Bind Our Loving Souls

Chapter One

My head moved back and forth methodically to the song I was playing on our fifty-year old upright piano. The “Moonlight Sonata” was my favorite song, and it was the perfect accompaniment for the drab weather outside. If it would only rain, as the forecaster had promised, I would be one happy girl.

On the outside, I’m nothing more than your everyday high school senior—average height and weight (well, maybe a little on the scrawny side), average brown hair and eyes, average grades, average ambitions. But on the inside, I’ve always been drawn to the darker side of things.

The youngest of four girls, my three sisters all above average on any given beauty or intelligence scale, I had our secluded Nevada home and too-busy-for-us-anyway parents all to myself, since the sister closest to me in age had gone off to New York to pursue a career in fashion almost a year before. I didn’t mind, though. I actually preferred it this way, just me and a gloomy melody sharing an empty old house at the end of the day.

Without warning, the power went out, and the room became a whole lot darker. I spun around on our antique piano bench and looked through the expansive windows on the other side of the room. Finally! It was raining.

I picked up the red sweater I’d laid over the back of the couch weeks ago and ran out the front door. Immediately, cold water splashed against my head and shoulders. It was early afternoon, but the dark clouds made it look more like the sun was preparing to set.

Taking in a deep breath of fresh rainy air, I closed my eyes and smiled, because when the world gets dark before a great thunderstorm, it’s like the lights dimming before a fantastic concert. But this is Mother Earth’s performance, her great rain dance, deadly gashes slashing through the sky, and clouds applauding thunderously. It is the sweetest symphony ever created, never played quite the same way twice.

Facing our long, winding driveway, I turned and ran around to the back of the house, where the flat land quickly became winding hills and hundred-year-old trees. It was a good jog getting to my destination—up and down a steep hill and then up an even taller one. But I knew that once I was at the top of the second one, I’d be able to look down on the still and peaceful valley that had always been my favorite place on earth.

Getting over the first hill was easy, but the second one required some bobbing and weaving through a good number of younger trees to get to the top, and it was so much taller.

It felt good once I got there, though, heart hammering, huffing and puffing and all. I reveled in the beauty below me as I fought to catch my breath, the youngest blades of grass and delicate flower petals trembling in the rash winds.

Pink and purple wildflowers grew in uneven patches here and there, and the tall grass always felt soft and comforting to my skin. Nearly at the bottom of the hill was a sort of miniature cave with walls of dirt and rock that were just the right size for me to sit in. It was the best place in the world to think or mourn a rough breakup, especially when orchestrated by the rain.

The water droplets were getting heavier and coming down harder. And just as I began jogging downward into my own little refuge, the first bolt of lightning shot through the air in the distance. The sky flashed with fury so I picked up the pace.

My sweater snagged on the branch of a tall bush, so I yanked hard enough that the limb broke off and flailed from my elbow all the way down the hill. Thunder crashed a moment before I ducked into my cave. And then I was able to relax. I plucked the clingy branch from my sleeve and tossed it out of the cave’s mouth, the wind catching it and carrying it away.

These were the times my mind was most clear, so I planned to try and decide what I would do when I graduated in a month. I knew I was cutting it way too close, but I honestly had no idea what I wanted. I loved piano and beaches and seclusion, but none of these seemed to offer much of a future. So I needed to decide which of my three closest friends to stick with after graduation. Whatever I did, it would be fun if I was with them.

Jo Hanna planned to keep working at the boutique in the mall, Daily Roses, where she’d been a store clerk for the past two years. She was paid two dollars above minimum wage, but it just didn’t seem like a forever option to me.

Carlotta was going to nursing school in the fall. She’s always been obsessed with helping old people, the thought of which literally made me cringe. But she was kind of the unofficial leader of our group, so I felt like she’d carry me through it easily.

And Cassidy wasn’t any more certain than I was about what she wanted to do. So she was planning to attend the community college in town to get all the basic classes out of the way, hoping she’d figure it out as she went.

Of the three, Cassidy’s plan was the most appealing. But it still bothered me that I had absolutely no direction in my life to follow, no paths paved in my mind. It just seemed pointless to go to college with no clue what I wanted to do. I really wished I had a better grip on things.

Lightning flashed, followed closely by thunder, each helping to soothe my troubled mind. Whatever I did, there would always be a good rainstorm to look forward to.

A jackrabbit ran out of the grass several feet to my right and climbed into a hole under a crooked bush. That jackrabbit’s so lucky, I thought. It doesn’t have to worry about its future. It just eats grass and snuggles up in a warm, safe underground home and it’s all set.

I let out a sigh. “I wish it was that easy for me.”

The leaves of the little bush became blue as an enormous flash of light blazed through the sky, dyeing the world a rich cobalt blue for only a second. Then something smashed against the ground on the other side of the far hill, ten times louder than thunder, and shook the earth violently.

I rolled out of the cave in my haste to get away, just in case the walls were about to give. But it remained intact as the trembling ceased.

I stood in the rain for a moment, considering going to investigate the great noise, when something leapt onto the top of the far hill from the other side. He gazed at everything for a moment as he sat crouching. He looked so human, and yet so inhuman at the same time. Kicking off with two very powerful legs, he went sailing outward and then down through the air.

I stifled a scream as I grabbed a branch from the ground and threw myself back into my hiding hole. The branch was nowhere near big enough to hide me, but it was all I had. So I curled myself into the tightest ball I could manage and held the pitiful limb in front of me.

Through the pointed leaves, I watched the manish thing move to the center of the valley on all fours. He’d just jumped from the top of the hill to the bottom, and yet he seemed completely unharmed. There, in the center of the stormy wraparound hills, he stood tall and studied the ground surrounding him.

His skin was azure, but his arms had a sort of dark leopard print on them. As he twisted around to look back, I saw the dark knotted hair that grew to an uneven point between his shoulder blades and on the back of his knees, which bent toward his back instead of his front. It looked like it was easier to get down and run with both his hands and feet that way. Aside from the bluish color, these would have looked normal if it hadn’t been for the razor-sharp claws that grew from each finger and toe.

I assumed it was a him because the only thing he wore was a cloth tied around his waist that dangled halfway to his backward knees, and what I could see of him looked male. The black cloth had several stones on it that cast bits of strangely colored lights, which somehow scared me even more, because the longer I watched him the more positive I became that there was nothing human about him. And no human could have created him.

He turned back to study the ground in front of him some more as he walked closer to me.

Even with a good distance between us, the fear swelling inside me threatened to push me to a breaking point. “Turn back,” I whispered softly to myself.

My blood ran cold as he looked up, meeting my eyes with glowing amber ones. He threw all his weight onto his hands as he leaned forward and shot toward me. The hair on my arms stood up as my body shut down the way it does in my nightmares. My voice refused to work; my muscles wouldn’t move. I was frozen with fear, and he was heading straight for me.

Slowing down only when he was close, he stood up and stared. His orangey eyes were terrifyingly unearthly. His head tilted slightly to one side as he leaned closer to my cave.

I broke free of this immovable state when he reached in with one long hand. Screaming, I kicked his hand away with both of my muddy tennis shoes. But the whole space I sat in was only maybe two and a half feet deep. I was practically throwing my body out of it just trying to get his arm away.

He pulled his arm back and looked puzzled as he stared at me. His lips parted and a breathy hissing sound came out, only making me more afraid. It continued as he reached out for me again.

This time when I tried to kick his hand, he moved it to the side and grabbed my ankle, yanking it out of the hole, and pinning it against the side of the hill underneath. I tried kicking him with my other leg, sure I was fighting for my life, but he grabbed that foot with his other hand and pinned it next to the first one. He managed to hold onto both with one hand, even though I was trying as hard as I possibly could to get free, and reach out to me with his other one.

I tried slapping it away, but he grabbed one of my hands and I forgot my fear completely. In fact, I forgot everything—who I was, where I was, everything. I simply stared into his luminous eyes, the growing intensity of their light making them seem like two little suns burning into my soul, and lay against the back wall. My body went absolutely limp as I slid down.

It felt like I was floating. And then my life began to flash before my eyes. I saw childhood memories racing through my mind, the greatest joys and heartaches I’d ever experienced, the sleepless nights of studying and worrying over this or that. Every so often a flash of blue would appear for a moment and I could almost make out two creatures like the one still holding my hand, his parents perhaps. Then there was this growing attraction I felt for whatever it was that stood before me. The all-consuming warmth that began spreading throughout my body was amazing.

Finally, he let go of my hand. There was suddenly a great deal of pressure in my head as everything came rushing back at once. It felt weird to sit up.

The being’s skin looked as if shimmering sun-kissed fish scales were creeping up over his arms as they went from blue to ivory. It spread over his shoulders and then his entire body until he looked as human as I did, aside from his still-glowing eyes. No more claws. No more matted black hair, just golden brown locks.

The sensation of being wet and cold and having water fall all over me began to return as I shivered and stared at him in amazement. “Who are you?” I asked, stepping out of my cave.

“Eeee-knock—of the Halvandors,” the man said in a ghostly voice, fading between human and what had come from his mouth before.

“What did you do to me?”

“I have only seen your memories.”

My eyebrows drew closer together. I felt naked and self-conscious at this, like he had just seen a part of me that was forbidden.

But he put a hand on my cheek as his overpowering eyes offered me a look of admiration. His voice became low and perfectly human. “You have a very beautiful and breathtaking soul, Sarafina.”

“It’s Sara,” I said softly, feeling too many things at once to be sure of which one was the most prevailing. His kind words put at me ease, though.

And with the intense attraction I felt to him, I couldn’t help but reach one hand out to touch the skin between his shoulders, just under his neck. I stared at this skin, softer than anything I’d ever touched, as I rubbed my thumb over it.

Enock put a hand behind my back and leaned closer. “I’d like to kiss you,” he said.

I stared at him in surprise and mild trepidation, but also realized I wanted the exact same thing. It was impossible not to be fascinated and drawn to the dark strangeness of this man. “All right.”

The way he stared at my lips and tilted his head way too much to the side made it obvious that he had no idea what he was doing and that he’d never experienced a kiss before. So I slid my hand along his neck and onto his cheek, letting my fingers guide his lips to mine. The curiosity and temptation I felt were so much stronger than any of my reserves.

And then my mouth was tingling. As he held and kissed me, the smell and taste of fire consumed me. My mind was instantly filled with images of molten lava and wildfires bursting around us, but the burning felt good. My free arm wrapped around his waist. His arms felt like they were melting right into my body. It felt so insanely wonderful.

And then a fiendishly shrill shrieking tore through the air, ripping my hands away from Enock so I could cover my ears. He held onto me still as he turned to look behind him.

At the top of the hill, in exactly the same spot I’d first seen him, another creature stood. This one was obviously a woman, with cloth and lit stones covering the front of her torso as well as the top half of her legs. Her black dreadlocks were fanned out in fury as she continued to screech and stare at me with fiery orange eyes. As she began running at alarming speed down the hill toward us, Enock’s form began to revert to what it was before. He opened his mouth to let out a deafeningly malicious roar, his teeth now long, pointed fangs, and then he let go of me to take off and meet her halfway.

Somehow without him standing right in front of me, all the fear returned. Even with Enock running right at her, the she-creature’s eyes remained locked on me, and they were full of murder.

Without giving it a second thought, I took off up the hill behind me. The horrendous sounds of both beasts colliding pounded against my back all the way. I didn’t stop, but I did look back when I was nearly to the top. Enock had his fangs deep in the other one’s neck as she continued to screech in outraged fury. Three more of them landed swiftly on the ground beside them, and then they were lost to the other side of the hill as I began my descent.

I turned my attention back to where I was going just in time to see the misshapen boulder I should have known was there. But in my horrified distraction, I ran right into it, slamming my shin against it, which caused me to fall forward. I screamed as I began rolling down the hill, my leg throbbing with pain.

But I only rolled over a few times before I felt something wrap itself around me. It went over once with me before digging his feet into the loose dirt and skidding to a stop as he held me securely against him. Before I could process anything other than the fact that the blue form of Enock was holding me, he was leaping through the air to the bottom of the hill. He veered to his right, leaning over and using one arm to aid in running at insane speed.

It was a completely new and different experience, being cradled against his incredibly perfect chest and skin. I wrapped my arms around his neck and made myself as close to him as I possibly could.

I wanted to sink back into the nothingness, aside from him. But it didn’t come. All I felt was being bounced around and the confusion and shock of everything that had just happened. Being in Enock’s arms, pressed against his heart, did give me peace, though.

Whatever had happened when he took my hand had done something to me. The heat of my body, the sweat mixed with rain and anxiety, felt like it was all for him.

My thoughts skidded to a stop with Enock, my body still held firmly against his. “Are you hurt?” he asked me in a stricken voice, wiping black blood away from his face with his free arm and moving both of us behind a massive tree trunk.

Before I could answer or ask what I really wanted to know—what was he, and had he killed the woman I’d seen him attack?—a mixture of ghostly hissing voices filled the air, as if someone were shouting in a whisper.

“Stay here where you’re safe,” Enock said, reverting partway to his serpent-like speech.

“Don’t leave me.” I grabbed his arm desperately. I was nowhere near ready for this thing with him to end. And the dark strangeness of Enock made me want so much more.

“I do not wish to, but staying would put you in danger. I will find you again—I promise.”

He grabbed my face and leaned closer, like he was about to kiss me. But he stuck out his discolored tongue instead and dragged it across my face from my chin to one cheekbone. Then he turned and ran away, leaving me alone and even more confused. I knew I should be disgusted, but the tingling skin he’d left damp on my face felt too wonderful. As my fingertips rested against my cheek and began to tingle also, I wondered if I’d just been kissed the way “his people” did it.

As the feeling slowly wore away, I began to worry about what he’d said. Was I in danger if the others found me?

The rain had become a sprinkle, and suddenly I really wanted to go home. I was beginning to come out of the drowsy spell Enock had cast over me, and the whole experience was exhausting to think about. I just wanted to go to my room and think. But I sat motionless where I was for another twenty minutes at least, just in case danger really was nearby.

And then slowly, cautiously, I leaned over to look around the tree to make sure the coast was clear. Nothing out of the ordinary. The two maple trees that always looked like they were holding a hundred hands with their big leafy branches weren’t too far behind me, so I knew exactly where I was.

As I stood up, I felt a sharp pain where I’d kicked the rock on the hillside. Then I limped back toward my house gingerly, thinking about the long walk I had ahead of me.