



Kelley Armstrong

DEMONOLOGY

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Demonology

Talia stared at the painting. A tiny fishing boat caught in a raging storm, swirling in an eddy, the crew members struggling, but managing to keep it afloat . . . while a giant wave swelled behind them. That's my life, she thought. You fight the storm and you keep fighting, but somehow, you never shake the feeling that a huge wave is gathering behind your back, waiting to blow it all to smithereens.

Her eight year old son, Adam, was sprawled across the office floor doing his homework, his blond head bent over the math workbook, pencil in his mouth, scowling at the numbers as if that could make them surrender their secrets. He'd been quiet for fifteen minutes now, a sure sign that he was dreading this appointment.

In the support group she attended, for parents of hyperactive children, the other mothers always crowed about their children's "quiet periods," those rare times when their kids stopped bouncing and bounding and chattering, and sat quietly for more than a few minutes at a stretch. Talia never joined in. When Adam grew quiet, it was a sure sign that something was bothering him. These days, he sank into these quiet spells at least a few times a week, more often if that week included "appointments."

In the last few months, they'd been to at least a dozen doctors. General practitioners, specialists of every type, psychiatrist, psychologists, social workers . . . a never-ending parade of professionals all claiming they could figure out what was wrong with Adam. Talia hated that phrase: "what was wrong with Adam."

There was nothing wrong with Adam, and she told him that every day. But the fact that she needed to tell him so often, that he required constant reassurance, was proof that even Adam, never the most sensitive child, knew something alarming was happening. How many blood samples could a little boy give, how many questions could he answer, how many x-rays and tests could he undergo, before he stopped trusting his mother and started to believe that there really was "something wrong."

"Mom?"

Talia looked over.

"I'm thirsty."

She lifted her purse. "I brought juice boxes and animal crackers—"

"I'm *more* thirsty than that." He wrinkled his nose, freckles forming new constellations. A pause, then he slanted a sly look her way. "I saw a pop machine down the hall."

"Did you now? And let me guess. *That's* how thirsty you are: full can of pop thirsty."

"Please?"

With a dramatic sigh, she opened her change purse and counted out, not just enough for a soda, but for a soda and a candy bar. Yes, she was bribing her child, apologizing for the appointment with junk food, but sometimes, the guilt won out, and you'd do just about anything to make the medicine go down easier. His grin as she handed over the money said she'd done the right thing, whatever the parenting books might say.

“Thanks, Mom.”

He bounded for the door and nearly knocked over a student walking in. A blurted apology and a sheepish glance at Mom, then, as he started to turn back to the door, he froze, gaze snagged on a photo. An aerial view of a forest fire. Adam had noticed it the moment he'd walked in, zeroing in on that one out of all the other extreme weather pictures decorating the office. Yet now he stared as if seeing it for the first time—the same way he'd stared at it a half-dozen times since they'd arrived.

“That’s a neat photo, isn’t it?” Talia said. “I wonder how they took it? From an airplane, I bet.”

“Cool,” Adam said, then tore his gaze away and took off, back on target.

Talia moved to the doorway to watch him. He shot her a look that said he was too old to have his mother looking out for him, but she only stuck out her tongue and stayed her ground.

As he ran down the hall, weaving through groups of students, her gaze slid back to the forest fire photograph. Should she have commented on it? Most of the doctors she'd talked to would have said “no,” that she should either ignore his fascination or distract him from it. Maybe Talia was naive, but that didn't seem right to her. Treat it as normal—that's what she thought, act as if Adam's fixation with fire was neither positive nor negative, just a fact of his life, like another child's obsession with cars or trains.

Budding pyromania. That's what the “experts” called it. Pyromania. Talia could barely even say the word, as if speaking it gave it a validity it didn't deserve. Yes, her son was fascinated by fire—not just fire itself, but depictions of it. Yet there was a big difference between staring at a candle flame and lighting your bed on fire, and Adam had never shown any inclination for the latter. He didn't light fires; he just liked to watch them. And, yes, maybe that

was a warning sign, but it was a simplistic explanation that ignored so many things that even the “experts” agreed didn’t fit with the diagnosis.

When Adam got angry, which, thankfully, was rare, if he struck out, his hands were hot enough to give you a physical jolt of surprise. The last time he’d done that—three months ago, with a bully at school—he’d left a mark on the kid’s skin. That’s when Talia realized she couldn’t keep treating Adam’s fire fascination as a boyhood quirk. That’s when the parade of experts had started.

And now, after months of searching, she’d ended up here. At a doctor’s office of a different kind. A college professor. She turned to look at the nameplate again. Robert Vasic. Professor. Nothing to indicate his area of expertise or even his department. Not that she couldn’t have looked that up. And she should have. No one could accuse Talia of being anything less than thorough, especially when it came to her son’s care. No matter how well recommended a doctor came, she always at least checked his credentials.

But this time . . . this time she hadn’t even made note of the department when she’d walked in. She chalked it up to exhaustion, that after months of searching, when the nurse at a specialist’s had taken her aside and slipped her Vasic’s number, she just said “good enough” and made an appointment. The truth, if she dared to admit it, was that part of her was sure she didn’t want to know too much. She was too desperate.

“Do you think he forgot about us?”

Talia jumped, and looked at the student Adam had nearly bowled over. The young woman smiled.

“Sorry, I was just wondering whether Doctor Vasic was going to show up.” A laugh. “He can be a bit absent minded.”

“Oh?” Talia said, trying to sound interested as she leaned over to look for Adam.

“Last month, we were supposed to have a quiz, and he completely forgot about it.” A grin.

“Not that anyone was complaining.”

There Adam was, at the vending machine, trying to make a decision.

“He’s a great prof, though, isn’t he? Enthusiasm makes all the difference, I think. Of course, it’d probably be hard to make something like that boring.” She laughed again. “When I told my mom I was studying demonology, she almost had a fit. She thought I was taking an occult class.”

Talia whipped around to stare at the young woman. Her mouth opened, but the student continued,

“Then I told her he used to be a priest, and that made her happier. I think she figures we’re learning about exorcisms and stuff.” She grinned at Talia. “My aunt called last week, asking if I could take a look at my little cousin, check for signs of possession. I think she was joking . . . but I’m still not sure.”

Talia struggled to nod, her brain spinning. Demonology? Former priest? Possession? Oh God, what had she done? She caught sight of Adam bouncing back from the machines, can in one hand, bar in the other, face beaming. She held up a finger, telling him to wait. Then she darted into the office, grabbed her purse and his homework, murmured something about remembering another appointment, and raced out.

“Mom?” Adam said as she hurried down the hall to him. “What’s—?”

“The appointment was canceled.”

He grinned. “So I don’t have to go? Cool.” A momentary shadow, then that sly look again.

“It’s getting pretty late to go back to school.”

She put a hand against his back to steer him forward. “Definitely too late. But I think there’s still time for the arcade, and I bet it isn’t too busy at this time of day. No line up for Pac-Man.”

The grin broadened. “Cool.”

They’d caught the attention of a professor, a slender middle-aged man with short graying hair and a beard. With his towheaded good looks, boisterousness and infectious grins, Adam often won attention in public, but it was usually indulgent smiles and the occasional pat on the head. But the professor, who’d been rushing down the hall, had stopped and was frowning slightly, as if he recognized them, but wasn’t sure. Talia smiled and kept walking in the other direction.

“Ms Lyndsay?”

She almost stopped. Almost turned. Then she realized who that “interested professor” must be: Robert Vasic. He knew he had an appointment with an eight-year-old and his mother, and there weren’t many eight-year-olds wandering the halls at Stanford.

“Ms Lyndsay?”

The voice moved closer, as if he’d headed back.

She took Adam’s arm, ignoring his protests, and steered him into a throng of students exiting a classroom. By the time they were through the crowd, Vasic was gone, having probably thought his identification mistaken. A soft sigh of relief, and she hurried Adam to the exit.

Talia dreamed of Adam’s father, as she found herself doing more often these days, especially after her quest smacked into another dead end. It made sense, she supposed—that a single

mother, struggling with a parenting problem would reflect on her son's absent father. But there was never any anger to her dreams, no "why I am stuck handling this alone" bitterness.

From the start, she'd accepted that Adam was her sole responsibility. Had she been able to contact his father when she'd learned she was pregnant, she would have—it was only right. But that hadn't been an option, and she'd never wished it was otherwise.

She'd been just starting college. There'd been a lot of changes in that first month, not all of them good, not all of them welcome. The biggest had been the end of a relationship. When she'd gone away to college, the guy she'd been dating since ninth grade had dumped her.

Maybe "dumped" wasn't the right word, implying a sudden, unexpected end to the relationship. Josh had warned her. Started warning her the day she sent in her college application. Leave for college, and we're through. Like most of the boys in town, he already had a job lined up at the tire factory, and had his life lined up right behind it. Start a good job, with good benefits, get married, start a family, just like his brothers and his father before him.

When he'd learned that Talia's plans didn't coincide with his, he'd given her his ultimatum. Go to college and you lose me. She hadn't believed him. When she'd been accepted, he'd taken the news with little more than a few days of sulking, and continued dating her right until Labor Day weekend. She'd thought he'd changed his mind. She knew the truth now—he just hadn't expected her to go through with it. When she did, he dumped her.

Three weeks later, she'd come home for the weekend, planning to talk to him and work it out . . . and found him dating Brandi Waters, who'd been after him since they'd been twelve. And that was the end of her weekend home, and the end of Josh.

Sunday morning, she'd caught the bus back to school, though she was sure she could have saved the fare and just kicked herself all the way back. Had she really gone home to try to make

up with him? After what he did? She should have booted his ass to the curb the moment he'd given her that ultimatum.

When she got back, she'd dropped off her suitcase at the dorm, then headed to the cafe to drown her sorrows in an herbal tea with scones and jam. They didn't have scones in Springwater. At home, they'd be biscuits, served with gravy not jam. They didn't have herbal tea, either. And they certainly didn't have any place like the Elysian Cafe, with its incense burners, abstract art, and Tuesday night poetry readings. Most times, Talia found the place too So-Cal, but tonight, anything that didn't remind her of home was exactly where she wanted to be.

She'd resisted the urge to bring schoolwork. Tonight was for wallowing, not studying. So she'd grabbed one of her roommate's novels. Stephen King's Salem's Lot. Vampires. If that wasn't indulgent wallowing, she didn't know what was.

She'd noticed him watching her as she'd sat down. A decent looking guy. Not gorgeous, but Talia didn't go for gorgeous. He sat by the fireplace, chair pulled up to the blaze as if he found the air-conditioning too much. She pegged him at a few years older than her, probably a grad student. Average height, average build, medium brown hair . . . average all around, really.

Only his eyes were noteworthy. They were an average shade of brown, but they glowed. Yes, that seemed impossible for brown eyes—green can glow, blue can glow, but never dull muddy brown. Yet his did, a warm brown with coppery glints. Those eyes looked vaguely familiar, and she thought maybe she'd seen him around campus before, which might explain why he was watching her. She smiled back, polite, nothing more, then sat down with her tea and scones.

After a few minutes of reading, a shadow passed over her table. She looked up to see the young man. He smiled. A cute, average sort of smile, friendly, nothing more.

“Vampires, hmmm?” he said, nodding at the book. “Do you like vampires?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never met one.”

He threw back his head and laughed as if this was the funniest thing he’d heard all day. His laugh was anything but average, as rich and vibrant as his copper-speckled eyes.

“That’s not the most comfortable place for reading,” he said, gesturing at her wooden chair and tipsy bistro stool. “The seats by the fire are much better.”

“Sure, but they’re always full—” She looked over. The chairs were empty, with only a jacket thrown over his to save his place. “Well, they were full when I came in.”

He smiled. “I scared everyone away for you.”

She laughed. “Thanks. But I’m not sure—”

“You don’t have to be sure,” he said, his eyes still dancing with amusement. “I’ll just go back to my chair and move my coat over one for you, and if that one gets uncomfortable, you know where you can find something better.”

With that he smiled, and tipped his head, the gesture oddly old-fashioned and courtly, then walked back to his chair by the fire.

Talia held out for ten minutes. Then she looked at him, reading quietly, looking up when he felt her gaze on him and only nodding with a friendly little smile, no pressure, no rush, as anti-Josh as this place was anti-Springwater. She gathered her tea and her scones and her book, and went to join him.

They’d spent the evening talking. Just talking, about an endless array of topics. He seemed to know something about everything, but what he wanted to know most was more about her, her

life, her interests, her goals. Of himself, he said very little, always deftly changing the subject when it arose. It didn't matter. Talia was fascinated, and there was something fresh and exciting about being found fascinating in return. Nine years later, she could still see him, leaning forward, the fire a backdrop behind him, making his eyes glitter, his hand absently dangling before it as if to luxuriate in the heat.

Only when the cafe closed at midnight did they leave. He offered to escort her back to her dorm. He actually said "escort," and she'd tried not to laugh, charmed in spite of herself. When they'd reached the building, they'd stopped under a tree to talk some more, and he'd kissed her.

In his kiss, there'd been something she'd never found with Josh and when she'd closed her eyes, she'd seen fire, and felt it blazing through her. Then she did something that she still couldn't believe she'd done. She'd invited him to her room. Her, Talia Lyndsay, the girl who'd made Josh wait almost two years before letting him "go all the way." And, to this day, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't regret what she'd done.

That night . . . well, she'd had lovers since, and few had come close. He'd been the perfect lover, patient yet passionate, and some nights she could still see him, feel him—the glimmer of his face in the candle light, the heat of his fingers.

That was what she always remembered in these dreams. Those candles and that heat. She'd come from the bathroom to find that he'd lit every candle her New Age obsessed roommate owned. She'd jokingly asked where he'd found the matches, because Sunny kept them hidden, but he'd only smiled and rose to meet her. And his touch. Hot, his skin like someone with a fever and his fingertips, warmer still.

She'd asked him to wear a condom, asked when she'd invited him up, and he'd produced one from his wallet. She'd seen him put it on—she was sure she had. As for what went wrong,

she could only assume it had broken. She hadn't noticed it until the next morning, rising to find a still-damp spot under her.

Afterward, all she remembered was him lowering her to the pillow, then staying there, watching her as her eyelids flagged. Once, she'd forced them back open and had one last glimpse of him, holding a candle to watch her face, his own shimmering against the flame. Then she'd drifted off, and when she awoke, he was gone. A month later, when she missed her period, she knew he'd left something behind.

After she'd left Doctor Vasic's office, she'd started feeling foolish. That student had been laughing about her out-of-touch mother jumping to conclusions—and Talia had done the same thing. Put the words “ex-priest” and “demonology” together, and she'd envisioned a man booted out for radical occult views, a nut who'd see a child fascinated by fire, and see a child possessed by hellfire imps. Right . . . and that was just the kind of guy who'd make full-tenured professor at Stanford.

So, Talia did what she should have done *before* the interview. She researched him. And she found a man with a solid academic record, lauded, admired and respected by his peers.

After three nights of dreaming about Adam's father, she knew her subconscious was telling her something. In her quest to help Adam, she'd run out of options. It was time to take another look at Robert Vasic . . . from a safe distance.

Two days later, Talia sat at the back of Robert Vasic's lecture hall, in his huge first year class. Getting in hadn't been difficult. As a young entrepreneur, she'd developed a knack for getting past "no." Taking time off work hadn't been tough, either. She was a horticulturist—a glorified gardener, as she said—and self-employed, so her schedule was flexible. Busy, but flexible.

Talia had little interest in demons, and couldn't believe Stanford not only offered courses in it, but that the first year class was *this* big. By the end of the lecture, though, she understood the attraction. As that student had said, Vasic was an outstanding lecturer.

When Talia had seen him in the hall, he'd looked like your typical dull academic, a droner for sure. But he taught his class with a quiet passion and a dry humor that made her suspect he could have even made her advanced botany classes interesting.

At the end, she tried to slip out unnoticed. It shouldn't have been difficult—the outflow was like a rushing river of bodies.

"Ms Lyndsay?"

She heard Vasic's voice, soft yet strong enough to cut through the chatter. She could pretend she hadn't heard, but if she did, she might not get up the nerve to make another appointment.

Talia worked her way out of the crowd. Vasic stepped off the lecture platform and motioned her aside.

"Did you enjoy the class?" he asked.

His voice was mild, no hint of mocking, but Talia still felt the first tingle of a blush.

"It was very interesting, thank you."

"It can be, though it's never as interesting as some students hope. No Satanic rituals. No demonic possession. No exorcisms."

Now her cheeks burned.

“So how is young Adam?” he asked. “He looked quite happy the other day. Glad to miss an appointment, I’ll bet. No doctors poking and prodding, asking questions, pestering him about his dreams, his thoughts, his feelings . . .”

“It’s been difficult for him.”

“I’m sure it has been.” His eyes met hers. “For both of you.” He paused. “May I buy you a coffee?”

Talia nodded, and let him lead the way.

They talked until their coffees went cold. Vasic asked questions, and Talia answered. It never felt like an interview, though. More like confession. Talia had never been to confession—she wasn’t Catholic—but she imagined this was what it would be like, talking to an open ear, to someone who seemed to have all the time in the world to listen to her, and was genuinely interested in everything she had to say. With each scrap unloaded, the weight lifted.

She told him about Adam’s father. All of it, most of which she’d never breathed to another soul. No matter how “liberated” you thought you were, there was a shame in admitting you’d become pregnant at seventeen, in a one-night stand, and didn’t even know the father’s name.

But with Vasic, the confession came easily. He’d wanted to know everything about Adam’s father, obviously looking for a genetic link, so she’d told him everything, right down to the silly fancies that ate at her brain, the images of fire, the heat of his touch. Far from judging her, Vasic had been fascinated, pulling the details out with a growing excitement, wanting to know every

observation she'd made, until he seemed to cut himself short, dowsing his enthusiasm and forcing himself to move on.

One other topic had inflamed that same spark of excitement—her description of Adam's "abilities." That's what he called them—the rising temperature when Adam's temper flared, the hot fingertips, the near-burn. He'd asked again how old Adam was. And when had this started? Had he burned anyone since that first time? Again, he seemed to fight his own interest and forced a change of subject.

When they finished, Vasic leaned back in his chair as if digesting it all. His gaze flicked to the wall behind the counter. Talia followed it to a calendar, that month's picture a photograph of a tornado. Vasic had noticed it before, when they'd first walked in, pausing slightly to look, then murmuring a comment before moving on.

"First," he said as he tore his gaze back to Talia. "Let me reassure you. There is nothing wrong with Adam. He's not a 'budding pyromaniac' or any other label they've assigned. I've worked with cases like this before, behavioral anomalies that science can't explain, and while his abilities may change as he grows, there is no cause for alarm. He will learn to manage them as we all learn to manage our special skills. That is where I can be of most assistance, Ms Lyndsay. Helping you and Adam monitor and manage his skills."

Talia tensed. "How much is this—"

He cut her short with a small laugh. "My apologies if that sounded like a sales pitch. I'm an academic, Ms Lyndsay, and I deal only in the currency of knowledge. Yes, I will keep notes on Adam for my research, but he will remain an anonymous subject, and I promise you that it will be strictly observational. I'll never subject him to any test or experiment for the sake of my

work. My career is established. I'm not seeking to do groundbreaking work, but simply to learn and to help others do the same."

"Learn about what? You know what's—" She stopped, realizing she'd been about to say "what's wrong with Adam." Instead, she said, "What's happening with Adam. If you've seen this before—"

"If you're asking for a label, I can't provide one. I don't believe in them." He leaned forward. "Labels don't matter, Ms Lyndsay. What matters is that you have a very healthy, very special young boy and that none of that—his fascination with fire, his special abilities, those anomalies they found in his blood tests—is a cause for concern. We can continue to meet like this, monitor Adam's progress, make him comfortable with his skills, and everything will be fine."

She looked Vasic in the eye. "Do people buy that bullshit?"

He blinked and pulled back.

"You said you've met other children like Adam. Do their parents fall for that? You pat them on the head, tell them everything is fine, and they go away happy?"

"A child's welfare is paramount—"

"I didn't need you to tell me that my son is fine. I know he is. What I want is an explanation. Not just a label. An explanation."

"There's no need—"

"To raise my voice? The hell there isn't. I've been searching for an answer for months, Doctor, and now you have it and you think you can just tell me everything is fine and I should be happy with that?" She paused, reining in her anger. "You said you wanted to meet Adam?"

Again, Vasic blinked, as if surprised by the change of tone and subject. Then he smiled and his eyes gleamed with barely contained enthusiasm. “Yes, certainly. I’m quite—I would very much like to meet him. He sounds . . . remarkable.”

“He is.” She took out her business card. “And if you want to meet him, here’s my number. When you’re willing to tell me what’s going on, I’ll bring him by your office.”

She let the card flutter to the table, and strode from the coffee shop.

When a week passed with no word from Vasic, Talia began to second-guess herself. Maybe the lure hadn’t been strong enough, and he hadn’t been as interested in Adam as he’d seemed. Or maybe he really didn’t know what was happening, only that he’d seen it before.

No, he *was* interested. There had been no mistaking the way his mild gaze had ignited when she’d told him about Adam’s “abilities” and his age, and when she’d asked whether he wanted to meet him.

As for what was happening, he knew that, too. His questions hadn’t been a “fishing expedition,” as with the other doctors and specialists, randomly tossing out queries in hopes of hitting the mark. He’d known exactly what to ask, including about Adam’s father. *Especially* the questions about Adam’s father. Nothing she’d said had shocked or surprised him . . . because he’d expected it.

After nine days with no call, Talia decided to light her own fire under Robert Vasic. First, she sent Adam to visit his great-great-aunt Peggy. Peg was like a second mother to Adam, and a fairy godmother to Talia. When Talia had been choosing colleges, her mother pushed her toward

Berkley, where her Aunt Peg lived. Peg had offered to let Talia stay with her, but had understood when Talia had wanted to try dorm life instead.

After Adam came, though, her aunt had been adamant. Talia would stay with her, and she would stay in school, while Peg—a retired schoolteacher—looked after Adam. When Talia had graduated, she'd given up job offers to stay in the area. After all Peg had done for them, Talia wasn't about to wrest her son away from her aging aunt when she no longer needed free baby-sitting.

Once Adam was at Aunt Peggy's, Talia made the call. Then she waited. Less than thirty minutes later, someone pounded at the front door. Didn't ring the bell or knock politely, but pounded. She opened it to see Vasic on her stoop, bareheaded in the rain, water streaming off his hair and beard, breath coming in pants as if he'd run from the car and was unaccustomed to the exertion. Seeing him like that, she felt a little bad about what she'd done. But only a little, and only for a moment.

"Are you all right?" he asked as he hurried in. His eyes were dark with concern, and she felt another slight pang of remorse.

"I'm fine," she said.

As he searched her face, she knew she should have seemed more upset, if not crying, then at least red-eyed, but making that phone call had drained her limited acting abilities.

"You should sit down," he said, taking her arm to guide her.

He thinks I'm in shock, she thought, and considered running with it, but couldn't. She gently pulled from his grasp and led him to the kitchen.

"Where's Adam?" he asked.

"Staying at his aunt's."

A brief frown, as if surprised she wouldn't have him right there, at her side, after such a traumatic event.

“And the other boy?” he asked. “Is he all right? The burns . . . second-degree you said?”

She looked at Vasic. “Does that surprise you?”

He blinked.

“It doesn't, does it? You knew this could happen. These changes you mentioned, that's what you meant. That it would get worse. That he'd start inflicting real burns.”

His gaze went to the patio doors. The rain beat against them, the harsh patter backlit by lightning and the rumble of distant thunder.

“May we . . .?” He gestured at the doors. “Another room, perhaps. Less . . . distraction.”

She took him into the living room.

“You knew this could happen,” she repeated before he could change the subject.

“Someday, yes. But not at this age. He's so young. I've never . . .” A deep breath. “I'm sorry, Ms Lyndsay. That sounds inadequate, but I made an error in judgment, and I feel horrible about it. I knew Adam was displaying his pow—abilities at an early age, much younger than I usually see, but I misjudged the speed at which he could progress. I did intend to contact you, in a few months, after you'd had time to . . .”

He let the sentence fade.

“Calm down?” she said, crossing her arms. “Stop being such a demanding bitch?”

He flinched at her language. She moved behind the couch, subconsciously taking cover before letting loose the bomb.

“Adam didn't burn anyone, Doctor Vasic. I just wanted to hear you admit that he could.”

Vasic's head shot up, and he frowned.

“You’ve just told me that my son could—will—someday be able to inflict serious damage with these ‘abilities’ of his. Now I think I have the right to know what’s going on. A label and an explanation, and if you refuse that, I can make things very unpleasant at Stanford—”

“There’s no need to resort to threats, Ms Lyndsay,” he said, his voice taking on an expected edge.

“And I don’t want to, but this is my son, and I need to know what he’s going through.”

He met her gaze. “What good will that do, Ms Lyndsay? A label isn’t going to give you a cure. There is none. It won’t help you look after him and keep him safe, no better than you can do—and are doing—now. What will a label do for you? How will an explanation help?”

“It will help me understand my son.”

“Will it?” His gaze bored into hers. “And what if this ‘label’ changed the way you saw Adam, changed your feelings for him.”

She met his gaze. “Not possible.”

They argued for another hour. Three times Vasic said he was leaving. Once he got as far as the front stoop. But when Talia showed no signs of backing down and letting him help Adam before she got an explanation, he took her back into the kitchen, by the patio doors.

For a minute, he just stared out at the storm. The look in his eyes sent a shiver down her spine. It was the same look Adam got when he stared into a fire.

“Do you like storms, Ms Lyndsay?” he asked softly.

“I . . . guess so. I’m not afraid of them, if that’s what you mean.”

“But they can be things to fear. Incredible power for destruction. Like fire. Beautiful from a distance, but devastating if uncontrolled. That’s the key, to storms and power. Control.” He glanced over at her. “I can teach Adam to control his powers. As for the source of that power . . .

.” He looked her square in the eye. “I think you already know what it is; you’re just too rational to believe it.”

“I don’t know what—”

“I’m talking about? Good. It’s better that way. Safer. For you. There is absolutely no need for you to know the source of Adam’s powers, Talia. You don’t need to know that to help him, and knowing will change . . .” He looked back out the window. “Everything.”

“I don’t care.”

He nodded, and opened the patio doors, then stepped outside. When he reached the far side of the plant-choked patio, he beckoned to her. She looked up at the rain.

“It’s all right,” he said. “Just step out.”

She did, bracing for that first splash of rain. But it didn’t come. She took another step. Still nothing. She made it to the middle of the porch and was still dry, while rain beat down all around her. She looked up. There was nothing over her head. Nothing to shelter her. She turned toward Vasic.

“Put your hand out,” he said softly.

She did, reaching out and feeling the hard sting of the fast-falling rain against her palm. Then the rain softened, and turned cold. Ice cold. Snow covered her hand. She looked at Vasic.

“Do you still want to know?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He nodded. “Then come inside and I’ll tell you.”