

# THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

BOOK ONE OF THE GIFTED TEENS SERIES



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TALIA JAGER

## **The Ultimate Sacrifice**

*Book One of the Gifted Teens Series*

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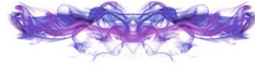
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## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Kasslyn.

## PROLOGUE



### MIRA

“MIRA, YOU CAN’T LET HER kill anyone. Do you understand?” he asked.

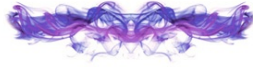
“Yes.” I nodded.

“Ever!”

“I’ve got it!”

“She’ll be in grave danger if she does...we all will.”

## CHAPTER ONE



### KASSIA

**J**ANA STOOD IN FRONT OF me, her hands waving frantically in my face. My gift had taken over, and I could no longer hear her screaming. Jana had never liked me and she tried everything to piss me off. She wasn't even a student at our school, but she had dated a few of the boys here. Although she was one of the increasing number of normal humans aware of us, she had no idea what my gift was, and that I could easily drop her to her knees in pain.

I narrowed my eyes and focused on her. She suddenly stopped yelling at me and began to rub her temples. I could feel my temperature rise as the anger continued to build in me. A small smile flickered across my face as I felt her pain building.

"Stop!" Mira yelled and jumped in between Jana and me. "She's not worth it! Don't let her push your buttons!"

I mashed my lips. Pity that my best friend was immune to my gift. Nobody knew why this was. It wasn't her only talent; she was also a compeller. She could tell someone what to do and that person would do it. There had been many times I wished I could have had her gift instead of mine. All I had to do was wish someone to be in pain and within a minute, they were.

When I saw the concern in Mira's eyes, I let up. She let out a sigh of relief and turned to Jana. "Go home, Jana. You were never here."

Jana turned and slowly began to pace away in a daze with a confused look on her face.

"Sorry," I muttered, ashamed that I let my gift get the best of me again.

“You know how annoying this is getting? You need better self-control.”

“You sound like my counselor.”

“Maybe I should be.”

I felt like smacking her, but she’d just smack me back, and she hit harder than I did.

We got in the car and took the two-lane road back to campus, which was nestled in the mountains in northern California. I glanced out the window at the towering trees on both sides of us. The moon had just peeked over the tops of the trees, lighting the way home.

After twenty minutes, the trees thinned out and before us stood Glendale Institute, one of two “gifted” schools in the country. Glendale was made up of a cluster of buildings enclosed by lush forests.

We parked in the parking lot and hiked up toward the courtyard. Directly across from the parking lot was a training field. As we entered the courtyard, there were dorms on our left and right, one for girls, one for boys. Straight ahead were the faculty quarters, dining hall, and learning center.

Each L-shaped dorm had two wings. The longer side housed the high school-aged students, and the shorter side was for the middle school students. When we walked into the room we shared, Mira told me, “Go to bed.”

“You don’t need to mother me.”

“Well, someone does and since nobody else is stepping up to the plate, I kind of have to.”

“What’s your deal?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I happened to be with someone when you went all mental.”

Oh. That’s what this was about. “You met a guy?”

“Yeah, a cute one, and you had to go and ruin it.” She sighed. “I rushed out of there so fast when Noe called I didn’t get his number.”

Guilt washed over me. “I’m sorry, Mira.”

Her face relaxed a little. “I know.”

“I didn’t mean to get so mad. She just...infuriates me.” I got angry just thinking about the little tramp.

“You have to learn how to ignore some things.”



I stuck out my tongue. “Pbbbbbt.”

“Do you know what could happen if you actually hurt someone?” she asked, raising her voice.

I pulled my hair back into a ponytail. “I’d feel good?”

“No, Kassia. You’d get in trouble. They’d punish you. And then they’d punish me for not stopping you.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll try to do better.”

“You said that last time.”

“Oh yeah. But that guy deserved it!”

She guffawed. “Yeah, he did.” She broke into a grin and we both collapsed on the floor laughing.



I watched Mira as she slept, wishing I could sleep like she did. The nightmares usually woke me up. At first, it was only once in a while, but now it was every night. Mira’s long, ash-blonde hair was spread all over her pillow. Her thin lips twitched now and then. She was my protector, although I think she spent most of her time protecting other people from me.

Sometimes I felt like I was broken. I had this rare gift, but instead of using it to do good, I used it for the wrong reasons. There have only been ten of us documented in history. Ten mind-blowers. Some were locked up because nobody could control them. Others were killed for the same reason. A few were able to control their gifts. And then there was me. I had Mira.

All of the students here at Glendale Institute had gifts. Some gifts—like mine—were only supposed to be used in emergencies. However, with my short temper, I don’t think the gods planned that one out real well.

How then did Mira get to me so fast? Noe. She was a predictor and could see things that hadn’t happened yet. Mira said Noe had called and tipped her off. Although we had driven to the town center together, we went our separate ways when we got there. We needed to be quick so we’d be back to Glendale before curfew.

As dawn approached and the sky brightened with yellows and oranges, I snuck back into bed, quietly pulled the covers up over my head, and pretended to be

asleep. One minute later, the alarm clock went off. I heard Mira groan and hit the nightstand as her hand searched for the off button. Finally, the alarm stopped.

“Kassia, time to get up.” She shook my arm.

I moaned. “Okay.”

“We can get to the bathroom before anyone else if you hurry.”

Slowly, I emerged from under the covers, rubbed my eyes, and yawned. It was some of my best acting yet. “What are we waiting for? Let’s go.”

Mira shot me a look and then smiled. We headed down to the bathroom we shared with the two other girls in the hall. I went straight to one of the showers and turned the water up hot.

A few minutes later, Mira called out for me. “Did you fall asleep in there?”

“No, I fell in the drain.”

“Funny,” she said, her voice droll.

I sighed and turned the shower off. I towel-dried my hair and body and slipped on my T-shirt and shorts again. Then I brushed my teeth. The rest I could do in our room.

As we were leaving, Noe and Auralee walked in. “Hey, Kassia, did you leave some hot water for the rest of us?” Auralee asked. She always looked beautiful no matter what time of day it was. Her strawberry blonde, pixie-like haircut required no styling at all.

I laughed. “Of course, but Mira didn’t.” Mira scowled at me. “Oh, lighten up.” I elbowed her.

“Not before noon,” she mumbled.

Back in our room, I unwrapped my hair and stood in front of the mirror for a long time. Same old dark auburn hair, glaring white skin. At least I didn’t have pimples. They wouldn’t dare show themselves.

“Were you expecting something different?” Mira asked, standing next to me. I was about half an inch taller, and a few pounds heavier.

“No.” I couldn’t tell her about my nightmares, about how sometimes I’d change into something awful in them. She’d worry too much. Besides, they were just nightmares.

I fumbled around the dresser for my eye shadow and lipstick—a light purple that brought out my eyes. Mira chose green eye shadow and a light pink lipstick.

“Purple again?” She rolled her eyes. They would most likely be categorized as hazel, but when you looked closer, you would see they were a blue-green, with specs of gold and brown floating in them.

“Violet,” I corrected.

“Whatever.”

“It matches.”

I smiled smugly. My eyes were truly a light violet color. Being curious, I once did some research and found that violet eyes were rare to both the gifted and regular humans.

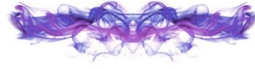
I pulled on my gray school sweatshirt, which was a little bit long in the arms, just the way I liked it. I always bought my long-sleeved shirts long enough to cover at least half of my hands.

“Ready for breakfast?” Mira asked.

“Yeah. Are you looking forward to seeing Zane?”

She blushed and bit her lip. “He’s not my type.” Her nose wrinkled—a sign she was lying.

## CHAPTER TWO



**W**E HEADED OUT THE DOOR and down to the dining hall. “Incoming,” I whispered when I saw Zane make a beeline toward us.

Mira didn’t look up; she knew exactly what I meant. “Hi, Zane. How are you this morning?” She didn’t miss a beat.

Zane turned beet red. “Hi, Mira. You look nice today.”

I stifled a giggle.

Mira glanced up at him, meeting his eyes. “Thanks, Zane.”

He ran a hand through his short brown hair. His nose was a little too long and pointy for his face. Behind his glasses, dark eyes darted back and forth between Mira and me. “Is she...in a good mood today?” he tried to whisper to Mira.

“I’m fine, Zane,” I cut in. “You may sit and talk with the lovely Mira. I won’t hurt anyone right now.”

He turned bright red again. “Sorry, Kassia.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s fine, Zane, stop apologizing. I’m going to get some food.”

Mira nodded and sat down. She must have been thinking about something because she started twisting one of her earrings. Zane sat down across from her. He had had a crush on her since they had gotten here. Mira had told me a few times if he would toughen up a little bit, she would be all over him. I contemplated telling him that, but refrained so Mira wouldn’t hate me.

I jumped in at the end of the line and grabbed two of everything for breakfast.

“Hey, Kassia.”

I looked behind me. “Hey, Lux.” Lux was a late bloomer. Her gift showed up when she turned fifteen instead of about ten like normal.

In the gifted world, parents would send their kids to one of the institutes to learn how to manage their gifts and learn their destiny. Most of the gifts manifested around a child's tenth birthday. Occasionally there was a late bloomer, like Lux, or a gift that showed up early. Since it's hard to keep our gifts secret, usually two gifted people will marry. Nobody has ever known of two gifted parents having a child that wasn't gifted. If only one parent is not gifted, the child may or may not be gifted.

"Good morning, Kassia!" Bren yelled and waved from across the cafeteria. I smiled back, not really wanting to chat with her. Being a mind-blower had its downsides. Sometimes it was hard to tell if someone liked me for who I was or just because they were scared I'd hurt them if they weren't nice to me. I had never used my gift on someone who didn't deserve it.

No matter how much I tried, I could not control my gift. After a few of the kids had witnessed the aftermath of me getting mad, word spread fast. Some kids got especially nervous when Mira wasn't close by. It was actually quite funny because I knew the school had a fail-safe. There were panic buttons placed around the school. If a situation spun out of control and someone couldn't control themselves, a panic button was pushed. This set off an alarm and a light started flashing, alerting everyone where the situation was.

The closest adult would take down the target. Literally. They had a special medication they would inject with a high-pressure jet injector that would knock someone out.

The rules were very clear. Don't interfere with each other's gifts unless absolutely necessary. Don't force people to use their gifts. Don't use your gifts for malicious purposes. Don't hurt people—emotionally or physically. Most of the gifts or powers we possessed weren't hurtful, but every now and then there was someone like me.

I made my way back to the table where Mira and Zane sat. He was hanging on every word she said. I plopped down in the seat next to Mira. "Here," I said, handing her the food.

"Thanks."

A few minutes later, Auralee showed up, dressed in capris and graphic T-shirt. She was known for wearing opinionated shirts. Today, her T-shirt read: *It is what*

*it is.* Sitting down across from me, she ran her hand up the bare nape of her neck and rested it on top of her head the way she always did when she was thinking. The short length of her hair showed off her delicate features perfectly. I wished being beautiful came that easy to me.

Noe appeared in her usual bright and colorful long skirt and blouse. She sat down next to Auralee, flipping her long, brown hair behind her, out of the way. While Auralee had a heart-shaped face and a pale complexion, Noe had an oval face and was darker.

We chatted about normal stuff until the bell rang. The first half of the day I had academic classes—math, science, social studies, English. The second half of the day was about our gifts and talents. One class was about our history, another about how to use our gifts, and the last was a physical education class that included martial arts and yoga.

Mira was in every one of my morning classes. Always had been. That way if anything happened, she'd be there to stop me from getting upset. It was annoying sometimes, but I dealt with it. I didn't have a choice—not until I could control myself.

Between science and social studies, I made her go to the bathroom with me. "I need to reapply my make-up," I told her.

She rolled her eyes, but took out a brush and smoothed out her long, shimmering hair. "Your make-up is fine."

I touched up my eye shadow and lipstick. "Now it is." I kissed the mirror, leaving behind a lipstick print, and skipped out of the bathroom ahead of her. The hallways were empty. If we didn't hurry, we'd be late.

I grabbed Mira's hand and we rushed into our next class, social studies, making it in the door just as the bell rang. Our teacher, Mr. Raymond, gave us an annoyed look. "Glad you girls could make it in time."

We smiled innocently at him and took our seats in the back of the room. Mr. Raymond had us take out our textbooks and follow along as he taught about some old war. My mind wandered, as did my eyes. I found myself staring out the window, thinking of my parents.

They had left me here at the school years ago when my gift had showed up. I had only seen them a couple times since, the last time being over three years

ago. I hadn't heard from them since. I knew it was my fault. They probably hadn't wanted anything to do with a monster like me, a gifted girl who could cause pain with her mind. I didn't blame them for not wanting to be around me, but it still hurt.

"Miss Lagos, would you care to answer the question?" Mr. Raymond asked.

Uh-oh. "I'm sorry, Mr. Raymond. I didn't hear the question." I looked at him sheepishly, hoping the apology would keep me out of trouble.

He frowned. "Please pay attention, Miss Lagos."

"Yes, sir."

Focusing on schoolwork had always been a problem for me. It bored me. Who cared about algebra and who did what in some war? I kept my eyes on the teacher, forcing myself to pay attention and not daydream. The only thing I could focus on completely was my gift. When my emotions were high, it was very hard for me to snap out of it.

Social studies was our last academic class of the day. We would go to lunch next and then to our gifted and talented classes. Those weren't quite as boring as the classes we had the first half of the day. I had two gifted classes before I had to go to therapy. My last class of the day wasn't really a class; it was a one-on-one with a counselor, Dr. Frost. Mira went to the physical education class while I was in therapy.

Dr. Frost was a middle-aged lady with graying hair and big brown eyes. Her high forehead wrinkled when she was concerned. "I hear you had a little slip-up, Kassia."

It always amazed me that Dr. Frost knew the things she did. It had only been Mira, Jana, and me. Mira had compelled Jana, so how did Dr. Frost find out? Maybe be a mind-reader or someone who saw it happen in their mind told her? It really didn't matter. What mattered was what she did with that information. "I guess."

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"Not particularly."

Her brows pulled together. "Kassia, we need to figure out how to help you, and to do that, you need to talk about what happened."

I sighed. "It was Jana."

“Again?”

“I don’t like that girl.”

“I know. What did she do this time?”

“She was bugging me. I don’t even know how it started.”

“Something must have made you angry.”

I frowned as I remembered bits and pieces. “She made some remark about me being a bitch because I wouldn’t give her brother the time of day. Of course, she didn’t stop there. She made some comments about Finn liking her now.”

Finn was my ex-boyfriend. I had dated him for half a year before breaking up with him. The relationship just wasn’t what I wanted. Just because I broke up with him didn’t mean I wasn’t jealous when Jana suggested that he was interested in her. I imagined he might do something like that to get back at me, even though we had parted as friends. I think Finn got a lot of crap for being the one who got dumped.

“So, which made you more upset?”

I scoffed. “Both. It’s not always what she says, it’s how she says it. Her holier-than-thou attitude.”

When Jana had started dating my friend Alton, she liked me. Later on, she tried to set me up with her brother and I rejected him, which made her hate me. Finding out from Alton that we all had some sort of superpower made her irritated. She believed we thought we were better than regular humans. For some reason, she held it against me in particular.

“Do you think she deserves to be in pain because she annoys you?”

I had to think about that. “Sometimes.”

“Really?”

“I suppose not.”

“So, how do we get you to control your emotions better?”

“I have no idea,” I responded honestly.

“How about counting? When someone makes you mad, you count.”

“Seriously? Are you joking?” I chuckled.

“No.” She didn’t look amused.

“I try to ignore people, but sometimes they keep going and going. I can hold it together for a few comments, but it’s when those people keep at it that I lose it,”



I explained.

“And what happens when people do keep at it?”

“The power consumes me. It taunts me,” I admitted. “It wants me to use it.”

“Then what?”

“Mira steps in.”

Dr. Frost sat back in her chair. “What if Mira wasn’t there?”

“Jana would have gotten very hurt.” That fact sat hard. “I don’t *really* want to hurt her. I just can’t stop myself.”

“What about walking away?”

“When it gets that far, walking away doesn’t seem to be an option.” My teeth played with my bottom lip. “Do you think I’d be able to give myself that shot, the one the teachers could use to knock me out?”

Our eyes met and she was silent for a minute. “If you can’t walk away, I doubt you could knock yourself out either.”

I hadn’t thought of that. “Probably not.”

The bell rang. “Kassia, if you find yourself in another situation, try to walk away or stop it. See if you can.”

I nodded, knowing that was pretty much impossible.



Mira and I walked arm in arm into the dining hall for dinner. We grabbed our food and sat down at our table. Mira had turned her chair around and was talking to someone else from another table.

As I started eating my dinner, Finn walked over and stood in front of me with his arms crossed. He was glaring at me. “How could you?”

“How could I what?”

His face turned red. “Jana. Last night. Ring a bell?”

“How did you find out?” I asked. Dr. Frost finding out was annoying enough, but having Finn know what happened really bothered me.

“I have ways. Really, Kassia, how could you even try to hurt her?”

“Seriously? That bitch? Why are you so upset?” I didn’t see what the fuss was about.

“What did you just call her?”

His raised voice made my heart start pounding. I felt the fire start to build in my body. I gripped the side of the table, turning my knuckles white. “A bitch.”

He closed his hands into fists and pounded them on the table. “Don’t call her that!” he yelled.

I shivered as the burning, tingling sensation shot through my body.

I heard Noe’s voice in the distance. “Mira!”

In a split second, Mira’s hand was on mine. “What are you doing?” she asked, looking back and forth between Finn and me. “It’s Finn!”

I wasn’t backing down. I didn’t care who it was. He was the one who came up to me and started it. I held my stare. Mira shoved Finn out of the way and got in my face. “Stop it right now!” I followed Finn with my eyes. “Kassia!” She put her hand on my face and turned it so I was facing her. “Stop!” she compelled.

Our eyes met and my anger disappeared. “Ugh!”

Mira squeezed my hand. “You okay now?”

“Define okay.” I blew air up at my long bangs, which covered my forehead and hung in my eyes.

Noe slipped into the seat across from me. Auralee walked up to Finn and was talking to him. All the kids in the dining hall were silent and watching us.

I stood up, knocking the chair over, and stormed out of the dining hall. Out in the night air, I tried to get a hold of myself. Mira followed. “Hey! What’s going on?”

“He came up to me and started arguing with me! But I can’t even have an argument without my stupid gift getting in the way!” I yelled angrily.

“It’s okay. It’s over. Nothing happened.”

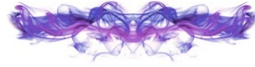
“Nothing happened because you intervened. I could’ve hurt him!” I thought about what Dr. Frost had suggested. There was no way I could just stop it or walk away.

“You didn’t. Now, do you want to go back to our room or do you want to finish eating?”

My stomach rumbled. “Eat, I guess.”

She nodded and we walked back into the dining hall. Everything had returned to normal. I sat back down, picked up my fork, and finished eating my dinner.

## CHAPTER THREE



**T**HAT NIGHT, THE SAME NIGHTMARE woke me again. People in black suits were chasing me. They wanted to capture me, to use me, to make me into something bad. I woke up in a sweat and glanced over at Mira to make sure I hadn't woken her up. She was still sleeping calmly. I let out a deep breath. Okay. I was safe. I curled up in the window seat again so I could see the courtyard below. Nobody was out there, nobody was coming to get me...it was just a normal courtyard at 2:12 a.m.

I stayed in that spot until dawn. Right before I knew the alarm would go off, I slipped back into bed.

At breakfast, I noticed some new kids were sitting at our table. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, but this irked me more than it should have. I stomped over to the table. "Excuse me, who do you think you are?"

They all looked up with shocked looks on their faces. There were four of them; two girls and two guys. The smallest, a dark-haired Asian girl, stood up. "What?"

"This is our table. You need to go."

She glared at me, looking me up and down. "And just who are you?"

Someone nearby snickered. "I'd move if I were you."

"Shut up, Karis," someone else whispered.

I ignored them. "I know you're new here, so I'll let this one go. Move now and don't sit here again."

The girl was about to say something else, but the boy sitting next to her stood up. "It's okay, we'll go," he said in a light tone. Our eyes met and lingered for a little bit. His eyes were medium brown with specks of gold. He smiled, which

made his face light up. Then he winked at me, which sent a spark, a very different kind of spark than I was used to, through my body.

The four new kids moved to a different table. I sat down and tried to take some deep breaths. *Calm down, Kassia, it's all over*, I talked myself down.

Mira sat next to me. "You good?"

I nodded. Anxiously, I twirled my hair around my finger.

"Then what the hell was that about?! Our table? Since when do we have assigned tables?"

"Since today?" I knew she was right. Although we didn't have an assigned table, we had always sat there.

"Okay...I'm gonna go get the food today. You...relax." She patted my hand. "Zane? Sit with her."

"What? Really?" Zane responded.

"Has she ever hurt you?"

"No."

"Then chill, Zane!" she snapped.

Zane sat down. "Morning, Kassia."

"Morning, Zane." I smiled sweetly. "Listen, you've got to lighten up around me." He stared at me, his jaw hanging down. "I have no desire to hurt you."

"But that could change at any time..." he said, his voice shaky.

"I'm working on that. But even if I got mad at you, do you think Mira would let me hurt you?"

"No, but she's not always around."

"Can you think of a time she hasn't been able to stop me?" I asked. He shook his head. "You're Mira's friend, you're my friend, I like you. I'm not going to hurt you, but you have to relax. Can you do that?"

"I can try."

"That's all I can ask. Thank you."

Mira arrived back with the food, placing a plate in front of me. Instead of my normal cereal or waffles, she had brought healthy food. "Fresh fruit and yogurt for you."

"Is this a punishment?"

"Maybe."

I laughed. "Fine," I said in a sarcastic tone. I bit into the banana and stole a look at the new kids who had settled in at another table. "Wonder where they came from."

"Does it matter? They're here now."

"Noe didn't mention them."

"Maybe Noe didn't see them."

"What didn't I see?" Noe asked, sitting down with us. Auralee sat next to her, wearing a T-shirt that said, *I respect your opinion, I just think it's stupid.*

"Them." I nodded in the new kids' direction.

"Oh yeah, I saw them."

I looked over at her. "And you didn't tell us because...?"

Noe's piercing amber eyes shot me an annoyed look. "I didn't realize I needed to report everything I saw to you."

"This would have been classified as an important detail."

"All I saw was them here at school. They didn't do anything." She looked over at them. "The boy, though...I see him talking to you."

"Which boy?" I asked a little too quickly.

She laughed. "The one with the sun-kissed hair. He's going to look over here in five seconds."

I counted in my head and sure enough, he looked over and caught my eye. I didn't look away; I waited for him to first. "What's his gift?"

She was quiet for a minute. "Can't tell. I can't see him using it right now."

"Hmmm."

"The Asian girl, she's a lie detector."

"Nothing fancy."

"The darker boy, he's a telekinetic."

I shifted my gaze to the brown-skinned boy with short, black hair. There were a few telekinetic kids here, Finn included. It was neat to watch them move things with their minds. We finished breakfast and went to class.



When I walked into my second class of the day, the new girl was talking with some of the kids. Her eyes were wide and her lips were in an O shape. When she

saw me, she stopped talking and stared. The other kids followed her gaze. I knew they were talking about me, about my gift.

“Morning, everybody.” I raised my eyebrows and smiled at her as I walked by. I glanced at the ridiculous outfit she was wearing and said, “By the way, whatever look you were going for, you missed.”

Laughter filled the room. Her face turned hot with embarrassment.

Auralee was on the other side of the classroom. *Hey, Auralee, does she know about my gift now?* I asked in my mind. She nodded without turning toward me. *She scared?* Again, Auralee nodded. I laughed. Auralee could read minds. I knew she’d be nosy enough to check out the new kids’ minds, but normally she tried to stay out of other people’s heads. If we said her name in our mind, though, she’d listen. The teacher came in then and class started.



“I controlled myself this morning,” I told Dr. Frost that afternoon.

“Really?” She seemed surprised.

“I didn’t let myself get too mad about a situation.”

“What was the situation?”

I told her what had happened at breakfast. “I didn’t lose control,” I repeated.

“That’s good, Kassia. However, it worries me that this small situation upset you so much.”

“But it didn’t!”

“You made these new kids move though?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“It’s our table.”

“You couldn’t sit somewhere else?”

Well, this wasn’t going the way I had thought it would. I sat back in the chair, reluctant to say anything more. Here I was proud of myself and she had to go make it into something else.

When the bell rang, she sighed. “I guess I’ll see you Monday.”

“Sure,” I mumbled and walked out.

The sun was out and the courtyard was full of students. Mira was by my side

in minutes. “It’s the weekend!”

“Yes, it is.”

The school had events set up during the weekends that were optional to attend. Some were fun. There could be dances or parties while other times they had lessons like dance or art, but tonight was movie night. The weather was nice, so they’d bring out the projector and show movies on the side of the school.

“We going to the movie tonight?” I asked.

“Sounds good.”

“Let’s do lunch in town tomorrow though.”

“Okay.”

I caught the new kids looking over at us during dinner. Auralee was being especially open. “The little one keeps wondering about you, Kassia. She’s having a hard time believing what she’s heard about you.”

I laughed. “I don’t think she’d want to test it.”

Her green eyes met mine and she smiled. “The golden boy wants to talk to you. He keeps going over what to say in his head. He thinks you’re hot,” she said, giggling.

Mira rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on.”

“What? You have a man,” I teased.

“I do?” She looked surprised.

“Yes, he would do anything for you.” I nodded over to where Zane was standing.

“Really, Kassia? We’ve been friends for years.”

“Exactly. You’re made for each other.”

She stole another look at him. “I don’t know. But you...you could have any guy here.”

“Sure. They’d all be scared into loving me so I wouldn’t hurt them.”

Mira laughed. I loved how her eyes lit up when she was happy. “Should keep them from cheating.”

“Face it, Mira. I’ll have to marry you. You are the only one who could tell me how it is.”

She shook her head. “Great...if only you were my type.” We both laughed.

After dinner, we made our way to the courtyard. As we walked toward one of

the small trees, we passed the new kids. “Are you going to make us move from this spot too?” the small girl asked. Auralee had told me her name was Arian.

A few kids nearby stared at her in horror. I thought about what Dr. Frost had said to me, and then I laughed. “Of course not, silly, this isn’t our spot. Gosh, who pissed in your Cheerios today?” I then continued walking until we reached the tree. I sat down and leaned against it. Mira was staring at me. “What?” I asked.

“You never walk away.”

“I’m trying. That is what you want me to do, isn’t it?”

Speechless, she nodded and sat next to me.

The movie started. It was an action adventure movie with some romance thrown in. About halfway through the movie, Noe leaned over and whispered, “Five minutes.”

“Five minutes until what?”

“He comes.” She winked.

“Do you know more than what you’re telling me?” I asked.

“There are some things that people shouldn’t know in advance,” she said and turned back to the movie.

“That’s not fair.” I pouted. She didn’t turn back around. I felt like tugging on her long ponytail and making her talk, but she’d know it was coming.

Of course, now I couldn’t concentrate on the movie. I was trying to watch him out of the corner of my eye. Sure enough, a few minutes later, he slipped away from his group. He came up behind me and hesitated, but only for a few seconds. Then he was next to me. I looked over at him and tried to act surprised.

“Hi,” he said with a smile.

“Hi,” I whispered back.

I waited; he sat silently watching the movie. Finally he spoke. “Sorry ’bout this morning.”

“No biggie.”

“Arian is just acting out a little, she’s insecure. I hope you can understand.”

Next to me, Auralee started coughing, obviously trying to cover up a giggle.

“Yeah...sure. Are you, uh...with her?”

“With her? Like dating?” He seemed surprised. I nodded. “No, we’re not



dating.”

“Oh.”

“Does it seem that way?”

I shrugged. “Well, you’re with her all the time.”

He laughed. “I don’t know anybody else here.”

“Fair enough. I’m Kassia Lagos.” I stuck out my hand.

He took it with a firm grip, sending a warm sensation up my arm. When he smiled, I noticed it was just a tad bit crooked and he had a dimple on the right side. “I’m Daxton Dekas.” After I raised my eyebrows, he added, “My parents like D’s.”

“I see that. Well, now you know someone here.”

“I guess I do.”

“Where ya from?”

“River Oaks,” he answered. River Oaks Institute was the other gifted school, located on the east side of the country.

“Oh, why the move?”

His face turned darker. “I’m not really sure. We were transferred here, but we weren’t told why.”

“Odd.” Transfers usually didn’t happen without a pretty big reason.

“Tell me about it.” He was silent again.

I wondered what he was thinking. I stole a look at Auralee, but she sat still. I waited for what seemed like a very long time. The movie played on and I happened to glance back to where Daxton had come from. Arian was glaring at us. “Are you sure you and Arian aren’t together?”

He followed my gaze. “Yeah, but she’s not a big fan of yours.”

I heard Auralee chuckle. I kicked her.

“So, it’s just seeing you with me?” I asked.

“I guess. She’s a friend.”

“Hmmm.” I’d have to think about that one. “And you want to be my friend?”

Our eyes met and I felt that pull again. “I’d like to be your something,” he whispered, without looking away.

Slowly, it seemed like our bodies were leaning closer to each other. I could feel his warm breath on my face. I licked my lips as the urge to kiss him built up

in me. It was almost as bad as losing control and hurting someone. I felt like I couldn't control my emotions. My body wanted to take over.

"Kassia." Mira grabbed my arm. "You okay?"

Our gaze was broken and I looked over at Mira. She looked concerned. I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I'm fine." I was a little miffed that she had interrupted.

Daxton looked dazed as well. "Well, I wanted to introduce myself properly. See ya later." He stood up and walked back to his seat.

I wasn't sure what to make of that. I leaned back against the tree, unable to take my eyes off of him. Arian was talking to him, her hands flying around. She was obviously mad. He gave her a hard look and she stopped. Then he looked over at me. He smiled, catching me looking at him. I returned the smile and then turned back to the movie.

After the movie was over, Mira and I walked back to the dorm. "What happened earlier?" she asked.

"I'm not sure." I paused. "There was this really weird connection. Like we're supposed to be together."

"You looked like you were locked on."

I nodded, pulling out my ponytail. "It felt a little like that. An intense feeling. I wanted to kiss him so bad!"

She giggled. "I've never heard you talk about someone like that."

"I've never felt like that, not even with Finn."

We got ready for bed and chatted a little longer. I hoped for a dream that night instead of a nightmare, but apparently that was too much to ask. The nightmare came again right on time, waking me up in a sweat, forcing me to check the mirror, and then wander over to my spot on the window seat.

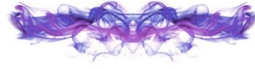
I searched the courtyard, looking for something out of the ordinary. It was empty yet again, and I was able to breathe easier. But then something in one of the other buildings caught my eyes. A movement? I looked harder and stifled a gasp. The new boy, Daxton, was at his dorm window staring at me.

I wasn't sure what to do. Stay there and stare back? Hide? Mira made a sound and I glanced over at her, but she was still sleeping. When I looked back, he was gone. I did a quick sweep of the courtyard and the boys' dorm one more time, but couldn't find any more eyes watching me. Had he been looking for me? Or

was this whole thing a coincidence? As I sat there longer, I started to wonder if he had been there at all. Maybe I had imagined him?

I crawled back into bed earlier than usual that night. My body was tired and my mind was full of questions. I tried some deep breathing and was able to fall asleep.

## CHAPTER FOUR



I DIDN'T STIR AGAIN UNTIL I felt someone shaking me. "Kassia, it's almost noon, get up!"

Noon? I yawned and stretched my arms. "I'm awake."

"Good."

"It's Saturday."

"Yes, that's my point. You wanted to go into town for lunch."

"Oh, right." I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and pushed up. "See, I'm up. Give me a few minutes to get ready."

"Few minutes?" She rolled her eyes.

I hurried down to the bathroom and quickly got ready. I decided not to dry my hair today. I brought it up into a clip and then pulled out a few strands. I touched my eyelids with the violet eye shadow and brushed them both with a few sparkles. Mira didn't like it when I got too flashy, but she could deal with it for the day. After I pulled on my jeans and purple tank top, I spritzed my body with a spray called "Lilac Blossoms."

"Done," I said, turning toward her.

She looked me up and down and sighed. "You look like a faerie."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"Nope. Just draws attention."

"I like attention." I smiled.

"I know."

Mira wore jeans with a green and brown shirt. She had braided her hair and only put on a touch of make-up.

I grabbed the keys real quick. "I'm driving today."

“Kassia,” Mira whined, “you drive too crazy.”

I didn’t listen. I was in a good mood and practically skipped to the car. Every pair of roommates at school was assigned a car to share. Ours was a Honda CRV. Driving it made me feel free and spontaneous. We drove down to a little deli in town and had lunch outside. I liked feeling the warmth of the sun on my face. “Sometimes I wish we could just take off, the two of us, and never look back.”

“Is this the fantasy where we marry each other?”

I opened one eye and shot her a look. “Noooo. It’s the one where it’s just us. We don’t have to worry about anything or anybody else.”

“Somehow, I don’t think it would be that easy.”

After lunch, we did a little shopping before heading back to school. As we turned onto the road that would eventually bring us back to Glendale, another car veered into our lane. I was going way too fast and had to slam on the brakes. The cars clipped each other, putting us into a spin.

When the spinning stopped, I looked over at Mira and asked, “You okay?”

“Yeah, you?”

“Fine.”

Both of our cell phones started ringing. I looked at mine. “Noe,” I said at the same time Mira said, “Auralee.” We both answered the phones, promised we were okay, and said we would be home soon.

I looked out the window at the other car on the side of the road. “Think they’re okay?”

“We should find out.”

We both got out and walked over to the other car, a small sportster. The front end was scrunched up and reminded me of an accordion. A man with gray hair and a beard sat in the driver’s seat. He looked over and saw us coming. Quickly, he seemed to get his wits about him and jumped out of the car. “Look at my car!” he yelled.

“Sir, are you okay?” Mira asked him.

“My car isn’t!”

“Sir, do you feel okay?” Mira tried again.

“I’m fine. But, look what you did to my car!” He raised his voice.

“What we did?!” I asked, surprised. “You came into our lane!”

“I most certainly did NOT!” he yelled. “You two don’t even look old enough to be driving.”

“You swerved into our lane!” I yelled back.

He was taken aback for a second. “Where are your parents? Let’s call them.”

“There’s no need to do that,” Mira said, calmly.

“You are irresponsible! You are going to have to pay for this!”

As he kept yelling, I could feel the power rising in me. A tingling feeling shot through my body, getting more and more intense as the seconds passed. The man’s yelling slowed and he started rubbing his head. “Irresponsible and immature!” He started back up again. I didn’t like liars or people who called us names. I focused my energy at him. He stumbled.

Mira stepped in between the man and me; she looked directly into my eyes, grabbed my wrists, and told me to stop.

I tried to peer around her at the man, who was still complaining about his car.

“Kassia,” Mira said again, “calm down. Take a few deep breaths and reel it in.”

I mashed my lips, but gave in and started to breathe. I closed my eyes and told the powers growing in me to relax.

“What the hell is she doing?” the man yelled.

“Sir, I need you to listen to me.” Mira’s comforting voice took over and he grew quiet. “You hit a tree with your car, it was all your fault, there is no need to call the police,” she continued. The man turned, went back to his car, and got in.

Mira grabbed my hand and led me back to the car. She pushed me into the passenger’s seat and took off. “You okay?” she asked.

“Mmhmmm,” I responded, my eyes still closed.

“I thought you were going to do better.”

I opened my eyes and glared over at her. “I am trying!”

She raced back to Glendale and hurried me upstairs. She sat me on my bed. “Don’t move.” She ran out of the room. I heard her banging on the door down the hall. Then I heard hushed voices and finally she came back in, looking relieved. “Noe said it would all be fine.”

I nodded. “Sorry.” The worst part was it wasn’t something we could hide. Even if we got the car fixed secretly and told no one, they would still find out.

Heck, they probably already knew.

My suspicions were confirmed about an hour later when there was a knock at the door. Mira opened it. Ms. Meadows, one of the school staff, stood there. She nodded at Mira. “Mr. Eaton would like to see both of you.”

I stood up and mumbled another apology. We followed Ms. Meadows to Mr. Eaton’s office. Dr. Frost was there too. “Hello, girls, please have a seat.”

Mr. Eaton was the headmaster of the school. We sat in the navy blue chairs in front of his desk. The office was a typical office, dark wood and not a lot of color in the room. An area rug was under the desk; the rest of the room was floored with dark wood. Dr. Frost sat on the couch on the side of the room and Mr. Eaton sat down at his desk.

“I hear there was an incident in town.” His brows came together and his forehead wrinkled.

“Yes, sir,” Mira answered.

“Care to enlighten us?”

“It was my fault, sir,” I spoke up. “I got mad.” I tried to take responsibility.

“What made you get so angry, Miss Lagos?”

“There was an accident,” I started and then quickly added, “It wasn’t our fault. He swerved into our lane and our cars crashed. He blamed it on us and started going off.” I looked over at Dr. Frost. “I tried not to get mad, I tried to keep my emotions under control, but eventually I couldn’t any more.” I looked down, ashamed.

“Did you hurt the man?”

“I...” I tried to remember.

“She didn’t get that far. I stopped her,” Mira chimed in.

“Good. What does the man think happened?” Mr. Eaton asked.

“He thinks he hit a tree.”

Mr. Eaton rubbed his temples. “Miss Lagos, you need to try harder to keep your emotions under control. I know you already see Dr. Frost five days a week. I can only ask you to work harder with her. I’m restricting you to school grounds until I see more improvement.”

I looked up, shocked. I had never been punished for using my power before. “That’s not fair!” I raised my voice.

“I understand you feel this way, Miss Lagos. But I must, for your safety as well others’.”

I mashed my lips together. Mr. Eaton looked surprised. “I know you will be able to control your emotions in here, right, Miss Lagos?”

“Yes, sir,” I said under my breath.

“Very good. Dr. Frost has agreed to talk with you now in her office. Please remember, I’m not restricting you to your room or classes, just the campus.” He nodded to Dr. Frost. “You are dismissed.” Mira and I stood up to leave. “Miss Trakas,” Mr. Eaton said to Mira, “I need to talk with you further.”

We looked at each other. I sure hoped she wouldn’t get in trouble for what happened. She sat back down and I followed Dr. Frost out of the room.

I was still fuming by the time we arrived at her office and could only pace around the room, trying to control my emotions.

“When you’re ready, we’ll start,” she said to me calmly.

I looked more closely at her. She was dressed casual today, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, and she wore no make-up. I noticed she kept her hand in her pocket. I scoffed. “You’ve got the drug right there, huh?”

“Yes. We can’t have you using your gift on one of us.”

“Do you think I could hurt you that quickly?”

“I know that is a possibility. However, I think I know the signs well enough. If I believe that’s the direction you are heading and there’s a chance you might hurt me, I won’t hesitate.”

I sat down, humbled. “I hate to think of anyone I like being afraid of me.”

“That’s why we need to work on controlling your anger.”

I sighed heavily. “How do I do that?”

Her hand came out of her pocket and she sat down. “We talk, we do exercises, and we’ll figure it out.”

Dr. Frost and I talked for a couple of hours. She gave me more relaxation exercises to do. I walked back to my room slowly, thinking about everything that had happened.

Near the entrance to my building, Daxton popped out in front of me. “Hey.”

I jumped, but relaxed when I saw it was him. “Oh, hey.”

“What’s up?”



I looked down at the ground and kicked at the grass. “I...uh...” Then I remembered the night before. “Wait a minute. Last night...I saw you.”

I saw a glint of recognition in his eyes. “I...Yeah.”

“Why were you there?”

“Just looking out the window. Same as you. Isn’t that what you were doing?”

“Of course, what else would I be doing?”

“Right.” He didn’t sound convinced. “Want to hang out tonight?”

Ironic. I get asked out on the day I get grounded. “As long as it’s on campus.”

He gave me a puzzled look. “Why?”

“Dad grounded me.” I laughed.

“Dad?”

“Yeah, the headmaster.”

“Is he really your dad?”

“NO!” I laughed. “Just joking around.”

“Is being grounded a joke too?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“What happened?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Okay. Maybe you can tell me over dinner in the dining hall?”

I giggled. “Sounds like a date.”

“See you then.”

I nodded and walked into my dorm. I went upstairs and to my room. The door was already open. Noe, Auralee, and Mira were sitting on the beds. “Hey.”

I plopped down next to Noe. She put her arm around me. “Grounded?”

“Yup.”

“It’ll be fine. We’ll find stuff to do here,” Mira said.

“I’m the one who’s stuck here, not you. You guys don’t have to stick around here for me.” I looked up. “Wait, he didn’t ground you too, did he?”

“No.” Mira shook her head.

“Well, what did he say?” I pried.

She rolled her eyes. “He just lectured me on letting you go as far as you did. But then he told me I did a good job.”

“That’s it?” I asked.

Her nose wrinkled a little. “Yeah.”

“Hmmm.” Her nose gave away her lie. There was definitely more to the story. But I wasn’t going to push now. Maybe it was something she couldn’t say in front of Noe and Auralee.

“So, what are you going to wear on your date tonight?” Noe asked. Everyone looked over at me.

I should have figured she’d know about that. “Jeans.”

“And?”

“Wait a minute! What date? Aren’t you grounded?!” Mira shrieked.

“Restricted to the campus,” I corrected her. “I ran into Daxton outside. He wants to have dinner...here.”

“I don’t get it.” Mira shook her head. “You get in trouble and still manage to land a date for the night.” She flopped back on her bed and groaned.

The rest of us laughed. “What top are you going to wear?” Before I could open my mouth, Noe said, “And don’t say purple because it matches.”

“Don’t you already know what I’m going to wear?” I asked, grinning.

“Yes.” She handed me a green shirt from my closet. “Green.”

“Then green it is.”

## CHAPTER FIVE



I MET DAXTON IN THE COURTYARD an hour later. He smiled when he noticed me walking toward him. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks.”

“Shall we go to dinner?”

I giggled. “Sure! Where to?”

He looked up at the sky. “Hmmm... I hear there’s a great place serving Italian food tonight,” he said before throwing me a wink.

“Perfect,” I said, and we headed to the dining hall.

The strong smell of tomatoes was in the air. It was definitely an Italian night. We got in line and I picked out a big bowl of spaghetti and meatballs. Realizing I forgot the rolls, I reached back over Daxton’s arm and grabbed two. Our arms touched briefly and that intense, almost electrifying feeling flew through me. I jumped and pulled my arm away, wondering if he noticed it as well. If he did, he didn’t say anything.

He carried both our trays back to the table. “Am I allowed to sit with you at your table?” he asked very seriously.

I laughed. “You are officially invited to sit with us from now on.”

We sat down and ate our food. It was pretty good for cafeteria food. The chefs knew what they were doing. The sauce tasted authentic and the food tasted better than one would expect for school food.

“What’s her name is staring again,” I informed him.

He laughed. “Ignore her.”

“She annoys me.”

“Try not to let it bother you.” He wiped his mouth.

I studied his face. His skin tone was a few shades darker than mine. He had a few freckles on his cheeks and he had that one dimple. I wondered what his gift was. It wasn't polite to ask. Usually if the person wanted you to know, they'd let you know. Or you could guess by the tattoo on their wrist, since all people with the same talent had the same tattoo.

My tattoo resembled the sign for infinity, and it went all the way around my wrist. Mira's tattoo was more like a long string of knots. Daxton's looked like a string of different-sized stars. I wasn't sure what that meant. I tried to remember if anyone else I knew had a star-like tattoo but came up blank.

After dinner, we walked around campus. "Tell me more about you," I said curiously.

"What would you like to know?"

"Anything you want to tell me." I tried to leave it open.

"Aren't all our stories mostly the same? Son or daughter of a gifted person. Not quite human, not quite superhuman. Thrown into a special school to learn about the world and here we are."

I laughed. "Yeah, guess they all do sound about the same. What about your family? Do you see them?"

"No. My parents were killed a few years ago."

"Oh." I looked down. "I'm sorry."

"I have an older brother who lives a normal life. He chooses not to use his gift. I haven't seen him in a while." He shrugged like it didn't bother him, but there was a hint of sadness in his eyes that said otherwise.

"I haven't seen my parents in a long time. Years now. I don't know why. I don't even know if they're alive."

"That sucks. Do you have brothers or sisters?"

"None that I know of."

We sat on a bench in the courtyard. We were close to each other, but not touching. It seemed like he was purposely trying not to touch me.

"Did you have a girlfriend at your old school?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. Have you had a lot of boyfriends here?"

I laughed. "Other than Finn? No, definitely not."

He looked surprised. "Why not?"

“They’re all scared of me.”

“Scared of you? Why would they be scared of you?” He paused. “Oh... because of your gift?”

I nodded. “I assume people have told you.”

“Yeah, I heard it around.” He stuck out his legs and leaned back. “I’m not afraid.”

“You’re not?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t plan on making you mad.”

I laughed. “Good, that’s good.”

“You really can’t control it?”

“Not very well,” I admitted. “I’m working on that.”

It was getting darker. The moon had risen in the sky and stars were beginning to appear. He looked over at me. “Kassia?”

I met his gaze. “Yeah?”

“Why were you really at the window?”

With our eyes locked, it was hard to think. The passion was rising again. “I have nightmares.”

His face softened. “I could take your nightmares away. I could take you to places you’ve only dreamed of.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

He leaned close to me; our lips were only inches apart. He hesitated, looking from my eyes to my lips and back again. Everything in me was screaming yes, but I stayed silent, trying to control my emotions. Then quickly, but gently, he touched his lips to mine. I closed my eyes and leaned into the kiss and my world changed. I was no longer sitting on a bench on campus. I was on a beach with the sun setting behind us. A warm breeze played with my hair and the salty air was heavy all around us.

I pulled away and suddenly the campus reappeared. “What the hell?”

He smiled unsurely. “I told you. I can take you anywhere.”

“You’re a dreamer!”

“Yes.”

Just then the bell rang, signaling our curfew to return to our own rooms. We stood and he walked me back to my building. “Think about it, Kassia. I can take you away...even if just for a little while.”

I nodded, and while my body and heart yearned for another kiss, I turned and quickly entered my dorm.

Mira, Auralee, and Noe were anxiously waiting for me to fill them in on my night. Of course, Auralee and Noe knew quickly. Poor Mira had to wait for me to actually respond. I filled them in on my evening with Daxton.

“A dreamer? Wow...” Mira spun her earring. “There are a couple of them here, right?”

“Yeah, girls, I think. I’ve never been close enough to them to find out what it was like,” Noe responded.

“Auralee, can you ever see or hear what they’re dreaming?”

“Not like you’re asking. I don’t think. Maybe if I knew it was happening, I could try.”

“What was it like?” Mira asked.

“Like I was really at the beach. I could smell the salty air, feel the warm breeze, and see the sun setting. It was a scene from my dreams.”

“That’s cool,” Noe said.

“It was, but freaky too. We were physically here, but we were there too. It was weird.”

After a few more minutes of talking, Noe took Auralee’s hand, and they snuck back to their room.

Unfortunately, Daxton’s dream earlier didn’t take away my nightmares that night. I woke to a quiet room and breathed a sigh of relief. Mira was sleeping and I was still me. I tried to go back to sleep, but instead I tossed and turned. I finally got up and went to the window seat.

Before doing a sweep of the courtyard like I usually did, my eyes shot over to the window I had seen Daxton at, but he wasn’t there. I wasn’t sure whether to feel relieved or sad. I guess I felt a little of both.



A few evenings later, I saw him sitting by the tree in the courtyard. I walked up

to him. "Okay."

"Okay? Okay, what?"

"Take me away."

He smiled. "When?"

I thought about it. "No time like the present."

He raised his eyebrows. "Is there someplace quiet we can sit?"

There were a lot of people outside tonight, so I looked around, trying to think of a place we could go. "Behind that building, there's a garden. We can go there." I started walking, and he followed me.

The garden was full of flowers and vegetable plants. I sat down on one of the benches scattered around it. Daxton sat facing me. "So, how do we do this?" I asked.

A smile spread across his face, making his dimple appear. "Close your eyes," he whispered. Slowly, I did. Without another word, he took my hands, and immediately we were somewhere else, this time high on a mountaintop. We could see everything for miles and miles. The sky was a deep blue and the trees below were greener than any I had ever seen. As I glanced around I noticed the air felt thin.

"Amazing!" I whispered. "Can we talk when we're like this?"

"Obviously," he answered.

"Can other people hear us?"

"No."

"Can you only go to realistic places?"

"What do you mean?"

"What about a fantasy world? Like purple trees and unicorns?"

Our surroundings changed, and now we were in a place where the trees were purple and a unicorn drank from a nearby brook. "Awesome!" In the dream world, I let go of his hands and walked around, exploring. Everything felt so real. Carefully, I walked up to the unicorn. She turned toward me, and I was able to pet her. She felt soft and silky.

I walked back to where Daxton was standing and sat down. The grass was blue, the sky pink. Daxton sat down next to me. "Do you feel okay?" he asked.

As odd as it all was, it was relaxing. I felt calm and peaceful here. "I feel

great.”

“Good. Can I show you anything else?”

I thought about that for a minute. “No. I think I need to process this first.”

Our eyes met and I felt myself blush. With the back of his hand, he softly brushed my cheek. With his finger, he lifted my chin up just a little, and then he traced my lips. He looked into my eyes as if he was asking for permission. I parted my lips and leaned closer to him. I could feel his warm breath as our noses almost touched. Slowly, with the anticipation growing, our lips met and he gently kissed me.

When he pulled back, I opened my eyes, checking to see if he was done. He was giving me his quirky smile. We were back to reality, back to evening time on campus. “Did we really just...kiss?” I asked.

Without answering me, he leaned in faster this time, brushing my lips with his, waiting for that signal my mouth would ultimately give. I could feel my heart racing, and my breathing quickened, as did his. I could feel his tongue just touch the outside of my lips, exploring a bit. I surprised myself when I let out a little moan. His fingers were in my hair now, dancing upwards as the kiss grew more passionate. And then almost as quickly as it had started, he pulled back a little, taking my lip with him for a second, leaving me wanting more.

My body was burning with power and I kept my eyes closed. I was scared if I opened them, I’d hurt him. I tried to settle the power back down inside of me. It scared me, how my power was taking over when I wasn’t mad. This was completely new territory for me, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it.

“Are you okay?”

I held up my finger so he’d wait a minute. *Just breathe.* When I was sure the power was gone, I opened my eyes and nodded.

“We should go. We’ve been out here a while.”

Speechless, I nodded again. He walked me back to my building. “Thank you,” I said to him, “for sharing your gift.”

“For you, anytime.”

Upstairs, the girls were all over me for every detail. I felt bad that Mira was the only one who wouldn’t know unless I told her.

I can’t believe you got to go to dreamland,” Auralee said.



“I can’t believe you wanted to go somewhere with purple trees!” Mira laughed.

Noe sighed. “But those kisses...He likes you.”

Auralee scoffed. “A lot!”

After their appetite for details was satisfied, we all went to bed.

I slept better that night, but not through it. I found myself at the window again, but this time it was closer to dawn than midnight. When I sat down, he was there in his window. He held up his hand and I mine, and then he disappeared back into his room. Strange. I looked down. The rest of the yard was quiet.

The next night as I was walking from the dorm to the dining hall, Arian jumped out from behind the bushes.

“Jeez.” I jumped. “What do you want?”

“What are you doing to Daxton?” she asked.

My eyes widened. “What?”

“He’s drawn to you. Won’t stop talking about you. He’s never been like that before.” She walked toward me.

“I didn’t do anything to him. Maybe he likes me?”

“Why would he like you? You’re a self-centered bitch.”

A surge shot through my body. “Excuse me?!”

“You and your table, you and your friends, you think the world revolves around you,” she taunted.

I narrowed my eyes as the power grew. *Breathe, just breathe.*

“You need to leave him alone.”

*Don’t give in. Don’t hurt her.* I wasn’t sure how long I could do this. Where was Mira?

“Arian! What are you doing?” I heard Daxton’s voice. When he saw my face, his eyes grew wide with concern. “Arian, get out of here!”

Inside my head, I screamed at him to get out of the way. I didn’t want to hurt him, but I knew I’d lose control if I said it out loud.

He put his hands on my cheeks and our world faded. We were floating in the air, up near the clouds. “Relax, Kassia,” he told me. “Let it go, let the anger go. She’s no longer here. There’s no threat.”

Looking in his kind eyes, I saw my own eyes all wild. I took some deep

breaths and soon felt my body relax.

“There you go. Feel better?”

“How did you know this would work?”

“I didn’t.”

“But you could have been hurt.”

“I don’t think you could hurt a friend.”

“I’m glad you’re confident in what I can and can’t do. I’m not so sure.”

He laughed. “Are you ready to go back?”

“Not especially, but I figured we’ve got to look pretty dumb standing in the middle of the yard.”

“Probably.” The clouds disappeared and I was standing again on the ground. There were a few people around staring at us, but Arian was nowhere in sight.

“Where were you going?” he asked me.

“To get a snack.”

“Let me walk you there.”

“Sure.”

He walked with me to the dining hall, sat with me while I ate, and walked me back to the dorm. “Have a good night.” He leaned in and his soft, supple lips touched mine gently. He smelled sweet tonight; his lips tasted like cookies. The kiss left me feeling tingly inside for the rest of the night.



I wanted to go out on a real date with Daxton, but because I was grounded, I couldn’t. I thought about sneaking out, but more than likely, somebody would tell. I would have to involve Mira.

“Mira, I need a favor.” I used my sweet, innocent voice.

“What?”

“I need you to ask Zane out on a double date with Daxton and me, and tell Eaton you’ll supervise me in town.”

She burst out laughing. “I was supervising last time! I didn’t do a very good job. You think he’ll forget that?” She took her hair out of the clip it was in and brushed it out.

I twirled my hair around my finger. “Can you at least try?”

“It won’t work. I’m telling you, there’s no point.”

“This sucks.”

“This is where I’d say ‘I told you so,’ but I’ll refrain since you’re my best friend.”

I picked up the pillow next to me and threw it at her. “I wish I had a different gift,” I said sadly. I walked over to the window seat and sat down. “I feel trapped.”

Mira threw the pillow back at me. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself. If you want a double date, then you’ll get it, but it might have to be on campus instead. Or would you rather go out alone since the only reason to double date would be to get off campus?”

Now I really did feel bad. “I always want you with me, Mira. You’re like my other half. I’d love for you and Zane to go out on a double date with us. But Daxton and I have done the dining hall date already, what more is there?”

Her eyes twinkled. “Wait and see.”



The next day at breakfast, Mira surprised the boys. “Kassia and I are inviting you both out for dinner tonight.”

Daxton and Zane looked at each other and then back at us. “You’re asking us out?” Daxton inquired.

“Yeah.” She nodded.

“I thought you were grounded, Kassia.”

“I am,” I responded.

“We’re doing something on campus.” Mira took a sip of her orange juice.

“Okay.”

“Is that a yes?” Mira asked, impatiently.

“Yeah, that’s a yes.” Zane smiled from ear to ear.

“Excellent. We’ll pick you up at seven.”

After classes were over, Mira and I walked back to our room. “So what am I supposed to wear to this date tonight?”

“Clothes,” she responded sarcastically.

I picked up a pair of socks and threw them at her. “C’mon!”

“When have you ever needed help getting dressed?”

“When I don’t know what I’m doing that night.”

She walked over to our closet and pulled down a pair of denim capris, then proceeded to my dresser and yanked out a white shirt from the middle drawer.

“This. It’s simple, but pretty. And bring your sweatshirt.”

I raised my eyebrows and smiled. “Thank you.”

After I got dressed, I fixed my hair up away from my face, and put on my make-up—mostly eye shadow and lip gloss. Lastly, I squirted a little bit of lilac body spray on my chest.

We walked over to the boys’ dorm, where Daxton and Zane were waiting. They both broke into big grins when they saw us. I hurried to Daxton and pulled him against me, hooking my fingers through his belt loops. Feeling his breath against my lips, I kissed him passionately.

I pulled away just in time to see Mira slowly walk up to Zane and smile shyly. She reached down and took his hand. “Let’s go,” she said, leading the way.

We followed her in back of the school toward the garden. I stopped abruptly when I spotted what she had done. “Wow...”

A huge blanket was spread out on the ground surrounded by faerie spheres. These were somewhat smaller than a soccer ball, lit up by faerie light. The light glowed a warm, off-white color.

“How did you get your hands on faerie spheres?”

“I know people.” She smiled, proud of herself.

As we approached, I noticed rose petals thrown all over the blanket. Soft music floated from her iPod. It was perfect—cozy, private, and romantic. I flashed a smile, letting Mira know I approved. I leaned over and whispered in her ear, “I love it...thank you.”

She nudged me with her shoulder. “I’m glad.”

After we ate, we lay back on the blanket to gaze at the dancing stars that illuminated the velvet, moonless sky. There was a slight breeze and the rustling of the leaves could be heard, but not seen. Being in Daxton’s arms underneath the entrancing night sky was astounding, and I found myself wishing I could stay in that moment forever.

Daxton ran his fingers up and down my arm, making me feel tingly inside.

“You’re so beautiful.” He brushed my bangs out of my eyes with his fingers. Then they were tracing my lips. I kissed each one as it passed by. There was a heat radiating between us, making every inch of my body want him to kiss me. My gaze moved from his eyes to his lips and back again, trying to make him very aware of what I wanted.

His lips grazed mine, ever so slightly, and I whispered his name. I cupped his face with my hands and allowed my fingers to travel to the back of his head, where they knotted in his hair. The music faded and when I couldn’t stand it anymore, I pulled him to me and pressed my lips to his. He kissed me back harder, making me feel like I was the only girl alive.

My heart soared, and I knew this was right. There was no doubt in my mind that he was the one for me. I had fallen head over heels for this guy in just a short time. In fact, time could stand still right now and I’d be perfectly fine with it.

We pulled apart and he nestled his face in my hair. I stole a glance over at Mira, who was making out with Zane. I smiled, happy for her. She deserved love too, and I knew Zane loved her. It was about time she realized that she loved him back.

It was then that Daxton breathed into my ear, sending fire through my body. Instantly, I felt an incredible passion inside me ignite and power consumed me. Gasping, I quickly scrambled to my feet and ran to the trees.

“What happened? What did you do to her?!” Mira was yelling.

“I didn’t do anything!” Daxton shouted back.

“Kassia! What’s wrong?” Suddenly, Mira was next to me. I was shaking. “Did he hurt you?” I shook my head. “Then what?”

*Breathe.* After a few deep breaths, I responded, “When we’re...intimate, my power...rises.”

I could tell she was trying not to laugh now. “Are you serious?”

I nodded, closing my eyes.

“Okay. Breathe through it. Feel it settling down.” She took her time with me and helped me relax. “You okay now?”

“Yeah.”

“You might want to bring that up with Dr. Frost. I won’t be around every time

you're making out with a guy."

Mira went back to the blanket and sat down with Zane. I was too embarrassed to move. How did I let that happen? How could my body lose control over something so wonderful? Did that mean I'd never be able to be with him?

"Kassia," Daxton called, walking toward me. I hid behind a tree. "Come on out. It's fine. Remember what I told you? Remember I said I didn't think you could hurt me?" he asked. "I believe that. I don't think you could. Besides, I can whisk you away if I need to."

"It's too dangerous."

He was in front of me now, his hair tousled, his eyes full of love. Giving me no chance to react, he placed his hands on my hips and squeezed me close to him. I tried to back away, but he held on tight. He wasn't forceful, just firm. His eyes searched mine, asking for permission. I sighed lightly and nodded, knowing there was no way I would say no to him—not now, not ever.

He kissed me again, gently at first and then more passionately. He stopped for a second, then, glancing into my eyes again, he kissed my neck and nibbled on my ear. I could feel my body burning again and I wanted to push him away. "Trust me," he whispered.

I took a deep breath, my body shaking. His eyes locked back onto mine and he kissed me again. The power felt like it had reached its limit and I was truly scared. My eyelids fluttered closed, and I felt like I was spinning. I opened them again and somehow it was like we were dancing, but we were in and out of different places...a beach, a meadow, a forest, a cavern, even a waterfall...each for only a couple of seconds.

Finally, he pulled away and we were back behind the school. The burning in me was gone and I was full of happiness and love. Out of breath, I shook my head, not really understanding what was going on. "What was that?"

"See?" he whispered. "We belong together." While not an answer to my question, it was something that I truly believed.

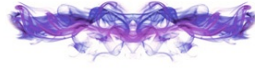
We walked hand in hand back to the blanket. I lay down next to Mira, who was gazing at the stars again. I took her hand in mine and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Thank you," I told her.

"For what?" she asked, turning her head so our foreheads were touching.

“The best night ever.”

“What are best friends for?”

## CHAPTER SIX



“I’M GOING INTO TOWN TO get the car fixed,” Mira informed me Thursday afternoon.

“Oh...” I looked down, sad that I couldn’t go.

“Do you think you can stay out of trouble for the evening?”

“I’ll try.”

“Good.”

“Can you bring me back some fudge?” I begged. There was a delicious candy shop in town with the best fudge ever.

“If you behave yourself.”

I laughed. “Okay.”

I left the door open so I could hear Noe and Auralee down the hall. I didn’t want to be completely alone. I had been working for an hour on a school project that I had put off for too long when Noe came tearing into the room, her eyes wild. I had never seen her look so terrified. “Noe?! What’s wrong?”

She couldn’t respond for a few brief moments, then it all came out quickly. “Mira. She’s in trouble! There are two of them, two big guys...they are...hurting her!”

The pen in my hand fell to the floor. “When, Noe?”

“Soon!”

I grabbed my phone and hit Mira’s name. Her phone went to voicemail. I tried again and then a third time. “She’s not picking up.”

Auralee was in the room now. “What’s going on?” I assumed she was getting everything so I didn’t even respond.

“Noe, I need to know where.” I grabbed her by the shoulders when she didn’t



respond and asked again.

Her eyes went empty for a minute and then she said, “Shasta View and Main. Hurry!”

“How long do I have?”

“Soon. Oh God, really soon.”

“I need your car.” I put out my hand.

Noe reached in her pocket and handed me her car keys. She looked like she was going to be sick.

“Thanks. You call me if something changes.”

“I’ll come with you,” Noe said.

“No!” I yelled. “Neither of you can be there.” They knew what I meant. I was afraid they’d get hurt. “Give me a head start and go get help. Tell them where.”

I dashed through the hall and flew down the staircase. I ran as fast as I could to Noe’s car, very glad that she had a fast sportster. I jumped in and tore off out of the parking lot and down the road, hoping there were no cops or stupid drivers. For once, I hated the secluded location of our school.

The normal twenty-minute drive took ten, but ten was still too long. I quickly found the first street I was looking for; now I had to find the cross street. A minute later I came across it. I threw the car in park and got out.

I spun around in a circle, looking for Mira, listening for her. “Slowly, Kassia,” I whispered to myself. I took a deep breath. I could feel her and knew she was close. Then I heard a clanging noise. I ran toward the sound. I could see her now in a way I would never forget. She was spread out on the hood of a car, jerking around as she tried to get free. One dark-haired man was holding her arms; another man with lighter hair was on top of her. Her pants were down around one of her ankles. She wailed and the guy on top hit her. Her legs stopped flailing and she whimpered.

I stopped a few feet from them. “GET OFF HER!” I screamed.

The two men’s heads snapped up and they stared at me. Their jaws dropped for a second and then they started laughing. “Look. Dessert,” the light-haired man said. “Grab her while I finish up here.”

The dark-haired man let go of Mira and turned toward me. He didn’t concern me right away. I wanted the other guy. “I said get off!” I yelled, narrowing my

eyes and mashing my lips. I could feel the intense pressure rising in me, taking over my body, exploding from my mind. Suddenly, his body went rigid. He screamed in pain, clutching his head. He backed off from Mira's body.

I could see Mira struggling to get up. She looked at me and shook her head. "No, Kassia!"

Her words faded as my gaze focused on her assailants.

"What is going on, Ralph? What's wrong with you?" The dark-haired guy stopped coming at me.

I switched my gaze to him. I had no idea if I could do two at once, but we were about to find out. I stared at him until he started rubbing his temples and screaming out in pain until he collapsed. The lighter-haired man was struggling to get up, but as I focused back on him, he dropped to the ground again.

I kept them both on the ground as I approached Mira. Seeing her bloody and bruised body made the power surge even more, and the men on both sides of me fell flat on the ground. Both of their bodies were now motionless. I was shaking, but I didn't dare move any further. I didn't want to let either one of them out of my sight until Mira was safe.

I had to focus on Mira. I was thankful that she was immune to my gift or she would probably be on the ground now too. "Can you get to the car?" I managed to ask.

Behind me, someone responded, "She doesn't have to. We'll get her." I immediately recognized Dr. Frost's voice. "We can't get to her until you stand down."

My face felt wet, but I couldn't tell if it was sweat or tears. "I can't. They hurt her!" I cried. I felt something on the side of my neck. Immediately I knew what it was—the jet injector. "Do it," I told her. And then everything went black.

I could hear voices, but I couldn't open my eyes.

"Dead," someone said.

"One or both?" a different voice asked.

"Both."

"Both dead?"

"How did she...?" a third voice chimed in.

"She's much stronger than we all thought."

“Take care of them and clean up the mess.”

“Someone needs to take the cars back.”

“Is she okay?” I heard Mira’s shaky voice.

“She’ll be fine. Don’t worry.” That voice belonged to Dr. Frost.

“She did it for me, she did it to save me.”

“We know. Lay back and rest. We’re going to get you two home.”

“They came from behind,” she added, her voice barely above a whisper.

I felt myself being moved, but still couldn’t wake up. Then I felt a motor start and the vibration of the road below me. It was quiet again, so I slept.



The next time I heard voices, I was able to open my eyes. I was in a bed in the infirmary. I could see Mira sleeping in the bed next to me. Her face was swollen and purple. She had some stitches on her bottom lip and bandages were wrapped around her arm. I could feel myself getting angry again. How dare they do that to her!

I felt a warm hand on my shoulder. “Close your eyes, take deep breaths, and count to ten,” Dr. Frost said calmly. I followed her instructions. “Good. Again.” I listened to her and the anger receded. “Now, open your eyes and look at me.” I did as she asked. “Can you see me okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Am I blurry?”

“No. Should you be?”

She snorted. “No. I just want to make sure you’re not experiencing any side effects.”

“Side effects of what?” I asked, and then I remembered. “Oh, the shot. You had to drug me.”

“Yes. You remember everything?”

I nodded. “I think so.” As my memories came back to me, I caught her eye. “I’m scared.”

She looked surprised by that. “Why?”

“Because I’m not sorry,” I said simply.

She nodded. “Believe it or not, I understand. You were protecting your best

friend. In a way, I'm almost proud of what you did for her. However, what you did wasn't good."

"Did I really kill two people?" I asked, hoping that maybe I was remembering wrong.

"Yes," she confirmed.

"I...I didn't know I could do that." I trembled. As much as I wanted those two dead for what they did to my best friend, I was upset that I had lost control. The power in me had been so great that I caused the death of two humans!

"You have a very powerful gift."

"How much trouble am I in?"

"There's a lot to discuss. Once you're up to it, we'll be meeting. There is so much, Kassia, that you don't know."

"That's the other thing I'm afraid of."

It was almost lunchtime when Mira finally stirred. I was sitting up in my bed at that point. They had brought me something to eat and I was nibbling on it. When I saw her moving, I looked over and saw she was awake. "Hey." I tried to smile.

The nurse noticed she was awake too and quickly pulled the curtain. Now why did she have to go and do that? It wasn't like Mira wouldn't tell me what was going on. I realized I was getting upset over something stupid and took some of those deep breaths Dr. Frost was always telling me to do. My body calmed down, and I finished eating my lunch. Soon after, the nurse opened the curtain back up.

I hopped off the bed a little too fast, lost my balance, and had to hang on to the bedrail for a few seconds. Once the room stopped spinning, I walked over to Mira's bed and sat in the chair next to her. Carefully, I took her hand in mine. Seeing all of her injuries close up brought tears to my eyes. Silently, they fell down my face.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"I'm sorry...I...I was too late...I should have been there. It's all my fault." I sobbed.

"No, it isn't. It is what it is."

"Did he? I mean, did he rape you?"

She looked down and I knew immediately he had.

“I was too late,” I said again. “The one time you need me for something and I failed.”

“Stop!” She raised her voice a little. “You saved me. They weren’t done with me. It was going to get a whole lot worse and you came as quick as you could. You broke rules, not just regular human rules either. You broke our rules. You used your gift. You did everything you could. So stop. There is no need to apologize. You saved me.” She pushed herself up to a sitting position, wincing in pain, and we put our arms around each other. It was then that her body shook with sobs along with mine. We cried together for a while.

After quite some time, someone spoke up, “Girls, we need to talk. If you’re both ready, let’s go to my office.” It was Mr. Eaton.

I helped Mira stand, and we followed him.

When we stepped into his office, I was surprised to see Noe, Auralee, Daxton, Zane, and Dr. Frost there. Everyone looked visibly upset. Both Noe and Auralee looked like they had been crying. Zane’s eyes were red, but his lips were pulled in a tight line, and he didn’t look at Mira. Daxton met my eyes and gave me a sympathetic smile.

“What’s going on?” I looked around the room.

“Kassia,” Mr. Eaton began, “there is a lot more to our world than you know. You have always been special because of your gift. As you know, your talent is rare. Years ago, those like you were called death inducers. That’s still the official name, but over time, nicknames have been used. Death-blaster, killer-eyes, and most recently, mind-blower. Death inducers have always had a reputation for being uncontrollable. You’ve been told that some were killed or locked up because their gift couldn’t be contained. Your gift revealed itself early, and we’ve been trying to keep it a secret. But now, with last night’s incident, we’re pretty sure that word will spread.”

“How? It was only us there.”

“We don’t think so,” Mr. Eaton said. “There are many things lurking in the shadows. Many things watching.”

“Well, if they’re watching us, can’t they see us here? Wouldn’t they know about me already?”

“No. The school is protected. There is an invisible shield that extends just beyond the perimeter of the campus, where the clearing begins. Not even some of our own kind can get through, so there isn’t a way for them to see what happens here. However, that doesn’t mean there aren’t ways. Things can get out.” Mr. Eaton looked intently at me. “Kassia, when you first came here, there were already whispers about what you could do, but you hadn’t killed anyone and that was important. The others didn’t care too much if you weren’t killing.”

“And now they do?”

He nodded. “Once it gets around that you killed two people last night, I’m afraid they will come for you.”

“Come for me?” I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

“Once you’ve killed, it’ll be easier to do again, and your power will want you to. Demons want you on their side. They want to capture and use you.”

I gasped. “But I don’t want to kill! I mean...I did want to kill those men for what they were doing...” I glanced at Mira. “But I don’t want to kill. I don’t want to be a monster!”

Mira put her arm around me. “You’re not a monster.”

“These demons, how will they use me? Can’t I just kill them?”

“My best guess is they will somehow try to get in your head.” Mr. Eaton pursed his lips. “Brainwash you in a way. Then you’ll take orders from them.”

“No!” Tears fell from my eyes. *Hey, universe: Anything else you’d like to throw at me right now?*

“How do we keep her safe?” Mira asked. I felt horrible that she was worried about keeping me safe when she had just been...violated.

“We could hide her and hope they don’t come looking,” Dr. Frost suggested.

“I think the best option is to get you out of here,” Mr. Eaton said.

“You want me to go on the run?”

“In a way, yes. Maybe things will blow over and you can come home quickly.”

“So where am I supposed to go?” I asked.

“Wherever Noe says.”

“Noe? She’s coming?”

“We think you should all go together. It wasn’t a coincidence you four girls were put on the same floor. You need to be a team. Auralee, you can read the

thoughts of people close by and make sure there aren't any threats. Noe, you can see the future. Figure out where to go and make sure nothing is coming. Mira can do the cleanup so people don't get suspicious. There is something else. I heard about the time Daxton was able to help you stop your emotions."

My head shot up. "You heard?"

"Yes. He pulled you into a dreamland and your anger slipped away."

"Yes." I glanced over at Daxton.

"I think he should be part of the team too. He and Mira can stop you if you get angry."

"And what if they aren't there? What if I hurt Noe or Auralee?" I certainly did not want to do that.

"They'll have these," he said, holding up one of the jet injectors. "We'll give one each to Zane, Noe, and Auralee."

I nodded. "Good. Zane's coming too?"

"Zane can talk to anything, whether it be a person who doesn't speak English or even an animal...he might be able to get more information this way."

"Hmmm..." Now came the all-important question. "Where do we go?"

"First, we will need to get you safely out of here. Then Noe will lead the way, wherever that may be."

"Won't it look weird? A bunch of kids traveling around without adults?" Mira asked.

"You won't necessarily be out in the open. If questions arise, that's where you come in. Compel them."

"Everyone?"

"If you must."

I could tell she wasn't sure if she could do that.

"I couldn't even compel those...assholes last night," she muttered.

"What?" Mr. Eaton asked.

"Nothing."

I hated stopping my friends from living their lives. "Isn't there anything you can do to me? Can you strip me of my gift? Can you scramble my brain? That way these demons won't want me and everyone can live normal lives."

"Not that I know of."

Auralee patted my knee. "It's okay, Kassia. I don't mind."

"Me neither," Noe said.

Mira and I looked at each other for a long moment. "You know I'm not leaving your side," she said.

"I don't know. It sounds too dangerous for everybody. Maybe I should just go," I suggested. I didn't want to be responsible for the deaths of my friends.

"Kassia, that's ridiculous."

"I don't...I just...ugh!" I sighed heavily, throwing my arms up in the air.

"We have some details to work out," Mr. Eaton said. "You should go back to your rooms and pack up. I'm not sure when it'll be safe, so we need you to be ready."

I stayed behind after everyone else left. "Mr. Eaton? Shouldn't I have some sort of punishment?"

"You were protecting your friend."

"But...I killed them."

"Yes. It's all been taken care of. Besides, I think you'll punish yourself enough."

"I suppose you're right."

"Go on, then, and be careful."

Mira was waiting for me outside. Just looking at her made me burst into tears. Her right eye was swollen; her lip was busted and bruises covered part of her cheek. I hated myself for not getting to her sooner. I should have gone with her even though I had been grounded. I thought about the day of the accident. If I hadn't been driving, the accident wouldn't have happened. She never would have needed to get the car fixed. And now I find out that by saving her, I had put us all in danger. Even knowing that, I would do it again.

We hugged for a moment, and then she whispered, "Let's go."

Back in our room, we packed one bag each to be able to move quickly if needed. It wasn't like we had a whole lot, but leaving our room and belongings behind felt wrong. We were supposed to be here, not on the run.

That night, Mira had nightmares. I curled up with her and held her as she sobbed. "It's okay," I whispered. "You're safe."

I began thinking about my own nightmares, the ones I had been having for



years. They could be coming true. Demons. Monsters. Coming for me...to turn me into one of them. I shuddered. I couldn't let that happen. What if I was to run by myself, now? Everyone was sleeping. I could sneak out and be miles away before they even woke up. Then their lives wouldn't be in danger.

Yes. That's what I had to do. I looked at Mira and kissed her cheek. Carefully, I slid out of the bed and grabbed my backpack. I opened the door and came face to face with Noe. "Really? Did you really think you'd get far?"

"Aw...shit. I didn't think about you."

"Gee, thanks. Go back to bed or the window. We leave together."

Mira stirred. "What's going on?"

"Your roommate was trying to run away."

I set my backpack down. "I was trying to keep you all alive."

"I know," Noe said. "All the same...we'll go together." She turned and disappeared back into her room.

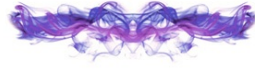
"I can't believe you were trying to leave!"

"Mira! I don't want you to get killed!" I raised my voice. "It's gotta be easier for me to hide than trying to hide six of us!"

"You have a point there...but we're not normal, Kassia. You have to remember that. We'll get by just fine. Besides..." she said and closed her eyes, "I need you. Now go to sleep."

I sighed, knowing I had lost this fight. I crawled back in bed with her and somehow managed to fall asleep.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



A SHORT RAP AT THE DOOR woke us up. Mira jumped out of bed and answered it. I rubbed my eyes and glanced toward the window. It wasn't even light out yet.

"Time to go," Ms. Meadows told us.

Hearing that, I was out of bed within a second. We grabbed our bags and left the room, closing the door behind us. The four of us met the two guys in the parking lot. Mr. Eaton was there and handed each of us an envelope. "This will provide identification and access to money. Do what you need to blend in. Go wherever you need to go. Don't tell me. Buy a disposable cell phone once a week, call the number in your envelope, and use the password as well. If the person on the other end of the phone doesn't provide the matching password, hang up and move locations immediately. We'll let you know how the threat is on our end."

He reached into his pocket and took out a set of keys. He handed them to Daxton, then, taking one last look at each of us, he said, "The SUV is yours. Go now and be safe."

He hurried away. We all stood there staring at each other for what seemed like an hour. Finally, Mira spoke up, "Where do we go?"

"I don't know."

"Well, we can't stand around here any longer. Let's get in the car and just start driving," Daxton suggested.

"Fine." I threw my bag in the trunk and hopped in the back seat. Mira sat next to me, Noe and Auralee sat in the middle, and the boys sat up front.

Daxton started up the car and pulled away from the school. I looked back and watched as the school disappeared. It was the only home I had known, and now I

was forced to leave it. I thought about all the other kids getting up and finding a handful of their classmates gone. I wondered what they would be told and if they would believe it.

I thought about the demons out there. If they were watching the school, couldn't they be watching us leave? Was it possible they could have cars? Or did demons not drive? I didn't even remember what a demon was supposed to look like. I hadn't paid attention in class. Were they scary looking? Or did they look like us?

The SUV raced down the windy back road. Having Noe there prevented us from getting pulled over, although I was sure if we did, Mira would get us out of it. The vibration of the car was soothing, and I felt my eyelids closing. I nodded off a couple times before Mira put her arm around me and pulled me close to her. "Thanks," I muttered before succumbing to sleep.

I didn't know how long I had been asleep. I opened my eyes. The sun was high in the sky, and the car was parked under some trees. My friends were stretched out on the grass of what seemed to be a rest area; they looked like they were in a heavy discussion.

I opened the door and stepped out of the car. Everyone looked over. "Hey, sleepyhead." Daxton smiled.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Just trying to figure out where to go," Zane responded as he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"Doesn't Noe know where?" I asked, puzzled.

"Not quite," she replied. "When we talk about staying close, I can see that's a bad idea. It's not until we decide where to go do I see whether or not it's good or bad."

"Oh." I hadn't realized that. "Ideas?"

"I don't even know what direction to go in." Daxton sighed.

"Do any of you remember what the teachers said about demons?" I asked. They all looked at me. I blushed. "I hardly ever listened. I didn't know I'd *need* to know this stuff."

Mira scoffed. "Typical. What do you want to know?"

"What do they look like? Where do they live?"

“Catlike, if I remember right. Not like cute little kittens, more like a black panther,” she answered.

“But not all of them. Some are bigger and more human looking. And there were little ones too, only a couple feet tall. They can cause a lot of damage because they’re fast and their teeth razor sharp,” Zane described.

“They’re all black? Like shadows?”

“Yes,” Zane confirmed.

“Were there any pictures?” I asked.

Mira rolled her eyes. “Yes, because while fighting demons, people stopped to take a picture for the history books.”

When she put it like that, I felt stupid for asking. “Oh.”

Zane shushed her and continued on, “As far as where they lived, it was in the darkest of dark places. Deep woods and caves. They like the dark. But that doesn’t mean they don’t come out in the light. So don’t let down your guard.”

“And how are we supposed to fight off these demons if they find us?”

“Daggers. Eaton put one for each of us in the glove box. They are faerie made and have magical properties. They will kill them.”

“One at a time,” I said.

“I would imagine so.”

“Six of us, millions of them, and we’ve got six daggers...great.”

They all stared at me, and then Mira started laughing, which made them all loosen up a little and laugh too. “What do you guys think about going south?”

I shrugged. “Sounds fine with me.”

“I don’t see an immediate problem,” Noe said.

Everybody agreed and we headed back to the car. Zane jumped in the driver’s seat and Mira sat in the front with him. He had reached for her hand, but she quickly drew it away. I took Daxton’s hand and pulled him in the back seat with me. We didn’t talk as we drove away. I leaned into him, and he traced my hand with his finger. His finger traveled up to my tattoo, where he traced the lines over and over again.

We hadn’t driven long when we came across the sign “Leaving California” and a few seconds later, another one saying, “Welcome to Nevada.” I sighed, longing to go home again. It seemed we had left it years ago instead of just

hours. I couldn't remember ever being out of California. Now, here I was, running across the country to save my life.

That night, we found a hotel to stay at. With Mira's gift, getting a room was a piece of cake. We only needed one room with two beds. Two of us would have to stay awake at all times. It was too dangerous for just one of us to stand guard. "Safety in pairs" was a motto they preached at Glendale.

"Kassia and I will take the first shift," Daxton said as he pulled the thick curtains shut. I glanced over at him. Not that I minded, I was just surprised he was offering for me. "What? You hardly ever sleep at night anyway."

A confused look crossed Mira's face. "You don't?"

"He's right. I don't sleep well."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Nightmares."

"Oh. You never told me."

"You always look so peaceful when you're sleeping."

"Are you two sure you can keep your hands off of each other long enough to stand guard?" Zane asked.

Both of us shot him a look. "Zane!"

"Just wondering."

"Shut up and go to bed!" I yelled, smiling at him.

Daxton and I sat at a table near the window. He had a deck of cards and some snacks. We played quietly until everybody was asleep. Then we talked a little bit, softly, so we didn't wake the others.

"Have you thought about the future much?" he asked.

"You mean if we survive this?" I bit into a cookie.

"Yeah. What do you want out of life?"

I finished my cookie before answering. "Love. I want to be happily married, have a couple of kids, and not live too far from my friends."

"What about a job?"

"I'm not sure yet." I had no idea what I wanted to do and always put off thinking about it. "What about you?"

"I want the same things you do. As far as a career, I like computers and writing, so maybe something in those areas." He shoved a whole cookie in his

mouth.

“Do you think we’ll get out of this mess?”

“There’s always hope.”

I nodded and examined the daggers we had been given. When I looked closely at the handles, I saw that they had been made to match our tattoos. I picked up the one with the infinity sign on it. “They match,” I said to Daxton.

“Oh yeah,” he said, picking up the one covered in stars. “Cool.”

“Do you often go places with your gift?” I asked.

“Depends on how you define often. Not every day. Maybe once a week?”

“I think that’d be a neat gift to have. It would be cool to escape the stress whenever I wanted.”

He put his hand on mine. “I’ll take you wherever you want whenever you want.”

“I may take you up on that.”

At the first sign of dawn, I showered while Daxton woke the others up. They took turns getting ready. I figured I better shower now because there might come a time when showers wouldn’t be available. We had some food delivered before we took off in the car. We kept heading south.

We stopped at a rest area for a bathroom break and to stretch out a little. After I left the bathroom, I saw Mira sitting at a picnic table. I could tell she was crying from the way her body was shaking. I hesitated, not knowing if I should go to her or give her space.

I looked around for Auralee and found her under a tree. Reading her shirt, I smiled. It said, *Friends are chosen family*. So true in our case. *Auralee?* She looked over and our eyes met. I motioned to Mira. *Does she need space or me?*

She pointed at me.

I walked over to Mira, sat down and put my arm around her. No words were needed. I held her as she cried on my shoulder.

Zane noticed what was going on, but I shook my head, not wanting him to come over. This was something Mira needed to do on her terms. The way she’d acted toward his gesture yesterday, I was guessing she didn’t want him touching her right now. Never having been violated that way, I couldn’t imagine what she was going through. After a few minutes, she wiped away her tears and

murmured, "Sorry."

"Sorry? Don't be sorry. You've been so strong, Mira. You went through something none of us have experienced and you haven't had time to deal with it because of all this. It's okay to take that time. I'm always going to be here for you."

"Thanks."

"Wanna talk about it?"

She looked down. Her eye wasn't as swollen, but the bruises had turned a deep purple. "I don't know. I can't put it into words yet."

"I'm here when you need me."

"I know." We sat there until she was ready to get back into the car.



On the fourth day, Noe yelled for us to pull over as we were driving. "What? What is it?"

Her eyes were searching for an answer. "We mustn't head too far east. Just south. Okay?"

"Okay," the rest of us replied.

That night in our hotel room, we spread the map out on the bed. "I think we're about as far south as we should go," Zane said.

"I agree." Daxton examined the map. "If Noe says we shouldn't go further east, then we should stay here."

"For how long?" I asked, twisting my hair around my finger.

"I don't know," Noe said. It was odd to get that answer from her. She shook her head and shrugged. "I'm not seeing anything yet."

We stayed inside most of the time with two of us always on guard. Mira took care of anybody's questions and got us whatever we needed.

Three days later, we bought a disposable cell phone. We all sat close together, put the phone on speaker, and called the number. The phone rang twice, a voice answered, and passwords were exchanged.

"How are you all?" Mr. Eaton asked.

"We're fine," Mira responded. "Things there?"

Mr. Eaton hesitated. "We're noticing some strange things but nothing big. I

think they are sending out scouts, trying to find out what happened, and figure out how to find you. You must stay away. Stay alert.”

“We will,” Mira promised.

“Throw the phone away, call back in a week,” Mr. Eaton said. We immediately drove a few miles away, destroyed the phone, and then tossed it in a Dumpster in a vacant parking lot.

Two days later, we were all walking back to the hotel from the store when Noe stopped dead in her tracks.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“They’re here,” she whispered. “Why didn’t I see it earlier? They’re waiting for us. They know we’re coming. There’s no escape,” she rambled.

“What do we do?” Mira asked.

Noe’s forehead was scrunched up and the corners of her mouth were turned down. “I can’t see!”

“Where’s your dagger?” Mira asked Zane.

“In the room,” Zane said.

“Mine too. UGH! Stupid!” Mira yelled.

I turned away from them and faced the hotel while they were all discussing what to do. The hair on my arms stood straight up before I could even see any demons. Seconds later, one stepped into my view and I felt a shudder ran through me. A sulfur-like scent filled the air and made my stomach lurch.

The demon looked up and our eyes met. Looking into his eyes was like seeing into the windows of hell. I swear I could hear screams trying to escape. I felt nauseated, frozen in fear. It continued to stare at me, sending shivers down my spine, and I felt goose bumps all over my body.

The demon was a cross between a cat and dog. Most of its body looked like a cat, except for its nose, which looked like it belonged to a bloodhound. Its eyes were like slits and red light poured out of them.

My mouth was dry, my breathing was fast, and my heart was pounding so loud I could hear it. *Get a grip, Kassia!* I closed my eyes long enough to break free of the hold I felt like it had on me.

I twisted my hair up out of the way and opened my eyes again. “I guess we have to face this and figure it out ourselves because they’re coming,” I said to



the group.

They all stopped talking and looked past me. The field was filled with black, shadow-like demons. I turned back toward my friends and yelled, “Go now!” If I was going to do the only thing I could do to protect them, they couldn’t be close by. Mira started to argue, but Noe grabbed her and yanked her backwards. I turned to face the demons that wanted me so badly.

The closest ones were the crosses between a cat and dog. Three of them were getting ready to pounce only a few feet from me.

I focused all of my anger and hatred and let the power rise up in me. I knew from killing those people that the power in me could be strong enough to kill anything here. I just had to feed my power with enough hate.

I could feel the power quickly taking over, building to its peaking point until I could no longer control it. I released it, letting it pour out of my mind, fixating it on the cat-hounds—my name for them—and watching them squirm in pain. After a few seconds they dropped to the ground. I kept at it, taking down a few at a time, but it wasn’t enough. There were so many of them! I tried to branch out and get more demons at once.

The next batch of demons were deformed and hideous. The sulfur-like smell coming from them made the bile rise in my throat. One of them lunged forward, claws out and mouth wide open. He was so close I could see his pointy teeth. Quickly focusing on him, I watched as he dropped to the ground, letting off an ear-piercing shriek that made me cover my ears until he was gone.

Just when I got my power back up, pain shot through my lower left leg, but I couldn’t break my focus again to look down. Keeping the tears at bay, I sent more demons dropping to the ground. The smaller ones stood less than two feet tall and were shaped like people with a head, body, arms, and legs. They, too, were all black with empty, soulless red eyes.

One of them was on my back now, ripping into my skin with its razor-sharp teeth. Crying out in pain, I reached behind me and grabbed whatever it was attacking my back and threw him. With lightning speed, he came right back at my side before I got a chance to move. If I lived through this, I needed to take up some kind of self-defense course.

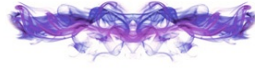
If I wasn’t mad before, I was really mad now. My head pounded and my body

tingled. I was shaking uncontrollably. My hands flew up to my head, and I rested my fingers on my throbbing temples. Releasing the power I had left, I commanded them to die.

The rest of the demons fell to the ground, except the stupid one that was chomping on my leg. I yanked him off. He was all black, but had slits for eyes and holes where ears should be. His body felt firm, but I didn't feel any bones. I gave him my death stare, and he went limp in my hands.

Throwing him to the ground, I looked around at all the demon bodies. I felt sick. The bodies looked like they were melting into the earth, like they were being sucked back down into hell. My own body felt weak and strangely calm. I lost consciousness before I hit the ground.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



I HEARD THE WHISPERS BEFORE I could open my eyes. “Is she...alive?” Mira’s voice was shaky.

“Yeah, but she’s been hurt,” Auralee answered.

“We need a healer,” Daxton stated.

“Well, Eaton didn’t tell us where we could find one.”

“Hospital?”

“And when they ask how she got hurt?”

“I have faerie salve. It’ll help,” Noe said.

“Where did you get that?” Mira asked.

“Don’t worry about it.”

I could feel someone taking off my shirt. “Oh God, that looks deep. Wash it off first.” Auralee’s voice.

My body jumped when the water hit my back. “Sorry,” Noe spoke softly.

I didn’t have the energy to actually speak out loud, and even if I did, I knew I’d lose control. *Auralee?*

“Yeah,” she whispered.

*Make sure they do whatever they need to, no matter how much you know I’m hurting.*

“Okay,” she said.

*Are they all gone? Did I get them all?*

“Yes.”

*Good.*

She chuckled.

“Is she talking to you?” Mira asked.

“Yeah, she wanted to make sure she got all the demons.”

“Of course she’s worried about that and not her injuries.”

“Kassia, we’re going to put faerie salve on your injuries. The wounds are deep so it’s going to hurt, but it will help. Are you ready?” Noe asked.

*Yeah.*

“She’s ready,” Auralee said.

“Here it goes.” I could feel her fingers on my back. The pain came quickly, causing me to gasp. It grew more intense as the seconds passed until I mercifully blacked out.



I woke in the car with my head on Mira’s lap. She was stroking my hair. As I became more aware, the pain got worse. I moaned a little.

“Kassia?”

“Mmmm?”

“How are you feeling?”

“It hurts.” Tears ran down my cheeks.

She smiled down at me and wiped my tears away. “I’m sure it does. It should heal quickly though.”

“Where are we going?” I tried to sit up, but my stomach churned and bile filled my throat.

“You shouldn’t do that.” She gently pushed me back down. “Those cuts were nasty. It’s only been a few hours. Tomorrow will be better.” I kept gagging. “Better pull over, I think she’s gonna hurl!”

Zane quickly pulled to the side, and Mira helped me out of the car. Every movement was extremely painful, but once we were clear of the car, I threw up. Mira stayed with me, rubbing my back until I was done. I wiped my face with my shirt. She handed me a bottle of water, and I rinsed my mouth out.

A few minutes later, I carefully climbed back in the car and lay back down on Mira’s lap. Trying to maintain my composure, I silently cried. I thought about the size of the demons, the ones that had actually attacked me. They were small. If the wounds from them could hurt this bad, I couldn’t imagine what the bigger ones would feel like.

Once we were back on the road, I asked again, "Where are we going?"

"No idea," Auralee said. "Figured we'd drive until we felt safe."

"Could you hear them?" I asked her.

"Yes and no." She ran her hand up the back of her hair and rested it on her head. "I could hear chatter. There weren't any words, not English ones anyway. It sounded like background noise or static. It got quite loud in my head, but I couldn't understand any of it."

"What about Zane?" I asked. He could talk to different things.

"I wasn't exactly trying to have a conversation with any of them," he answered.

"Oh, right." Exhausted, I shut my eyes. But every time I fell asleep, I would see the demons' eyes...red, empty, dead...staring at me, wanting me...and I would jerk awake. Mira just kept talking softly to me as she stroked my hair, and I finally fell back into a deep sleep.

The next time I woke, we were at a gas station. Zane and Daxton were outside the car filling it up. "I need to go to the bathroom," I told Mira.

"Okay, the four of us will go."

"I don't want to move."

She smiled sympathetically. "I'll help you."

Pain shot through my body as I made my way out of the car. At one point, I thought I was going to vomit again, but somehow I held it down. We walked to the bathroom and each took turns going. I splashed water on my face and rinsed my mouth out again. I tried to peek in the mirror at my shoulder, but I couldn't get a good view.

"It'll be better tomorrow," Noe said, forcing a smile. "There will be scars though."

"Great," I mumbled.

"You were amazing back there," Auralee complimented.

I laughed. "I'm sure it was a sight to see."

"It was over so quick."

"Felt like forever," I said. "Death stare."

"What?"

"That's what I'm calling it. My death stare kills."

Mira scoffed. "Of course you named it."

I shrugged. "Seemed appropriate."

She laughed and threw a paper towel in the trash.

We all stood there looking at one another in the gas station restroom. I'm sure even that was quite a sight. We put our arms around each other and managed to do a group hug. "We better go."

Auralee peeked out the door to make sure it was safe. She waved to us, and we hurried to the car. Noe had said we could go east now. By the morning we were headed out of Arizona and into New Mexico. The pain was better just like everyone had said. It wasn't completely gone, but I imagined it would be by the next day.

The car was feeling cramped, and we all needed some good horizontal sleep. We agreed on getting a hotel room for the night. We took two-hour shifts that night so that everyone could get about six hours of sleep. I actually slept. Now that my nightmares were coming true, I didn't have to dream about them. Or maybe my mind was too tired to dream.

The next morning, the pain was completely gone. In the bathroom, I found a scar on my side and a good-size one on my leg. I couldn't see the one on my back, but I could feel it with my fingers.

When I came out of the bathroom, Daxton waved me over to him. "We're going to start keeping our daggers on us." He lifted up his pant leg to show me his.

Mira pulled up her shorts. Her dagger was attached around her thigh. "Not quite comfortable, but hidden and accessible."

"Okay, do mine."

She nodded and attached mine to the inside of my thigh. "When you wear pants, you can put it at the bottom like the guys."

"Got it."

"Look at your leg! It's healed."

"Not bad. I thought the scar might be worse," Auralee commented.

The scar was a long, jagged line. It didn't look pretty, but it was better than I could have hoped. I glanced over at Daxton, wondering what he thought of it. He smiled back at me and winked. I hoped that meant he wouldn't find me less

attractive.

Auralee stood up, and reading her shirt, I rolled my eyes. *The universe is laughing behind your back.* Sure felt like it!

This time, Daxton drove and I rode shotgun. We spent two days in the car before stopping at another hotel. I was alone for a brief moment when everyone went to get some food. It felt good to have that moment of privacy...not that I didn't love my friends and appreciate everything they were doing for me, but it just felt nice to be alone, and what did I do with that time? I completely broke down. I sunk to the bathroom floor, pulled my knees to my chest, and sobs shook my body.

I'm not sure how long I sat on the cold tile before Daxton walked in. He sat down next to me. I rested my head on my knees so he wouldn't see my smeared make-up face. "Kass..." he whispered. "Where do you want to go?"

I didn't even have to think about it. "A white sand beach."

He put his arms around me, and I closed my eyes. "How's this one?" he asked.

I opened my eyes and looked around. The beautiful beach reminded me of pictures I had seen of the Caribbean. Immediately, the rhythmic pounding of waves comforted me, repressing all of my fears. The ocean was a deep turquoise, and I could stare at it forever. The white sand was pure as snow. I was barefoot in this world. I curled my toes into the sand, which was warm and smooth.

I walked over to where the waves were crashing onto the beach and sat down, sticking my feet into the warm water. Daxton silently sat next to me. Each wave would touch my toes and then pull back, only to repeat again. I felt peaceful. There was nothing like this feeling. If only we could stay here forever, a place without demons, a place where I didn't have this horrible gift.

I closed my eyes and lay back on the sand, absorbing the sun's warmth. The sun hadn't moved since we entered this world. I giggled, wondering if I could get sunburned here. "What's so funny?" Daxton asked, lying down next to me.

"Nothing. I'm just being silly."

He ran his hand up my leg and traced my new scar. I was surprised the scar had followed me into dreamland. I shivered looking at it. It brought back unpleasant memories. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Why are you sorry?"

“I couldn’t protect you.” He kept on tracing the scar. “I’m a man and my gift is only being a dreamer. I’m not a fighter like you. I want to be. I want to protect you.”

“These dreams are amazing,” I said. “I don’t know what I’d do without this escape of yours.”

“Pfft.” He looked into my eyes. “Watching you battle demons is unnatural, it’s wrong. I should’ve been the one protecting you.”

“No.” I touched his face. “Nobody should have to do that.”

“You’re so strong.” He smiled.

I laughed. “I’m only strong because I have to protect my friends. I’m not so sure I’d be strong if I was just by myself.”

“You would be. You’re the strongest person I know,” he said, looking into my eyes. “And the most beautiful.” He leaned closer to me and kissed me. After he pulled away, we lay there for a long time.

When I felt completely at peace, I rolled over and said, “I suppose we should get back.”

“I suppose,” he agreed. Within a few seconds we were back in the bathroom.

I glanced over at him. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

He stood and pulled me up. I glanced in the mirror. Mascara was streaked all down my face. “I should clean up.” He nodded and kissed me before stepping out of the bathroom.

I heard voices as I washed my face and reapplied some make-up. I felt so much better, like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. When I walked out of the bathroom, all five of my friends were looking at the map trying to figure out what to do next. Noe was talking. “Something dark is coming, but I can’t see when or where.”

I sure didn’t like the sound of that. Something dark? I thought about sneaking away again to protect them, but Auralee shot me a look. *Stop getting in my head!* I yelled at her. She shook hers. *Wouldn’t you want to protect us if the roles were reversed?* She shot me another look, but she didn’t answer.

Zane was pointing at something. “Let’s go this way.”

“It’s as good a plan as anything,” Daxton said.



Noticing that I was in the room, Mira asked, “You okay?”  
I nodded. “Yeah.”



The next morning, I was sipping a cappuccino watching out the hotel window when I saw some movement in the trees. My body tensed and I waited nervously, trying to see what it was. *Calm down*, I told myself. *It’s probably just an animal. No need to get all freaked out.* Then I saw it again. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight up, and I started shaking as the fear set in.

This cat-hound was using its big nose to sniff the ground. It was all black, like a 3D shadow. I was about to scream when it looked up right at me. I swear the thing smiled. Then it looked like it howled, but I couldn’t hear anything. The cup dropped from my hands and hit the floor with a loud clang.

“Kassia!” Mira came bounding out of the bathroom. “What? What is it?”

I pointed out the window and she ran over.

“Shit,” she swore. “Can you...kill it...from here?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t take my eyes off the monster.

“Try.”

I concentrated on the demon, letting the anger fill my body once again, and wished him dead in my head. But he didn’t seem to be in any pain. I tried another time with the same result. “I don’t think it’s working.”

“Keep trying.” I heard her open the door. Soon there were more voices. “Don’t get too close,” Mira was saying.

“How many?”

“I only saw one, but he can’t be alone...or at least, won’t be for long.”

“Do we have time to leave? Or is that riskier than staying?”

“I think we should go.”

“Yes,” Noe piped up. “We should go...now!”

Mira was by my side in a second. “Any luck?”

“No,” I said under my breath.

“Let it go.” She was trying to get in front of me. “Deep breaths and let it go. We need to get in the car.”

I forced my eyes to close and calmed my body down. When I was sure the

threat—from me—was gone, I opened my eyes again and looked at everyone. “Ready.” I glanced back out the window; the cat-hound was still there.

“Let’s go.” We grabbed our bags and raced to the door.

Noe closed her eyes for a second before we went any further. “Quickly,” she said.

Quietly, we hurried out of the hotel room to the parking lot where the car was and took off. I watched the area where I had seen the demon. He saw us and started to chase. “He’s coming,” I told them. Again, I tried using my gift to stop him, but it wasn’t working. He was fast, but the SUV was faster and soon we were long gone. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“How did they find us?” I asked.

“And why am I not seeing it all?!” Noe pounded on the car door.

“I don’t think we’ll be safe anywhere,” I said.

Nobody said anything for a few minutes. “What are we supposed to do?”

“What can we do? We’re just a bunch of kids.”

“Maybe we’ll have to take them down.”

I laughed. “Oh sure, that’s something we can do.”

“Well, we have to think of something. We can’t just keep running around the country.” Mira sighed.

“The only thing they want is me. I don’t know if there’s a leader we can kill. Even if there is, wouldn’t the next guy want me too?” My voice was low.

“Probably. But we’re not handing you over,” Daxton vowed.

“It makes sense, though. It’ll keep everyone else safe,” I argued.

“And what happens when they brainwash you and turn you into a killing machine?” Mira’s voice cracked. “That’s what you want? You want to be a killer?”

“No. I don’t want that. That leaves only one thing to do.”

“And what’s that?” she asked.

“I have to kill myself.”

“What?!” Auralee’s jaw dropped. That was a response I usually didn’t get from her. I had actually caught her by surprise.

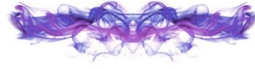
“Are you out of your freaking mind?!” Mira yelled.

I slumped back in my seat. Sometimes I wondered if I was out of my mind.

Thinking about handing myself over to demons, contemplating suicide, that must make me insane. But what else could I do? They weren't going to stop until they had me. We couldn't keep running. And if they did get me, they'd use me. But if I was dead, then they couldn't use me, and my friends would be safe.

The only problem with this was I didn't want to die.

## CHAPTER NINE



**A**T THE NEXT PIT STOP, Mira approached me hesitantly. “You’re not really thinking about suicide, are you? Do we have to put you on some sort of twenty-four-hour watch?”

“I don’t see her killing herself anytime in the near future,” Noe said as she walked by.

“I don’t want to die, Mira, but I don’t want you to die either. I feel like this is the only way to protect you.”

“I understand that. It’s almost sweet. Except it’s not! We’re talking about death.”

I mashed my lips together. “Okay, listen. This is the only thing I can think of to keep you guys safe. If we can come up with a better plan, great, let’s do it. But if not, if there are no more options, if it comes down to it, then we go with my plan.”

After a moment of silence, she answered, “We won’t need your plan. Somehow, we’ll figure it out.”

I hoped she was right.

It was time to call in to the institute. After passwords were exchanged, Mr. Eaton asked us how we were. Mira filled him in on everything that had happened in the past week. She described the demons and how I had killed them all. She even told him I was threatening to kill myself to save them. “If they found us a second time, they’ll find us again.”

“I’m afraid you’re right. And now that they have your scent, they’ll do it quicker. We’ve had some here and they were dealt with. I’m sure that’s not the last of them. They will send more. The faculty is on high alert.”

“What can we do? How do we stop them?”

He didn’t answer right away. “I don’t know.” It was odd hearing the headmaster of a school admit he was clueless.

“Is there anyone who might know?” Daxton asked.

Again, silence, then, “Vala. If you can find her, she might be able to help you.”

“Who the hell is Vala?”

“She is a shaman, an oracle. She’s the greatest of her kind. You must find her.”

“Any idea where?”

“She likes the quiet and elevation. The only places I’ve ever heard of her living were in the mountains, away from civilization.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down enough.”

“I’ll see if I can find out more. Good luck.”

We hung up, destroyed the phone, and tossed it. “Find the shaman,” Zane muttered while eating lunch. “Shit, how are we supposed to do that? If they wanted us to save the freakin’ world, they should’ve given us better gifts.”

I laughed out loud at that one. He looked up, embarrassed that I was actually listening. “Sorry.”

“S’okay.” He rubbed his temples. “We’re smart, we’re gifted, and we’re clueless. How does that make sense?”

“Maybe we should find other gifted people?”

“And tell them what?”

“I don’t know. What about faeries?”

“Nah, they’re too peaceful. They’ll only get involved if it threatens them directly.”

“Well, we still have our gifts. Zane, you can talk to animals. Maybe they know something. Mira can get people to talk or think about something, and then Auralee can read their minds. Noe can keep her eye on the future.”

Daxton then said, “Once again, I have nothing important to offer here.”

I took his hand, but I wasn’t sure what to say or how to comfort him.

“We can’t wait to talk to Eaton again. We need to find this shaman sooner,” Noe told us.

“Okay. We need to head up, huh?” I asked. “Anyone know the highest points around?”

“In this country...I think California, Colorado, and Washington,” Daxton said.

“Of course, we’re driving away from there, and that’s where we need to be!”

Mira shouted. “UGH!”

“So, we drive back, find the highest points, and hope that the shaman is there.”

“Sounds ridiculous.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“No.”

“Well then, let’s turn around and try to find this lady.”

Noe had that faraway look in her eyes again. “Noe?”

She didn’t say anything for a few minutes. “We will find her, just not sure when.”

“That’s something.”

Back in the car, we headed west. The plan gave us all something to think and talk about. Even if it didn’t work, it was a plan, and that was more than we had an hour ago.

As I watched out the window, tree after tree passed by. Could the shaman help us? Would she? I didn’t know anything about her. I wondered if they’d taught about her in classes while I was daydreaming. Why hadn’t I paid more attention?

We continued to drive, stopping only for breaks and at night to sleep. “We’ll see demons today,” Noe said one morning.

“Great,” I said back sarcastically.

“Does that mean we’ll survive it?” Mira asked.

Noe didn’t answer. Instead, Auralee said, “She’s trying to make sense of what she’s seeing. It’s hard for her. She can’t see them clearly. She thinks it’s because they’re pretty stupid beings, and they only do what they are told to do.”

I let that sink in. The demons were stupid and under orders. “Can she tell who is ordering them to get me?”

“Not yet.” Auralee ran her hand up the back of her hair and rested it on top of her head.

“Well, it would be nice if she could speed that up.”

“Kassia!”

“Sorry...just frustrated.”

“We all are,” Auralee said as she patted my hand.

It was almost more nerve-racking knowing these demons were going to show up than wondering if they might. We were extra aware and alert. Noe was quieter than usual as she tried to concentrate.

Halfway through the morning, she opened her eyes and pointed out the window. “Up there. See them?”

We all looked ahead of us. Sure enough, three demon cat-hounds were watching for us. As we passed, they ran alongside the car. It only took a minute to speed ahead of them, but it shook us all. “Was that all of them?” I asked Noe.

“No,” she said quietly.

*Awesome. We’d see more.* “This day just keeps getting better,” I said.

We drove until the car was almost out of gas. We literally had to stop although none of us wanted to. We found the biggest, brightest gas station we could and stopped there. Staying together we first got gas and then went inside to the bathroom.

People were giving us strange looks. We tried to smile and look normal. I saw a couple people chuckle after reading Auralee’s shirt. Today, it read, *If you die in an elevator, be sure to push the UP button.*

“They’re here,” Noe whispered. “Out there.”

Looking outside, we realized we were surrounded by a number of demons. The good news was there weren’t as many as there had been in the field. “Excuse me, ma’am, do you see anything weird out there?” Mira asked a middle-aged lady.

The lady glanced out the windows. “No. Are you kids okay?”

“Yes, we’re fine.” She smiled.

“So, regular people can’t see them.” Zane stated the fact out loud.

“Or maybe the demons don’t want humans to see them,” Auralee speculated.

“What do we do?”

“If we wait, more will come,” Noe said.

“So, we go,” Zane said.

“How do we get to the car?”

“Use our daggers?”

“There are cameras all over this place.”

They looked at me. “Can you do anything?”

I walked up to the windows, facing the demons head on. I glared at the one who looked like he was in charge, and I felt the power within me rise up. *Die, you bastard.* But he didn't. I was just as close to him as the ones I had killed in the field. It had to be the window. Somehow the window blocked my gift from getting to him. I had to go outside.

"No, Kassia," Auralee said.

"Yes," Noe said at the same time.

I couldn't look back at them. I hadn't put my power "away," and I'd end up hurting everyone in the store. Slowly, I made my way to the door. It was hard trying to keep the power up while doing something else. Multitasking wasn't easy. I pushed open the door and stared straight at them.

A few of the demons let out a high-pitched shriek that sent chills down my spine as they fell to the ground. The little ones in the back were rushing toward me with their speedy little legs, but I was taking them down pretty easily. The bigger ones lasted a little longer, writhing in pain on the ground, before dying and melting into the earth.

Finally, the demons were all gone. I couldn't move. I stood there shaking uncontrollably. My friends joined me outside and, grabbing me, rushed back to the car.

"Good job, Kassia!" Zane hollered.

"Thanks." I smiled, proud of myself. The minute I leaned back against the seat, I fell asleep. Fighting demons took a lot out of me. I was exhausted.



We got a hotel room that night. Daxton and Zane studied the maps, trying to figure out which mountain to try first. They were in an intense discussion. Auralee and Noe were watching TV. Mira was in the bathroom taking a shower. I was sitting on the floor, leaning up against the bed, just thinking. I had taken off the dagger and was fiddling with it.

"Think she's okay?" someone asked.

"I think so."

"She's been quiet lately."

"We all have been. It's different now."



“Wish it could go back to how it was.”

“I think we all do.”

That was an understatement. I’d do anything for all this to go away, for Mira not to have been raped, to not have killed people, and to not have demons chasing us.

“She’s making me nervous playing with that dagger.”

Suddenly, the dagger was ripped out of my hand and slammed down on the nightstand. “Hey!” I glared at Noe.

“You’re making us nervous.”

“Sorry...” I looked away, my eyes moist.

“Let’s play truth or dare,” Auralee suggested.

“Seriously?”

“Yup.”

“Um...okay.”

She talked us all into playing, although the guys didn’t look very happy about it. “Just play,” Auralee said. “It’ll get our minds off things.”

“Whatever.”

It was fun to play, but I wouldn’t say my mind ever wandered away from reality for long. It brought me back to the dorm rooms and how much fun we had just being kids. We ended the night with a gigantic pillow fight, all of us collapsing on the beds with feathers everywhere.

After the laughter subsided, Noe asked, “Kassia, can I play with your hair?”

“Yeah!” I always enjoyed having someone do my hair.

I sat on the bed, and she brushed and braided it.

The boys laughed. “Oh Zane, can I do your hair?” Daxton batted his eyelashes.

Zane laughed. “Oh yes, please do.”

We shot them looks and stuck out our tongues. “Oooh, real mature.” Daxton smiled.

“Maturity is out the window tonight,” I replied. “Screw maturity.”

“Oh, in that case...” He rushed over to me and kissed me hard on the lips.

“Hey, I’m trying to do her hair!” Noe yelled as I laughed.

Mira flipped through the channels until she found a cartoon. We all sat on the

beds eating candy and laughing at the TV. It felt good to let go and relax. It was like we were letting our inner child come out for a while. If only it could stay like that.

We all accidentally fell asleep that night. A scratching sound on the door woke me up. My head snapped up, and my eyes opened wide as I stared at the door. My dagger was still on the nightstand. I was pretty sure I could get to it fast, but if there was more than one demon, I'd need help.

Quietly, I elbowed Mira, who was asleep next to me. "Shhh," I told her and pointed to the door. She kicked Zane. Soon everyone was awake, and we all clutched the daggers in our hands. Zane crept close to the door. He raised his eyebrows and looked at each of us, silently asking if we were ready. We nodded in response.

Quickly, he unlocked the door and yanked it open. Two small cat-hound demons jumped back in surprise. Zane and Daxton thrust their daggers into the demons' bodies, and we watched as they writhed around a bit before going limp.

We watched as they looked down the hall. Their eyes suddenly widened, and they hurried back into the room. "There's more, lots more."

"Outside too," Noe said.

"Shit." Mira paced the room. "What are we going to do?"

"Fight and run."

"We shouldn't have missed this," Mira chided.

"You know what. If I die today because I was having fun last night and had the best sleep I've had in weeks, then so be it," I said, trying not to let them know how terrified I was.

We were on the bottom floor of the hotel. "Let's go out the patio door," Daxton suggested.

We threw our backpacks on our backs, clutched our daggers, and went for the back door. The second we were out, the smell of sulfur stung my nose, and demons lunged with their claws out. I got the first few with my dagger, but then I planted my feet.

Zane shouted, "Mira, stay near Kassia. Keep them off her while she takes them down. The rest of us stay in back of her."

I felt a demon-cat on my leg, tearing through the skin before I heard Mira

stabbing it. I concentrated on killing the ones in front of me. Every now and then, I'd feel pain cut through my body. After all the ones were dead, I let the power go and turned around. There were still quite a few left, but it was too risky to use my gift. Still clutching my dagger, I leapt at some of them, stabbing them. I yanked one off of Mira and another off Auralee. Noe was doing a good job keeping them off her.

Suddenly, there was a demon near me. I could feel the air around me turn cold before I could see him. When he came into view, my eyes widened. He looked like a deformed human. There was no fat on his bones, and his skin was translucent. He was frail looking. His head was too big for his body, and he had only a few strands of hair.

I screamed.

Although weak looking, when his hand clamped around my wrist, it was strong and powerful...and cold. His touch sent a chill through my body that I'll never forget. Before I had stopped screaming, Mira had plunged her dagger into his heart. He sunk into the ground, his vacant eyes never leaving mine for a second.

Just when I thought we were done, five giant demons stepped out of the woods behind the hotel. I could feel the blood drain from my face. Death felt like it was only a moment away. I was completely terrified. These beasts had almond-shaped eyes that I didn't dare look into. A low growl came from one of them, freezing me in place. I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood.

"Shit," someone swore under their breath. Their fat bodies were lined up and coming right at us. Thankfully, they were slow, and it gave me a few seconds to think. I quickly realized if I was to use my power, nobody could be fighting them, or I'd hurt them too. My power by itself wasn't strong enough to take five giant demons down at the same time. Mira was the only one immune, but I couldn't let her go out there alone.

Daxton turned to me. "This is going to sound crazy, but it's the only shot we have."

"What?" I was all ears.

"Kassia, you have to use your power while we try to stab them. The second we feel pain, we will retreat. If we can get in a couple of stabs, it might weaken

them enough for you to take them down easier.”

“You’re right, it’s crazy.”

“Noe?” He looked at her.

“Go,” was all she said.

He rushed at one of them, stabbing it in the side before I could refuse. Mira ran at another. “Aw, hell...” I planted my feet again and closed my eyes for a second, trying to find the energy to do what I needed to do. I was tired. My body wanted to rest after all the demon killing it was doing. Opening my eyes, I faced the huge demons. Their soulless eyes were a freaky red color. Staring at them, I released the power. I tried to focus it above the heads of my friends, right at the demons’ eyes.

The demons that had been injured swayed quicker than the ones that hadn’t, but I couldn’t get them to fall yet. They might have been slow, but they were strong. Noe kept dashing back and forth from behind me, stabbing one and then retreating. Auralee copied her, but the boys were hardheaded and tried to stay at it. I couldn’t tell if they were in pain, and it was distracting me. I couldn’t stop to find out. I knew I almost had it. Thankfully, Noe and Auralee saw it too, and they each grabbed one of the guys and dragged them back.

With them out of the way, and Mira repeatedly attacking, it didn’t take too much longer for the demons to go down. As soon as they were melted into the ground, I collapsed.

It was a few minutes before anyone spoke. “Shit, Kassia, you can really hurt someone,” Daxton mumbled, still rubbing his head.

I turned my head toward him and muttered, “Sorry.”

“You idiots had to stay out there so long. What were you thinking?!” Mira yelled, protectively kissing Zane’s head—which he was loving.

“They weren’t thinking. They were trying to be brave,” Auralee defended them.

“It worked,” Daxton said proudly.

“I could have killed you,” I stated.

Zane placed his hand on my back. “You didn’t.”

“I couldn’t stop,” I said weakly. “The power takes over completely until the threat is gone.”

“Yeah, the threat.”

“I can’t seem to distinguish what’s a threat and what’s not when we’re battling something.”

“I bet you can. I bet you just have to focus harder,” Daxton said.

“Don’t you think I’ve tried?”

“We better go,” Mira suggested. They all stood up, but my body wouldn’t let me. I was physically drained. “Are you coming?”

“I can’t get up.”

A concerned look crossed her face. “Are you injured?”

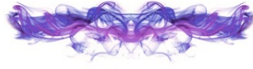
“Just really weak.” Fighting to stay conscious, I blinked my eyes a few times.

Daxton and Zane walked over to where I was lying and looked me over. “Nothing we can’t fix in the car.” Daxton scooped me up and carried me to the car, kissing me the whole way there.

Noe and Auralee were the least injured. After putting some Band-Aids on her cuts, Noe started driving. The rest of us helped each other get patched up. I put the faerie salve on some of Mira’s deep cuts. Only one of my cuts was deep and needed the salve. I didn’t want to waste it on the smaller ones. The guys had some wounds on their arms that we bandaged up, but I was more worried about their heads. Both of them continued to complain about headaches.

I dug out a bottle of ibuprofen and insisted they both take a couple. I worried that I had caused some permanent damage. They shouldn’t have gotten in the way and I should have known better than to let them. I swore not to let it happen again.

## CHAPTER TEN



**B**Y NIGHTFALL, WE WERE ALL exhausted. We knew we'd have to stop and sleep. "I think we should sleep in the car, and two of us have to keep watch and stay awake at all times," Zane suggested.

"I think that's the best idea," Daxton agreed.

It wasn't comfortable, but I believed it was safer. We took turns keeping watch. Morning came and there were no signs of demons. We got gas and food and continued on our way, discussing the best way to proceed.

"We'll be in Colorado by this evening. Do you guys think we should check out Mt. Elbert or go straight into California?"

"If we go to California and can't find her, we'd have to backtrack to Colorado, right?"

"Yes, and up to Washington."

"Then it makes more sense to check out the closer one so we don't waste time."

"Agreed."



The next morning, we were at Mount Elbert. "So, what do we do? Start hiking up?" Mira asked.

"Yes, and Zane will start talking to the animals. I don't think we'll have to go far," Noe replied.

"I hate leaving the car behind. Maybe some of us should stay?" I suggested.

"No, we must stay together," Noe said. I gave in. I wasn't arguing with her.

We all started the hike. Zane said, "We need to go off the trail to find the

animals, but we'll scare them off if we all go together."

"But we shouldn't split up," I said.

"Okay, the two of us will go just a little bit off trail, the rest stay close by," Auralee suggested.

None of us liked it, but we agreed.

Auralee and Zane slowly veered from the path until they disappeared. We stayed where we were, anxiously awaiting, looking back and forth between where they had disappeared and Noe, who informed us, "They'll find some animals, and he'll talk to a rabbit." She giggled. "It looks funny."

I laughed, imagining geeky, dark-haired Zane talking to a bunny. They came back fairly quickly.

"The animals I spoke to said they've heard of the shaman, but she's not here. They think more west."

"Do we trust what these animals say or...get a second opinion?" I wasn't quite sure how to ask that.

"Um..." Zane paused. "I guess I could ask another one?" He didn't sound sure of himself. "Do you really think animals can lie?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Just saying."

His mouth twisted a little and he headed in the opposite direction to try to find another animal.

"Really, Kassia?" Mira sighed.

"What? I want to be sure."

Less than five minutes later, he was back. "I talked to a deer this time. No shaman here. She too thinks she heard west. I'm guessing Mt. Whitney."

"Fine. California, we're coming home."

I was relieved we didn't find any demons waiting for us when we got back to the car. Turning up the radio, Mira and I sang loudly and off key. "Oh please, shut up!" Zane yelled, holding his ears. We laughed.

"How long is the drive?"

"About seventeen hours."

"That's seventeen hours of singing we can do!" I giggled.

"Oh God, help us."

We all burst into laughter.

Four hours later, we were hungry. “Pull over, Daxton!”

“I’m trying to get us as far as possible.”

“Ugh.” Mira threw back her head.

Noe spoke softly as always. “There’s a sub place and a gas station a few miles ahead. We can fill up, get sandwiches, and get right back on the road.”

“Fine.” Daxton scowled.

We pulled into the gas station. “Noe?”

“No demons.”

“Let’s go, be quick.”

We all had jobs to do. Mine was going to the bathroom, getting the drinks, and getting back to the car. I did my job quickly, getting back to the car and letting Daxton go to the bathroom. I started up the car and drove it over to the door for a quicker exit.

When everyone was back, I took off down the highway. I let them eat while I drove. Daxton unwrapped my sandwich and handed it to me. “Thanks.” I smiled. I drove us about three more hours before getting tired. “Can someone take over?” I asked.

“Of course,” Mira said. “I’ll drive.” We pulled over without getting out. Mira and I switched spots. Seven hours down, ten to go.

“Think we’ll make it tonight?”

“Yes,” Noe answered. “But we’ll have to wait ’til morning before heading up the mountain.”

“I hate waiting.”



“Hey.” I sat next to Noe after our next break. “How ya doing?”

She smiled. “Okay.”

I took her hand. “Thanks, Noe. I know you gave up a lot to come with us. I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“Thanks, but I don’t feel like I’ve been that helpful.”

“You have!”

“I feel blind.”

“You’re awesome, Noe. We’re all doing the best we can.” We leaned shoulder



to shoulder for a while. “You’re a great friend.”

“Thanks. You are too. I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

The sun set in front of us. Another day done. “Hotel tonight?”

“I don’t know. God! I hate all this not knowing,” Noe answered, frustrated.

“We’ll get as close to Mt. Whitney as we can, park, and then sleep. We have to get up by dawn and get going,” Daxton spoke up.

We all nodded silently. This had to be it. I didn’t know how much more driving around we could take. When we arrived, we couldn’t park as near as we had hoped, but we got as close as we could. We slept, uncomfortably, for the night.

When I woke up, Zane was already outside of the car. He was sitting on the ground face to face with a squirrel. I held back the giggle that was threatening to come out of my mouth.

I couldn’t hear what he was saying, but his lips were moving. His head was bobbing up and down and then he smiled. I swear the squirrel looked like he nodded too before he took off. Quietly, Zane snuck back in the car. I crept up to him. “Hey.”

He jumped. “You scared me.”

“Sorry. How did...uh...that go?” I glanced out the window.

His cheeks turned a deep red, and he pushed his glasses back up his nose. “Okay. I think we might be on to something.”

“Really?” I didn’t want to get my hopes too high.

“He says he doesn’t go up, but he has heard that strange things happen up there.”

“Strange things?”

“Yes. He said that the birds might know more. They go up and down often.”

“Naturally.”

He shot me a look. “Don’t knock the gift.”

“Gosh, wasn’t it just a couple weeks ago you were scared shitless of me?”

“A lot can change in a couple weeks.” He looked down.

“Yeah...” I looked at my hands. “Zane?”

“Hmmm?”

“If something happens, you take care of Mira for me.” It wasn’t a question.

He looked over at me and our eyes met. Seeing how serious I was, he responded, “Of course I will.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“I need something else from you.”

“What?” He looked confused.

“I know we’re friends, but out of everybody here, we’re probably the least close.”

“I like you, Kassia. I was just scared of the unknown, I guess.”

“I know you do, Zane. I like you too. But still...if the demons get me and somehow brainwash me or whatever it is they have planned...you have to kill me.”

His jaw dropped. “It’s not going to come to that—”

“Zane,” I interrupted. “I just need to know that you will keep Mira—all of them—safe. If the demons turn me against you...” I started to get choked up. “*You* have to kill me. They won’t. You have to protect them.”

He was silent for a minute before he responded, “If I know that you are truly gone, I will kill you.”

Hearing that was more disturbing than I thought it would be. “Thank you. Now, go find a bird.”

He scoffed. “Yes, ma’am.” He stepped back out of the car.

When I looked back, I noticed Mira was awake, and she had tears streaming down her face. “You weren’t supposed to hear that,” I told her.

“Obviously.”

I crawled over the seat and sat next to her. “It’s only an emergency backup.” I was crying now too.

“I can’t think about this, Kassia. I just can’t.”

“Okay.” I wrapped my arms around her and held on for a long time.

A warm glow had lit up the eastern sky and soon a large, glowing sphere appeared over the horizon. I dried off my tears and woke the rest of the car up. Zane had made his way back. “A little bird told me there is someone up the mountain. It sounds like the person we’re looking for. It’s going to be a long hike though.” He looked over at the convenience store we were parked at. “They

open in a few minutes. We need water and power bars. I'm not sure where this person is, but the round trip hike to the summit is twelve hours."

Daxton whistled. "Twelve hours."

"We're all in good shape. We all have our gifts. I think we can do it, but we may not have to go that far."

"We may be fighting demons along the way, which will take a lot out of us," I reminded him, hating to be the downer.

"Yes, there's that."

"Make sure we bring the salve and first-aid kits. And, of course, our daggers," Auralee said, squeezing Noe's hand. Today, her shirt warmed my heart. It read, *Love is blind; friendship closes its eyes.*

"All right, guys, let's get in the store and up the mountain," Zane said. We all banged our fists together.

After shopping at the store, we found ourselves at the trailhead, staring ahead. "This is it. Everybody ready?" Zane asked.

A bunch of "Yups" answered back.

We headed in two by two. The beginning wasn't too bad. About half a mile in, we came across a water crossing. Somehow we made it across without getting too wet. A few minutes later, a ranger who was coming down the mountain stopped us. "Morning, kids. Can I see your permits?"

Zane and I exchanged looks. "Permits?"

"Yes, you are supposed to have permits to be on this mountain. If you don't have them, I'm afraid I will have to escort you back."

Mira stepped up. "Sir, you already saw our permits." She smiled. "You checked us all and we each have the necessary permit. You're going to continue going back down the mountain, and we'll continue going up."

He looked confused for just a few seconds. "That's right. I already saw your permits. Thank you. Be careful now." He smiled and continued going on his way.

I giggled. "You're awesome, Mira."

"I know."

"Let's go."

Soon, Zane saw something scurrying off the trail. "I'll be right back."

We stood around while people going up the mountain passed us. I figured we looked pretty dumb just kind of standing there. A few minutes later, he was back. “That was a marmot.”

“What the hell is a marmot?” Mira asked.

“I dunno. Some big squirrel-looking animal.” He shrugged. “He said we need to go to Mirror Lake.”

“How far is that?”

“Four miles from the trailhead.”

“And how far in are we?” I asked.

“That sign we just passed, pointing out the different trails, was about a mile in.”

“Great.” *Only three miles to go.* I sighed. I pushed on ahead of them, knowing we needed to get there. My legs were already aching and I was hungry, but I wasn’t going to complain. We were here because of me; I had to get us there.

We hiked up quietly, each of us in our own heads, except maybe Auralee. She had all of us to entertain her. We stopped a few times for drinks and snacks. A middle-aged man was coming up past us. He stopped for a moment. “Take it one step at a time, kids. Slow and easy. That’s the only way to reach the top.”

“Thanks.” I nodded. If only we were just going to the top. If only we were normal kids on a normal hike. But no, we were trying to find a secret shaman who lived somewhere on this mountain and might or might not help us with our little demon problem.

Noe stayed quiet on the hike. She wasn’t a big complainer, but she grimaced a few times. I assumed something was bothering her. I had developed a pain in my side and each step hurt. “Hey, Auralee, what are those hikers in front of us thinking?” I had to talk about something or the pain would drive me nuts.

She laughed. “Okay. The guy is trying to impress the girl, who loves nature and outdoors. He told her he loves to hike, and she suggested they come here. Now he’s wishing he had kept his mouth shut.”

I laughed. “That’s funny.”

“There’s a family behind us who climb to the summit every year. Six months ago, their oldest son died in a car crash. This is their first time without him, and they’re all feeling a little different about it.”

“Wow.” I felt bad for them. For me, it would be like losing one of us. I hadn’t grown up with blood relatives, so my friends were my family.

After another hour, I saw some water ahead. “A lake! Is that it?” I looked back at Zane. “Which way do we go?” Excitement rose up in me.

“Calm down, Kassia. That’s not Mirror Lake. It’s Lone Pine Lake.”

I stomped my foot, and Mira laughed. “You gonna have a temper tantrum now?”

“Yes.” I stuck out my lower lip.

“Do you know how much further, Zane?” Daxton asked him.

“Little over a mile.”

Daxton took my hand. “We’re almost there.”

We trudged on. The pain in my side grew with every step. I tried to go slow and easy, but I felt like I was holding everyone back. Daxton gripped my hand, hanging on to me. Every once in a while, he’d turn to me and say something sweet like, “I’ve got you. We can do this.”

In the next twenty minutes, we descended a little into a place called Outpost Camp and started walking through some meadows. We proceeded up the trail and it wasn’t long before Daxton pointed and said, “There, Kassia, look.”

I could see another lake now, not quite as beautiful as the one earlier. There weren’t as many people there. “It’s closed to camping,” Zane said. “Maybe that’s why she likes it here.”

“Look how rocky it is after this.” Auralee pointed ahead. “The tree line ends here.”

“Trees can’t grow further up because of the environment,” Noe responded.

Zane put his finger up, signaling us to be quiet. “I’ll be back.”

I picked at something sticky on my hand until he returned. “Well?”

Zane nodded. “Follow me.”

We waited until there weren’t any more hikers in sight, and then we headed toward the lake. We walked around to a secluded spot. “Now what?” I was beginning to get annoyed. We had been driving around the country for weeks, fighting demons, and hiking for hours. What else did we need to do?

“We wait.”

“For?”

“I’m not sure.”

Glad he had the patience to sit around and wait. I, however, did not. “C’mon, Zane! This is fucked up. We wait? Is she even real? Is she going to appear in the middle of the lake? I want answers. I don’t want to wait!” I yelled, getting mad.

“Psst, Mira, you might want to intervene before she blows,” Noe suggested.

“Oh!” Mira stood up in between Zane and me. The blood drained from Zane’s face as he realized who was getting mad. “Kassia,” Mira spoke softly. “Chill out. We’re all tired. We’re all frustrated, but Zane didn’t do anything, and well, I’d really like it if you didn’t kill him.”

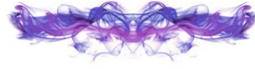
I broke my concentration and looked at her. “Fine, for you.” The look on Zane’s face bothered me though. “I wouldn’t have hurt you, Zane.”

His face softened. “I know...I think.”

I sat away from the group, thinking about what we were doing, hoping this shaman would be able to tell us what to do. What if she couldn’t or wouldn’t? What would we do then? We’d have to go to plan B. We couldn’t keep living like this.

As it got darker, I got more worried. “Wonder if there is even such a thing as a shaman,” I muttered under my breath.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



I THOUGHT I HEARD SOMETHING. MY head snapped up, and I saw her. She had long white hair and the yellowest eyes I had ever seen. Come to think of it, I didn't think I'd ever seen yellow eyes before. Her skin was thin and pale. She looked like she was over a hundred years old.

"I passed a hundred a long time ago, my dear."

And she could read minds.

"Follow me." We all stood and followed her. She took us a little farther up the mountain to a place I was sure nobody had ever been. "Nobody can see this place," she told us, "unless you're with me or I let you. You may call me Vala."

Her home was a decorated cave. Long sheets hung on the walls of the cave, and a rug covered the floor. A kitchen table and a bed were shoved against a wall. Many books were lined up on numerous bookshelves. It was plain but homey.

The lady shaman sat down and looked at us all. "What brings you gifted kids to my mountain?"

If she could read minds, she should know. I took a deep breath. Here went nothing. "We're hoping you can help us." I filled her in on who we were and what had happened at the school. "We've been running and hiding for a couple weeks, but the demons keep finding us. We won't be safe, ever, anywhere. We're hoping you can tell us what to do." I wondered if I sounded desperate enough, because we were extremely desperate.

She didn't speak for a few moments. I got the feeling that she was reading each of our minds, but she didn't confirm that suspicion. "You are all in a very dangerous position," she said finally. Her voice was high, like that of a young

child. “Especially you, Kassia. So young, so beautiful, and so deadly.” I swallowed hard. “I have heard whisperings long before your gift was revealed. They have been waiting for you.”

My hands were shaking. “I don’t want...”

“I know, child. Despite you killing humans, your soul is full of light. You only killed to protect.”

I nodded, looking at Mira, who had tears flowing down her face. “Please, can you help us? Please...” I was crying now too.

“Demons are awful creatures. They are being controlled by Kern. He is the one calling the shots,” Vala explained.

“Do we need to kill him?”

She cocked her head to one side and then the other as she looked at me. “He is very hard to kill, and killing him won’t stop all the evil in the world.”

My shoulders sagged, my hopes sunk. “Is there no hope then?”

“You already know what you have to do to protect those you love.”

My eyes grew wide. “That’s all there is?”

“NO!” Mira jumped up.

“Over my dead body!” Daxton shouted.

Vala grinned proudly. “You have loyal friends.”

“I have to protect them.”

“Yes...” She looked back at me. “They won’t stop until they have you, and when they do, child, you will be used as a weapon. The only way to stop that from happening is death. But you will have to do it in front of Kern himself.”

I heard Mira gasp behind me.

“That means I have to get caught.”

“Yes.”

I shuddered, remembering the demons’ eyes.

“The dagger you have, make sure it’s well hidden. When you’re brought before Kern, he will want you to demonstrate your gift. You will not be tied up at this point so take the dagger and stab yourself in the heart. They will not touch the dagger; they cannot. It is made by faeries and sealed by angels. It will burn their hands if they touch it.” Vala looked at my friends and said, “You must not take it out either. Bring her body with the dagger back here to me. We will deal



with her properly then.”

Mira was holding her head in her hands. “There has to be another way.”

“I am sorry, but there is not.”

Her voice rang of truth, and I could feel it in the very fiber of my being. I had known this all along. I had to die for them. Not that I wanted to die, but as long as it kept them safe, I would. “Where do I go?”

“Don’t worry,” she cackled. “They will find you.”

“If they take her, how do we find her?” Noe asked.

Vala looked over at Noe. “Your difficulty has to do with demon leaders having the ability to cloud people from seeing the future. Once Kassia’s body is abandoned, you should be able to see where to go.”

Noe nodded and softly responded, “Okay.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing else?” Daxton asked, his voice shaking.

“You love her. Tell her this.”

“Nothing?” Auralee asked. “We came to you for help, and you tell her to commit suicide?”

“The demons of this world are just getting stronger and stronger. The good is fading. I’m the last of my kind in this country. The faeries won’t come out of hiding. The angels won’t set foot on the ground. Humans are destroying the earth as well as themselves. The gifted are getting fewer. But somehow, you kids have given me hope.” Vala closed her eyes. “Yes...hope. Remember what I said you have to do. I will see you soon.” She stood up and looked straight at me. “Godspeed.”

And with that she was gone.

Nobody moved for a long time. I think we were all in shock. “We should be going,” I muttered.

“That’s it? You’re just going to give yourself to them?” Mira screamed, lunging at me. She grabbed my shoulders and started shaking me. “You can’t! I didn’t take care of you for all these years just for you to kill yourself!”

*Oh Mira, sweet Mira.* “Always worried about me.” I cupped her face in my hands. “Now it’s time for you to let me take care of you.”

“No!” she wailed like a baby. “Take me with you! We’ll die together!”

“Absolutely not!” I held her while she sobbed. It felt odd comforting my

friends over my own death. I had to keep repeating, “This is for them,” over and over in my head or I might have completely lost it. I was holding on by a thread. I felt like I was going to snap at any second. So chanting, “This is for them, this is for them, this is for them...” kept me from doing so.

Daxton sat down next to me and put his arm around me while I still held on to Mira. She had literally cried herself to sleep, and I was still stroking her hair.

“Vala was right,” I told him.

Our eyes met and I smiled.

“I love you, Kassia.”

My heart melted. “I love you, too.”

He kissed me gently and lovingly. I never wanted it to end. I ended up falling asleep while leaning on him. When I woke again, the sun was starting to rise. We needed to go. Vala had given us a safe place to sleep that night, and now it was time to face our destiny.

I woke everybody up, and we descended the mountain slowly. We had no desire to get to wherever it was we were going. A few times, I found myself blinded with silent tears and stumbled along the trail. One of my friends would grab my arm and help me find my balance. Somehow I think it took us longer to get down than it did to get up. We were in no hurry.

Back in the car, we just sat. “Where do you want to go?” Zane finally asked.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Do you want to go home?”

Hell yes, I did, but I couldn’t risk bringing danger to Glendale. “No.” I shook my head. “Let’s find somewhere to eat.”

“Okay.” He started driving.

I turned to Auralee and asked curiously, “Could you read Vala’s mind?”

“No,” she answered.

After we ate, we checked into a big hotel with a pool, and we had a good time. I tried not to let my impending death get in the way of being with my friends. I couldn’t keep dwelling on it. At least not in front of them. I had to be strong so that they could be strong. But at night, when they were sleeping, I’d break down. Why had I been brought into this life if I was to leave it so young? Why did I have to die in such an awful way?



“This is nuts! We’re not going to let you sacrifice yourself,” Daxton said, abruptly. This caught the attention of everyone in the room, and they turned toward us.

Knowing this was the only thing that would work, knowing I had to do it, there was only one thing I could say. “Don’t make me hurt you.”

His eyes widened. “You wouldn’t…”

“If I have to.”

“Mira…she can stop you.”

Looking over at her, I responded, “To save me, she’d have to let all of you get hurt. Do you think she’ll stand by while that happens?”

“What about that drug that knocks you out?” he threatened.

“How much of that do we have? We’ll run out at some point,” I countered.

“Noe?” He seemed desperate now. “Can’t you see a way around this?”

Poor Noe. The look in her eyes clearly showed she wanted no part of this conversation. “No. I’m so sorry.” She took a deep, shuddering breath. Then she suddenly sprang up from where she was sitting and ran to the bathroom. Auralee went after her.

Daxton’s lip quivered and tears formed in his eyes. “Do you expect me to just let you do this?”

My heart broke for him. I wanted to reach out to him, bring him to me, and beg him to keep me safe. I swallowed hard. “Then don’t watch.”

He picked up a book and threw it across the room. “Dammit, Kass!”

Tears sprang to my eyes. “Don’t you all understand?! I did this. I brought this on. They want ME! They will kill you to get to me. I have to protect all of you.” I looked at Mira, who was bawling on the bed. “I failed before. I have to succeed this time.”

I shifted my gaze to Daxton. “You have to let me go. I have to do this.”

“I don’t want to,” he said between his teeth.

I stood up and walked over to him. “I know.” I grabbed the hair on the back of his head, pulling him toward me, and kissed him. “We were just getting started.”

“Seems like we’ve always been together.”

“I’ll love you forever.”

Sadness replaced his anger. He led me to the bed and we snuggled close.

I asked Daxton, "Why do you love me?"

He looked puzzled at my question. "Why do I love you?"

"Yeah. Why?"

He grinned. "That's easy. You're smart, kind, loving, and you have a great sense of humor. I love how sarcastic you are." I giggled, melting a little inside. "But most of all, I love how loyal you are. You'd do anything for the ones you love." He brushed his lips against mine, gently kissing me. "Why do you ask?"

"Just wanted to know."



Miraculously, it took another two days until the demons showed up again. When I saw them, my heart sunk. This was it. My time was up. My number had been called. I thought about not telling anyone and just going off with the demons. I shook off that idea. I knew I had to say goodbye.

But how? How did I say goodbye to the best group of friends anyone could ever have? How did I look Mira in the eyes and convince her that it would be okay when I didn't believe it myself? How did I say goodbye to the guy I'd fallen in love with? Hot tears burned my eyes as I watched the cat-hound demon sniff the ground. He knew I was here. He was just waiting for his buddies.

Noe stood next to me. "I can't see everything, Kassia. It's not clear to me what will happen. I guess that's good..." Her voice trailed off. "You're making a huge sacrifice. I wish I could have helped more. I'll miss you," she whispered.

I hugged her. "Thank you for being my friend."

"Always," she said and kissed my cheek.

Auralee walked up to me next. "I know you've been hurting inside. I know how badly you are struggling with this. I also know how sure you are. This sucks."

"Yeah, it does," I agreed.

"You're the best," she said, hugging me.

Zane approached me next. "They're here, huh?"

"Yup." I turned back to the window. "Two of them now."

"I'm sorry, Kassia. I wish we could have found another way."

I scoffed. “Me too.”

“I hope it’s not painful.”

I reached over and hugged him. “Thank you for your help. You’re a good guy.” He smiled and nodded before walking away with both his hands shoved in his pockets.

Mira and Daxton just stared at me. I smiled and shrugged. Finally Daxton got up and walked over to me. “I am sorry that I can’t protect you.”

“It’s okay. Sometimes the girl has to be the hero.”

He smiled that crooked smile of his that warmed my heart. “I just wish it didn’t have to be my girl.”

“Mmmm.” That would have been preferable.

“I love you,” he said. “I will always love you.”

A tear escaped and streamed down my face. “I love you, too.”

He cupped my face with his hands and leaned in real close like he did with our first kiss. Slowly and gently, our lips touched and we kissed. We ended with our foreheads together and eyes closed. I brought my lips to his one last time, not wanting this to end. For a second, I felt safe. “Can you remember the places we’ve been?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

“What was your favorite?”

“The white sand beach.”

“When it’s time,” his voice shook, “you go there in your mind. You’ll always be safe there.”

More tears fell down my face. “I will. Maybe someday you’ll meet me there.”

“I will. I promise,” he said before quickly turning and walking away.

The only goodbye left was Mira. How do you say goodbye to your soul mate? She had been my best friend forever. Fate made us sisters even if we didn’t share the same blood. Glancing out the window, I saw a handful of demons; I knew time was running out. “Mira...” I beckoned to her.

She shook her head, flat out refusing. “No.”

I sighed and walked to where she was sitting on the bed. I sat on the floor and put my head in her lap like I had done so many times over the years. She couldn’t resist stroking my hair like she always did. Her tears fell on my face

and mixed with my own tears, but I didn't mind. I finally had the courage to speak. "You have been my best friend for years. You've protected me, cared for me, and loved me. Now you have to let me do the same for you. I want you to live a long life, okay? I want you to live for me. Can you promise me that?"

She didn't answer right away. "I'll try."

I lifted my head up and looked at her. "Try hard."

She shrugged. "I don't know what I'll do without you."

"You have them." I nodded to the rest of our friends, who were staring out the window.

"They aren't you."

"I know. I'm the most awesome." I giggled.

She let a little smile get through her tears. "You are."

"We were awesome together. Now, you need to be awesome on your own."

"I don't want to be."

"I know."

"How are you being so strong?" she asked.

"Oh Mira..." I shook my head and my lip quivered. "I'm not. I'm trying to hold it together..."

I pulled her to me and hugged her hard. My arms never wanted to let go. I let myself cry—sob—but only for a minute. "I love you," Mira whispered.

"I love you too, Mira."

Zane's voice was barely above a whisper. "There are a lot of them now. They're approaching the hotel."

"It's time then." I took some deep breaths, trying to steady my body.

Noe spoke next. "We all must go out there and fight so they don't think something's fishy."

"Kassia, do you have your dagger?" Auralee asked.

I double-checked its place on my leg. "Yes, nice and hidden."

Together for the last time, all six of us headed outside to face the evil demons. Filled with adrenaline, I started to run ahead. Daxton ran after me and caught my arm, spinning me back to him, and pressed his lips to mine. Salt from our tears mixed into the kiss, making it more passionate. I melted a little right then, knowing this was the last time I'd be with him...knowing I was going to my

death.

It took everything in me to push him away. I couldn't even look at him. Turning and facing the demons, I could feel a numbness in the pit of my stomach. The air hung heavy with the smell of sulfur. I used my power to drop some of them to the ground. The cat-hounds screeched, sending tremors through my body.

When the giant demons appeared, I knew it was time to let them capture me. I released the last bit of power I had and looked back at my friends once more. *This is for them*, I told myself again. Auralee looked up, tears streaming down her face now. *Watch out for them, Auralee*. She nodded. *Yourself too*. She nodded again.

I pretended to be concentrating on the bigger demons, as they got closer. One of the grotesque beasts with horns charged at me, stopping only inches from my face. His almond-shaped eyes were wide open and the red light poured out of them, making me dizzy. He smelled foul, like rotten food, and my stomach churned. I was paralyzed with fear. My heart pounded, and I felt like I couldn't breathe.

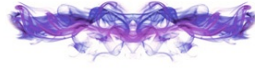
An extra arm came out from the demon, and he grabbed at me with his slimy hand. I jumped back a few times out of habit and fear. One of the smaller demons had already grabbed a hold of my leg, sending shooting pain up it. This was insane. I couldn't believe I was letting this happen. Could I change my mind? Before I could think about it any further, the big demon grabbed my body. A bone-chilling cold spread throughout my body. I let out a scream.

The demons seemed to get excited by my capture, acting all frenzied and letting out short high-pitched shrieks. My body was shaking and tears were running down my face. I didn't want to be captured. I didn't want to die. Pushing those thoughts out of my head, I reminded myself who I was protecting.

As the big demon started to retreat, all the smaller ones followed his lead. I heard Mira scream my name. I watched Zane hold Daxton back, and the girls clung on to Mira to keep her from coming after me. "Zane!" I yelled. He met my eyes. "You remember your promise!" He nodded and I knew he would.

That was the last thing I remembered before everything went black.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



**W**HEN I REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS, I was lying on my side. There was something over my eyes and in my mouth. I also seemed to be tied up. I couldn't move, scream, or see. Fear gripped my body. They had me now, and if I didn't stick to the plan, they would try to use me.

Worried about my friends, I thought back to the last thing I remembered. When the bigger demons had shown up, I had let myself be captured. I remembered seeing everyone else before they dragged me away. None of them looked badly hurt. They should be okay, physically anyway. That was a relief. And now that I was here, they'd be safe.

Although I wasn't sure where *here* was. I was lying on what felt like a hard, cold floor. Being blindfolded, I couldn't tell for sure. It felt like both my hands and feet were tied up. The rag in my mouth tasted of rotten food, which matched the smell creeping into my nose. I had to focus on my stomach every once in a while to keep from vomiting. I could hear noises far away, but I couldn't tell what they were.

I tried struggling to see if I could get free, but I was unsuccessful. I couldn't get the gag out of my mouth either. I finally gave up and lay quietly, thinking of Daxton and our time on the beach. Thinking of him kissing me passed the time. I wished I was a dreamer like him, so when I was in this kind of situation I could escape it in my mind.

I began wondering if I'd know I was being brainwashed. I had to die before that happened, but what if I couldn't tell? What if they turned me into a demon weapon and I didn't know it? What if I already was? I prayed that wouldn't happen, but if it did, I knew Zane would follow through.



Voices came closer. I stiffened, but tried to control my body from shaking. “Kern wants to see her now.” I felt something yank me up and I flinched. “She’s awake,” the same voice said.

“Such a pretty girl,” another voice chimed in. I could feel the bile rise in my throat. “Maybe we’ll all get a piece of her when she’s on our side.” They cackled. I couldn’t stop from vomiting that time. As soon as I did, I started choking on it because the gag was still shoved in my mouth. It burned as it came out my nose.

“Oh, that’s nasty!” The gag was yanked out of my mouth. I coughed and spewed all over for a few minutes. With my hands tied, I couldn’t even wipe my mouth. I felt gross.

After grabbing me and carrying me up some stairs, they dropped me on the floor. “Here she is, Master.” The horrible, rotten stench intensified. I imagined this was what hell smelled like. I could feel the evil around me and had to bite my lip to keep from screaming.

A darker, deeper voice responded, “Thank you.” I felt someone staring at me. *Don’t show your fear, Kassia*, I told myself. “Hard to believe a sweet-looking thing like her kills in seconds. I think I should like a demonstration,” he said. “Yes, yes, I would. Boys, when I am safely behind that door, take her blindfold off and untie her.”

“Yes, Master.”

A minute or two passed before I felt someone or something untie me, pull me up, and take off the blindfold. Although it was a fairly dark room, it took my eyes a while to adjust. The room was cold, damp, and empty except for a few chairs. There were some dark red stains on the wood floor. Blood maybe?

I realized the two idiots that had brought me up here were gone, but the hair on my arms was still standing up. There was something here—something evil. I looked around for the threat, finally finding it up against the back wall. At first, I could only see its narrow, red eyes. As it moved forward, it made animal noises, and I could see it looked kind of like a bull. A demon bull. Goose bumps exploded all over my body.

I could tell it wanted to charge, but it was waiting for the right moment to attack. Should I take this bull down? Or let it eat me? Something in me told me

to take it down so Kern knew for sure he had the right girl.

I faced the bull head on and stared at him, wishing that he would be in pain, wishing that he would die. At first, nothing happened to the bull—he was strong. I kept my focus and brought my powers up. Again, I stared at the bull. He staggered a little this time, but he recovered and charged at me. *C'mon!* I focused harder. Before he got more than five steps, he collapsed on the ground. And then his black, shadow-like body melted into the floor and disappeared.

I heard a door open in back of me, and I spun around, ready to kill something else. “I would love to meet you face to face, but you mustn’t try to hurt me or I’ll be forced to punish you,” Kern’s voice said. I wondered what kind of punishment he’d be dishing out for that. “Can you restrain yourself?”

I rocked back on my heels and let the power dissipate.

“Good. I had heard you couldn’t control your power well. However, it seems you’ve come a long way in a few weeks.”

I stood there silently, waiting.

“Kassia, my name is Kern, and I’m going to be your master.”

*Like hell you will,* I thought.

He stepped out of the shadows now, and I could see him. He towered over me...hair white like snow, cold eyes pitch-black like the darkness that surrounded me.

Two things took me by surprise—his age and his beauty. For master of the demons, he wasn’t ugly or deformed at all. He was actually quite handsome. His skin was flawless and almost glowed. His smile was perfect and his teeth were straight and white. And he was young! He had to be close to my age. He was nothing like I had imagined and yet he was everything I had imagined.

He was full of evil; you could feel it pouring off of him. I bit down harder to keep myself in check. *Breathe. Just breathe.* He wore a cloak like something I would picture a bad guy in a movie wearing. He held something resembling a remote control in his hands.

“Think of yourself as a wild beast, and I’m the one who’s going to tame you.” The corners of his mouth curled up into a wicked smile. That terrified feeling built up again, and I felt like I was either going to faint or puke. *Breathe.* He walked around me in a circle, checking me out. “You have no idea the strength

of your power. Together, we can control the world. Now, of course, we can go about this two ways.”

*Great. I get a choice.*

“The harder of the two is, of course, if you resist. I will be forced to break you and reprogram your brain to accept me as your master and then you will do whatever I say. The easier choice is for you just to give in to me and become my bride.”

That made me choke. “Your what?” I finally managed to say.

“My bride. Like I said, we can rule the world, you and I.”

I was speechless for a minute. “I will never willingly be your bride.”

“That’s a disappointment. I was so hoping you’d understand this was best for you.” He frowned. “You may want to rethink it. If you’re willing to do this, you won’t lose your mind, your memories.”

I didn’t even ponder that for half a second. *No way!* I kept quiet, trying to read him better. He wanted me to control the world with him. If I wasn’t going to do this, he was going to force me to by erasing my mind. “You want to control the world?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He let out a wicked laugh. “Why not? I want to rule, I want to choose who lives or dies. I want to be a god,” he confessed.

“Why bother? Most of the humans don’t even know everything that exists around them.”

“I want to rule them as well.”

“Still not getting it.”

He frowned again. “Power, sweetheart.” I shuddered when he called me that. “Think about when your power fills you and you must kill. Don’t you love that feeling? Your body’s full of power! That’s what I want all the time.”

*Hmmm. Interesting.*

“And with me, you think we can control the world?”

“Yes. First, I will tear down the glamour shield from this world. That way the humans will be able to see everything that’s coming. Next, I will unleash the small demons, then bigger ones, and whoever is left will have to face the biggest

ones of all. The survivors of all that, if any, will have to bow to me. They will work for me.” His face lit up as he talked about his plans.

“What happens when we get killed?”

He laughed. “We won’t be able to be killed.”

“Really?”

“First off, I won’t be going out there to do the fighting. That will be up to you and the demons. After some training, you will be able to kill thousands within seconds. Anyone who doesn’t bow, dead just like that.” He snapped his fingers. I gulped. “Second, I’m not easily killed.”

“Why do you need me for this?”

“I don’t necessarily *need* you...I want you. Ever since I was a child, I have heard about you. I have wanted you. I even dreamt about you. As I grew up, the only thing I ever wanted was to have you by my side, but my teachers told me I couldn’t have you because you were special. They used to say you’d save the world. At least until you killed humans.” He laughed.

“Somehow I knew you weren’t so pure,” he continued. “I could do this all on my own, but I don’t want to. It will be easier with you. People will trust you because you are so beautiful and then you’ll kill them without a second thought. Not just one or two, but thousands at a time! Besides, I want you. And now I have you. So, one way or the other, you will do what I say.”

“What if I kill you right now?” I asked, wondering if I could kill him and escape this awful place without having to kill myself.

He laughed again. “The second you tried, demons would be all over you, and you would be tortured and brainwashed immediately. It wouldn’t be pleasant. Besides, I’m protected.”

The only way this would end was if I was dead, and the only way to convince him I was dead was to die in front of him. It was time. It had to happen now. I wasn’t going to be a part of this. I wasn’t going to willingly go along with it. No way was I going to let myself be brainwashed either.

I tried to calm myself down. This was the plan. Freaking out now might give away what I was going to do, and I couldn’t have that. He might try to stop me. I could still feel the dagger around my upper leg. Vala had been right. The demons were too stupid to check me for weapons.

Swiftly, I grabbed my dagger out and pointed it at him. He was taken aback, surprised, but then he started laughing. “You’re going to kill me with that?”

“If you say you’re protected from my power...why not?”

He made a motion with his hands and demons emerged from the shadows and started moving toward me. “So, I guess this means you don’t want to take the easier route?” He nodded at the demons. “Go ahead and take your best shot. I’m sure these guys will take you down before you take two steps.”

I didn’t need two steps. In my mind, Mira and Daxton’s faces flashed before me. Saving them. Protecting them. That’s what this was about. I steadied my hands and clutched the dagger. I turned it toward me.

Kern laughed. “You wouldn’t.”

I smiled one last time. “Oh, but wouldn’t I?”

Then I plunged the dagger into my heart.

Kern shrieked, “NOOOOOO!”

I heard myself gasp. Then I felt my legs give way from under me, and I crumpled to the floor. The pain wasn’t nearly as bad as I had imagined. I felt warm and tingly. I wasn’t scared anymore. I had done the right thing. I could feel my heart slowing down, giving up.

Kern’s voice was getting further away, but I could still hear him. “No, no, no...get some help.” I could see him above me now. He was reaching for the dagger.

“Master, no!”

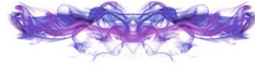
“Why not?”

“It’s a faerie dagger.”

“Oh,” he said, his voice fading more. “This isn’t fair!” he whined like a child. “She was supposed to be mine!”

Everything got fuzzy and faded away... Remembering what Daxton said, I closed my eyes and pictured the white sand beach we had been on not long ago. There was no pain here, no fear, just serenity. I walked over to the edge of the water like I had done that one time, sat on the sand, and stuck my feet in the warm ocean water. Perfect. Heavenly...

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



### MIRA

I SCREAMED AS THE DEMON SNATCHED Kassia. As I started to run after her, Noe and Auralee grabbed me and held me back. With tears streaming down my face I watched them take her away. I shouted her name as her body went limp in the demon's hands. When she disappeared into the woods, my knees gave out, and I collapsed on the ground. I was furious at her for agreeing to this suicide mission even though I knew it was the only way to save the stupid, freakin' world.

Zane sat down next to me and tried to rub my back. "Piss off," I told him.

He sighed. "I'm really sorry, Mira."

Daxton, who had been trying to keep it together, was in back of me somewhere, sobbing. I knew I should go to him and try to comfort him, but I had known her longer. I was her best friend, damn it. I needed comforting, but I didn't want any. I hated all of us right now. I hated myself for letting her go. I hated myself for not finding another way.

The hot tears rushed down my cheeks. I hoped and prayed she wouldn't be in any pain. For someone who dished pain out the way she did, she never could handle it very well. Somehow, I knew she'd get up the courage to stick that dagger into her...pain or not. *Please, just let it be quick.*

"Mira, it's been over an hour, she's not coming back. Let's go inside," Zane said. I glared at him.

Auralee stood up. "Why don't you guys go inside? Give us some girl time. We'll be in soon."

Zane and Daxton exchanged glances. "Think it's safe?"

Daxton nodded. "They only wanted Kassia."

Noe added, "They won't be back."

"And what about Mira? She's not going to go after her?" Zane asked Noe.

Noe looked up for a minute. "No, she won't."

"Okay." Zane and Daxton walked slowly to the hotel and disappeared inside.

Noe sat on one side of me, and Auralee sat on the other. The three of us cried together. "Can you see anything, Noe?" I asked.

"Would you want to know?" She looked at me seriously.

I looked away. I honestly didn't know. Would I want to know what was going to happen?

"Mira, Noe can't see what is happening clearly. But I don't think you'd want to know the awful things your best friend is facing. Sometimes ignorance is bliss."

"Oh, shut up! You still have your best friend!" I yelled.

Noe took my hand. "I really can't see what's happening, and I'm kinda glad I can't."

"We're going to be here for you," Auralee said. "We all love her."

We sat in silence awhile longer. I couldn't get my mind off of what could be happening to her. She must have felt like this when she found out I was being attacked, but she could do something about it. She saved me. There was nothing I could do now, nothing any of us could do. We were helpless.

"How did we let this happen?" I asked softly.

"They would have gotten her one way or another," Noe responded.

Auralee sighed. "I thought you weren't going to say anything."

I looked from Noe to Auralee and back again. "What are you talking about?"

Tears ran down Noe's face. "I kept seeing her get taken. No matter what we did or where we went, I always saw her getting taken away. The vision changed a little each time, but the ending was always the same." Her voice shook. "At least this way, it's on her terms."

"Why didn't you say something?" I asked.

"You all needed hope. I couldn't take that away." Her lip quivered, and she started sobbing.

My eyes filled with tears again. I took Noe's hand. I didn't want her to think

she did the wrong thing. “It’s okay.” I took Auralee’s hand too, and we sat there until our tears dried again.

“C’mon, let’s go inside.” Auralee tugged my hand.

“Kay.” I stood up and we all walked to our room.

Kassia hadn’t taken any of her stuff with her, obviously. Who would bring anything to their death? I touched the shirt she left lying on the bed. Then I picked it up and held it to my nose, breathing in her sweet scent. She always smelled like lilacs. Smelling her without her here made me break down again. My body heaved with sobs as I clutched her shirt.

This whole thing was my fault. If I hadn’t gone to get the car fixed by myself, those guys never would have attacked me. Kassia wouldn’t have saved me, and she’d still be here. Thinking of that day brought more tears and rage. I hadn’t been able to get the image of the men who had raped me out of my mind. Their dirty smell was permanently imprinted in my brain. I had showered a hundred times since it happened, and I still didn’t feel clean. The cuts and bruises on my face had healed, and although there wasn’t any evidence of the assault left on the outside, nothing on the inside would ever be the same again.

They had stolen something from me that I’d never get back. I didn’t know how I’d ever get past what happened. I assumed Kassia would be there with me helping me through it. My best friend was gone now, and I would have to handle it alone.

“No, you won’t.” Auralee sat next to me. “I’m here.”

As tears slid down my cheeks, I nodded and wondered if it was a good or bad thing that I was friends with a mind-reader.

Nobody spoke for a long time. I sat against the headboard and wrapped my arms around my knees. Daxton was watching out the window as if he was waiting for Kassia to come back. I wondered if I would know when she was dead. Would I feel it? And if I didn’t, did that mean she had failed? Or would I never know?

My tears finally slowed and dried on my face. I curled up with a pillow and finally succumbed to sleep in the middle of the night.





Suddenly, I sat straight up, feeling a pain so excruciating in my heart, I thought it was going to explode. I gasped for air and I knew immediately that Kassia was dead.

I looked around; the sky was getting a little bit lighter, meaning it was almost dawn. Noe was sitting on the edge of the bed with tears streaming down her face. Seeing me, she said, “I didn’t see it. But I saw her body.”

I scooted over to her and we hugged. As the sun rose, one by one our friends woke up. When they saw our faces, they knew. Auralee burst into tears again and Daxton punched a wall, leaving a large hole. Guess I’d have to cover that up when we checked out. Zane stayed quiet and tried to be there for me. He didn’t know what to say, and I wasn’t making it any easier on him. I felt bad for being so harsh, but nothing in me felt like being nice.

“Noe, were you able to get an idea as to where she might be?” Zane asked, being the most level-headed right now.

“It’s not far. They drove about an hour from where they were to...dump her body. She’s in the woods. I just don’t know where.”

“We should hurry,” Daxton said.

Nobody showered. We just grabbed our bags and ran to the car.

Zane drove and Noe sat in the passenger seat. We had been driving for about an hour when she told him to stop. “In there,” she said, pointing toward the woods.

We got out of the car and started hiking into the woods. “Which way?”

“I don’t know...just in, go in deeper,” Noe instructed.

We walked further, our pace quickening.

“This way,” Noe said, leading the way. Every so often, she would stop and then continue on. We hurried, almost running ahead.

Then I saw her...her crumpled body on the ground. I stopped in my tracks. “Kassia!” I yelled out, and then ran the rest of the way to her, hoping that somehow she’d still be alive. I reached her body and knelt down beside her. *Be alive, be alive, be alive*—I pleaded. I turned her on her back. The dagger stuck out from her heart. Hesitantly, I moved the hair from her angel-like face. She was pale, her lips no longer candy-apple red. I put my ear to her mouth, hoping for any signs of breathing. Then I placed my ear down on her chest, but instead

of a beating heart, I heard nothing.

“No...no...no...” I sobbed and tried to shake her awake. “Please,” I whispered. I looked up at Auralee. “Can you hear anything?”

Tears were streaming down her face as she shook her head.

Daxton knelt down beside me. He stroked her face with his hand and then brushed her bangs away from her eyes. “Have you ever seen her look this peaceful?”

He bent down and kissed her on the lips.

I picked some leaves out of her dark auburn hair. “Should we take the dagger out?” I asked, not wanting to see it lodged in her.

“No. Vala said to leave it in,” Zane answered.

*Oh yeah.* “Why?”

“I don’t know. But I think we should listen.”

Noe took a white bed sheet out of her backpack. She laid it on the ground. “Wrap her up,” she told Daxton and Zane.

Carefully, they picked Kassia up and put her on the sheet. Then they gently wrapped her in it. “How are we going to get her back up that mountain?” I asked.

“Off the trail, when it’s dark.”

“We can’t wait that long. We have to go now,” Noe said.

“How are we going to explain that we’re carrying a body?” Daxton asked.

“We’ve got Mira. Anybody asks, she’ll compel. They never saw a body,” she answered.

“Okay, let’s go.” Daxton lovingly picked Kassia’s body back up.

When we got back to the car, we gently placed Kassia in the back and drove quickly back to Mt. Whitney. The guys would have to carry Kassia up the mountain. I’d go in front and make sure anyone who saw us...didn’t see us. We had to move faster than we did a few days ago. My hands and feet were scraped up from falling quite a few times. But we continued on, reaching Mirror Lake much quicker than before.

“Where is Vala?” I asked. “How do we get to her house?”

“We have to wait for her,” Zane said.

“We don’t have the time.” I paced. “Out here with a body,” I grumbled.

A marmot ran by and Zane perked up. "This way," he said, pointing after the little animal.

The marmot led us to the shaman's house. Vala was waiting outside for us. She took Kassia's body from Daxton and placed her carefully on her own bed. She unwrapped her. "Good. Very good."

"Good?!" I yelled. "This is good?!" I completely freaked out. "My best friend is dead and it's good?!" I was on the verge of losing it.

Vala looked at me with her wild eyes. "You don't understand and that's okay. You will. But right now, I need you to say your goodbyes. You need to leave quickly."

Noe was the first one to move. She knelt next to Kassia and spoke quietly to her. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but I imagined it was something sweet. She stood, kissed her on the forehead, and walked to the other side of the room.

Zane was standing next to me. He pulled me to him and held tightly to me. I buried my face in his chest. I heard Auralee's voice. She was saying her goodbyes now. I turned back around and watched as she too kissed Kassia on the forehead.

"I'll go next," Zane said, and he squeezed my hand before letting go. He walked over and sat down next to Kassia. He didn't say much, but I did hear him say, "I'm so glad that I don't have to keep part of that promise, but I will keep the other part. I will take care of Mira." He stood up and also kissed her forehead before walking across the room.

Daxton and I glanced at each other. "I'll go," he said, but it took him a minute to move. When he did, he did it slowly. He knelt down next to her and took her hand in his. "I have loved you from the first time I met you...and I always will, forever and ever in the eternities," he told her. The tears flowed heavily down my face now. He stroked her face with his hand and then buried his face in her hair. When he was done, he kissed her, stood up, and then joined our friends on the other side of the room.

It was my turn now, but my feet were like lead, and they wouldn't move. Zane approached me. "Go say goodbye."

"I can't." I bit my lower lip.

"You can. You must." I looked at him and sighed, knowing he was right.

I shuffled my feet and knelt next to Kassia. She looked so beautiful just lying there. I took her hand and opened my mouth to say something, but I didn't know what to say. What do you say to your dead best friend? How do you say goodbye?

"I...I don't know what I'm going to do without you. I already miss you so much. We were supposed to be friends forever. Part of me is so mad, Kassia, SO mad. But mostly I'm broken..." I didn't even bother wiping the tears away anymore. They kept pouring out of my eyes. "I will never forget you." I forced myself to stand up. I too bent over and kissed her. "I love you."

Vala escorted us to the door. "Go back the way you came. Go home. Keep an eye out for anything suspicious. I think Kern is still set on attacking soon."

"Will we ever see you again?" Zane asked her, although I wasn't sure why. Who cared? I had no interest in ever seeing her again.

"Yes, sooner than you think." We started to leave. "Thank you, kids, for following directions."

"Yeah, sure," Zane answered. He gathered my hand in his, and we walked out of her home back onto the mountain.

Even though I was surrounded by people I loved and knew exactly where I was, I felt completely alone and lost. Zane still had my hand; he tugged on it a little. "C'mon."

I looked back toward the shaman's house. Leaving Kassia there felt wrong. We should bring her home. Auralee walked up next to me and took my other hand. "It's okay," she told me.

We hiked back down slowly and climbed back in the car. We were a few hours from Glendale, so we just started driving there. Nobody said anything for a long time. Finally, Zane broke the silence. "We should go directly to see Eaton."

"Yeah," Daxton said.

"How are we supposed to go back there without her?" I asked.

Nobody responded.

Once we were at the school, we grabbed our stuff from the car and started walking to Eaton's office. It was early afternoon now. The few students we came across stopped to stare at us. I couldn't imagine what we must have looked like. Some of the kids started whispering. As I glared back at them, I found myself

wishing I had Kassia's gift. I'd love to be able to drop them on their asses.

Zane pounded on Eaton's door when we got there. "Come in," the voice boomed from inside.

He jumped up from his chair when he saw who was walking into his office. He looked at each of us and then peered behind us to see if there was anyone else. He gestured for us to sit down, but there weren't enough chairs. Zane and Daxton stood. Nobody said anything. No one wanted to speak. Zane must have thought it was his job, so he finally spoke up. "We're back."

"I see that. Where is Miss Lagos?"

"Dead."

"What?" He immediately looked at me for confirmation. I was sure my tear-stained face and bloody clothes reassured him that what Zane was saying was true. "Tell me everything."

We poured out our story slowly and painfully. "That's it, I think," Zane finished up.

Mr. Eaton's face looked long and sad. "I'm very sorry to hear of Kassia's passing. I know how difficult this will be on all of you. Whatever you need, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thanks," I whispered. "I think we might need a day or two before starting classes again."

"Of course."

Noe spoke then. "I feel that danger will come to us soon. I don't know when. I just feel it's coming. I think Kern is very, very mad right now. I was thinking that training classes might be appropriate. Physical training as well as gift training. Also, we should know how to use these daggers."

"You shouldn't have those on campus." Mr. Eaton frowned.

"I have no plans on giving mine back, not after what I saw out there. Weapons training would be useful for everyone at this school," Daxton said.

"We will keep our daggers hidden, but we will not give them up," I added.

Mr. Eaton mashed his lips, clearly thinking about what he should do. "Fine," he answered. "But if I catch any of you using them against another student or teacher, you will face serious consequences."

"Agreed."

“How much of this should the others know?” Auralee asked.

“I told them that you were all sent on a special mission. I suppose you could say Kassia died fighting demons. I wouldn’t go into any other details right now. I don’t want to create a panic.”



In the courtyard, Zane pulled me close to him. When our eyes met, he leaned in for a kiss. At first, I pushed him away. I didn’t want him touching me like that. Unpleasant memories filled my mind.

His face softened. “Mira. I won’t hurt you.”

I nodded and let him lean back in. His lips were a little wetter than I would have liked, but the kiss made me feel loved. “If you need anything...”

“Thank you.”

Daxton walked over to me. “That goes for me too. If Zane isn’t around and you need something, let me know.”

“I will. Thanks, Daxton, for loving her. You made her very happy these past months.”

His eyes filled with tears, but he smiled anyway. “I hope so.”

They left, walking toward their dorm. Noe, Auralee, and I walked into our dorm and up the stairs. Taking out my key, I unlocked and opened the door to our room and then I froze. It was just as we had left it. I half expected to see Kassia sitting on the window seat she loved so much.

Auralee put her arm around me. “Why don’t you sleep in our room tonight?”

“No thanks.” I shook my head. “I want to be close to her.”

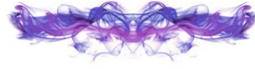
“Okay. If you change your mind...”

“Thanks.”

Noe reached over and hugged me. “We’ll be right here.”

I walked into my room and closed the door behind me. There was a picture of Kassia and me on our dresser. I grabbed it and collapsed on Kassia’s bed, tears flowing down my face.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



### KASSIA

I HAD BEEN ON MY PERFECT white sand beach when the darkness took over. I heard chanting in a foreign language. I struggled to open my eyes, and when I finally did, it was hard to focus. After blinking a few times, I could see someone sitting next to me.

“Is this Heaven?” I asked. My eyes wandered around. It sure didn’t look like how I pictured Heaven.

“No.” She shook her head.

“Aren’t I dead?” I asked, confused.

“No, you are very much alive.”

“What?” I started thinking back. I remembered shoving that dagger into my heart. I remembered the pain, the warmth, and the beach. “I died.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Then...”

“Relax, child. I’ll explain. First, you need to drink this.” The woman came into focus now. It was Vala, and I was in her house. She put a mug in front of me and lifted my head. I sipped the warm, unpleasant drink.

“What happened?” I asked.

“So impatient.” She pushed the mug at me again. After I drank all of it, she laid my head back down on the bed. I glanced down at my body and easily found the hole in my shirt that the dagger had made. Dried blood covered my clothes. I had definitely stabbed myself. The proof was right here. I pulled up my shirt to look at my skin. There was no hole or mark. It was like the dagger never went

into my body. “Why don’t you tell me what you remember,” Vala said.

I tried to push myself up and Vala helped me to sit on the bed. My body felt weak, but I was determined to tell her everything. I began to relate what happened, starting with how they captured me. “I was unconscious when they brought me there, so I have no idea where ‘there’ is. I woke up blindfolded, gagged, and tied up. I don’t know how long it was, but they finally came and got me. I was brought to meet Kern. He unleashed a demon bull for me to take down. He wanted a demonstration. Then he showed himself.” I took a deep breath. “He gave me two choices. To join him voluntarily and be his bride or he’d have to force me. Obviously, I chose my own way.”

“Go on,” she encouraged.

“He said he wants to rule the world. Unleash demons until he has control.” I shuddered, remembering the look in his eyes. “He wants to play God. He wanted me by his side to make things easier. Said after training, I’d be able to kill thousands at a time, and he’d send me out to do this because people would trust me.” Vala handed me a drink of water, and I took a few sips.

I continued, “He said he had heard about me a long time ago, but I was untouchable because I was special. I was supposed to save the world. Apparently, when I killed those humans, that changed. He said I wasn’t pure anymore, and I could be his.” Tears fell down my cheeks.

“I threatened to kill him, but he just laughed and said it wasn’t possible. So I turned the dagger on myself. He thought I was joking. And then...I...I stabbed it into my heart. That’s all I remember.” I looked at Vala. “Is it true that he’s protected?”

“Somewhat,” she responded.

“What does that mean?”

“It means it will be very difficult to kill him.”

“How am I...alive?”

“Some of what he said was spot on. I believe the rumors are true. You are supposed to save the world. Just not single-handedly. With Kern after you, the only shot you had was death. It was a risk, and I wasn’t sure it would work. But I knew they would have searched until they captured you, and then they would have used you. So dying was your only option.” She paused for a moment.



“But you, Kassia, are more special than you realize. Not only were both your parents gifted as were your grandparents on all sides, but one of your mother’s grandmothers had angel blood.”

“Angel blood?” I asked, puzzled.

“Yes. Even the smallest amount will be dominant through all generations after that.”

“And you knew this?”

“Yes. I know many things. I have known your family for a long time. The daggers were not only made by faeries, but also sealed by angels. They kill demons, not angels. However, if stabbed directly in the heart, your heart will stop. Your body will seemingly die. Demons cannot remove the dagger, nor can they use it. If the dagger is removed properly, life is restored to the person with angel blood.”

“Amazing...” I whispered. “Why didn’t you tell us? Why didn’t Noe see it?”

Vala smiled. “I blocked her from seeing us right now and she can’t see the demons clearly. This was good because I needed this plan to work perfectly. I needed you to actually kill yourself, and I needed everyone to believe you were dead. I couldn’t let Kern be tipped off.”

“And what if I had missed my heart? Or what if they brainwashed me first?”

“They were both possibilities. This was your only hope, Kassia.”

I nodded then, completely believing that. “So, where is everybody?” I was excited to see my friends.

“On their way back to school.”

“What? Why?” That didn’t make sense. They wouldn’t have left me.

“They think you’re dead,” she said matter-of-factly.

“We need to call them, tell them!” I raised my voice. “They’ll come back.”

“No. We can’t.” Her cold expression didn’t change.

“Yes! We can! If you don’t have a phone, I’ll just go find a way back to school.”

“Kassia...” She tried taking my hand, but I pulled away. “They can’t know yet.”

A tear slid down my cheek. I didn’t want to sound conceited, but I knew they’d be crushed right now. They didn’t have to be because I was okay. “I don’t

understand. Mira's my best friend, and Daxton...I...I'm in love with him."

"I know, and I'm sorry. I wish this could be different."

"It can be. We just have to tell them!"

"You want to protect them, right? That's why you sacrificed yourself."

"Yes."

"This isn't over. It won't be until Kern is dead. Do you understand? You and your friends won't be safe until he's dead."

"But you said it would be difficult to kill him."

"Difficult yes, impossible no." She was trying to hold back a smile. "His plan is to destroy the world. We can't let him do that. We have to stop him. Unfortunately, you are not ready yet." She paced around the room, muttering.

"There are a number of things that need to happen. First, I will take care of the spot where they left your body. I will make it look like animals got to you in case they go back to check. Second, you must remain 'dead.' They cannot know you are alive. Which means there is no going back to your previous life. Third, you need to train. You all need to train. Last, we need to kill Kern. In order to do that, we will need the help of the faeries and all of the gifted we can recruit."

"But if we need the gifted, we need my friends. Why not tell them now?"

"You're not ready, none of you! The school will train them; I've already seen that. They will train them physically and give them weapons training. They will be prepared for battle. But you need more training, special training, and that requires commitment, focus, and dedication. You can't be thinking about your boyfriend or conversing with your best friend. I need you to train first."

I sighed and closed my eyes. I could not believe what I was hearing. I didn't want any of this. I wanted to go back to how things were. This wasn't fair. I was only sixteen! I wanted to be gossiping with Mira and making out with Daxton, not training for an epic battle. I wanted to go home.

Then Kern's face flashed in my head. Those evil eyes and wicked smile made me shudder even now. His words about sending the demons out to kill people echoed in my mind. He had to be stopped. I needed to protect my friends. My mind raced and finally wrapped around what she was saying. They couldn't know I was alive yet. I had to do this for them.

I opened my eyes. "How long will it take? Are we talking years here?"

She looked away for a minute. “No. I almost wish we had that kind of time to get ready. It will happen before the year is over.”

“So...just so I know if I’m understanding this right. Are you saying that I’ll see my friends before the end of the year?”

“Yes.”

Relief flew through me. There were only a few months left in the year. As I thought about that, worry replaced the relief. “I’m supposed to be trained by then?”

“Yes.”

“How is that going to happen?”

“As soon as I know your body is healed, we are going to go to the only person I trust—a warlock. Together, he and I will train you properly. It will be grueling. The days will be long and you will want to give up,” she warned me. “But it will be worth it.”

“Vala, you say you know things?”

“Yes.”

“Everything?”

“Not everything.”

“Most things?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I know this sounds petty, but will you be able to tell if they’re okay...my friends? I hate the thought of them hurting.”

Her face softened. “You are very kind, Kassia.” She smiled. “I can...check on them for you.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

“I want you to sleep now. I have to go deal with that first thing we talked about.”

“Okay.”

She handed me a clean shirt. “Change your shirt. I need to bring it with me.”

“Okay.” I took off the bloody one and put on the clean one. It was a little big, but it would work.

“I’m trusting you not to leave.”

As much as I wanted to, I knew this was too important. “I won’t.”

I lay back down on the bed. My mind was going a mile a minute and I thought of how Mira and Daxton must be feeling right now. Tears ran down my face again and I felt horrible for not being able to tell them. I wondered if they'd be able to forgive me. Then I wondered if they'd replace me. What if Daxton started dating Arian? What if Mira got a new roommate?

Mira...Mira wouldn't forget. She wouldn't replace me. We had never been apart for longer than a few hours in years. What was I going to do without her? I knew it was stupid to be thinking about such trivial things, but I was going to miss her teasing me about everything. I already missed her voice and her hugs. How was I supposed to get through months without her?

I cried until the tears wouldn't come anymore. Then I yawned and soon succumbed to sleep.



I woke to humming in the morning. Turning over, I saw Vala cooking on her small stove. It smelled like eggs. "Good morning, Kassia. How do you feel?"

"I think I'm okay." I managed to sit up on my own.

"Very good. Come sit down and have some breakfast."

Carefully, I slid off the bed. I wobbled for a second, but caught myself and walked to the table. My legs felt a little weak, but overall I felt okay. Weird, considering I was dead the day before.

After breakfast, she showed me to a bathroom I hadn't seen before. "You can get cleaned up in here."

"Thanks," I said, stepping into the bathroom. I looked around and wondered how in the world this bathroom got into a cave on a mountain. I wasn't complaining, just curious. Looking into a mirror, I was startled at my reflection. I was paler than usual, my hair was tangled, and I was dirty.

I stepped into the small shower and let the cool water fall on my body. It wasn't hot the way I liked it, not even warm, but it wasn't freezing either. I watched as the dirt and blood rinsed off my body and went down the drain. I shampooed my hair and scrubbed my body. I examined my chest again while in the shower. There was still no evidence of the dagger...I was amazed.

Once I dried off and brushed my hair, I looked back in the mirror. I was still

on the pale side, but I looked a lot better. Much more like me. I found a new toothbrush lying on the sink; I opened it and brushed my teeth. It felt good to be clean. I dressed in some clean clothes she had laid out for me and exited the bathroom.

“Feel better?” Vala asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Good. I think you’ll be healed enough to travel tomorrow.”

“Where are we going?”

“North,” was all she said.

I stayed inside all day, sleeping, resting, and eating. I couldn’t stop thinking about Daxton and Mira; it was excruciating being away from them. I thought about going home and climbing into my bed with my satin sheets and my big, warm comforter. I hoped someday I’d be able to go home, but I wasn’t sure about anything anymore.



Vala woke me up at dawn the next morning. “Time to go.”

I got up and dressed. She handed me my dagger, the one I had used to kill myself. It was hard to believe it was the same one. It was clean now—all the blood had been wiped off. I stared at it for a minute, tracing the infinity sign with my finger before strapping it to my lower leg. After she fed me some breakfast, we left the cave. It was bright on the mountain, and the air was crisp. We started walking a different way than we came. “Tell me if you get tired,” she said, handing me a walking stick.

We walked and walked. The sun was now high in the sky; we had been walking for hours. “How long will we be traveling?” I asked, starting to worry.

“Couple of days,” she responded.

“Great.” I sighed.

“It will build up some endurance.”

I was sure it would. My body was aching. I was cold, yet sweaty, and getting hungry. But my mind kept thinking about what had happened and what was going to happen. I wondered what Mira was doing right now. Were Noe and Auralee helping her? Was Zane keeping his promise? Was he looking out for

her? Mira deserved someone like him, as geeky as he was; he had shown devotion and intelligence these past couple weeks. He would be good for her. I hoped she would let him take care of her. Knowing Mira, she'd fight it for a while.

Poor Daxton was too new to the school to have developed a lot of friendships. He had Zane though; I hoped Zane would be a good friend to him. I wondered if Daxton could use his gift on himself. Maybe he could dream of a place where I was. I sighed. I shouldn't think like that. Selfishly. I was still alive, and I didn't want to think of him with anyone else.

Vala didn't respond to any of my thoughts, which was good because it helped me forget that she could read minds. Finally, she slowed down. "We'll rest up ahead." A few minutes later, we entered a meadow. Vala sat on a rock and closed her eyes. I wasn't sure if she was just resting or having a vision. I took off the backpack she had given me, grabbed out a sandwich I had made for lunch, and ate it in record time. Then I pulled out a canteen of water and took a few sips.

When she opened her eyes, I asked, "Is everything okay?"

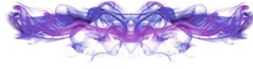
She nodded. "Yes. Are you done eating?"

"Yes."

"We should continue on." She stood up.

*Right. No resting here. Endurance is what I need.* I pushed myself up and followed her across the meadow and onwards.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



### MIRA

“**Y**OU HAVE TO COME OUT of this room some time!” Auralee yelled, pounding on the door. “You have to eat!”

I turned over and covered my head with a pillow, trying to ignore her. She only pounded harder. “Mira! It’s been a week.” I heard some voices outside the door. “Okay, Mira, if you don’t answer the door right now, we’re going to go to Eaton and have someone open it for us!”

“UGH!” I jumped up and threw the door open. “What do you want?!”

She shoved a sandwich at me. “Eat!”

It was a hot meatball sub, one of my favorites. The scent of the sub flowed into the room and made my mouth water. My stomach let out a low rumble. I had eaten in the past week, but it was just snacks I found around the room. I sighed, giving in, and took the food. Famished, I tore into it. “Happy?” I asked, my mouth full.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Was there something else?” I asked, when she didn’t leave.

“I want to see how you are.”

“How do you think I am?” I glanced at her shirt. My eyes filled with tears as I read it: *Good friends are hard to find, harder to leave, and impossible to forget.*

“I know it’s been rough. We’re all hurting.” She picked up the picture I had on the bed of Kassia and me. “I know you guys were best friends, but I miss her too.”

I felt a sliver of guilt. Her sympathetic eyes met mine. I knew how both

Auralee and Noe felt about Kassia. “I know. She loved you guys too.” I hated—absolutely hated—talking about her in past tense.

“Everybody’s asking about you. You know she wouldn’t want you to be alone. She would want you to live your life. Do that for yourself or do it for her. Whatever you need to tell yourself, but live, Mira, live your life.”

Playing with my earring, I thought about what Kassia would want. I imagined her teasing me about moving on. She’d tell me that a week wasn’t enough time to grieve for her. She’d see me with some other girl and say how easy it was for me to replace her. But deep down, Kassia would know that wasn’t true. She would want me to live and move on. I just wasn’t sure I wanted to.

When I looked at Auralee though, I saw the same hurt in her eyes. She missed Kassia, but she was worried about me. She didn’t want to lose me too. “I’ll try.”

“Good. Come to class with me tomorrow?”

“Okay.” I gave in.

She smiled genuinely. “Thank you.”

That night, the tears poured down my cheeks again, and my head pounded from crying for so long. I hugged her pillow tight, trying to squeeze it into the gaping hole in my chest, hoping that it would help close it, if even just for a minute. Why? Why did she have to die? Why did she have to be the one? Why couldn’t it have been someone else’s best friend? She was a good person and didn’t deserve to die. She saved me. How did that translate into punishing her by death?

I didn’t know how I would ever get through this. How do you get over the death of the person closest to you? How do you even begin to heal from something like that? I ran my finger over the picture of us and whispered, “I miss you.”



The next morning, I got up when the alarm went off. I had slept in Kassia’s bed again. I forced myself to get up and walk down to the bathroom. I took a shower and went back to my room to get dressed. It was unnaturally quiet getting ready for school, and when I went to put my make-up on, I broke down in tears again.

Kassia and I had always shared our make-up, picking on each other’s styles.



How was I supposed to get through a day of classes when I couldn't even put on make-up? Screaming, I threw the bag of cosmetics across the room.

"What happened?" Auralee pounded on the door. "Mira? Are you okay?"

I unlocked the door and let her in. She took one look and threw her arms around me. I sobbed on her shoulders for a few minutes. "I can't do this."

"You can. For her." She cleaned up the make-up and handed me a tissue. After my tears dried, she said, "You don't need any make-up. You're beautiful without it. Let's go eat some breakfast and get to class." She tugged on my hand.

I didn't budge. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to face anyone or answer their questions. There were so many things I didn't want to do. I wanted to stay in our room...my room, and live in my memories, but Auralee was there, holding my hand. I took a deep breath and followed her to the dining hall.

I must have been quite a sight because everybody was staring and whispering. Still holding onto my hand, Auralee led me over to our table and pushed me into a sitting position. "I'm going to get food."

Noe was already there and she nodded at Auralee. Turning back to me, she said, "Hey."

"Hi."

"I'm glad you're here."

I didn't know how to respond to that. I wasn't glad I was here. I didn't know why anyone cared that I was here. Even "thanks" didn't seem like a good response so I kept my mouth shut.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Zane notice I was there. *Oh God, not now.* He hurried over. "Hi, Mira."

"Hi."

"I've been calling you."

"I know." I had been ignoring my phone, even turning it off to shut it up. It wasn't that I didn't want to be with Zane, I just had a lot to process right now.

He looked a little sad. "I hope I didn't bother you."

"It was annoying at times," I said, not thinking.

"Oh, sorry," he muttered.

I sighed, scolding myself for being such a bitch. "It's not you, Zane. I'm just having a very hard time."

“I could help you.”

“What can you do?”

“I can be here for you,” he said, taking my hand, “if you let me.”

I tried to smile. I owed him that. “Thank you. I’ll try...”

He nodded. “Listen, I promised Kassia I’d take care of you. I fully intend to keep that promise. Not just because I made it, but also because I really like you.”

I remembered when I overheard her asking him to take care of me. She was the kind of person who would worry about something like that. I had been so mad at her, but when she climbed over the seat and hugged me, my anger quickly disappeared. I never could be mad at her for long.

Just then, Daxton approached us and plopped down at the table. It was the first time I had seen him since we got back. The normally happy guy I had come to know looked pale and sickly.

“He hasn’t been eating either,” Auralee said, shoving plates of food at us. “Now, both of you listen up. You need to eat. She wouldn’t want to know you weren’t taking care of yourselves. She would want you to be healthy and happy. Noe and I aren’t going to put up with this behavior anymore.”

Daxton and I glared at Auralee for a minute. “Fine,” I said, before Daxton gave in. “I’ll eat.” I grabbed an apple off the plate and bit into it.

Daxton took some toast and dramatically shoved it into his mouth. Noe spoke softly. “I talked to Eaton again. The new school training classes start today. Nobody knows about them yet. They’re calling everyone out to the fields at two o’clock.”

That raised some eyebrows. “Interesting. Any ideas what will be included?”

“Physical and weapons training were mentioned, but I don’t know the specifics,” she said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the girl that Kassia didn’t like, Arian, was staring at us. More specifically, she was staring at Daxton. I watched as she stood up and walked over. I’d be damned if I was going to let her get her claws into Daxton. He wanted to move on...fine, but not with her.

Suddenly, Auralee stood up and faced her. “Not going to happen, sweetheart. Turn around and walk away.”

Arian stopped in her tracks, her eyes wide. She spun around and went back to

where she came from. I almost laughed. “I thought I was the compeller,” I said to Auralee.

She did laugh. “I didn’t like what was in her head.”

Daxton just stared at us. “I don’t want to be with her.”

“Good. We’re here to make sure *that* doesn’t happen.”

He shook his head. “Whatever.”



I survived the looks and whispers in my morning classes. Nobody actually spoke to me, which I supposed was better. I didn’t know what to say to anyone. After lunch, we went to our other classes and sure enough, everyone was dismissed to the fields at two o’clock.

I stood with Noe, Auralee, Daxton, and Zane. Noe’s floral skirt was blowing in the wind. She had her arm around Auralee and was whispering something in her ear. I wondered what she was saying.

Mr. Eaton had a microphone, and he spoke to the entire student body about the new classes and training that would be given at the school. He made no mention of Kassia or what had happened. “Many of you have lived sheltered lives, especially those of you who have been here for years. I know you all have learned about demons in class. We believe they are growing in numbers and will be released sometime in the not-too-distant future.”

Murmurs flew through the audience.

“I know it sounds difficult to believe, but these warnings come from trusted sources. All of you possess some sort of gift, but just knowing what that gift is doesn’t teach you how to use it against demons. Some gifts can’t be used against someone or something. All of you need to start physical and weapons training. Once you demonstrate you can handle yourself physically and emotionally, you will be able to carry your weapon on your body.”

The whispering died down a little. Mr. Eaton continued on, “Today, we begin this training. Your days will be longer. You will start with the normal classes, go to your gifted classes, and then have physical and weapons training. On weekends, you will focus on the weapons and physical training only. We hope to have you in shape within a month.”

The audience was stunned into silence. “I expect each of you to put 100 percent into this. We have to unite, be one, and conquer these demons!”

I wondered if anyone here besides the five of us had ever even seen a demon, let alone fought one. I shuddered, remembering the ones that looked like cats but acted like dogs and the little ones that had dug their teeth into Kassia’s back. I did not relish the idea of coming face to face with one again.

Our training started off with running, sit-ups, and push-ups. Then we started learning more advanced martial arts techniques. After an hour of that, we were divided into small groups. Our group got to learn about knives and daggers. The teacher showed us the proper way to hold and sharpen one. We didn’t get to do anything with them—safety and maintenance first. Wonder how surprised he’d be if I took out my dagger and started playing with it. The one strapped to my leg was much nicer than the ones we were training with.

After weapons, we had more physical training to do. This time it was cardio boxing and lifting weights. By six o’clock, I was exhausted. Four hours of training was tough, but I knew firsthand that I needed this training. At dinnertime, I was starving and practically inhaled my food.

I crashed on my own bed that night and slept for nine hours. Banging woke me up. “Everybody up early. Class starts earlier from now on!” It sounded like Ms. Meadows was letting everybody know what was going on.

My body protested as I got out of bed. Slowly and painfully, I made my way to the door, answered it, and thanked her. Glancing out the window, I saw the sky beginning to change from dark to light. Swearing under my breath, I downed some ibuprofen and made my way to the shower. This was way too early to be awake.

The days started to blur together. Breakfast, class, lunch, class, training, dinner, bed. Instead of relaxing and hanging out when the weekend arrived, we were met with a dawn wake-up call and all-day training.

Other than being exhausted and covered with bruises, I didn’t mind the physical demands; it helped me get my anger out.

On Sunday afternoon, they started teaching us how to throw the knives. “More thrust behind your throw,” the teacher told me. I nodded and visualized the demon that took Kassia. I aimed and threw the knife as though I could actually

save her. It stuck straight in the middle of my target. “Great work! Do it again.” I went and got the knife and hit the target right on again. “Excellent. Keep going... Now do it ten times!” he challenged.

All the training kept my mind occupied. I wasn’t able to think of losing Kassia as often. It still hit me every time I went back to our room. I still broke down every night. But the days kept me busy. After knives, we learned how to use a bow and arrow. Martial arts moves got easier as I learned them and the physical training got more demanding.

Every two weeks, we’d get a day of rest. Those days I slept in longer, ate slower, and thought of Kassia more. Those days were harder; sometimes I wished they wouldn’t bother with them. But it also gave us time to hang out with each other. At night, they’d have a movie playing, and I’d lie in Zane’s lap watching. He’d stroke my hair or rub my back but never getting too intimate. I wasn’t ready for that.

It was amazing how easy it was to forget that Kassia wasn’t with us. I’d turn to say something to her, only to realize that she wasn’t there. Then the sadness and anger would hit all over again, and I’d break down in tears without warning.

“Why are you crying?” Noe asked, sitting next to me at lunch.

Holding my head in my hands, I softly responded, “I just realized I can’t hear her laugh anymore.”

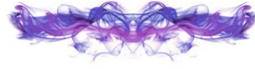
“Oh...honey...” She wrapped her arms around me and rocked me side to side.

The next week, our training included team exercises. We broke into smaller groups and the teachers showed us how to work together and protect each other. First, we learned using martial arts. Then we learned using weapons. Every day, we’d get a demonstration from the teachers and coaches. Their moves were quite impressive. I hoped I’d be that good someday. Maybe if I had been that good, Kassia wouldn’t be gone. At the very least, if I had known how to fight like I did now, I could have saved myself from those two men that night, and Kassia wouldn’t have had to rescue me. So many what-ifs.

One night when I couldn’t sleep, I got out of bed, and sat on the window seat she used to sit in all the time. Across the courtyard was the boys’ dorm. I saw Daxton staring out the window of his room. He noticed me, but he didn’t wave or anything. We just sat in the windows of our rooms, missing the person we

loved most.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



### KASSIA

**V**ALA'S IDEA OF WALKING FOR a couple of days ended up being more like a week. We stopped only to eat a few times a day and slept for six hours a night. Never more. Some days we walked through rain and once even snow. Thankfully, most days the weather was okay. She wasn't the best companion either. She didn't talk much, which left me feeling alone most of the time. Every now and then, she'd encourage me or promise we were almost there.

"Why couldn't we drive?" I asked for the hundredth time.

"Endurance," she answered again. "We've got to get you strong."

The problem with all the walking and quiet time was that I couldn't stop thinking about my friends. What were they doing? How were they feeling? I hoped they were taking care of themselves. I hoped they weren't too upset. A part of me wanted them to mourn for me, but I wondered if that was wrong somehow.

By the fifth night, my feet burned with blisters. My body screamed in pain, and my fingers were numb. I wasn't sure how much longer I could take this. I needed a full night's rest and a shower because this wasn't cutting it. I tried to keep most of my complaints in my head—although I was sure Vala could hear them. I kept telling myself that it had to be this way for me to get my life back.

"Vala?"

"Yes?"

"Can't Noe see me?"

"I can't be positive, but I don't think so. She thinks you're dead, so she's not

‘looking’ for you. Kern hasn’t decided when and where to attack. When he does, maybe she’ll see something then,” she said, offering her opinions.

I nodded my head even though she couldn’t see me. It made sense, I guess. “When Kern decides, will we know?”

“Yes.” She sounded very sure of herself. “We’re almost there.”

“Really?” I raised my voice excitedly. I picked up the pace so I could keep up with her.

Ten minutes later, a white two-story house appeared in the distance. As we approached, a tall man with long, dark hair walked out to meet us. He embraced Vala and then turned to me. “Kassia, nice to see you again.”

“Uh...again?” I was confused.

“You were very little the first time we met,” he said, choosing his words carefully.

“Oh, okay.”

“My name is Ramsey Baatar.” He stuck out his hand and I shook it tentatively. Closer up, he seemed even taller. He had a beard and wild-looking green eyes. “Welcome to my home. I know you will be staying for a while, so let me show you around,” he said, quite friendly.

I glanced over at Vala and she nodded. All three of us walked inside. It was a cozy house with a nice country kitchen and an inviting living room. Upstairs there were three bedrooms and a bathroom. “You can sleep in here,” Ramsey said, showing me into one room. It was a good-sized room, with a comfortable-looking bed in the middle—it must have been at least a queen. The comforter was one of those big, white, down ones that you could snuggle up in and be warm instantly. There was a desk and bookshelves full of books. It seemed familiar in a way.

“It’s very nice, thank you.”

“Why don’t you rest and get cleaned up. Then you can come down and eat. We’ll talk then.”

“Sounds good.” After they walked away, I closed the door, sank into the bed, and was asleep within minutes. A noise woke me and I glanced at the window. It was darker, probably late afternoon. I yearned to sleep more, but I knew they were probably waiting on me. I went to the bathroom and took a shower—the



first one I had since leaving the cave. I turned the temperature up and the hot water poured over my aching body. I didn't want to get out, but sensed I should. I didn't think either of them pampered themselves with long, hot showers—at least not often.

There was a clean outfit sitting on the counter. It was just a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, but I'd take it. I got dressed, brushed my hair and teeth, and went downstairs to find Vala and Ramsey sitting at the kitchen table sipping out of mugs. "You look refreshed," Vala noticed.

"I feel better. Thank you."

"Please sit." Ramsey gestured. "Would you like some tea? Dinner will be ready soon."

"No, thanks," I declined politely.

He nodded. "Very well. I guess we should get down to business." He took a sip of his drink, keeping his eyes on me the whole time. "I have known this was coming for a long time. This war has been brewing since the beginning of time. You, Kassia, are believed to be a special entity. Vala told me she explained to you about the existence of angel blood in your body."

"Yes."

"That will help keep you alive in the future just as it did last time. That's not the only difference that makes you special. Your gift is special too. It revealed itself earlier than most do—"

"It did?" I interrupted, wondering why this was the first I had heard of it.

"Yes, you were very young. Your parents were worried because it's such a heavy gift, and you didn't understand it. Being a mind-blower is an amazing talent. There is so much you can do with it." His eyes lit up. "I can't wait to teach you."

I wasn't sure if I should be excited or scared. Vala patted my hand. "It's fine, child. We're both here to help you. We want to help you get your gift to the level it needs to be at for a battle."

"Okay," I said, ignoring—for now—the fact that this man knew my parents. I'd have to learn more about that later. "How do we do that?"

"It will be a lot of work. We will have to teach you how to control your gift. We'll also be working on physical workouts and weapons training." He turned to

Vala. “How is her focus?”

“Depends on her mood,” she answered like I wasn’t sitting there. “She misses her friends terribly, and she was in love.”

“I *am* in love,” I corrected her.

“Ahhh...I can sense that,” he said to Vala and then turned back to me. “From what I hear, your friends protected you until the end, and now you’re protecting them.”

“Something like that,” I muttered, casting my eyes down to the floor.

“Now, I haven’t met Kern. What was he like?”

My head snapped back up. “Scary.”

“Scary how?”

“Well...he was gorgeous, which I hadn’t expected.”

Ramsey chuckled loudly. “That makes him scary?”

I blushed. “Well, it was more that I didn’t expect that. I expected demon-like, freaky, ugly, and then there was this beautiful, white-haired guy in front of me. Young too. It was just something that surprised me,” I admitted.

“Okay, what else?”

“He was rambling on about me being his bride and ruling the world together whether I liked it or not. If I didn’t give myself to him voluntarily, he was prepared to force me by brainwashing me or something.”

“Did he say how he planned to rule the world?”

“Only that he was going to unleash demons. First, small ones, then bigger and bigger until we all bowed to him.” I shuddered, remembering his words.

“We can’t allow that.”

*Duh.* “So, how do we stop him? Do we attack first?”

“No. We can’t do that. Both the gifted and the faeries are peaceful beings,” Vala said. “Being who I am, I too, am peaceful, bound by the Earth. I cannot start a fight. I can help and protect though, once that fight has been started.”

“I have been in many battles,” Ramsey said. “But none were started by my people. We have to be very careful here. Kern has to attack first, and then we can step in.”

A timer started beeping. “Oh good, dinner is ready.” He served us steaks, potatoes, and green beans. Being as hungry as I was, the green beans tasted like

cookies! I ate everything on my plate and asked for seconds.

“Why don’t you get some sleep now. I’ll be waking you early in the morning to start. No time to waste.”

I nodded, wiping my face. “Dinner was delicious. Of course, I haven’t eaten much in days.” I stole a look at Vala, who almost cracked a smile. “Vala, you said you’d be able to find out if my friends were okay. Is that something you can do anytime? Can you tell me how they are before I start this training?”

She nodded. “Go get ready for bed and I’ll be in to see you.”

“Okay.” I rinsed my plate off and headed upstairs.

I heard Ramsey speak to Vala. “Are you sure you should tell her how her friends are? Will that distract her?”

“No, I think she’ll do better knowing how they are rather than wondering. I think it’ll help her focus.”

As I walked up the stairs, I glanced over to the living room. An image of my parents playing with me in there flashed through my mind. *Odd. What was that?* I shook my head, continued on to my room, and got ready for bed. When I walked back into my room from the bathroom, Vala was sitting on the chair. She had a faraway look on her face. I guessed she was checking in to see how everyone was. I sat on the bed and waited for her to speak.

After what seemed like an hour, she finally looked at me. “First, they are all fine. Alive. No injuries,” she reported. “Mira is, well, she’s devastated, but Auralee has finally convinced her to eat and go to class. Noe hasn’t seen anything yet and Daxton is hurting; he too hasn’t been taking good care of himself. But Zane got on him and he’s starting to recover. The school has started trainings too. Physical stuff, weapons trainings, a lot of the same things we’ll be teaching you.”

I smiled and tears sprang to my eyes. “They’re all okay.”

“Yes, they are. That doesn’t mean they don’t miss you every minute of the day, and I am sorry about that. I know how much you miss them, but hang on. I will get you back to them, I promise.”

“Thank you, Vala.”

“You’re welcome. Sleep now. Tomorrow I want you focused and alert. Don’t make me regret filling you in.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I got under the covers. “Good night, Vala.”

“Good night, Kassia.” She turned off the lights and closed the door.

I sobbed silently in my pillow until I fell asleep.



Morning came way too early. Gone were the days of sleeping in and hitting the snooze button. “Rise and shine!” Ramsey pounded on the door, causing me to fall out of bed. “Time to get up and face the day.”

When I opened my eyes, I noticed the sun had already peeked over the horizon. At least he waited until sunrise. “Coming...” I said in a drowsy voice. The air was chilly, so I quickly slipped on the only clean jeans and T-shirt I had. I grabbed my hoodie from the chair and threw that on too.

After getting ready, I hurried downstairs and had breakfast. I had no idea what Ramsey and Vala had in store for me. Imagine my surprise when I walked out the door to find them with a cat-hound. I froze. My eyes widened, and I looked back and forth between them, trying to figure out if I had been duped.

Vala shook her head. “No.” She answered the question I had asked in my head. “We caught him a while ago and now we want to see you kill him.”

“I need to see what you can already do.” Ramsey gestured.

I let out a sigh of relief. “Okay, move out of the way then.” I walked down the porch steps and faced the demon as Vala and Ramsey moved to the sides. I planted my feet and glared at the cat-hound, sending him my death stare. Being a smaller, weaker demon, it only took me ten seconds to have him flat on the ground and another five for him to die.

“Impressive.” Ramsey clapped. “Our goal is to get that down to less than five seconds.”

“Smaller ones are easier,” I told him. “Bigger ones take longer. And when there are a lot, I can do more than one, but not hundreds at a time.”

“You will.”

“How are we supposed to test this?”

“Nobody ever told you that you could do other things?” Ramsey asked.

My jaw dropped. “Um...no. I would have remembered that.”

“Tell me, when you kill like that, how do you feel inside?”

“Angry. I get mad and then whoever is there suffers from pain or death.”

“So your body fills with anger and hate?”

“Pretty much.”

“What do you hate? Bugs? Birds?”

“Definitely bugs.”

He stood next to me. “I want you to look out in the field and see the bugs. They’re out there. You need to focus and concentrate enough that you can see every bug.”

I shot him a look. “Really?”

“Yes, really. I’ll be sitting over there when you’re done.”

That made me laugh. *Bugs? Really? Okay.* I concentrated on the bugs. Some I could pick out right away; however, I was certain there were more of them. I tried to push my mind further, expanding beyond a few feet, but it felt blocked somehow. I glanced over at Ramsey, who was smiling. I wasn’t laughing anymore. Sighing, I tried again and again. After about an hour, I threw my hands up and sat on the ground.

I held my head in my hands, trying to figure out what I was doing wrong. How was I supposed to find every bug here? How did I open up and let my mind go?

Ramsey finally got up and walked over to where I sat. “Get up,” he ordered. I stood. “You can’t give up. You can do this. Empty your mind and listen.”

I nodded. First, I closed my eyes for a few seconds. I tried to let every thought in my head disappear. Then I opened my eyes and listened. I envisioned seeing the bugs showing themselves. And they I did—not all of them, but there was definitely more than before. Just not enough.

“Better,” Ramsey said. “Now, do it again and try to push back further.”

I did the same thing as before. I could see the ones I had earlier. I focused further on a spot in the distance and concentrated on getting every bug around to show up. More started to appear and I got excited. Suddenly they all disappeared again.

“Good, but see what happened? When you got enthusiastic, you broke concentration, and you lost power. You have to hold it until you’re done with them. Remember, you are in control. You have the fate of any living thing in your hands.”

*Any living thing?*

It took another few hours to really get it down, but I was pretty sure every bug nearby was visible. As I held my focus, I heard Ramsey whisper to me, “Now kill them.”

My eyes narrowed, and the power within me sprang to life. It was almost like Kern had said. The power enjoyed being used. When the power reached its limit, I told the bugs to die. About a third of them dropped right then and there. “Damn,” I swore.

“That was better. Not enough, but better.” He looked up at the sky. “I want to you to jog around the tree line for twenty minutes and then come inside for lunch.”

I looked up at him to see if he was serious. He was. I sighed and started jogging. It felt good to be actively doing something, but after twenty minutes I was ready to stop.

Lunch consisted of sandwiches and soup. They let me have a half an hour break before taking me back outside to practice more. Each time I tried it, I got a little better. After a couple more hours, Ramsey moved on to teach me martial arts in case I ever needed it. “With your gift, I doubt you will, but there may come a time when it comes in handy.”

“Sure.” I shrugged. I had learned the basics at Glendale, so Ramsey taught me the next steps. We worked on them for the rest of the afternoon. After dinner, I excused myself to my room. I sat on the bed reading one of the books from the bookshelf, but I only got a few chapters in because my mind just wasn’t in it.

I wished Auralee’s gift worked long distance. I could send her a message; let her know I was okay. It seemed wrong to allow them to think I was dead. I missed my friends. I missed talking to them and hanging out with them. I missed Daxton’s kisses and Mira’s laugh. I curled up on the bed and tried to fall asleep.

Even though I was exhausted, I couldn’t sleep. I was so used to hearing Mira breathe, whether I was asleep or awake, that it was just too quiet here. In the quiet, the loneliness settled in and I felt completely and utterly alone, even with Vala and Ramsey nearby.

There was no window seat in this room and standing at the window just felt weird. So I stayed in bed, tossing and turning, my heart empty. A few tears fell

down my cheeks, but I quickly wiped them away. I couldn't dwell on this. I had to figure out how to do better. I had to save them.

The next morning, I couldn't do any better. Ramsey silently paced around me, and I could sense his impatience. "Kassia...concentrate on these bugs. Try to see them as enemies. As demon bugs. They are a threat to you, to your friends, to the world."

I fought back the urge to laugh. Imagery had always been hard for me. That's why I loved Daxton's gift. He could take what I wanted to see and show it to me. I took some deep breaths and cleared my mind. I thought about my friends and how I had to save them from this evil looming over us. I opened my eyes and tried again, thinking of the bugs as the enemy. This time almost all of them died. "Whoa," I breathed.

"Good, Kassia!" Vala cheered.

I smiled, proud of myself.

"Yes, very well done," Ramsey added. "Take a break and we'll get started on some martial arts and work on your dagger skills too."

By the end of the week, I was pretty confident that I could do some serious damage in a battle. I wasn't perfect yet, but I was on my way. I kept up with all the trainings they threw at me.

One night, I stayed out on the porch steps. Looking up at the night sky, I remembered the date night I had spent with Daxton. It seemed like a lifetime ago. I smiled, reliving Daxton's soft touch. I remembered the way he had held me against the tree and the sound of the leaves rustling as he kissed me. The way he had made me feel when he challenged the power within me.

The pain in my heart brought tears to my eyes once again. I had a hard time seeing him clearly. I wished I had my phone, which had pictures of him and Mira on it. I had left it in my room at school when we ran.



As the days passed, I still found the nights to be the hardest. Some nights I found myself falling asleep quickly, probably from pure exhaustion. Other nights I lay awake no matter what. When I did fall asleep, I would wake up to a tear-soaked pillow.

I had found an old blank journal and wrote letters to my friends in it. I knew they would never be read, but it felt good to get what I was feeling off my chest. I worried that once we were reunited, they'd be mad and hate me. I wasn't sure how well I'd accept that. It wasn't my fault. I suppose I could have told Vala no and found a phone, but I really did fear for all of our lives. I wished I could talk to Mira about it. She'd know what to do. She always knew what to do.

At breakfast the next morning, I asked the question that had been bothering me for a while. "You said you knew my parents."

Ramsey looked up. "Yes."

When he didn't offer any more, I asked, "How did you know them?"

"They came here with you when you were little," he answered.

"How old was I?"

"Not yet five."

"What did they want?" I asked, annoyed that he wasn't being more forthright.

Stealing a glimpse at Vala, he said, "You had already shown signs of your gift. They were scared. You were very young and didn't understand."

I let that sink in. "When you say that...do you mean I harmed people?"

He mashed his lips a little. I could tell he was trying to think of how to answer that. You know when a question goes unanswered too long, it can't be an answer you want to hear. "Because you were so little and didn't understand, sometimes when you had a temper tantrum, your gift would release."

"Oh my God! Did I kill people?"

"No. Your parents kept you pretty secluded."

"I hurt my parents then."

He hesitated. "Yes, but you didn't kill them."

"I caused them pain," I whispered. My eyes filled with tears. It had been years since I had seen them. I could hardly remember what they looked like. "What did you do here?"

"I tried working with you, but you were so young, it didn't really help. So we kept you here for a while. While I'm not immune to your gift, I can handle it longer than the average person."

"Why don't I remember being here?"

"I used a spell."



“What?!” I raised my voice, feeling violated.

“I knew what was coming, Kassia. I couldn’t afford for things to happen earlier than they were supposed to. I couldn’t have you knowing.”

“So you erased my memory?”

“No, I didn’t erase your memory. I just blocked part of it. Do you want to hear the rest?”

I nodded eagerly. “Yes.”

“After a few years and some training, we got you into the institute a little early. But I had to find someone immune to your gift. I started a search—”

He didn’t get to finish. “You found Mira.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “I found her. I was able to talk to the school and get her assigned as your roommate.”

“So our friendship was...arranged?” I said quietly.

Vala patted my hand. It was one of the only ways she showed affection. “In a way, yes. But the two of you grew into the best of friends all on your own. Nobody put a spell on you to become friends; that part happened all by itself.”

I nodded, trying to believe what I was hearing. “Was anybody else a plant?”

“Not really.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, I believe Mr. Eaton told you that Noe and Auralee were put in the room next to yours for a reason. Again, the friendship took a life of its own. We didn’t mess with anyone’s mind.”

My eyes got wide. “Daxton.”

“We did have a hand in getting him transferred to your school. You have to realize that we kept hearing that you still couldn’t control your gift and that kids were afraid of you because you could hurt them. We all knew you didn’t mean to do this. Mira was immune and effective, but not always around. We needed someone else and we could only hope that Daxton would be able to stop your anger by using his gift,” Ramsey explained.

“But we didn’t ask him to fall in love with you. He knew nothing about you. He didn’t even know why he had been transferred,” Vala added.

“So you knew I’d be back?”

“Yes. We didn’t know the exact circumstances, but we knew at some point, it

would be our job to train you. We promised your parents we would.”

“Do you know where my parents are?” I asked.

They exchanged glances again. “We haven’t heard from them in years. Their gifts are essential in the battle to save the world. We think, and please keep in mind that neither of us knows for sure, that they were captured.”

“Captured? You think?” I tried to process that. “Kern?”

“We don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know?” I wasn’t trying to be rude, but these two seemed to know an awful lot. Why didn’t they know this?

“There is something blocking us from seeing them.”

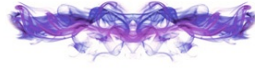
My face fell, and I became silent while I thought about everything they had told me. Many things made more sense to me now than they ever had, but at the same time, brought more questions to my mind. I was frustrated and upset. My parents were being held prisoner somewhere. And here I thought they didn’t care about me. I was so wrong about them...they did love me. They had tried to help and protect me. They had done everything they could for me. “Did they know that I’d be so...special?”

“Yes.”

So they knew they had to keep me safe at any expense. Even if it cost them their freedom. Maybe even their lives. I realized at that moment that everybody was counting on me, relying on me, and trusting me to be the best I could to save them. That was one hell of a burden. But it was one I was willing to commit to.

I looked at Vala and Ramsey. “Let’s go. I want you to train me to be the best mind-blower I can be.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



### MIRA

A MONTH HAD PASSED SINCE TRAINING had begun. I was exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Not a day went by that I didn't find myself in tears. I missed my best friend more than I thought possible. There were days I didn't want to get out of bed but forced myself to. I wanted revenge so bad I could taste it. The trainings were the only thing keeping me going.

Today we were actually going to be fighting each other. It kind of scared me; I didn't want to hurt anyone I knew. However, we needed the practice. They broke us into different groups, and each group had a referee. We were told to knock our opponent down, but that was it. I made it through the first few rounds before it got more difficult. I almost lost a couple times, but won in the end. I was thankful I didn't have to fight any of my close friends.

I sat on Kassia's bed again, looking at her picture, trying to remember her voice. Suddenly, it dawned on me there was a way I could hear it again. I dug my phone out of my pocket and dialed her cell phone number. Her voicemail immediately picked up. "Hi! You've reached my phone. I'm not here right now or rather I left my phone somewhere. Leave a message and if I ever find it again, I'll call you back. Bye!"

Hearing her voice brought tears to my eyes. She sounded so happy. I listened to it a couple more times before burying my head in her pillow and falling asleep.



Another month passed by before I knew it. I lost my sense of time. Every day my body was pushed to its limits, and every night my mind wandered to the what-ifs.

I was sitting at lunch one day staring at my sandwich when Zane sat down next to me. “Mira, come with me.” With one hand, he picked up my food. With the other, he took my hand and gently pulled me to the garden. We sat on the bench. He stared at me and I blushed. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks, I think.” I couldn’t have looked beautiful. I hadn’t dressed up or even put on make-up since the first week training had begun. It was pointless. The make-up just ended up smeared, making me look more horrible than going without it. I took a bite of my sandwich. “How are you doing?” I asked, my mouth full of food.

“I’m fine. It’s just been tiring.”

“Yeah, for sure.” I took another bite. I was hungry, and I didn’t care if Zane was watching me stuff my face.

“How are you handling—”

“Stop.” I put up my hand. “If you say her name, I will become a basket case for the rest of the day. I can’t have that happen.”

“Okay.”

I was silent for a minute and twirled my earring. I had to push back all the feelings that were threatening to come to the front of my mind. “Kiss me.”

His eyes widened. “What?”

“You heard me. Kiss me.”

He didn’t wait for me to say it again. He moved closer and leaned in, hesitating for a few seconds as he let his warm breath fall on my lips. Then he pressed his lips against mine. I leaned into the kiss and pressed back. His hands were around me now, holding me against his body. My body responded by heating up and getting all tingly. I pushed him back and sat in his lap, facing him. He smiled, obviously enjoying this side of me.

I took his head in my hands and pressed my lips to his. Then I kissed his cheek, his ear, and his neck before I made my way back to his mouth. My heart was racing, and I was breathing fast. I nibbled on his lip and tugged on it as I pulled away.

“Wow...” he whispered.

“Sorry,” I said, apologizing for getting carried away.

“Don’t be sorry. That was...amazing.”

“Hey, you two!” an adult yelled. “What are you doing back here? The bell rang, you are supposed to be in training!”

“Oops.”

We both giggled and hurried back to the courtyard. I crammed the rest of my sandwich in my mouth and threw away my garbage. Arian was watching. I bet she was the one who sent people after us. For some reason, even with Kassia gone, she still hated us. I thought about compelling her to do something that would get her in trouble, but I figured it would just backfire and get me in trouble instead.

Zane winked at me and went to his group. Auralee caught my eye. She went up to Arian and raised her voice, which was rare for Auralee. I got closer so I could listen. “Not only am I watching you, I’m also reading your mind. You try getting any of my friends in trouble again, you will be sorry.” The look on Arian’s face was priceless. She hadn’t seen *that* coming. I chuckled a little. She started to say something, but Auralee cut her off. “Don’t go there.” I chuckled again. That was a side of Auralee I didn’t see often.



A few days later, I saw Daxton sitting in the courtyard alone. I walked over and sat beside him. He smiled at me, but it was a forced smile. “Hey,” I managed to say. I liked Daxton, but when I was around him I felt Kassia more and that was hard. I wanted to be there for him, but sometimes seeing his hurt was like looking into a mirror. “How ya doing?”

He shrugged. “’Bout the same.”

“Wanna talk?”

His eyes were cast down. “I just miss her.”

“Me too.”

“I feel like I shouldn’t. I feel like everyone is waiting for me to pick up the pieces and move on, but I don’t want to.”

“That’s how I feel too. You loved her, and it’s okay to mourn for her. I do all

the time.”

“You seem so together though.”

“Oh, Daxton.” I sighed. “Sometimes I look tough on the outside, I have to. But inside I guarantee you, I’m a mess. I cry every night. *Every night*,” I emphasized. “The pain won’t go away. She was a part of my life for six years. It doesn’t just disappear.”

“I only knew her for a short time, but I felt so drawn to her. I still do. I don’t know how to move on.”

“Daxton?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you ever use your gift to see her? Can you even do that?” I asked. He looked up at me, startled. “Oh my God, you do!”

“Mira...it’s...”

“You’ve been doing it. Oh, Daxton, you have to take me there. You have to!” I insisted.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“It’s addicting, and she’s not real. It’s hard to remember it’s not really her.”

“But to see her one more time...” My heart ached.

“And then what, Mira? What about the next time?”

“Just once,” I pleaded.

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t.”

“You’re being selfish! You’re keeping this all to yourself,” I accused him.

“It’s not like that. It’s just...a fantasy world, a dream world. It’s not real!”

“Then why do you do it? Why do you go there?”

He didn’t answer. I felt bad for him, but he had a way to see Kassia and I didn’t. Right now, I wanted to see her badly. Tears flowed down my cheeks. “Okay,” he said, giving in. “But only for a minute, and that’s only because I care about you, and I don’t want you to lose touch with reality.”

I nodded, agreeing to anything.

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t be doing this.” He placed his hands on mine, and I was whisked away in a heartbeat. Daxton and I were standing on a white sand beach. The sun was shining down on us. The smell of the ocean tickled my

nose.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“She loved this beach.” He smiled, looking toward the ocean.

I followed his gaze and gasped when I saw her. Kassia was sitting on the beach with her feet in the water. I knew she wasn’t real, but she sure looked it. My heart was racing, and I could feel the tears falling down my face.

As we walked closer to her, she turned and waved, looking more beautiful than I remembered. Her eyes lit up like we were the only two people in the world who mattered. Her face had color in it unlike the last time I had seen her. I had to laugh when I saw her perfect lip gloss sparkling in the sunlight. Her long, auburn hair blew in the ocean breeze. She looked so alive and happy.

I wondered if I could talk to her and hug her, but I knew I’d be happy if I could just sit next to her and be with her. There was no place I’d rather be. Suddenly, I was pulled from the dream and found myself back in reality.

“What the hell?”

It wasn’t just Daxton and me anymore. Noe was standing next to us. Her eyes were wild. She was searching for something.

Auralee was running up to us. She shot us disapproving looks. “You two shouldn’t be doing this. We’ll get to that later. What is it, Noe?”

She put her finger up and made us wait a minute. “It’s almost time.”

“Time for?”

“The battle to start.” Her words were hushed. “I can’t see everything, but it looks like they’re coming here. We have to tell Eaton.”

Jumping up, we all hurried to Eaton’s office, where Noe filled him in.

“Here?” he asked.

“From what I can tell, Kern wants to get rid of the gifted and faeries first, then move on to the rest of the world. He’s going to attack the schools. He personally holds a grudge toward our school because of Kassia. He wants to see the demons bring us down,” Noe said, talking fast, pacing around the room. “We have to prepare everyone.”

Mr. Eaton looked out of his window. “Noe, how bad will it be?”

“We will lose some, sir. I can’t see the ending yet, too many demons in the way.”

He nodded somberly. “How long do we have?”

“Two weeks...give or take. As soon as I know, I’ll let you know.”

“I’ll step up the training,” Mr. Eaton said.

We were excused and walked back outside. Auralee turned to Daxton and me and started pointing her finger and yelling at us. “What were you two thinking? That’s a dream, it’s not real! Why would you do that to yourselves?”

“I had to see her again,” I defended myself.

“Not like that.”

“Why not? She was alive and happy!”

“It’s not real, Mira!” Noe chimed in. “I know you’re both hurting tremendously, and I would love to see her again, but that isn’t her. You’re just prolonging your healing.”

Daxton and I looked down, feeling ashamed.

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad,” Auralee said. “I’m just worried about you. Please let your hearts heal now.”

I thought about seeing Kassia on the beach. It was a pleasant thought. Maybe that was all I needed. Thinking of her somewhere happy and safe made me smile, and that was better than remembering her dead and colorless.

Auralee nodded. “You’re right. Remember her like that.” She reached over and hugged me. “She’s always going to be here with us.” She put her hand over my heart. “She’ll always be with you.”

I looked over at Daxton. “She’s right. You’ve got to let her go. We have to prepare for this battle. We need to be ready.”

“I’ll try. It’s hard because it’s something I can do anytime.”

“I know. Try for us,” I said, knowing that I’d have to talk to Zane and have him keep an eye on Daxton.

“I will.”

I gave him a big hug before walking away. I pulled out my cell phone and called Zane. “I need you to meet me in the courtyard,” I told him.

“Be right there.”

I waited for him by the door of his building. When he stepped out, I threw my arms around him and planted a kiss on his lips. I led him to a nearby bench, and we sat down. “There’s a couple things going on.”



“Okay...?” He looked concerned.

“First, Noe said the battle will be soon. In the next two weeks.”

“Really?”

“That’s what she says.” I let out a short laugh. “You don’t question what she says.”

“Okay, what do we do?”

“We talked to Eaton. He’s going to step up the training. I guess that’s all we can do. The other thing is about Daxton. He’s been seeing Kassia—”

“What?” he interrupted me. “How?”

“He’s been using his gift and seeing her that way. He...uh...I talked him into letting me see her today.”

“Oh, Mira...”

“I know, but I had to. It was quick...just for a minute or two, and she was so happy Zane...she was on a beach and full of life. Seeing her like that made me happy,” I said, letting the tears fall down my face.

He took my hands. “I get it. I do. The last time you saw her she was dead. Seeing her alive like that made you think she was in a good place. Closure.”

I nodded. “Yeah, sort of.”

“But?”

“Daxton. It’s like he’s addicted to seeing her. He can’t stop because he can see her as much as he wants. It’s hurting him. It’s keeping him from healing. He promised today that he’d try and stop, but he needs a friend...you. You need to help him. Please.”

“Of course I will,” he responded.

“Thank you.”

He put his arm around me, and we sat there until the sun went down. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, you will.” I smiled and we kissed again before I went back to my room. When I got there, I picked up the picture of Kassia and me and sat down on her bed. I ran my finger over her picture. “I miss you so much. So incredibly much. I don’t want you to think I’m forgetting you because I’m really not. I will never, ever forget you. I know it wasn’t you that I saw today, but seeing you like that made me hope that you are happy somewhere. And that means I can start to

heal..." I clutched the picture to my chest and lay down on her bed. This was the one place I could still smell her. I cried until I could cry no more, and then my tired body fell asleep.

The next week was brutal. Mr. Eaton had informed everybody that he believed the demons were coming, and we needed to be ready. We stopped all regular classes and concentrated on the physical and gifted training. We got up earlier and went to bed later. I had fought these demons before. I knew how freaky they were, and I wasn't taking any chances with my life or the lives of my friends.

Noe pounded on my door one morning. "Today, Mira!" she yelled, when I opened it.

"When?"

"Nightfall."

"I'll be ready."

"I know you will." She forced a smile.

I showered, knowing very well it could be my last time. We all sat at our table for breakfast. I laughed seeing Auralee's shirt. It read: *The End Is Near*. Nobody spoke. We knew exactly what was coming, and it scared each of us. Noe had told Mr. Eaton that they would be here by dusk. I ate everything on my plate; I wanted to make sure I had enough energy for the battle.

Once Mr. Eaton made the announcement that tonight was the night, the atmosphere at school changed. I think most the kids here thought they were being played. Now it was real. They were nervous and scared.

Around three, I checked my dagger. I saw that a lot of the other kids were doing the same. The five of us met up an hour later. I crammed a chocolate bar in my mouth, savoring each bite and scanned the courtyard. Noe hadn't said where they would show up, so all we could do was watch.

About half an hour later, Noe stood and started walking around the building. We followed her. On the way, we called Mr. Eaton, and he joined us. She pointed and said, "They will surround the school and break through the shield using magic of their own. There will be many of them and they will come from all directions. Some that we haven't seen before." She paused. "Warn the other schools. The demons will attack them at the same time." She stopped talking and a confused expression crossed her face for a moment, but she shook her head

and sat down on the grass. She muttered something to herself and then said, “Any time now.”

After making some phone calls on his cell, Mr. Eaton had the students line up around the school, and then we waited. I could feel the tension all around me. The hair on my neck and arms was standing straight up. I could feel something coming.

We didn’t have to wait long. First the cat-hounds, as Kassia had called them, showed up, sniffing the ground. Behind them, thousands of the little guys moved in, showing off their fanged teeth. It was truly one of the scariest sights I had ever seen. The stink coming from them was horrendous. Their red eyes, full of evil, sent tremors through me.

“My God!” Mr. Eaton staggered.

We held our position; they had to make the first move. I thought about all the kids at the school. There were probably five hundred of us and upon looking at the demons approaching there had to be at least five thousand of them. How would we ever survive this?

When the first one leapt in the air at one of us, someone yelled, “GO!” We charged at the demons. With my dagger out, I stabbed demon after demon. They kept coming at us, and I kept thrusting my dagger into them, watching them fall to the ground. Every couple minutes, I’d look up and check on my friends, making sure they were all good. I noticed bodies on the ground, but I turned away, not wanting to think about that right now. Besides, Eaton was supposed to have a healer here and extra medical staff. I continued on, killing one demon after another.

A few times, I had to use my martial arts skills to keep demons off me. I took a few deep breaths. My arms were tired and they wanted a break, but when I looked up I couldn’t see an end in sight. The demons were still everywhere.

Zane ran up to me. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” I nodded. Taking a deep breath, I raised my dagger again, and we were able to clear out a small section of demons, only to have to move on to another. Bit by bit, we gained a little ground, the five of us together. I had no idea how the other side of the school fared.

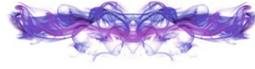
The horrid cat-hounds seemed to be gone now, leaving a ton of the smaller

ones behind. Although they died easily, it was hard to keep up because there were just so many of them. Very few things kill demons. Gifts like Kassia's being one. Weapons made by faeries or sealed by angels were another. I could send one flying with a kick, but I couldn't kill it unless I stabbed it.

I found myself fighting through tears. The leader of these horrible creatures had killed my best friend. I hated them, and I made sure they knew it.

After we killed some more, I stood straight up to look around and saw her standing there. My heart stopped. *Am I dead?* I blinked a few times, but she was still there. Standing in the middle of the side yard was Kassia. Her hair was whipping in the wind, but it was the look in her eyes that made me shudder. She was staring straight at us, but instead of a smile, she was giving us her death stare.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



### KASSIA

**T**HE NEXT TWO MONTHS WERE merciless. I welcomed it, but my body hated me for it. I worked from sunrise to sunset with only a couple of breaks. By the end of the second month, I could drop almost all the bugs in the area in less than five seconds. Vala and Ramsey added distractions while I was concentrating by talking, playing music, or even running in front of me.

“You need to be able to handle distractions, ignore them, and focus on what you’re there to do. You can’t hurt the people or the faeries, you can only hurt the demons,” Ramsey said. It had taken a long time to master that, but I had done it.

Ramsey tested my powers with different kinds of bugs and at different times of the day. One night, he had me find all the mosquitoes and fireflies. Then he told me to kill the mosquitoes but keep the fireflies alive. That took more work, but I was able to do it...almost.

One morning Ramsey announced that he had come across some demons. *How does one even just happen upon demons?* He called them scouts. They were sent to look around and report back. “I want to use them in your training,” he said, throwing me off guard. “I am going to release them all at the same time, and I want you to kill them as quickly as you can.”

“Okay,” I said, not thinking twice about it.

He had put the demons in cages. Now he drew his hands up, and the cage doors opened. The wind blew their nauseating scent toward me, causing me to gag. However, these demon scouts looked different than the ones I had encountered before. They looked like a cross between little shadow people and

bears. They had a round head, body, arms, and legs, but they were only a couple feet tall. Instead of fingers, they had sharp claws growing out of their hands. Then there were their eyes of course, the eyes of a demon—narrow and red—which sent shivers through me.

Vala stood directly behind the demons. I was able to ignore her completely and aim only at the demons. It took five seconds for me to kill them and send them melting into the earth. Ramsey clapped. “Well done!” He reminded me of a proud father. Looking at Vala, he asked, “Did you feel anything?”

“No.” She smiled. “Not a thing.”

“Excellent!”



“I have captured more demons to practice with,” Ramsey announced as we walked outside a few days later.

*Great. Just happened upon a few more, I suppose.*

“This is important. I want you to perfect singling out the demons and leaving everything else out. There will be a lot of distractions at the battle.”

I nodded. “I understand. I just don’t like it.”

I could see the dwarf-like demons approaching now, slobbering all over the ground. I shuddered. I also noticed an unnatural number of wildlife nearby. Ramsey must have brought them in too.

Ramsey stood behind me. “In your mind, pick out the demons from the other animals.”

There were rabbits, squirrels, and birds. I was having a hard time picking out only the demons. “I can’t. There’s too many.”

“You have to.”

I tried again, but with so many different species, I kept screwing up. “It’s not working.”

“Use your mind,” he told me.

“To do what?” I didn’t understand what he was asking me to do.

“Open your mind and send out a stream of light to each demon.”

“What?”

“Just try it,” he said patiently.

I let out a big breath of air, blowing my bangs out of my eyes, and opened my mind. *Stream of light, huh?* I imagined streams of purple leaving my mind and flowing out to find every evil thing I could see. They swirled like ribbons in the wind until they touched the demons.

“Are you seeing it?” Ramsey asked.

“Yes,” I said, quietly amazed.

“Are they only touching demons?”

“Yes.” *Unbelievable.*

“Now kill them.”

The demons scurried closer, and the hatred in my body rose. I sent out a surge through the streams, and the demons immediately collapsed on the ground.

As soon as the demons melted, the purple swirls disappeared, and my anger dissolved.

“Good job.” Ramsey clapped.

“Thanks. I never imagined it that way, it was...kinda cool.”

“I don’t think you realize how much power your mind holds.”

“How did you know I could do that?”

“You told me when you were little.”

*Oh, right. And it probably got blocked out along with who knows what else.*



Two days later Vala called me downstairs. “Kern has decided that they will attack the gifted schools in a week.”

“The schools? They’re attacking the schools?”

“Yes. All of them at the same time. Kern isn’t too happy with your school. He wants revenge because of you. He’s going to be there watching, but he’s making a mistake. We will be there too, and you will have your shot at killing him.” Vala clapped excitedly.

I wasn’t sure this was something to be excited about. “How do I kill him?” I asked, remembering how hard it supposedly was to actually kill him.

“That is what we will teach you this week.”

A few days later, Vala handed me a new dagger. “This one is only for Kern,” she said. The dagger was longer than my other one and the engravings were

different. “This one was made the same way as your other dagger, but it has more magic in it.”

“Do I just plunge it into him?” I asked.

“There are a few ‘rules,’ if you will. First, you will need to have Mira or another compeller with you. It might help if you have someone who can read minds as well. Kern will most likely be holding something—a wand, a stick, a remote of some sort. The compeller will need to make him drop that.

“After that, use your gift on him. This won’t kill him, but it might weaken him a little. Then you—and this is important, only you—will need to stab him three times. The last time needs to be directly in the heart, and you will need to leave the dagger in as far as you can. Ramsey or I will take over from there.”

Sounded easy enough.

“It does,” she responded. Sometimes I forgot she could read minds because she usually kept it to herself. “Getting close enough to him will prove to be difficult. He is strong. And if he gets ahold of you first, it could very well be over—quickly.”

“When do we leave?” I asked.

“Soon. I won’t make a decision until I’m ready to leave. Just in case he has a watcher. I’d like to take him by surprise.”

“I’ll be ready.”

“Kassia, you are ready.”

I smiled. That was big coming from Vala. “I hope I make you proud.”

“You will. You already have.”



Three days later, Vala woke me up. “It’s time to go.” Quickly, I dressed in jeans, a white T-shirt, and my hoodie.

The three of us started walking after shoving some food in our mouths. “Will we be walking a long time?” I asked.

“No. Just to the portal,” Ramsey answered.

“Portal?” I was flabbergasted. “We have portals?”

Ramsey chuckled. “Yes, there are quite a few, but they’re only used when necessary.”



“Where is it?” I was a little annoyed Vala had made me walk all the way to Ramsey’s if there were portals.

“About half a day’s walk.”

“Oh, so nowhere nearby?”

“Near enough,” Ramsey answered.

“Is the battle happening today?”

“Yes, the demons will be there by dusk.”

“Will we?”

“Yes.”

“There won’t be time to socialize, Kassia. You can do that later,” Vala advised.

“I understand.” Thinking more about these portals that existed, I asked, “Can anyone use the portal?”

“No,” Ramsey answered, but he didn’t elaborate.

After a few minutes passed, I asked, “How does it work?”

“You just step in.”

That wasn’t exactly the answer I was looking for.

“Some things just don’t have an explanation. It just works,” Vala said.

We walked through forests and across meadows, stopping only to eat and take short breaks. “Keep up your strength,” Vala said, shoving a sandwich at me. “You will need it.”

During the mid-afternoon, I asked out loud, “Do you think they’ll hate me?”

Nobody answered. Either it wasn’t something they could answer or they didn’t think I’d want to hear the answer. I left it at that. This walk was easier to handle than the trek there. I was in shape now and didn’t mind it at all.

The sun was low in the sky when we reached a secluded area on the outskirts of a large city. I had no idea where we were. “Will this hurt?” I asked skeptically.

“No. Just watch your landing,” Ramsey responded.

“Where does it come out?”

“About a mile from the school.”

“Really?” I couldn’t believe there was a portal that close to the school and nobody had ever mentioned it.

Ramsey did some crazy things with his arms and a light appeared. It grew bigger until it was a large, colorful oval. Ramsey went through first; he just

stepped in and disappeared. It was as if the portal opened up and ate him.

“You go next,” Vala said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Hesitantly, I stepped up to the portal. I took a deep breath and walked in. The next thing I knew, it was ejecting me out into a forest. Ramsey caught me and helped me get my balance. “Whoa,” I gasped.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

Vala stepped out of the portal with grace and ease. “Years of practice,” she said, seeing my expression. “Let’s go. We have a mile to cover, and it’s almost time.”

Soon, I could see Glendale in the distance. My body tingled—but I wasn’t sure if it was from fear or excitement. The students and faculty were all lined up around it. We were coming in behind some of the demons. Vala put her finger up to her nose. The cat-hounds had already started their attack. “Let the others get rid of them. We don’t want them to sniff us out,” Vala whispered.

I tried not to breathe too deeply because the rotten odor was overwhelming. Must have been the number of demons in the area making it a hundred times stronger.

There were so many demons. Fear was taking over and I was shaking again. *Calm down. Just breathe. There’s nothing to be scared of. You can do this.*

Once the cat-hounds had been taken care of, the smaller demon dwarves rushed in. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something moving up in the trees. I lost my focus and looked up. It took only a few seconds for my eyes to adjust, but then I saw them. Faeries. They were a little bigger than my hand and their wings were transparent. This helped them to hide in the trees and blend in with nature. They were striking creatures, absolutely beautiful.

They each had a bow and arrow. Their weapons, being faerie made, were lethal. The arrows were made like the daggers, with magic. As they shot them into the demons, the demons immediately fell dead to the ground. The faeries never missed, never accidentally hit a student or teacher, never even hit the ground. I suspected a little bit of magic was in play there too.

Vala cleared her throat, reminding me I was needed. “Go,” she mouthed.

I hurried to a spot where I was surrounded by demons and without thinking

twice, I killed them. My mind was trained now. I could separate the demons from the gifted. Picking them out so I wouldn't hurt them was easy. I tried taking down every demon here, but there was way too many for that. I did get hundreds at a time.

Now that I was so much stronger and better with my gift, I could take note of things in the corner of my eyes. Suddenly, I saw her—Mira. She was fighting a demon with her dagger. It was obvious that she, too, had been well trained in the past months.

Seeing her threatened to break my focus. Part of me wanted to run to her, throw my arms around her, and never let go. When Daxton came into view, my heart almost flew out of my chest right then. Seeing him again after all these months had some crazy effects on me.

I noticed Vala giving me a look and realized I wasn't doing my job. I focused for only a second longer, and the demons dropped to the ground. There were so many of them and I realized that to get more at a time, I needed to get in the middle. Running, I took off toward them. Then, planting my feet and opening my mind, I commanded them to die, and they did. Killing hundreds at a time was exhilarating. I was enjoying this more than I should.

There were so many gifted mixed in with the demons, it made it harder to focus. Remembering what I had been taught, I singled out all of the demons in the yard by using my power to make purple swirls materialize from my head to each demon. Then, with that power, I sent out a surge and the demons dropped to the ground.

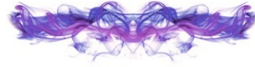
Once the majority of demons on this side of the school were dead, I looked back to where my friends were fighting. They were doing really well, except there were some demons creeping up behind them. I hurried closer, knowing that I could do this without hurting them.

It was then that she saw me. I could tell by the expression on her face that she recognized me immediately. She stopped fighting and was staring at me now. I resisted smiling and running to her. I couldn't yet. In a minute, she'd be dead because she was just standing there. Zane followed Mira's gaze, and his jaw dropped as he recognized who she was staring at.

As I stared back at them, I realized how I must look. I hadn't thought of that. I

sure hoped I could drop these demons faster than Zane could throw that dagger into my heart. I wasn't sure I could live through that twice. I only had to focus for a second more before the demons fell to the ground.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



**W**ITH THE DEMISE OF THE smaller demons, the bigger ones were coming out of the woods now. There were demon bulls and those giant beasts, like the one that had captured me. I rolled my eyes; they couldn't have waited a few more minutes? I scanned the yard for Auralee; she was my only chance right now.

I spotted her staring at the demon bull with his big red eyes and steam like smoke coming out of his snout. *Auralee!* Her head shot up and she looked around until her eyes rested on me. Her jaw dropped. *I need you to stop Zane. I don't have time to explain right now. But it's really me.*

She nodded and ran to Zane's side. As I focused on the bulls that were surrounding us, I could see Auralee struggling with Zane. The bulls were harder and took a few seconds longer, but down they went.

Zane saw the bulls die, and he let Auralee force his arm down to his side. He didn't look away from me. I spun around where I stood, looking for any more immediate threats. I figured I had a minute, if that, to go to them.

I ran straight for Mira and threw my arms around her. Inhaling her sweet scent, I closed my eyes, and I was home. I pulled away a little bit and looked at her. She was still in some state of shock. "You're dead..." she whispered.

"I was," I said with tears streaming down my face.

She looked me right in the eyes like she was searching for something. I smiled, trying to comfort her. "It's really you," she breathed.

I nodded. "Yeah."

Her knees buckled a little, and Zane caught her even though he was still clutching his dagger. She regained her balance and touched my face like she

wasn't sure if I'd disappear now. Tears filled her eyes, and she smiled back finally.

Vala and Ramsey approached quickly. "We don't have time for explanations right now. We must go."

"GO? Go where? You can't leave!" Mira yelled.

"I need you and Auralee to come with me. It's time to stop Kern," I said firmly.

Before I turned to go, my eyes rested on Daxton, whose eyes were wide. I went to him quickly and pressed my lips against his. "I still love you," I told him. Then I grabbed Mira and Auralee and hurried to catch up to Vala and Ramsey.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Back there." Vala pointed to an area heavily guarded by demons.

As we rounded the school, I noticed that this side of the school hadn't fared as well. Demons were still attacking. I took a moment to find a good spot, focus on the demons, and kill them—hundreds at a time.

Once they were dead, I nodded to myself, satisfied. "It's up to us to kill Kern," I told Mira and Auralee. "Mira, I need you to compel him to put down whatever he's holding. Auralee, I need you to read his mind. Signal to me by touching my shoulder when he's at his weakest emotional and physical point."

"Okay," she said.

Coming up on more demons, Mira and Auralee positioned themselves to fight them. "Don't worry about them." In seconds, I had the first group dead.

"How did you...?" Mira stumbled on her words.

"Later," I said, focusing on some more demons.

Ramsey pointed. "He's up there. Remember what we taught you. We'll take care of the remaining demons out here."

The three of us slowly approached the woody area, killing demons as we went. Kern came into view quickly. Seeing him again sent the biggest shiver of all down my spine. I forgot how scary and evil he was. His dark eyes were wide. His mouth parted in surprise as his eyes settled on me. I smiled, knowing I had gotten the best of him even if just for a minute.

He quickly tried to hide his surprise and replace it with smugness. "Kassia..."

it's so nice to see you again. I'm thrilled that you are...alive." His words dripped with sarcasm. Looking behind me, he must have noticed that I had obliterated his army. "I see your powers have grown. It sure would be nice to have you on my side." He took a step toward us. "Are you sure there is nothing I can do to convince you?" He flashed his gorgeous smile, making my body tremble again.

"No way in hell."

"Too bad. We would have made a cute couple."

With a wave of his hand, he sent the three of us flying backwards. He laughed as we stood back up and dusted ourselves off. He made a motion with his hand and giant demons came from behind him. I wasn't sure if I should take down the demons or go after him. Something in me said to stay focused on him, so I did. He raised his hands, conjuring up a fierce wind.

I saw that he did indeed have something in his hand. Without moving, I began to use my gift. I didn't want my body to give anything away, so I just started thinking of him hurting. I started off with a lower level of power and very gradually let it grow until he was rubbing his head. I nudged Mira, who thankfully snapped out of her trance-like look and said, "Kern, put down the thing in your hand."

Kern laughed. "Like that's going to work. Please." He knocked us down again and stood over me. "We could have been so good together."

"Not in a million years."

"We were made for each other."

My stomach turned cold. "There's only one man for me, and it's not you!"

I tried using my power, but he was pushing back somehow. "That won't work!" he said as he ran up to me and kicked me in the ribs, causing me to cry out in pain.

Mira started to come to my aid, but I threw her a look and she backed off.

I pushed harder in my mind and Kern stumbled back a few steps, inadvertently giving us room to get up.

Knocking Mira and Auralee down a third time with a wave of his hand, he quickly grabbed me by the throat and shoved me against a tree before I was able to react. He held me firmly as I gasped for air. My lungs felt like they were on fire, but my eyes still functioned. I upped my power a little bit until he swayed

and loosened his grip on my throat. He looked at me, bewildered.

“Mira,” Auralee uttered.

“Put the object in your hand down, Kern,” Mira ordered, and the cell phone dropped to the ground. He looked surprised that he had responded to her. Turning toward Mira, he waved his hand, throwing her back, her head hitting a rock as she fell.

Fury rose in me, and I stepped it up a notch, making him groan a little. “I don’t understand...” he muttered under his breath.

Auralee touched my shoulder, and I grabbed the dagger off my leg and jammed it into his chest. He yelled out in pain. I yanked it out and shoved it back in him. He screamed out again. *One more time, in the heart*, I reminded myself. I pulled the dagger out, and I looked him right in the eyes. “Go to hell,” I told him, and thrust the dagger into his heart as hard as I could.

He staggered backwards, gasping for air. He tried to take the dagger out, but I kicked him and he fell to the ground. I stood over him, his face a twisted mess of confusion. “How can you do this?”

I giggled a little. “Didn’t you know? I’m part angel!” Then I stomped on the dagger, driving it completely through his heart. I watched as he took his last breath and the life drained from his eyes.

Within seconds, Vala and Ramsey were next to me. “Well done.” Ramsey patted me on the back. I looked around for the other demons, but they were gone.

I rushed to Mira’s side. “Are you okay?” She had a cut near her temple and blood was dripping down from it.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

I sat down on the ground and looked around. All my hard training had paid off. Relief filled my body along with anxiousness. What was I supposed to do now? Was that it?

The way Vala looked at me sent another shiver down my back. “Kassia,” she said, “only this part is over. If you think Kern was the only evil creature in this world, wait until you see what’s coming. It’s a battle that’s gone on as long as life itself. Good versus evil. Kern was just a pawn in this battle. Don’t let your guard down, any of you. Keep training. Keep practicing.” She put her hand on



my shoulder. “Remember I told you that you were special, that your time was coming?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“This wasn’t it.”

“Oh.” Her words left an unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“We will take care of Kern’s body. You can go enjoy your friends now.”

“What will you do with him?” I asked curiously.

“Burn him.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what I had expected, but that wasn’t it.

I stood up and helped Mira to her feet. We took a step toward the school, and then I remembered something. “Wait. What about my parents?” I turned back, but Vala and Ramsey were gone. “Hmmm.”

The three of us walked back to the clearing. Daxton, Zane, and Noe were waiting for us. I looked beyond them and saw some people getting their injuries taken care of. Some were walking around looking dazed and confused. Unfortunately, others lay on the ground, unmoving. I estimated about twenty. My lip quivered. I hadn’t been able to save them all.

I ran to Daxton and gave him a proper reunion hug. His warm arms wrapped around my body, and I began to sob. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m just happy,” I muttered, looking up at him. “I’ve missed you, and I was scared you might have replaced me.”

He smiled. “I think it’s a little too early for that.”

“So you’re not with anyone else?”

“No.” He brushed my bangs away from my eyes with his fingers.

My heart leapt and I grinned. I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him fiercely. His hands held my face, and his soft lips played with mine. I pulled him against me, pressing our bodies together. My fingers dug into his shoulders, but nothing in me wanted to stop.

“Tell me,” I said, in between kisses, “that you still love me.”

He pulled away long enough to meet my eyes with his perfect brown and gold eyes. “I love you, Kassia. Now and forever.”

I smiled through my tears and began kissing him frantically again. The power in me rose, like it had done that night under the stars. We were whisked away to

different dreamlands, each for only a second. When we were done, reality returned, and I buried my face in his chest. I could feel his heart racing, matching mine.

I turned to the rest of my friends. Mira was leaning against Zane. Looking at Zane, I said, “Thank you. I see you would have kept both of your promises.”

He blushed. “I wasn’t sure—”

“I know you weren’t. I appreciate it. You would have saved the day if it wasn’t me.”

“You’re the one that saved the day,” he said. “If it wasn’t for you, I don’t think we would have made it.”

“Thanks. You guys were doing pretty well without me.”

I hugged Noe. “You didn’t see anything?” I asked her.

“Of you? No. Not until I saw the battle. What I saw didn’t make sense, so I thought some of my own emotions were seeping in somehow.”

“I missed you, Noe.”

She smiled. “I missed you too.”

“And Auralee, thank you for being able to read minds. Not sure what I would have done with Zane if you couldn’t.”

She laughed. “Um...sure.” She hugged me. “I’m so glad you’re alive. Mira and Daxton were like little lost puppies.”

I looked over at Mira. “I missed you so much.” I swallowed hard.

She put her arms around me. “I missed you too.” We both had tears streaming down our faces. “Living without you was miserable.”

“I know. It was the same for me. I never want to go through that again.” Our eyes met. “You’re my best friend, Mira.”

“And you’re mine.” We hugged again. “Now, I want to hear what happened, including how you got so awesomely terrifying, but start with this whole being part angel thing.”

I laughed and started the long story of what had happened as the six of us walked back to the school arm in arm.



None of them noticed as a pair of red eyes watched from the forest.



Roots and Wings

Book Two of The Gifted Teens Series

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**W**HEN TALIA ISN'T HIDING IN the bathroom from her six children munching on a chocolate bar, she enjoys hiking the red rocks in Utah or sitting on the beach with a Kindle in her hands and her toes in the ocean.

Talia has written a number of books for young adults, including *Damaged: Natalie's Story*, *Teagan's Story: Her Battle With Epilepsy*, *If I Die Young*, *Secret Bloodline*, *Lost and Found*, and *The Gifted Teens Series*.

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