway. Downstairs, I can hear voices—hopefully someone's cooking breakfast, though I can't smell anything good.

Sure enough, when I get to the kitchen, Aqua's manning the blender.

“Smoothies?” What a dismal prospect. “Seriously?”

“They're good for you,” he defends. The asshole even makes them with water instead of milk or a milk substitute, so they're basically juice with some yogurt in them for texture.

“You know what else is good for me? Protein, well done.” I like it with extra

charcoal.

Aqua shudders. “I can put protein powder in yours,” he offers, like that’s going to make a difference. But he’s being nice, so I nod.

“Thanks.” I hope my smile doesn’t look as much like a grimace as it feels, though from the way River’s biting his lip to keep from laughing, I think that hope is in vain. I slide onto a stool beside him at the island. “You guys are here late.” They normally leave as early as possible to get Aqua into the ocean. River likes it there too.

“I’m not diving today,” River answers the implied question. “I’ve got research notes to type up and organize if I want to publish this next paper. Aqua decided to delay leaving so we could have breakfast together.”

“Anything for more time with my River,” Aqua adds, then turns the blender on. Two months ago, I would have rolled my eyes at that, but I get it now. If it wouldn’t cause problems for Bran at his job, I’d go hang out there to spend more time with him.

Aqua puts my smoothie in front of me a minute later, then joins us with his own. “Perry said to tell you he thinks something is going on with George, but he’s not sure what.”

I swallow my mouthful of watery fruit puree and nod. “Yeah, I noticed that. He’s spending a lot of time off by himself somewhere, and he never really has a good answer for where.”

“Do you think it’s us?” River asks worriedly. “The house has gotten a lot fuller this year—are all the extra noise and people worrying him?”

“Nah,” Aqua declares, and I point.

“What he said. If it was that, he’d just bitch about it. Maybe he’s hooking up with someone new? He doesn’t usually do more than one-night stands, but occasionally he’s had a fuck buddy in other lives.”

Aqua shrugs. “That’s probably it. Except why wouldn’t he just say that? He’s not shy.”

I snort at the idea of George being shy, but he has a point. Why wouldn’t George just say so, instead of fobbing us off with vague comments like “I was out.”

“Let’s give him space for now,” I suggest, though I privately resolve to feel him out about it—subtly. “If he does need some time to adjust to the noise, or if he’s hooking up with someone, it’ll blow over within the next few months.”

Aqua makes an agreeing noise and then asks River a question about his research. I take another swallow of my smoothie and decide that as soon as they leave the kitchen, I’m gonna burn me some bacon.

A thread lights up in my consciousness, the awareness that a wildfire has taken hold not too far away. Normally I ignore these—I’m aware of every flame that exists on the planet, so I’d go insane if I gave much attention to any except the out-of-control ones. But since I met Bran and learned about their arsonist, I’ve been investigating every wildfire along the western seaboard that might be out of place.

Reaching out now, I find the awareness of the fire. It doesn’t think or feel the way humans do, or even animals, but anything that exists has a rudimentary consciousness—a pursuit of existence. For fire, it’s to burn.

In the echoes of its origin, I see a match thrown into dry brush.

And then another, a few feet away.

And another.

And another.

Definitely arson.

“Fuck.” I put down my smoothie as the others look over at me.

“What is it?” River asks, concerned.

“Arsonist.” I’m skimming through the fire’s imprints of those early moments, looking for images, impressions.

“The one Bran thought was you?” Aqua perks up. “Do you need me to rain on the fire?”

I open my mouth to snap, then pause. That might not be a bad idea. It’s been burning for long enough now to have gained a foothold, and by the time the fire department gets there...

“Let me see if I can identify the arsonist first.” I’m not putting this fire out until I have the information I need.

The flames from the matches would have had the closest impression of their creator, so I start there. Big hands, callused and rough. The body is also big, and wearing... a plain black tee. That’s disappointing. The face... Unfortunately, the matches were held too low and at the wrong angle for me to see more than a shadowed jawline.

I cycle forward, waiting for each of those tiny first fires to take hold, grow large enough to eat the brush, and come into sight of the arsonist again.

There. Perfect. Four angles, giving me a great view of both profiles and the front of his face. I'm a little surprised to see that he's not smiling as he looks at the fires. Arsonists who light fires for the joy of fire, because they can't resist the impulse and have been under stress that only lighting a fire can fix—pyromaniacs—feel pleasure from lighting fires and seeing them take hold. This man just seems... intent. As though he has a reason for setting this fire.

Maybe he's not the particular arsonist we're looking for. Or if he is, there's something bigger going on.

"Can you look up an area for me?" I ask abruptly. "Tell me what's there?" The fastest way to rule this man out as being our arsonist is to work out why he's started this fire.

"Sure," River says, pulling out his phone. "Address?"

I hesitate, then expand my awareness. "It's, uh, out near Blossom Valley, I think." I give him vague coordinates that don't help at all.

Then he has the bright idea of checking the online fire maps and trackers. The fire is still young but established enough to have caught my attention as problematic, and sure enough, it's already been reported—in the Blossom Valley Summit Preserve. I match the satellite photos he shows me of the area to the images in my head.

"That's the one. What's close to the fire? Anything that someone might be trying to burn down?"

He double-checks the location, then grimaces. "Not really. There are some towns nearby, but the fire itself is in the middle of the preserve, off the hiking trail. It's not a long trail, and the fire would probably cover that quicker than a person, but I don't think you could set a fire there and be sure that it would burn down something in one of the towns."

I make up my mind. “I need to go check it out.” Knocking back the last of my smoothie—for energy, if nothing else—I parse through the images coming from the fire in real time, looking for the man. Is he still there? Arsonists often like to watch the fruits of their labor, and pyromaniacs especially do.

There he is—standing with a group of hikers, all of them watching the blaze. One is on her phone, presumably talking to emergency services, while another is holding up his phone, possibly taking photos or video. The arsonist is just standing there, looking around. Occasionally he glances back at the fire, as though to check it’s still there, but mostly he’s... ignoring it?

I don’t know what to make of this.

“Aqua, I’m sorry, can you put off your swim for a while? I need to keep tabs on this guy, which means I probably shouldn’t drive.” There are faster ways for me to get where I need to go than mundane human vehicles, but they take a lot of energy, and it’s not worth it for such a short trip. The way Aqua drives, we’ll be there in half an hour. The fire crew has to get access to the blaze—there’s no way they’ll have put it out before I get there. If this guy sticks around?—

An image flashes in my mind of the man watching a fire, but it’s not this one. It’s another fire I was at... maybe last year?

It’s not proof he set that fire as well, but it’s definitely a coincidence worth checking out.

“Let’s go now.”

I was right—by the time we get to the trailhead, the fire crew is only just beginning work on the fire. They’ve closed the trail, of course, and the last ten minutes were somewhat anxious for me when the onlookers were shooed away and asked to return

to the parking lot. I was concerned that our guy might just leave once he wasn't close enough to see the fire properly. I scan the lot anxiously as Aqua and I get out of the car.

"There, right next to the cordon," I say at last. There are so many people milling around that?—

Wait. I know that person—he's in Bran's division. And that's his captain. What are they doing here? This isn't their area.

And where's Bran?

Quickly, I check in with the fire, searching for him there, but it's too hard to tell with all the gear. Should I try calling him?

He won't be able to answer. If he's here, he's doing his job. I need to do mine, like I promised him I would. It's not like this fire is a true threat—not yet, anyway, and I won't let it get that far.

"Uh, Flame?" Aqua says uncertainly. "I don't want to freak you out, but there's a guy standing over there smiling at you. A lot. It's making me uncomfortable."

I drag my gaze away from Bran's crew members to see who?—

The arsonist. The arsonist is staring at me, and he's grinning wide. That's... weird. Maybe he recognizes me from the other fire? But why would he be smiling?

"I'm going to talk to him."

"I'll come. When do I get to make it rain?"

“Later. Maybe,” I add. There’s a really good chance it won’t be necessary.

We’re halfway across the lot when I’m spotted, and Bran’s captain waves at me and gestures for me to join him. I’ve met him twice since Bran told him I’m a former fire investigator, so it makes sense that he’s not surprised to see me here and that he might want my opinion.

I hold up a finger to indicate I’ll be there in a minute, then cross the remaining distance to the arsonist. I’m still not sure what I’m going to say, but I never get the chance to find out.

“You came. I knew you would.”

brAN

The fire is well under control and should be out soon, which is great. Next will be the investigation into how it started, which is not our problem. We're only here because most of the local battalion engines were already out on calls when this blaze was reported, and they needed a second one.

I trade off with Elgin, stepping back to take a break, though truthfully, I doubt I'll need it before the fire is out. I'm reaching for a water bottle when the radio crackles.

"Bran," the captain says, "we need you up here."

What? We dropped him and Suarez, our engineer, at the trailhead before we came down the fire road, because the local cops were unable to attend right away. What could they possibly need me for? They closed the trail immediately, and now they're just keeping people back and answering questions from concerned locals.

Tippin, the captain of the other engine, must be thinking the same thing, because he gives me a weird look before replying, "There a problem?"

"Yes, but not with the fire," the captain replies. "If you can spare Bran, send him over."

Tippin raises a brow at me, and I shrug. Sighing, he gestures for me to go, and I turn and start a slow jog up the fire road. Luckily, the fire isn't too far from the trailhead, but I still have some ground to cover, and by the time I get there, they'll probably have the fire out.

It's not fun running in my gear, however slowly, and I'm drenched in sweat by the time I reach the road. The trailhead parking lot is just a few yards along, and I'm curious about what could have made the captain call me back... and try not to think that something's happened to Cody.

The raised voice gets my attention as I turn into the lot, but it's not especially loud. No... it's just that everyone else is silent. Very silent. Eerily so.

Uh-oh. Thirty or so hikers and snoopers don't usually get this quiet to listen to someone complain about a trail being closed.

I stride toward the group of people, tuning in to what the man is saying as I get nearer.

“—you come every time. That has to mean something. It's like you can sense that I'm calling for you, that I need you.”

What the fuck?

“Explain it to me again,” a voice says. A familiar voice. Flame's voice. What the fuck? “You saw me at a forest fire in Idaho?”

“I didn't just see you, we connected! Our souls recognized each other! You just need to let go of the societal norm that keeps you from seeing that, and we can be together.”

“I'm trying to understand that,” Flame says patiently, and finally I'm close enough that I catch a glimpse of his bright hair. Aqua's beside him, which I'm not sure is a relief or not. I'd feel better if it was George—or even Perry. He's the kind who'd claw out the eyes of someone who was trying to poach his friend's boyfriend. “Sorry, you never mentioned your name?”

“I’m Chad. Chad Winch.”

Flame smiles, but it’s so fake, I’m surprised Chad doesn’t notice. “Tell me again, Chad. You sa—I mean, we connected at a forest fire in Idaho. Then what?”

“I lost track of you after—you left before I could get your number. That hurt. At first I thought you were rejecting me, and I couldn’t understand why.”

A muscle in Flame’s cheek twitches, but he just makes an encouraging hmm sound. I spot my captain and begin edging around the group toward him.

“Then I realized you weren’t rejecting me. You were just afraid! Brainwashed by society to think that fated mates weren’t real.”

I nearly choke on my own spit, and Aqua cocks his head, confusion clouding his pretty face.

“All I had to do was give you time to come to terms with your feelings. I needed to give you space . But not too much, because I can’t be far from you.”

Oh my god, what is even going on right now? I reach my captain and lean in close to ask him.

He gives me an inscrutable look and replies in a low voice, “A confession.”

“Only,” the stranger, a completely ordinary-looking man with brown hair and an earnest—if slightly glazed—expression, continues, “you were so hard to find! You don’t have social media or anything. I was devastated until I remembered that old logic problem about the woman who fell in love with someone she saw at her mother’s funeral and killed her sister so she could see him again. All I had to do if I wanted to see you was start another forest fire!”

For a second, I swear my heart goes still. Does he mean...?

“But you didn’t come to that. So I went and looked at all the news footage from the fire I saw you at, and I realized there were a lot of firefighters from other states.” He shrugs. “It took me a while to work my way down the coast, and you didn’t come to every fire. But eventually I got here and realized you came to more fires in this area, so this is where I stayed. And now I only start a fire when I desperately need to see you. I’m trying to be patient, but waiting has been so hard for me.”

This is our arsonist. Our arsonist just confessed in front of three members of the SDFD and a few dozen other witnesses. I swallow, even though my throat is dry.

“Cops?” I murmur.

“Should be here soon. I put in a call when I realized what he was saying,” the captain mutters. “Your boy is handling this like a champ.”

“I’m sure the wait has been awful,” Flame says soothingly. “Thank you for being so patient. I came over today to tell you I need just a little more time to sort things out.”

Chad nods eagerly, so absorbed by Flame that he doesn’t seem to notice as a cop car turns into the lot, lights flashing but no sirens. I exhale with relief as the captain goes to fill them in.

Flame’s still talking. “...some complicated things going on in my life, and I haven’t wanted to expose you to them. But things will be very different soon.”

“How long?” Chad asks longingly. “How much longer do I have to wait?”

He never gets an answer. The crowd parts to let the cops through, and Flame steps back, keeping a wary eye on Chad as he realizes what’s going on.

“No! You don’t understand?—”

“Chad Winch, you’re under arrest for arson,” one of the officers says as the other cuffs him.

“It’s not arson when you’re doing it for love!” Chad proclaims, then looks for Flame. “Don’t worry! As soon as I explain this, they’ll let me go. We can be together then.”

The officers exchange glances, and one says, “I’ll call this in. Gonna need a psych assessment before we can question him.”

“It’s all going to be okay,” Chad promises Flame as the cops walk him to the car. “Wait for me!”

One of the cops stays by the car, talking on the radio, while the other comes back to start taking witness statements. I make my way over to Flame.

“What the fuck?” It’s not what I intended to say, but it covers all bases.

“This isn’t how I thought things would turn out,” he agrees.

“Are you okay?” Chad didn’t touch him or anything, right?

He smiles at me, and the difference between this smile and the one he gave Chad is like night vs. day. “I’m fine. Shocked. This has never happened to any of us before.” He glances toward the trail and lowers his voice. “The fire’s out, by the way.”

I nod. “That’s good. Um. Wow. Thank you for helping to catch the arsonist? Though if this ever happens again, can we do it without them being obsessed with you?”

“That sounds like something I can support. I’d rather?—”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Aqua says. “I’m confused... why did he think you’d need time to get used to your fated mate?”

Sheer exasperation crosses Flame’s face as he turns to his friend. “That’s what you took from all this?”

Aqua rolls his eyes. “No, of course not. I also know that if the fire’s out, you won’t let me make it rain.”

I grab Flame’s arm before he strangles Aqua in front of the cops. “Thanks for coming, Aqua. Do you mind waiting in the car for just a second?”

He smiles sweetly at me. “I like you. I’m glad you’re sticking around.”

We watch him walk off, and then Flame says, “I’m glad you’re sticking around too.”

“Mhmm. You know, Chad did have one thing right.”

“I did not feel a bond with him!”

I chuckle. “No, I know that. I mean... you and I have been seeing each other at fires for years, right?”

He nods warily.

“And in all that time, you never recognized me as your fated mate. You needed time to come to terms with your feelings.” It’s a challenge to keep a straight face as he stares at me in disbelief. It’s only when he starts to sputter that I let myself laugh.

He looks around, and I can see the second he realizes that this isn’t the place for him to kiss me while I’m on duty. “Just wait,” he promises. “Tonight I’ll show you exactly how in tune with my feelings I am.”

And he did.

Thanks for reading Flame !