

## INTO THE HOLLOW - SAMPLE CHAPTERS 1 & 2 (unedited)

Do not read if you haven't read EIT books #1-5

I mean it!

### CHAPTER ONE

Whiteout.

That's what I saw when I finally pried my lids open, my lashes stuck together with the glue of tiny snowflakes.

White. White. White.

Where was I?

I rolled over with a groan and felt an explosion of pain in my side. I looked down and as my vision began to right itself, I saw a rock jutting into my stomach, protruding from the cold, snow-blown ground like a weapon.

I eased onto my back, the chill seeping through my jacket. My bare fingers tingled as I ran them over my body. I felt intact, nothing bleeding or broken.

But how did that explain the rich, acidic smell of blood in the air?

I slowly sat up, surveying my surroundings.

I was sitting on the barren, rocky ground up the side of a mountain. Snow swirled in the air from all directions, some of it falling on the icy white patches on the earth, the rest blown away like angel dust.

Because of the infinite white, I could barely make out a forested valley below, and across from me, in the haze of snowfall, a few jagged peaks.

Beneath me the ground sloped off gently, alternating between sudden drop-offs. Vertigo swept through me and I dug my frozen fingers into the hard ground, suddenly afraid I'd roll off

the side and fall to my death.

A soft rumbling came from my left. I turned, painfully, my side still smarting, and saw a slight overhang where snow fell off in gentle lumps. My heart sped up a few beats.

I let out the breath I was holding, watching it freeze and catch in the air before drifting away, and noticed a trace of red where the snow had just fallen.

My bones seized with chill.

I peered at the red spot, my eyes widening as it began to spread and bleed across the snow.

Glancing up at the overhang where the snow had come from, I saw another clump of it come sailing down, landing on the red with a poof.

It too had a spot of red in it that slowly spread like a stain on a paper towel. Curiosity getting the better of me, I carefully got to my feet and walked over to the patch of silky wetness. Hunched over, I tried to figure out why the snow was bleeding. I felt a drip on the back of my neck.

I reached back with my hand and when I took it away, it was slick with blood.

Did I even want to turn around?

I did, anyway.

Above me was a limp, lacerated arm, its torn and bloody fingers dangling over the edge of the overhang.

Claws. Teeth. Blood.

Tearing. Gnawing. Eating.

The images and sounds ripped through my head in a flash of smoky darkness.

Dex! I remembered Dex.

My chest collapsed in on itself as I tried to recall the last time I'd seen him.

Where was he?

What happened to him?

I eyed the arm above my head and felt the world drop away beneath my feet.

~~~

A hard nudge into the side of my stomach again.

I winced and grabbed it, expecting to find the sharp, snow-dusted rock but instead found a dainty hand and long fingers wrapped around mine.

My eyes flew open. Beside me, Ada poked my side, a quiet smile on her face.

We were in the back of my dad's car. Of course we were.

My father, at the wheel, eyed me nervously in the rearview mirror. My mom sat beside him, looking out the passenger's side window. Ada was next to me, stuck with the bitch seat, as the hulking douche canoe, Maximus, hunched on her opposite side.

“Are you feeling OK?” Ada asked, keeping her voice low, even though everyone in the damn car could hear her. “You fell asleep there. You were drooling.”

I wiped at my mouth and at the puddle on my collar.

“Well, I’ve sort of had a long day.”

My eyes met my dad’s in the mirror again. He looked so much older than he did the other day. Was it possible to drive someone to an early grave?

“We’re almost home, pumpkin,” he said.

I nodded and felt eyes boring into the side of my head. Reluctantly, I looked past Ada and at Maximus, who was staring at me intently.

“What the hell are you looking at?” I sniped.

His expression didn’t change and he didn’t look away, just kept trying to read me with those green eyes of his.

*This is all your fault*, I projected at him, hoping he could hear it in some way. It kind of creeped me out that it looked like he nodded in return.

“Perry,” my dad warned, though his voice had lost the edge it normally had. I guess when your daughter is borderline psycho and may or may not have just been kidnapped along with your 15-year-old, it’s best to use the kid gloves.

I sighed and looked out the window at the darkening Portland cityscape. I thought about Dex and if he was OK. Jail. I couldn’t believe it. I mean, the idea of Dex in jail wasn’t all too surprising. He kind of seemed made for jail in some ways, but he was there on account of me. On account of my parents. On account of Maximus. The unfairness of it all boiled my blood and heated my face.

After Dex, Ada and I returned home from Idaho and the exorcism. All my fears came to a head right in my parents’ front yard.

Dex was hauled off by the cops on suspicion of kidnapping, which was totally bunk considering both Ada and I had willingly gone with him. At first, my loving Dr. Freedman thought I wasn’t in my right mind to give consent, so he convinced the police and my parents to take me to the hospital to get checked out. All I wanted to do was holler and fight and scream, but that probably would have only helped his case. I very reluctantly took Maximus’s advice to just go along with it. But I didn’t believe for a second that he’d have my back when he said he wouldn’t let anything happen to me.

Well, I guess he did keep his word because nothing did happen to me, though I won’t give him all the credit. The once-over at the hospital proved to everyone how coherent I was. Because, well, I was. The demons weren’t haunting me anymore. Abby was long gone. I left them all with Roman in those dusted Idaho hills. I’d be lying if I said I felt a hundred percent better. But that had nothing to do with ghosts or my mental state. I was just extremely tired and felt ... off. Like a lot of extra energy was pooling around in my bones with nowhere to go.

Two very contradictory feelings at once and it was scrambling things a bit in my head.

Ada also helped me by ruthlessly sticking to her story: that I had been nutso because I was sick and had a terrible fever. In a panic, she called Dex because he would know what to do and he took us to a medicine man who applied a bunch of herbs and shit during a healing session and voila! The fever broke, I was cured. No more crazy Perry.

I could tell that no one really wanted to believe that story, but they had no choice. Like the truth would have made any more sense—the truth is what would have gotten me in trouble. At least with this version, an external and mildly believable circumstance brought on the psychosis. Plus, it was hard to argue with it when I was sitting there in the examining room, forming complete sentences, wholly lucid, acting like myself.

And Maximus, well, he didn't turn on me like I thought he would. He backed up Ada's story and even interjected some observations such as, "I knew there was something physically wrong with her. I just wasn't sure what, and hearing about Perry's history, I jumped to the wrong conclusion." A total lie, but one I appreciated. It didn't mean I didn't want to kick the ginger right in his freckled balls.

And so I left the hospital with a clean bill of health. Dr. Freedman seemed disappointed. It was like he wanted me to be sick. It didn't help that I caught him pulling my mother aside and telling her to watch me very carefully. I had a feeling that he didn't mean for today, or the next few days, or the next few weeks.

He meant for the rest of my life.

My thoughts drifted over to Pippa. My grandmother. It would take me a long time to come to terms with that, even though deep in my soul I knew we were related. Maybe in some ways, I always knew. Maybe I had seen her in my childhood. Maybe you could feel yourself in someone's blood.

It broke my heart to learn what my mother had done to her. Though I wasn't a parent, I still couldn't imagine what it would be like to have your daughter put you away, to condemn you to a horrible life, to a certain lonely death. It made waves of nausea simmer in my belly.

I looked over at my mom, keeping my actions subtle. She was still staring out the window and so I couldn't see her face. That was just as well. I didn't think I could ever look her in the eyes again, knowing everything that I knew now. I wasn't sure how I'd even survive in the house with her watching my every move for the rest of my life, waiting for me to screw up. I had no reason, really, to believe my mom would act the same way with me as she had with Pippa—my grandmother—but ...

My mother always acted as if she was scared of me. I now understood why, to watch the signs of "mental illness" creeping up in your daughter, knowing what might lie ahead. But now, everything had changed. She was afraid of me and I was afraid of her.

"Afraid of her?" Ada asked.

I jumped in my seat and turned to see everyone in the car looking at Ada, including my mother. I quickly averted my eyes from hers to Ada's questioning face.

"Did ... I just say something out loud?" I asked, my heart tight. I hoped to God I wasn't babbling on about my mother. That *really* wouldn't have helped.

But while Ada said, "Yes," everyone else in the car said, "No."

Oh, great, now she was acting loony too.

She raised her brows at me and a flash of fear sparked in her eyes. I stared right back, willing her to not say anything else.

Finally, Maximus laughed awkwardly. "I reckon it's been a long day for everyone, myself included."

My mom smiled gratefully at him, then shot her daughters a suspicious look, and turned back in her seat.

No one said anything for the rest of the ride.

~~~

A knock at my door roused me out of my dreamless sleep.

"Come in," I groaned, hoping it was someone I wanted to see, which nowadays meant Ada.

It was. She poked her blonde head in my room and squinted at the darkness.

"Sorry to wake you," she said as she came in and gently closed the door behind her. She flicked on the lights.

"Arrrrrgh," I moaned, throwing my arm over my eyes. "Thanks a lot. What time is it?"

"It's almost ten, lazybones," she said. I felt her come over and sit on the side of my bed.

"In the morning?"

"No, at night."

"Then why are you waking me up? Can't a girl sleep?" I mumbled. "I survived an exorcism, you know."

"That's what I came here to talk to you about," she said lowering her voice.

I took my arm off my face and blinked at her. She looked as serious as anything.

"OK, what is it?" I whispered. An exorcism was the last thing we wanted to get caught talking about. I was so paranoid now, and apparently so was she.

"I...I don't know what happened to you when you were...gone," she said. She looked very small and scared. "But it hurt. It was...so terrifying. I didn't know what I'd do without you."

"Oh, Ada," I told her, sitting up. "I'm fine. I came back."

"Did you?" she asked. "You seem different."

I bit my lip. "Well, I feel different. Not in a bad way, but I do. I don't know what Roman did to me."

“You went somewhere...”

I examined her face carefully. Had I talked to her about Pippa, about what I saw in the Thin Veil? I didn't think so. At least, I didn't remember.

“Somewhere?” I asked.

“I know about our grandmother,” she said deliberately. “Pippa. I know what happened to her.”

My eyes widened, the breath leaving me. “How...did I tell you?”

She smiled, lips tight and closed. “Sort of. I don't know what's going on Perry but...OK, this is going to sound really freaking weird but from time to time, I'm, like...hearing your thoughts.”

That threw me for a loop. I almost laughed then I remembered her bizarre question in the car. But...that was impossible.

I looked at her even closer, wondering if she was fucking with me. Not that she would, but there was no explanation that I could grasp. What, I suddenly became telepathic? How come I couldn't hear anyone else's thoughts?

She watched me for a few beats and I asked, “All righty, if that's true, did you hear what I was thinking just now.”

She shook her head.

*How about now?* I asked internally, projecting my thoughts onto her with all the concentration my poor brain could muster.

“Yeah, I heard that one,” she exclaimed quietly, her smile broadening with wonder.

I matched her smile in wattage. This...I couldn't even begin to fathom *this* discovery. It was like waking up and finding out you had super powers.

“Oh my god, OK, how about now...OK wait,” I said excitedly.

*Is Maximus still in the house?* I thought with power behind it.

Her expression was open, watching me.

“Well?” I asked.

“I didn't hear anything,” she said.

I took in a deep breath and closed my eyes, my insides straining, like I was pushing through a massive headache.

*Is the ginger still here? Or has he left?* I asked.

I heard nothing so I opened my eyes to see Ada with her eyes closed.

“Still nothing?” I prodded her.

She opened her eyes. “No, I was trying to project my thoughts onto you. The assfart left right after you took your nap. He said he was going back home and he'd call you later.”

“Oh freaking joy,” I snarled. “Well, I can't hear you. Try again.”

We tried back and forth for a while. Sometimes Ada heard me but only when it felt like I was busting a nut. Otherwise, it didn't work and I never heard her.

“Maybe it’s a one-way street,” I mulled it over. One-way street was better than no way, providing I had the choice of whether she heard it or not. I didn’t want my sister to hear everything I thought, no matter how close we had become.

“Maybe,” she said. “Do you think Pippa passed something on to you?”

I shook my head. “Wouldn’t she have said something?”

“I don’t know. Perry, I’m scared.”

“About what?”

It was a stupid question.

She sighed and started picking at the blanket. “About everything she told you. How could mom do something like that to her? What if she does the same thing to you? To me?”

I grabbed Ada’s hand and squeezed it. “You’re going to be OK. You’re the favorite here. You’ve never given mom any sign that you’re about to go loco. Keep it like that.”

“You never did either until you were my age.” Her voice trembled.

“Ada,” I said determinedly. “You have the advantage. You now know about everything. You know the stakes. Just keep being yourself and if you ever see anything that doesn’t make sense to you, ignore it. Ignore it and talk to me. We’ll keep it just between us. No one ever has to know or suspect anything.”

“And what about you? You know mom is going to be watching you like a hawk. You don’t see the way she looks at you when you’re not looking. She has that same fucking look on her face as the doctor.”

“She’s still our mom,” I told her. Though I thought the same thing, I felt strangely defensive. “We can’t jump to conclusions and we can’t start hating her. I mean, fuck, she *is* our mother. We have to believe she would never do that to us. She’s not a monster. And if she wants to spend the rest of her life worrying about me...well...then she can do it from a far.”

“What?”

I swallowed hard and looked around my familiar room. For the last few weeks it was a circus of horrors. Now it meant nothing to me at all.

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately,” I told her honestly. “It’s time for me to leave. To move out. I’m fucking nearing spinsterhood anyway, it’s getting pretty sad that I’m still here.”

“No...don’t go,” she pleaded with those round blue spheres. Her plea was weak though and I knew she was on board with the idea.

“If I stay here, I’ll just get worse. How can I function being paranoid as hell at each turn? I couldn’t. I can’t live here, with her, worrying about the next time I fuck-up. I might be fine now, but am I ever really all there, especially now that I’m, what, a bloody telepath? This shit isn’t leaving me anytime soon and we both know it. I might not have a demon on my back but I can guarantee I’m not getting rid of my ghosts anytime soon.”

She grew quiet and squeezed my hand back, her eyes dropping to the bed. We sat in silence

for a minute, both in our own heads. She gave me no indication that I was in hers.

Finally she pointed out, "But you don't have a job. You don't have any money. How are you going to move out?"

I let out a deep breath. "I don't know. But I have to leave. And soon."

"You could move in with Maximus," she suggested innocently.

I shot her a dirty look. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

She threw up her hands in surrender. "OK, well before you bite my head off just hear me out."

I didn't want to but she continued on, "Look, we're both not a fan of him. I know I wouldn't mine shoving my curling iron up his ass and turning it to eleven, but aside from that, he did do you a favor today."

I opened my mouth to protest but she shushed me. "And I know it was a weak favor and that most of this is his fault and that he never had your back and yadda yadda yadda and OK, I really hate him too. But I wouldn't suggest going with him if I didn't think it would be better than you staying here. Move in with him, get a job and move out."

"No way," I said, crossing my arms. "Not happening. Not ever fucking happening. And also, who the hell says he'd want me crashing his stupid apartment?"

She gave me a wry smile. "Perry, it's pretty obvious he still has a hard-on for you."

"Oh Ada," I smacked her arm. "Don't say things like 'hard-on' it grosses me out to hear it from you."

"Fine," she said, taking her arm away from me. "I guess you do have one other option."

I had a queer tightening in my chest and could barely eke out the words, "What?"

She didn't say anything. She fished her phone out of her pocket and started to text something.

"Ada!" I cried out. "What is the other option?"

She put the phone down and smiled at me. She gestured to my window with her head.

"It's outside."

My legs felt like they were encased in cement. I stared at her, bewildered, my mind racing on about something I both did and did not want to think about.

"Go on," she said more urgently.

I slowly got off my bed and eased my way over to the window. My heart thumped hard against my chest and the blood filtered out of my head.

Outside, across the street, a black Highlander was running, its exhaust floating in the night.

"How the..." I said, barely find the words.

She got up and joined me by the window. "Maximus went to bail him out earlier. He's still a twat, of course, but at least Dex isn't jail any more. It's not like the charges were going to stick anyway."



I took my eyes off of the sight of Dex's car, my heart awkwardly tumbling over itself at the thought of him outside, and looked at her incredulously.

"How did you know? Did you plan for this to happen?"

She grinned. "Remember that whole sometimes hearing your thoughts thing we were just trying out? I already knew you were thinking of making a run for it. Dex doesn't know, I just told him to come here right after Maximus got out. I have a feeling though, let's call it a hunch, that he's got a hard," she paused, catching my eyes flashing, "er, soft spot for you too."

I didn't know what to think about that. Looking out at Dex's car, and the answer she had given me, all I did know is that my life was – yet again - about to change in an incredibly messy way.

## CHAPTER TWO

"Well?" prodded Ada as I stood at the window. "Go say hello."

"Where's mom and dad?" I asked, not taking my eyes off of the running vehicle, feeling like my chest was being torn in two different directions.

"I think dad's still downstairs watching Law & Order. I don't think he'd be too thrilled to see you going out the door right now."

I nodded. "The window it is."

I put my hands underneath the edge and pushed it open. A cold blast of late February wind coated me in seconds and I felt Ada jamming a retro Kyuss hoodie into my hands.

"Thanks," I mumbled and quickly slipped it on along with my Chucks. I was half-way out the window, ready to put my feet on the sloping roof below when Ada called out, "Hey do you think I can take over your room when you're gone?"

I shot her a look.

She shrugged. "What if I meet a guy and have to sneak out too? It's only fair you know."

I sighed and couldn't help but smile. "Sure."

"Awesome. Well, don't be too long...you never know if they'll want to check on you," she

warned, heading toward my door.

I nodded and stepped onto the roof. I was lucky that it was such an easy escape route. When I was younger I used to sneak out all the time. In the past few weeks the route had been used twice; once when a demon had led me up there, the other when Dex came in through my window to rescue me. You know, the usual stuff.

Now he was back. And I wasn't sure if I was going to let him rescue me again. I wasn't sure what the hell I was going to do about anything. I had two options and neither looked very promising.

I made it to the tree at the end of the roof and shimmied clumsily down it, my body still a bit sore from the trauma of the last few weeks. The minute I felt the ground beneath my feet, a trembling started around my heart and radiated outward. I was nervous. I was damn nervous. I couldn't find the strength to walk away from the tree and onto the street.

*It's just Dex, I told myself. He's not worth having a panic attack over.*

And yet my lungs were constricting.

I knew it was just Dex but that was the problem. I didn't know which Dex I had or which Dex I wanted, if any of them. That's where the nerves came from. My uncertainty. Everything had changed. And changed again. One second I wanted to run into his arms and thank him for saving my life. Then in the next second I remembered what had happened between us. I remembered the pain, the darkness, the hell I went through. I knew it wasn't fair to blame him for demon possession but sometimes I found myself cursing him for it. If he hadn't left me like he did, had sex with me and just used me like some old dishcloth, I wouldn't have broken in half. I wouldn't have seeped open and left that space for something else to come in.

And the miscarriage. What, for one very brief time, had been a baby. That killed me in ways I never thought it would. I never thought much about kids and lord knows twenty-three is too young for me to be having them but...it really ripped at something deep inside, something I never thought I had. It was a weird sense of loss and something I couldn't even explain.

You'd think I'd be used to that, the unexplainable. But when it came to my feelings, when I couldn't figure out what they even were, that's when I was really scared. That's when my nerves would clamp up my throat, squeeze my lungs and make me feel that standing underneath a bare tree was the safest, smartest option for me. I wasn't in the house, I wasn't in his car. I was just me. In-between.

Eventually though, I found my footing. Some perverse need to choose. I walked out from under the broken canopy and made my way onto the street. There was the car up ahead, parked on the side of the road, facing the other direction, like he had driven past the house first, then turned around at the end. Funny to think that had happened while Ada and I were attempting to be telepathic inside my bedroom.

I stepped quietly, afraid my feet would echo down the street and be carried off by the breeze

and into the house. I knew my parents would flip the fuck out if they knew what I was doing. I kept going.

I wasn't far from the car when the driver's door flung open. My insides whirled feverishly, my breath halting. In that moment I realized he still had that power over me, to make my body react when my mind wanted to turn away, and I hated him for it.

Dex stepped out, almost in a hurry. I hadn't realized I had stopped where I was and was just standing on the road, staring at him in a hiccup of time. I only had a few seconds to take him in, his black cargo jacket, his messy, wind-tossed hair and beautifully scruffy face, the flash of emotion in his dark eyes, buried under the furrow of his brow.

Then he was running toward me and for a moment I thought maybe something was wrong and that I should run too. Then I thought maybe something was right and I should run anyway.

He ran to me and engulfed me in his arms, holding me tight to him, raising me a few inches above the ground. I was caught so off-guard, I could only let him hold me. My breath was gone, squeezed out from the intensity of his hug. I didn't think I could hug him back even if I wanted to.

He held me like that, my feet dangling, his strong arms keeping me as close to him as possible. His face buried in my neck and his familiar smell draped over me like a comforting blanket while his breath tickled my skin until my hairs stood on end. I decided to ignore my brain for a second and just enjoyed the sense of being completely embraced.

"Perry," he mumbled, his lips grazing my throat while he spoke. "Perry..."

He never finished his sentence. Instead he eventually pulled his face away, my skin still feeling hot from his contact, and lowered me to the ground. He kept his hands on my arms, keeping me in place, as if he was afraid I'd run away. With his back to the streetlight, his face was encased in shadows but I could still see his eyes glinting. I couldn't read them except that they looked slightly feverish.

I cleared my throat. "Hi."

A quick smile flashed across his lips. "I'm sorry for just dropping by like this, I just had to see you. I was worried sick."

I smiled wryly. "*You* were worried sick about *me*? You got carted off to jail."

"You got carted off to the hospital," he said gruffly. I noticed then he was holding my hands in his and squeezing them. I eyed them with uncertainty and he let go, taking a step back from me as he did so, as if he was only just noticing he was intruding in my personal space.

"I got out," I said reassuringly. "And apparently so did you."

He glanced briefly over my head at my house then said to me, "Look, can we go in the car and talk? I promise not to keep you long."

I nodded and followed him back to the car, wondering what it was that he wanted,

wondering how his shoulders got so much broader. I hopped in the passenger side and was met with a rush of warmth from the heater.

I don't know why things felt awkward between us when the last time I had seen him, he was holding onto me, promising that they'd never take me. Of course, that didn't work and I didn't fault him for that. But being apart again, even for just a few days, reminded me of how much had changed between us. And sitting in the dark car, only the familiar glow of console lighting us up, there was a discomfort in my seat. I wondered if he felt the same.

I tried not to study his face but now that I could see it clearly, it was hard not to. There was a line of worry on his forehead and his brown eyes were searching my face, alternating between washes of sorrow and apprehension. He never lost that unnerving way he looked at me – that would always be Dex. I just hoped he wouldn't look too deep. I felt the walls around me going up slowly, brick by pasted brick.

Finally, I looked away and studied the dashboard as if it were suddenly fascinating.

"I'm surprised the car is still holding up," I remarked, remembering how it had crashed into a tree only days before, bashing the front side and the headlight. It almost hurt to remember when I was wrapped in duct tape, with a terrible darkness inside me trying to get out.

"I'll get it fixed when I go back home."

"When are you going?" I asked, keeping my voice light, still avoiding his eyes.

I felt him pause, growing tense for a second, and I quickly added, "Not that I'm trying to get you to leave."

His smile was tight. "Tomorrow, probably. I just...wanted to see how you were doing. You look better."

"Do I?" I looked down. "I thought I looked slimmer in the duct tape."

Again, that pained smile. "How are you feeling?"

I shrugged. "I'm tired. Sore, still."

He nodded absently, his thoughts elsewhere. I wanted to tell him what Ada and I had discovered but for some reason I couldn't find the words. It was ludicrous but Dex was always the one to believe me when no one else would.

I opened my mouth to give it a shot, but he beat me to it and said, "Listen..."

He looked down at his hands and cleared his throat. The atmosphere in the car changed dramatically from the strange awkwardness to full-on jangled nerves. I watched him closely. He did in fact look really nervous, biting his lip, blinking fast and at nothing.

"What?" I asked.

I could hear his breathing intensify.

"You need to get out of that house."

I shouldn't have been surprised to find out we were on the same page, but I was. I tried to hide it by eyeing him uncertainly.

“What do you mean?”

He lowered his eyes and voice. “You know what I mean. Perry, you can’t stay there anymore. After everything that’s happened...it’s not safe.”

“The demon is gone.”

“Your parents aren’t. And frankly, my dear, I wouldn’t be surprised if some other supernatural hitchhiker came and found a ride through you. You’re too weak-”

I glared at him. “I am not weak.”

He looked at me steadily. “You’re the strongest woman I have ever known. Ever. But it, they, found a way in. I can’t risk that happening again. And like hell I’m going to let you stay in a house where your parents are jonesing to put you away like some animal.”

“I wasn’t aware you had control over my life.”

He sighed and leaned in closer. “I know you’re still angry-”

“Huh!” I exclaimed, folding my arms but he quickly went on.

“But putting that aside for a moment,” he continued, “you know you can’t stay there. I know you know it. I know your sister knows it. Your grandmother sure knows it. We all do.”

“Well what do you suggest I do then?” I asked carefully.

He bit his lip, a gesture I used to find adorable. Now, it didn’t do anything for me. Not much, anyway. He let his eyes roam out along the empty street. Either he was deep in thought or bidding his time.

Finally, he asked, “Did you like Seattle?”

I sucked in my breath. He wasn’t asking me what I thought he was asking me...was he?

His eyes were guarded in the dark but I could read sincerity on his expressive forehead, like part of him was taking a chance that the other part didn’t dare take.

“What?”

There he went, biting his lip again. He ran a hand through his thick hair, giving the ends a bit of a tug. I remembered tugging at that hair, vividly.

“I mean,” he ventured, looking at me with a hint of anxiety, “I think you should come live with me. In my apartment. In Seattle.”

Now, I know it was just what Ada and I had been discussing but I was not prepared to hear the offer come from his own mouth. Dex was asking me to move in with him? What the hell kind of sorcery was this?

He quickly continued, “I don’t mean like you have to be my permanent roommate or anything. Just until you get on your feet. It can be a place for you to stay in the interim. Or longer, you know, if you wanted to.”

I looked away from him, my eyes widening, heartrate speeding up. This was all kinds of right and wrong. Especially wrong. So much wrong.

“Perry?”

I shook my head and struggled for words. "I don't know what to say."

"Saying yes would be a start."

"I need to think about this..."

"Please, don't think long." His voice had dropped another register and was laced with a kind of urgency that made my skin feel tight.

He reached over and grabbed my hand and I let him. I looked down at it, at his long, strong fingers wrapping around mine, feeling like his hand was different in some way. But that was crazy. It wasn't. He was still cocky, self-assured Dex...asking me something I never, ever dreamed possible.

I knew my choices but I didn't have to like them. If I went with Dex, I knew I'd be safe. But would my heart? How could I ever trust him again? How could I think that living with him, even as his roommate, even for a short while, wouldn't be emotionally damaging in some way? After everything that had happened to me, I was sick of my heart being stomped on and would do whatever I could to prevent that situation from happening again.

But then there was Maximus. He was less messy for my emotional well-being. But let's face it, it's not like there was nothing between us. I had sex with the man. Several times. And no, I wasn't really in my right mind when I did it, but it still happened. It still made things awkward. It still put another well-hung elephant in the room. Not to mention that I didn't really trust Maximus. Sure he bailed out Dex, but that only made me question *why*? At times he seemed to be my greatest supporter yet he could rat me out to my parents in a heartbeat. I just didn't know where I stood – with either of them.

Dex squeezed my hand hard, bringing me back to earth.

"Don't you dare move in with Maximus," he warned, his eyes shining dangerously.

"What?" I exclaimed. Could he hear me thinking? "Why did you say that?"

"Because that's your only other option, unless you have a million bucks hidden in your barista tip-jar."

"I could go with Rebecca," I told him, not knowing if that would work either.

He shook his head. "She and Em are having some problems. Otherwise I'd suggest it."

I narrowed my eyes thoughtfully. "Would you really?"

He sighed and let go of my hand. "Look, I know things are kind of awkward right now."

I scoffed.

"OK, fine, really fucking awkward. I know that. And I know we have a lot to talk about—"

"We have nothing to talk about," I shot in.

His nostrils flared and he was trying hard to compose himself. "Fine. I guess we have nothing to talk about either. But for one second can you just accept the fact that despite what has happened between us, I still care about you. More than you'd probably want me to care about you. And that I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure you're going to be

OK. I know I failed many times before...but you just have to believe me when I tell you I'm going to do everything I can now to make things right."

I studied him carefully, trying to ignore the sincerity in his words. He was buzzing with a sort of energy that I associated with our sexual encounters. I didn't know what it was, there was nothing really sexual about what he was saying or the way he was acting toward me. But it was there all the same. It was a buzzing, vibrant aura that represented sex and power and something else I couldn't put my finger on.

"There's something different about you," I said, squinting at him.

If he seemed annoyed at my avoidance of the topic, he didn't show it.

"There's something different about you," he replied. "But you're a woman and you change every five minutes."

I frowned. "Is that it?"

He returned the look. "I don't know, is it?"

I threw my hands up and went to go open the door.

"Wait," he cried out softly, putting his hand on my arm. "Please, please don't go like this."

"Like what?"

"Like not making a decision," he explained. "Can't you see the urgency?"

"Dex, you're asking me to move in with you. You. You of all people in this world."

He looked away, tugging at his hair again.

"I'm sorry," I went on, "I know it's urgent. I can feel that too. But this choice for me might end up being just as dangerous as staying here with my parents. I'm sorry."

Dex continued to look away but I saw the wince. I saw the strange cloud of despair over his eyes. I took in a deep breath, steadying my nerves, and opened the car door. Outside, the street was quiet and cold and my feet echoed loudly when they hit the ground.

"I'll let you know, OK?" I told him. He wouldn't even look at me.

I shut the door and walked away feeling like I had shut a window on a lifeline I was going to need desperately. Every step away from the Highlander felt like I was walking knee-deep through mud. And the closer I got to my house, all cheerily lit up against the darkness, the more I felt like I was heading into a dark hole. My pride was soaring inevitably high but as much as I enjoyed saying no to Dex, I knew it would crash-land later in a smoldering wreckage.

I stopped near the driveway and looked up at my bedroom window. It was hard to believe how close I had been to losing my life, to losing my very soul. If it hadn't been for Dex...I wouldn't have been burdened with the choice I currently had.

I exhaled, wiggled my fingers anxiously, then turned and jogged back to the Highlander that was still waiting at the roadside.

I rapped on the glass and Dex quickly undid the window.

"Hey," I said uneasily, peering into the car. "I was wondering if you could stop by here before

you leave tomorrow.”

He nodded coolly. “OK. What for?”

I could see the walls going up around him as well. They sure weren’t there before.

I smiled shyly. “I don’t want to be alone when I tell my parents I’m moving to Seattle.”

There was a pause as he took it all in.

Then his grin filled the whole car.