

THE
BURNING
SHADOW

Jennifer L. Armentrout



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

New York

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THE BURNING SHADOW

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I

Just put it in your mouth already.”
Blinking rapidly, I lifted my gaze from the steaming bowl of tomato soup to where my mom stood.

That was a string of words I sort of never wanted to hear come out of her mouth ever again.

Her blond hair was smoothed back into a short, neat ponytail, and her white blouse was impressively wrinkle-free. She wasn’t so much staring as she was glaring from where she stood on the other side of the island.

“Well,” came the deep voice from beside me. “Now I feel super uncomfortable.”

The woman I’d believed to be my birth mother up until a few days ago appeared remarkably calm despite the fact that the dining room was still in shambles from the epic death match that had taken place less than twenty-four hours ago. This woman did not tolerate disorganization of any kind. However, the taut corners of her lips told me she was seconds from becoming *Colonel Sylvia Dasher*, and it had nothing to do with the broken dining room table or the shattered window upstairs.

“You wanted grilled cheese and tomato soup,” she said, punctuating each food item as if it were a newly discovered disease. “I made them for you, and all you’ve done is sit and stare at them.”

That was true.

“I was thinking.” He gave an elaborate pause. “That getting you to make me grilled cheese and tomato soup was too easy.”

She smiled tightly, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Eyes that were brown only because she wore specially designed contacts that blocked the Retinal Alien Check—RAC—drones. Her real eyes

were a vibrant blue. I'd only seen them once. "Are you worried that the soup is poisoned?"

My eyes widened as I lowered the perfectly toasted buttered bread and melted cheesy goodness to my plate.

"Now that you mention it, I'm worried there's arsenic or maybe some random leftover Daedalus serum in it. I mean, I feel like you can never be too sure."

Slowly, I looked at the boy sitting next to me on a stool. *Boy* wasn't exactly the right word to use to describe him. Neither was *human*. He was an Origin, something *other* than Luxen and human.

Luc.

Three letters, no last name, and pronounced like *Luke*, he was an utter enigma to me, and he was . . . well, he was special and he knew it.

"Your food is not poisoned," I told him, inhaling deeply as I tried to interject some common sense into this rapidly deteriorating conversation. The nearby candle, one that reminded me of pumpkin spice, almost overwhelmed his unique, outdoorsy scent that reminded me of pine needles and fresh air.

"I don't know about that, Peaches." Luc's full lips curved into a half smile. These were lips that I had recently become well familiar with. Lips that were as completely distracting as the rest of him. "I think Sylvia would love nothing more than to get rid of me."

"Is it that obvious?" she replied, her thin, fake smile narrowing even further. "I always thought I had a rather good poker face."

"I doubt you could ever successfully hide your rampant dislike of me." Luc leaned back, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "I mean, the first time I came here, all those years ago, you pointed a pistol at me, and the last time I came here, you threatened me with a shotgun. So, I think you've made it pretty clear."

"We could always go for a third time," she snapped, her fingers splaying across the cool granite. "Third time's a charm, right?"

Luc's chin dipped and those thick lashes lowered, shielding astonishingly jewel-tone eyes. Amethyst. The color wasn't the only thing that gave away the fact that he was rocking more than *Homo sapiens* DNA. The fuzzy black line surrounding his irises was also a good indication that there was only a little bit of human in him. "There won't be a third time, *Sylvia*."

Oh dear.

Things were . . . well, awkward between her and Luc.

They had a messy history that had everything to do with who I *used* to be, but I'd thought the whole grilled-cheese-and-tomato-soup thing was her waving a white flag—a weird offering of a truce, but an offering nonetheless. Obviously, I'd been wrong. From the moment Luc and I had walked into the kitchen, things had gone downhill fast between the two of them.

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," she remarked, picking up a dishcloth. "You know what they say about the arrogant man."

"No, I don't." Luc dropped his elbow to the island and propped his chin onto his fist. "But please enlighten me."

"An arrogant man will still feel immortal." She lifted her gaze, meeting his. "Even on his deathbed."

"Okay," I jumped in when I saw Luc's head tilt to the side. "Can you two stop trying to out-snark each other so we can eat our sandwiches and soup like normal human beings? That would be great."

"But we're not normal human beings." Luc sent me a long side look. "And I cannot be out-snarked, Peaches."

I rolled my eyes. "You know what I mean."

"He's right, though." She scrubbed at a spot on the island only she could see. "None of this is normal. It's not going to be."

Frowning at her, I had to admit she had a point. Nothing had been the same from the moment Luc entered—actually, *reentered*—my life. Everything had changed. My entire world had imploded the moment I realized just about everything about me was a total lie. "But I need normal right now. Like, really badly need normal right now."

Luc's jaw clamped shut as he returned to staring at his sandwich, his shoulders unnaturally tense.

"There's only one way you're going to get normal back in your life, honey," she said, and I flinched at the endearment.

It was something she always called me. Honey. But now, knowing she'd only been in my life these last four years made the simple, sweet word seem wrong. Unreal, even.

"You want normal? Cut this one out of your life."

I dropped my sandwich, shocked that she would say that—not just in front of Luc but that she would say it in general.

Luc's head shot up. "You already took her from me once. That's not going to happen again."

"I didn't take her from you," she fired back. "I saved her."

"And for what, *Colonel Dasher*?" Luc's smile was razor sharp. "To give yourself the daughter you lost? To have something you knew you could hold over my head?"

My heart squeezed painfully in my chest. "Luc—"

The dishcloth wrinkled under Mom's fingers as her hand balled into a fist. "You think you know everything—"

"I know enough." His voice was too soft, too even. "And it's best you don't forget that."

A muscle thrummed along her temple, and I briefly wondered if Luxen could have strokes. "You don't know her. You knew Nadia. This is Evie."

The gulp of air I inhaled got stuck in my throat. She was right and she was wrong. I wasn't Nadia. I also wasn't Evie. I had no idea who I really was.

"They are not the same," she continued. "And if you really do care for her—for Evie—you'd walk out of her life and let her go."

I jolted. "That's not—"

"You think you know her better than I do?" Luc's laugh could've frozen the Alaskan wildlands. "If you think she's your dead daughter, then you're living in a fantasy world. And if you think that me walking out of here is what's best, then you don't know shit."

My gaze darted between them. "Just FYI, I'm sitting right here. Totally present for this argument that is about me."

Both ignored me.

"And just to be really, painfully clear," Luc went on, "if you think I'd walk away again, then you've obviously forgotten who I am."

Was the dishcloth starting to smoke? "I haven't forgotten what you are."

"And that is?" Luc challenged.

"Nothing more than a killer."

Holy crap.

Luc smirked. "Then you and I should get along famously."

Oh my God!

"It's best that you remember you're only a part of her life now because I'm allowing it," she retorted.

Luc kept his arms crossed. “I would sincerely love to see you try to keep me away from her now.”

“Don’t push me, Luc.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve *been* pushing.”

Bluish-white energy flickered over Mom’s knuckles, and I just lost it. All the violent, raw emotions swirled inside me like a cyclone, lashing through every part of my being. This was too much—just too much.

“Stop it! Both of you!” I shot to my feet, and the barstool toppled over, cracking off the floor and startling both her and Luc. “Do you guys really think any of this is helping right now? At all?”

Luc whipped around on the stool, his odd eyes slightly wide while Mom stepped back from the island, dropping the dish towel.

“Have you guys forgotten that I almost died last night because a psychotic and slightly suicidal Origin had a *T. rex*-sized bone to pick with *you*?” I pointed at Luc, and his jaw hardened in response. “And have *you* forgotten that you’ve spent the last four years pretending to be my mom? Which is scientifically impossible because you’re a Luxen, something else you’ve lied about?”

Mom’s face paled. “I’m still your mother—”

“You convinced me that I was some dead girl!” I shouted, throwing my hands up. “You didn’t even adopt me. How is that even legal?”

“That’s a really damn good question.” Luc smirked.

“Shut up!” I swung on him, my heart racing and my temples beginning to throb. “You’ve also done nothing but lie to me. You even made my best friend become friends with me!”

“Well, I didn’t exactly make her become your best friend,” he replied, slowly unfolding his arms. “That happened organically, I’d like to think.”

“Don’t bring logic into this,” I snapped, my hands tightening into fists when the lines of his mouth softened. “You two are driving me out of my mind, and I barely have any of it left. Do I need to remind you of what happened in the last freaking forty-eight hours? I learned that everything I knew about myself was a lie and that I was pumped full of alien DNA courtesy of a serum I can barely pronounce, let alone spell. And if that’s not messed up enough, I found a classmate super-duper dead. Andy’s eyes were legit burned out of

his face, and then I was literally just dragged through the woods and had to listen to the bizarre ranting of an Origin who had hard-core abandonment issues!”

Both stared at me.

I stepped back, breathing heavily. “All I wanted to do is eat a damn grilled cheese sandwich, eat some freaking soup, and be normal for five seconds, but both of you ruined it and—” Without warning, a wave of dizziness swept over me, making my chest suddenly feel hollow. “Whoa.”

Mom’s face blurred as my knees went weak. “Evie—”

Luc moved so fast I couldn’t have tracked him even if I were not weirdly seeing double at the moment. Within what felt like half a second, he had a strong, steady arm around my waist. “Evie,” he said, cupping my cheek and lifting my head. I hadn’t even realized it had lowered. “Are you okay?”

My heart was pounding too fast, and my head felt like it was weighed down with cotton. Pressure settled on my chest as my legs trembled. I was alive and standing, so that meant I was okay. I had to be. I just couldn’t get the words out at the moment.

“What’s wrong?” Worry threaded every syllable of Mom’s voice as she drew closer.

“Dizzy,” I gasped, squeezing my eyes shut. I hadn’t eaten anything since sometime the day before, and I’d only managed to get one bite of food in before they had started to argue, so being dizzy wasn’t all that surprising. Plus, the last week . . . or month had been a bit *much*.

“Just breathe.” Luc’s thumb dragged over my jawline, making long, soothing strokes. “Take a few moments and just breathe.” There was a pause. “She’s okay. It’s just that she was . . . she was hurt pretty badly last night. It’s going to take a bit for her to be 100 percent.”

I thought that was weird, because this morning I’d felt like I could’ve run a marathon, and I didn’t normally feel like running unless a horde of zombies was chasing me.

But slowly, the weight lifted from my head and chest, and the dizziness faded. I opened my eyes, and the next breath I took got stuck in my throat. I didn’t realize he was so close, that he was hunched over so we were eye level, his face only inches from mine.

A thoroughly perplexing mix of emotions woke deep inside me,

fighting to get to the surface—to get me to pay attention to them, to make sense of them.

His bright gaze met mine as a lock of wavy bronze hair toppled forward, shielding one of those stunning, abnormal purple eyes. I took in the features that were pieced together in an inhumanly perfect way we mere mortals truly couldn't accomplish without a skilled surgical hand.

Luc was beautiful in a way that a panther in the wild was, and that was what he often reminded me of. A sleek, captivating predator that distracted with its beauty or lured its prey in with it.

There was a daring twist to the corners of his full lips, tilting them up. Early October sunlight streamed in through the kitchen window, glancing off sharp cheekbones, highlighting them and creating alluring shadows under them.

I was staring at his lips again.

When I looked at him, I wanted to touch him, and as I stared at him wanting that, that teasing grin of his kicked up a notch.

My eyes narrowed.

Only a few Origins could read thoughts as easily as it was for me to read a book. Luc was, of course, one of them. He'd promised to stay out of my head, and I think he did most of the time, but he always seemed to be peeping when I was thinking the absolute most embarrassing thing possible.

Like right now.

His grin became a smile, and a flutter picked up in my chest. That smile of his was as dangerous as the Source. "I think she's feeling better."

I jerked away from him, breaking the embrace as warmth crept into my cheeks. I couldn't look at her. Sylvia. Mom. Whatever. I didn't want to look at him, either. "I'm okay."

"I think you should eat something," she said. "I can warm up the soup—"

"I don't really want to eat anything," I interrupted, my appetite nonexistent at this point. "I just don't want you two to fight."

Mom looked away, her small chin jutting out as she folded her arms over her chest.

"I don't want that, either," Luc said, his voice so quiet I wasn't sure Mom heard him.

My chest squeezed as I met his gaze. “Really? Seemed like you were more than willing to fight.”

“You’re right,” he said, surprising me. “I was being antagonistic. I shouldn’t have been.”

For a moment, all I could do was stare at him, and then I nodded. “There’s something I need to say, and both of you need to hear it.” My hands curled into loose fists. “She can’t keep me away from you.”

His eyes deepened to a violet hue, and when he spoke, his voice was rougher. “Good to hear.”

“Only because I can’t be kept or forced to do anything I don’t want to do,” I added. “That goes for you, too.”

“Never would imagine it didn’t.” He was closer, moving toward me as silently as a ghost.

Drawing in a shallow breath, I faced Mom. Her face was pale, but beyond that, I couldn’t read anything in her expression. “And I know you don’t want to try to force Luc and me apart, not now and not after everything. You were mad. You guys have a messy history. I get that, and I know you two may never like each other, but I really need you guys to pretend that you do. Just a little.”

“I’m sorry,” Mom said, clearing her throat. “He might’ve been willing to argue with me, but this was on me. I invited him for lunch, and then I was unnecessarily rude. He obviously has reasons to not trust me or accept any of my actions in good faith. If it were the other way around, I would feel the same as he does.” She drew in a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Luc.”

Shock splashed through me as my eyes widened, and I wasn’t the only one staring at her like I didn’t understand the words coming out of her mouth.

“I know you and I are never going to like each other,” Mom continued. “But we need to try to get along. For Evie.”

Luc was as still as a statue in one of the few museums that had survived the alien invasion. Then he nodded. “For her.”

In my bedroom later that evening, I found myself sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the corkboard tacked full of pictures of my

friends and me. I didn't even know when I started looking at them, but I couldn't take my eyes off them.

Luc had left shortly after #grilledcheesegate, which was for the best. Even if they sort of smoothed things over, it was best if they got some space between them. Probably a whole zip code worth of space. I wanted to be hopeful that they could get along, but I also knew that may be expecting too much from both of them.

I sighed, my gaze crawling over the photos. Some of them were photos of us just chilling or goofing off. Others showed us in Halloween costumes or dressed up in fancy dresses, hair and makeup on point. Me. Heidi. James. Zoe.

Zoe.

She'd been the first friend I'd made at Centennial High four years ago. We'd hit it off immediately, both of us having suffered—or at least thinking we had—unimaginable loss after the invasion. Our little party of two quickly expanded to include Heidi and then, eventually, James. The four of us had been thick as thieves, but Zoe had been lying, too. Just like Luc. Just like Mom. Zoe had been ordered to be my friend, to watch over me because Luc couldn't, and maybe Luc had been right earlier. Maybe she was made to become my friend, but we'd become best friends all on our own. Who knew? I didn't. And we'd never know.

My stomach grumbled once more, and I knew it was time to go downstairs, because my stomach felt like it wanted to eat itself. Part of me hoped Mom had holed herself up in her bedroom. I felt terrible for thinking that, but things were always super-uncomfortable after a fight, and I didn't have the brain space to deal with it. The moment I hit the foyer and heard the TV on, I knew I wasn't that lucky.

Taking a deep breath, I squared my shoulders and entered the living room. An episode of *Hoarders* was playing on the TV, and I shook my head as I continued into the living room.

She was at the island, a bottle of mustard, loaf of bread, and a packet of deli meat spread out before her. There was even a bag of sour cream and cheddar chips, my favorite. Roast beef. She was making roast beef sandwiches, and it was apparent, based on the fact there was only mustard on the bread, that she'd just started.

Mom looked up as she picked up the packet of meat. “Hoping you’re hungry.”

My steps slowed. “How did you know I was coming down? Were you listening for sounds of life outside my bedroom door?”

“Maybe.” A sheepish look crossed her face. “I was planning to coax you out with this if you didn’t.”

I stopped to stand behind the barstool that I’d knocked over earlier. “I am hungry.”

“Perfect.” She motioned at the barstool. “It’ll be ready in a few moments.”

“Thanks.” I sat down, letting my hands fall to my lap as I watched her drape a slice of roast beef over the bread and then another. I had no idea what to say as the silence stretched out between us. Luckily or unluckily, she knew exactly what to say.

“If you’re still upset with me, I completely understand,” she said, cutting right to the point in typical Colonel Dasher fashion. Another slice of roast beef went onto the sandwich. “I apologized, but I know I said things today to Luc that I shouldn’t have, and you were right. After everything, you didn’t need that today.”

I loosely folded my arms in my lap as I looked around the kitchen. “Luc . . . He did sort of start it. I mean, he didn’t need to bring up the whole pulling-a-gun-on-him thing, and I know you two are probably never going to get along, but—”

“You need him,” she answered for me, placing the bread on the meat.

Warmth hit my cheeks. “Well, I wouldn’t say that.”

A faint smile tugged at her lips as she looked up at me. “You are as much a part of him as he is a part of you.” Her smile faded as she shook her head. “Luc thinks he knows everything. He doesn’t.”

Thank God Luc wasn’t here to hear her say that.

“And he especially thinks he knows why I did what I did when I decided to . . . help you become Evie, but he doesn’t. He’s not in my head,” she said, and I wondered if she realized that Luc could read thoughts. She had to. “And I know he doesn’t trust me. I can’t blame him for that.”

“But you stopped my fath— You stopped Jason from trying to shoot him,” I pointed out. “And you weren’t the only one keeping

secrets. So was he. It's not like you've given him any other reason to not trust you. The same goes for him."

She nodded as she reached for the bag of chips. "You're right. Maybe we'll try it again, and next time, we'll have better results."

"Maybe," I murmured.

"You don't sound too certain."

"I'm not," I admitted with a laugh.

A wry grin appeared as she dumped some chips onto the paper plate, next to the sandwich. "But something you can be certain of is that I am your mother. I may not be her by blood or by certificate, and I may have only been in your life for these last four years, but you are my daughter and I love you. I would do anything to make sure you're safe and happy, just like any mother out there would."

My lower lip trembled as my chest and throat burned. *Daughter. Mother.* Simple words. Powerful ones. Words I wanted to own.

"I know you're mad about how I kept everything from you, and I understand that. I suspect it will take a long time for you to get over that. I don't blame you. I wish I had been more up front with you about him and who you were. The first time he showed up here, I should've told you the truth."

"Yeah, you should have, but you didn't. We can't change any of that, right? It is what it is."

Mom looked away then, smoothing her hand over the front of her shirt. She'd changed out of the blouse and into a pale blue cotton shirt. "I just wish I'd made different choices so that you could have made different ones."

I lifted my gaze and looked at her—really saw her. Something about her seemed off. Mom looked at least a decade or so younger than her age, but she seemed paler than normal. Her features were drawn, and there were faint lines around the corners of her eyes and deeper grooves in her forehead that I'd sworn hadn't been there two weeks before.

Despite all the lies and all the million things I still didn't understand, concern blossomed. "Are you okay? You look tired."

"I *am* a little tired." She reached up, lightly touching her shoulder. "It's been a while since I tapped into the Source."

A tremor coursed through my entire body. She'd used the Source when fighting Micah. "Is that normal?"

"It can be when you haven't used the Source in a while, but I'll be fine." She smiled then, a faint but real one. "Eat up."

Feeling a little bit better about everything and almost normal, I scarfed down the sandwich and chips so fast it was amazing I didn't choke. Once I was done, I was still hungry. Dumping my paper plate in the garbage, I went to the fridge and stared inside, debating if I wanted to go to the trouble of cutting up the strawberries I spotted and smothering them in sugar or if I wanted something easier.

"When you're done cooling yourself off standing in front of the fridge, there's something I want to show you," Mom announced.

I snorted as I grabbed a packet of string cheese. Walking over to the trash can, I pulled off the wrapper and tossed it into the trash. "What?"

"Follow me." She turned, and I followed her to the front of the house, to the French doors that led to her office. She opened the doors, and my steps slowed.

A tiny part of me didn't want to go into the office.

I'd found pictures of her in there, the real Evie, hidden away in a photo album. I'd always been told that we didn't have any old photo albums. That Mom hadn't had the chance to grab any of them during the invasion. I'd blindly believed in that, but now I knew the truth, and I knew why there could be no photo albums.

I wouldn't have been in them. The real Evie would've been.

"You remember the night you called me while I was at work because you thought someone was in the house?" she asked.

The question caught me off guard. She was talking about the night I'd been here alone and had heard someone downstairs. "Yeah, I'm probably not going to forget that until I'm eighty. You thought I imagined it."

"You didn't." She turned to her desk. "Someone was in here, and they did take something."

I opened my mouth, but I couldn't get any of the words out. That was probably a good thing, because most of the words building on my tongue were curses. Finally, I found my voice. "You said nothing was taken."

"I was wrong. I wasn't hiding anything from you. I just didn't

realize until this afternoon. I was organizing my office when I discovered it," she said.

I had no idea how she could organize her office any more than she normally had. For Pete's sake, her office was already more organized than a monthly planner.

Unease surfaced as I stared at her. "What was taken?"

She reached into the desk drawer and pulled out that damn photo album, placing it down on the desk. She opened it to the blank pages. "When I was in here straightening up, I happened to open up the album. I hadn't looked through it in a while, but I noticed it then. There were pictures of Jason's daughter here. Other birthday pictures and a few candid ones." Her fingers lingered on the blank pages. "Those were taken."

Confused, I lifted my gaze to hers as my thoughts whirled. "It had to be Micah. He'd been . . ."

"He'd been what?"

He'd been in this house before, while I'd been sleeping. He'd scratched me—*choked me*. I'd thought it had been a nightmare until he'd admitted to me what he'd done. A shudder rolled through me. Mom didn't know about that. Crossing my arms, I stared down at my bare feet. The purple nail polish had begun to chip on my big toe.

Micah hadn't admitted to taking the photos, and he also claimed that he hadn't killed Andy, one of my classmates, or that poor family in the city. He'd owned up to Colleen's and Amanda's deaths, and Luc and I had just assumed he'd been lying.

What if he wasn't?

And why would he take pictures of the real Evie? He knew who I was from the beginning. He didn't need picture proof. Knots twisted up my stomach as I lifted my gaze to hers. "What if it wasn't Micah? Why would someone take them?"

The line of her mouth thinned until the upper lip was nearly gone. "I don't know."