

THE PROMISE

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A WAR AND A WEDDING | BOOK ONE

MELISSA SERVICE

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To JEM.
Where you go, I'll go.
And where you stay, I'll stay.



*Some tell history badly.
Some do not tell it at all.
And still others use it to manipulate society.
~ Diane Butler Bass*

BEFORE

Pale droplets of mist hung heavy in the crisp morning air as he watched her from afar. She didn't even realize he was there, but then that didn't surprise him. Why would she? They didn't run in the same circles, and even if she saw him right now, she wouldn't have recognized him anyway.

He had known for a long time what his job was, and he was an expert at it. But lately, the job had become more difficult. He couldn't help it, but the more he was around her, the more the beauty of her skin wore on him—*oppressive*, like a heavy coat in hot July.

And *that* made the task at hand difficult.

There had been a string of them before her. And, in all likelihood, the string would continue on, long after she was gone.

Years ago, a nervous frenzy had enveloped him when he encountered one whose beauty and intelligence excited him as none of the others had. The depths to which he had planned to take this intrigue before succumbing to the grand finale had started a chain reaction of enthusiasm and excitement in him that he'd never experienced before—not even the

first time. The levels of euphoria were so much so that when she succumbed, it almost caused him to tumble into a deep depression at how easily she had been overcome. But not all had been lost that day.

This lifestyle—this road he walked, had started long ago when he had craved something that would never be his. But, he didn't care. He had learned to take what he wanted—*when* he wanted it, and that arrangement had been working just fine for as long as he could remember.

Still, there was something about this one. More naïve and innocent than his previous conquests, the advantage would be his, and she would not know what charms he had cast until it was too late. And for that, he *almost* felt sorry for her.

But this was bigger than her.

This was a cosmic game of Senet and he was on the upward swing. He was the master of his world, and with the addition of this beautiful game piece, he would be one step closer to tasting the sweet victory that was due to him—the victory, he deserved.

He slyly smiled and then gaped at her once more through the opened window, before turning down the quiet road towards his house. His plan would work and the coveted crown would be his. Because with this fearful and timid girl, it would only take a moment to cast the seeds of doubt, which would lend itself to the right opening. And with that opening—she would not be able to resist him. She would entertain him. And she'd gladly let him into her world. After that, everything would be easy.

And her fall, *inevitable*.

Ellyce Jensen was nobody special. So, all the reasons why she was crouched down behind the bottom row of her father's dress pants hiding in his closet, were lost on her. She held her breath while dust and sweat ran down her face, stinging her eyes. Squinting through the cracked closet door into the darkened bedroom, she realized now that it had probably been dangerous, and pretty stupid, not telling anyone that she was alone.

But she hadn't. Because at first, she didn't think it was a big deal. And telling people that her dad had disappeared without a trace would just complicate things when he returned home. Besides, it wasn't like this was the first time Thomas Jensen had ever forgotten to come home—it was just the longest. And the only time he hadn't called.

No matter what harebrained idea Thomas was chasing, he always called. But he disappeared 56 days ago, and she had not seen nor heard from him since.

Thinking back to that day, three things stood out in her mind. It was 86 degrees and unusually sunny for the third week of January. It was the week before her seventeenth

birthday. And it was also the day that the Doomsday Clock had been set one minute to midnight. The newly sworn-in President had only been in office three days before the nightly news had started splashing the phrase “*End of the Modern World*,” across every television screen in America, and the Atomic Scientists changed the clock’s status to “extremely critical.”

Ellyce saw the clock’s change in status as an omen, but Thomas had told her not to worry about it. He said it was a tool—but mostly, a figment of scientists’ imaginations to keep the masses under control. Thinking about it now, Ellyce realized she should have pressed him for more information, but at the time, she didn’t know what she didn’t know.

Forty-five days ago, she found the jagged, haphazardly scrawled note that Thomas had left for her in what appeared to be the start of another manuscript. Nestled between pages 16 and 17, and in a fashion typical of Thomas, the note was an Easter egg—what some call a clue, hidden in plain sight. His first order of business was to congratulate her for finding the note he had left in her “between years.” And then he urged her to find the place where he had hidden her “official” birthday card along with a stash of cash and supplies that she could use until the appointed time came.

Rounding out the odd combination of items found in Thomas’ secret hiding place, was a diamond necklace with an oddly shaped key attached that resembled one of those cheap souvenir trinkets found at the overpriced shops at Disneyland. Thomas concluded this unwelcomed birthday adventure with another note—this one more carefully crafted, telling her that he knew she had longed for a *SIMPLE KIND OF LIFE*—written out in all caps.

He also acknowledged that she’d be confused, but that she would be okay. *No*, that was wrong. Thomas didn’t assure

her that she'd be okay—he had assured her that she would be *fine*.

And Thomas Jensen never said, *fine*.

Fine was a four-letter in their house.

Fine was the word Vanessa, her mother, had thrown out all those years ago the day she left him. Well, the day she left, *her*.

But Ellyce couldn't go down that bunny trail right now because one of the two men who were in the process of ransacking her home was making his way down the hallway towards her father's bedroom. Ellyce cupped her hand over her mouth, willing herself to be quiet, but she was having little success. She'd always made fun of those perky, B-movie actresses in scary movies who hid in the closet and took breaths so rapid and heavy that the neighbors down the street could hear—not to mention the killer right outside the closet door. Yet, ironically, that was exactly what she found herself doing, and keeping quiet during a crisis proved more difficult than she ever could have realized.

When she initially heard the sound of the two men entering the house, she had suspected it was her ex-boyfriend, Benson, and one of his rowdy football buddies. But when the shorter man, the one with the scarred face, started ransacking her father's sunroom study—something Benson and his friends never would have done, Ellyce ran for her father's closet as quickly and as quietly as she could, and hid.

For over a month, she'd been keeping up appearances at school, and then at night, spending all her time trying to understand her father's cryptic notes. But his clues didn't make any sense. And neither did the cash or the key. She had no idea what a song about him and Vanessa had to do with returning to the *beginning*. Or what they had to do with finding some guy named, *Derek*. How do you find someone

you've never heard of—whose last name you don't know? What book or website do you go to for that information?

Thomas Jensen, or *Red Walker*, as he was known in the literary world, was a novelist—a simple writer, he would say. And Ellyce grew up listening to his stories about ancient prophecies, conspiracy theories, and all other sorts of supernatural phenomenon. And while she and Thomas may have shared the same address, they rarely shared the same views of the world. The stories Thomas told were fables—mere fantasies for people who needed a crutch or a coping mechanism to deal with the harsh realities of real life. But, Ellyce hadn't been one of those people. She didn't have a harsh reality—not really, anyway.

Yes, it was true that her mother had walked out on them when she was four. And yes, it was also true that Sydney Parker and her shallow friends had continually reminded her of that fact every day since fifth grade. But leaving them was Vanessa's issue, not hers.

The scent of the man, orange peel and cassia leaves, wafted through her father's bedroom and pushed into the space she occupied, snapping her back to reality. Through the cracked door, she watched the man slide his fingertips across her dad's pillow and down the side of his bed, coming to a stop at the foot of the bed—directly across from where she was kneeling.

The man pushed the ball of his foot into the hardwood floor, and then glanced over at the closet door. After the third squeaky depression, he turned, sat on the bed, and smiled in her direction. It was in that moment, that Ellyce *knew* that he *knew* she was there, and her heart raced inside her chest.

She grasped the fabric of her jeans, trying to keep herself from bursting into tears while he taunted her. She closed her eyes, wishing silently she would have told someone—*anyone*

—that she'd been alone. But there was no wishing this away now. He was right outside the door, no doubt pondering all the ways in which he would kill her.

“Not here,” scar-face’s raspy voice called out from the hall. A tear fell down her cheek as she struggled to keep her ragged breathing under control.

“Well, keep looking,” the man on the bed whispered, kicking the closet door open with his foot. His ash-gray eyes peered into her wide hazel eyes, and her body trembled with fear at the sight of him. Holding his index finger to his lips, he whispered, “Shhh,” listening as the sound of the other man’s footsteps bounded towards the room.

Ellyce’s eyes darted between the man sitting on the edge of the bed in front of her and her dad’s bedroom door. Feeling helpless, she waited for the man’s accomplice to join them. But the scarred man only paused for a moment in the hallway. Kicking something out of the way, he mumbled to himself, and then returned the way he had just come. When he was out of sight, the man on the bed stood up and sauntered toward Ellyce. She looked down, breaking her gaze, and then closed her eyes again. She mentally prepared herself for the worst. But without another word, the man slammed the closet door shut.

An audible gasp escaped from between her lips, and Ellyce quickly cupped her mouth, willing herself to be quiet before she flipped upright onto her feet. She scoured the space around her for something that could be used as a weapon. The object didn't need to be lethal, but it did need to momentarily stop them so she could get away.

Shaking as the adrenaline pumped through her body, she grabbed a wooden piñata stick leaning against the back wall of the closet and decided it would have to do. With the stick in her right hand, she braced herself against the floor and tried controlling the racing thoughts keeping time with her breathing. Who were those men? What did they want?

And why had the gray-eyed man shushed her?

She heard the men trailing off through the house, back out the way they had come, but she didn't dare move. For more than an hour, she sat in the small closet, crouched and ready for an attack while every creak and moan of the old house made her question whether they had returned to finish her off. After a few more minutes, the adrenaline wore off completely and she crashed hard, collapsing to the floor.

With a shaky exhale, she clutched the piñata stick tightly across her body and gave in to the hysterical, messy sobs that overcame her. She knew from all those self-defense classes Thomas had made her take as a kid that the first rule of self-defense was to run—*always run*—but she couldn't. She didn't want to leave the relative safety of the closet. And even if she did, what if they were waiting outside the house for her? On the other hand, Gray-Eyes had the perfect opportunity to finish her off when he was standing in front of her. Maybe that was his game? Well, whatever he was doing, Ellyce wasn't interested in sticking around to find out.

She pushed the pants to one side of the closet and maneuvered toward the door, holding her breath while she grasped the door handle. Turning the knob slowly, she prayed that her worst fears of someone standing on the other side of the door wouldn't be realized.

Thankfully, she was alone.

On her elbows, she army-crawled through the house, inching herself across the wood floors, trying to keep herself low and hidden from view. Once she was inside her bedroom, she quickly stripped out of her jeans and striped crop-top, and grabbed her black t-shirt, black hoodie, and navy-blue sweat-pants. After changing, she instinctively reached for the dark-red-heart-printed blanket she'd received from Benson on Christmas Day, but she dropped it just as quickly when images of Benson giving Sydney the same blanket flashed into her mind.

Up until the middle of fifth grade, things had gone mostly okay for her. But then, after winter break, when her dad's popularity had started gaining traction and his mysterious, unspoken past collided with the rejected advances of Sydney Parker's newly divorced mother, well, let's just say Ellyce received a quick education about how small towns really

worked. A few months ago, things went from bad to worse when Benson, the person who had known her better than anyone else on the planet, abruptly broke up with her and started dating Sydney. This one act of betrayal was all it took to culminate the five-year process of successfully making her a social pariah.

Of all the girls Benson could have dumped her for, why did it have to be Sydney? Ellyce crawled across her bedroom floor, not wanting to think about Benson or Sydney, and opted for her brown Ugg knock-off blanket instead. She inched forward and sighed. It wasn't like she could blame him. Sydney *had* won the genetics lottery.

Ellyce slid her phone charger into the band of her sweat-pants and carefully pulled the silver-pointed letter opener her father had given her from the desk. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn't have thought of stabbing anyone—including Sydney—but with how her night was going, she decided that anyone in her way was fair game. Quickly slicing the letter opener through the air in front of her a few times, she smiled and kept inching forward, pleased with her form. The letter opener was smaller and more easily concealed than the piñata stick, and it would make the perfect “jab and go” weapon, *should the need arise*.

Common sense told her it wasn't safe to return to Thomas' closet, but he had the best closet in the whole house. With shelves that scaled the side wall and a top shelf that had a larger cut-out for attic access, this place would have been the premiere hide and seek spot when she was a kid. Unfortunately, Thomas had never let her play in his closet.

Tonight, however, with limited options and Thomas not around to yell at her, she decided camping out near the attic access panel was her best option. She'd stay there until morn-

ing, then make a break for it when more people would be awake and alert to help her if she needed it.

As she made her way into Thomas' room, Ellyce saw the glistening light of the full moon spilling through his window. The light reflected off the mirror hanging in his closet and beamed a perfect white line across the bedroom floor. She followed the line, taking note of how it ran flawlessly along the seam of hardwood flooring—like an air traffic controller beckoning her inside the safety of its walls.

She was almost to the door when she heard the front door open. Ellyce thrust herself into the closet—and quickly closed the door behind her. Pressing herself against the mirror, she had planned on diving behind Thomas' pants again, but the floorboard beneath her hand gave way. A *click* sounded throughout the small room and the mirrored wall popped open, brushing her leg.

Thomas has a door in his closet, she thought to herself as she tugged the door open wider. A small plume of musty dust wafted towards her, and she fanned it away.

Pulling her shirt over her nose, Ellyce stared at the dark hole in front of her, wondering what might be concealed inside. Her mind raced, knowing that whatever was in there had to be dank because the sound of crickets chirping pierced the silence below her. She shuddered a little. This dark hole was reminiscent of her grandmother's old cellar; and after getting locked inside it as a kid, she wasn't keen on going into tight, dark places alone, which brought her thoughts back to Benson.

Benson wasn't afraid of much, and he never let her be afraid, either. He was always pushing her, but never in a mean way, just in a way that made her better. And if Benson were here right now, he would have been off through the hole to

wherever it led before she had even finished pulling her shirt over her face.

But Benson wasn't here.

And they weren't together anymore. And, frankly, she didn't want to think about him. Their relationship had had a good run, but the run was over. Benson had moved on, and so should she. She didn't need him to do this. She could do it all by herself.

But would she? That was really the question.

Why did Thomas have a concealed door in his closet? And, more importantly, *what was he hiding?* She reached for her phone's flashlight, only to realize that in the chaos and confusion, she had grabbed the charger but left her phone in her room. And now, with someone in the house again, she couldn't go back to get it. Without a phone, she had no way to contact the outside world. And without a flashlight, there was no real way she could see what was hidden behind this door.

Ellyce started to close the door to make her way up towards the shelf by the attic, but she froze as a loud booming sound rattled off the glass windows in Thomas' room. No, she had to move forward. This would be a better place to hide than the open shelf. But how would she get out? And what if there were bugs, or snakes, or worst yet, poisonous spiders?

She pulled her long, ruddy hair into a ponytail, and considered her options. The way she saw it, there were only two: she could stay in the open closet and become a potential victim or she could get locked inside a room with potentially creepy bugs. Neither were really appealing, but between the two—creepy men, or creepy bugs—which was worse?

Pushing herself into the room, she pulled the door closed behind her. The creepy bugs won out, she decided, because they could be more easily conquered and squashed than creepy men.

I can do this, she reminded herself, taking in deep, calming breaths as she sat in the pitch black, musty space, waiting for her eyes to adjust. She inched forward blindly, patting the floor in front of her, well aware of the fact that something could crawl out of its hiding place and bite her.

But she told herself over and over that there were no bugs, or spiders, or snakes—

Until there were.

She stifled a scream, reeling backwards, swatting at whatever had brushed her forehead. As she retreated, the creature's thin tentacle wrapped itself around her wrist and slid between her fingers. Her mind raced, conjuring up images of what sort of alien being was living in this closet while she yanked her hand away, flicking her open palm downward, trying to break the connection.

Light flooded the area around her.

In between deep breaths of stale, musty air, she laughed manically. The alien tentacle was a benign light pull in the middle of a staircase landing—nothing more. Ellyce stood up and brushed herself off before peering over the edge, thankful for the light. Another shimmy or two forward in the darkness, and she would have found herself at the bottom of a flight of stairs.

Stairs. Thomas had a door that led to stairs in the middle of his closet. But why?

She dangled her foot over the edge, unwilling to touch down as she tried to process the information. She didn't want to be waiting for whoever they were—who wanted whatever it was they wanted from her dad—but she'd also had quite enough adventure for one day. And then another insidious thought entered her mind: What if Thomas wasn't who he said he was? What if he was someone else? Someone leading a double life, a mass murderer, and this was where he hid the

bodies? She could see the headlines now: *Bodies found in Jensen Family House of Horrors*. No matter how far she traveled, she'd never be able to outrun the shame.

Ellyce sat down on the top stair and shook her head. *No, Thomas wasn't like that*. She was letting her imagination get the best of her. There was a rational explanation for why there was a creepy, secret room in their house. She just didn't know what it was at this moment. And it didn't help that for every reason she could come up with, she found herself easily playing the devil's advocate. Ellyce turned to go back into the main closet, deciding that Thomas wasn't part of this—whatever *this* was—when she noticed the words he'd written on the wall adjacent to the door:

*Ellyce, sometimes the right way—the only way out
—is in.*

Off the tail end of the word *in*, he had painted a neon arrow pointing to the bottom of the stair, along with these words:

*You cannot trust those you thought you could—even if
you'd like to do so. Please, my Love. You must hurry.
Derek is waiting.*

For the second time tonight, she collapsed on the floor, feeling defeated. Not only had he known about this crazy place, but he wanted her to go deeper inside. No way. She wasn't gonna do it. Her mind protested as her body pushed forward, slowly descending the staircase, one step at a time. "I don't know what sort of game you're playing, Thomas Jensen, but I don't like it. And the next time I see you, you and I are gonna have some serious words about this."

Ellyce trudged forward in contempt, wondering if Thomas had orchestrated this whole thing—his disappearance, the arrival of those men. And for what? Was this some plan to toughen her up? He knew better than anyone that she wasn't the brave, adventurous type. "Maybe you're the one I shouldn't trust," she said, flipping on the light at the bottom of the stairs. The ceased chirping of the crickets only punctuated the strangeness of what she saw.

From the looks of this room, Thomas' upstairs study had not been his only workspace. But unlike any traditional home office she'd ever seen, this one's four walls had four completely different architectural styles: one was bricked; another was covered in brassy velvet wall-paper with golden bees embossed in the print; the third was coated in thick plaster of Paris and painted a Robin's egg blue. The fourth wall was even more strange because it contained a rocked-in fireplace, which made it especially odd since there was no chimney anywhere else in the main part of the house.

Ellyce shrugged, deciding the fireplace was for show because without it, the room would have been less cozy. Without the fireplace, the room would have felt more like an underground dungeon where bodies were hidden.

There was nothing remotely out of place about this space—except for the room itself, and the fact that there was a really expensive looking chandelier hanging from the middle of the ceiling. She wandered around, taking note of the weird relics that littered the floor, looking for anything of significance. Nothing stood out. There appeared to be only one way in and one way out of this room, so she didn't quite grasp the meaning of his hand-crafted note painted on the wall above. It was another one of his stupid puzzles.

Ellyce frowned and then picked up several of the oddly shaped objects, studying them. They didn't look like anything

special, at least from what she could tell. But maybe one of the scrolls or tablets were what those men were looking for. Or maybe they wanted something else hidden down here. She put down the artifact and moved over to the table along the wallpapered wall.

Stacks of papers were piled high upon two small wooden tables and a console lining the wall, but nothing stood out there, either. Ellyce stopped and smiled, coming upon a bookshelf that hovered oddly in its own space opposite the stairs. It housed four solitary books, and she reached out and traced the first letter of the second book in the series. These books were her father's stories—the bulk of his life's work, and the same stories she had learned to ignore as a kid.

She did, however, have a special fondness for the second book of the series, which dealt with Abraham Lincoln. Though, to be honest, she couldn't remember now what the book was about. The last time she had read it, she was too young to understand the complexities of it all. The story was about some conspiracy, like all of her father's books, but that wasn't why she'd read it. She read this one because it had reminded her of Illinois, and of when Thomas was happy and not so Red Walker-ish.

It's not that she wasn't a fan of Red Walker. Red was okay, and he afforded her a nice allowance. It was just that Thomas had never been the same since moving to California. This state had been the birthplace of his reinvention, and so, yes, those popular girls at school whispering cruel rumors in the halls were partially right about him.

With his dark and brooding, yet somber eyes, his patchy, but neatly trimmed beard, and his straight, night-colored hair that hung lazily against his face (something she could only attribute as a throwback to his angst-filled and rebellious younger days), Thomas Jensen *was* a mystery. And *the myste-*

rious, she understood from living with a literary father, was certainly an attractive quality for most people. But it was one that could also get you into trouble.

The façade that Thomas—the normal and moderately wonderful, yet super over-protective dad—presented to the world (not to mention all those Hayvenhurst moms), was nothing more than the branding allure of Red Walker, the writer. And that, Ellyce knew, was the truth. What she didn't know was what to make of all of this. What was this place, and why would he keep it a secret?

Ellyce gathered a stack of papers from the console and sat at the desk in front of her. As she flipped through a few of them, one in particular caught her eye—a document with her birth date listed on it. She scanned it for anything noteworthy, but it looked like it had been printed in some weird foreign language, or like the printer had malfunctioned mid-print job.

She leafed through some of the other stacks, but they all looked the same. The only intelligible thing on any of these documents was her birth date and the names: Daniel Hunter, something McIsh, and something Monroe. She held the paper up toward the chandelier to see if she could read the first names of the McIsh and the Monroe people, but the names had been blacked out with a sharpie pen and then copied, permanently redacting all traces of the first names.

Her mom, Vanessa, was a McIsh, but why black out her name? And what was up with the other two names? Maybe they were witnesses or relatives or something. Either option was a possibility, since Ellyce didn't actually know that much about her mother—or her mother's family for that matter—aside from what Thomas told her when the annual elementary school family tree project came up.

The Monroe name was a weird coincidence, though. Benson and his family were Monroes, but there was no way

the two sets of people could be related. She and Thomas hadn't moved to the Los Angeles area until after Vanessa left them, and they didn't meet the Monroes until Ellyce and Benson started kindergarten. Their teacher, Mrs. Sylvia Patterson, paired them up the first day of school as "Kindergarten partners," and the rest, as they say, is history. Though right about now, Ellyce was wishing that the kindergarten partnering thing hadn't gone so well.

Perhaps if Benson had picked his nose, or smelled funny, she wouldn't have stayed friends with him for such a long time, and she wouldn't be hating him now for his new choice in girlfriends. Ellyce frowned, refusing to let herself think about Benson or Sydney again, and resumed searching the stack to see if there was anything else that would make sense.

At the bottom of the pile was another document, written in the same cryptic font as the others. This one had her name written across the top in bold, block letters. Along the bottom of the page, Thomas had scrawled the following message to her:

For some, the supernatural world is too great to bear, but the ancient prophecies are true, my dear—whether you choose to believe them or not. But just because you remain blind to that realm doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Eventually, you'll have no choice but to boldly embrace the world that's hidden in plain sight. It won't be fun, but you'll be fine.

You'll understand soon. I promise.

~ Love, Dad.

P.S. I need you to keep the Bees close.

Ellyce threw the paper on the desk and leaned back in the chair. *Keep the bees close?* What on earth was he talking about? She pushed her fingers into her temples and gently

pressed, trying to stop the throbbing in her head. The pain of feeling like her life had been built on a lie overwhelmed her. *How could he do this to her? How could he send those men to scare her like that?*

In defiance of his cruelty, she pushed his novels from the tiny bookshelf, wincing each time a book hit the floor with a hard thump. She'd never forgive him for this betrayal.

She was shaking her head, trying to redirect her thoughts, when she spotted an old laptop sitting against the wall. Firing it up, she tried reigning in the anger that welled up inside her. The machine's fan hummed to a start, filling the silence of the room. A few seconds later, she clicked the search history tab and racked her brain trying to recall what he'd said he was going to write about. For the life of her, she couldn't remember, and the computer wasn't any help. Its history had been wiped clean.

Ellyce pulled her bottom lip into her mouth, crushing the corner of it between her teeth, trying to think. The unfinished manuscript upstairs had all the answers she was looking for, but she wasn't willing to chance it. She leaned over and picked up the fourth book in the series, quickly flipping to the back pages. The next book would be a sequel in the series, but the topic escaped her. She was certain there would be a teaser to the next book in the back of this one, but there was nothing—not even an advertisement. That fact alone seemed odd, but perhaps this was simply an early printing. She set the book on the table in front of her and stared at it, willing it to tell her its secret, but it was no use.

This was the same book she had upstairs, and the pages held no discernible secrets about her dad, or the beginnings of anything, or people named *Derek*. As much as she wanted things to be different, she wasn't in one of his stories, and these books weren't the keys to anything. She pushed the

book aside and cupped her face in her hands, searching the room.

Come on, Ellyce. Think. Clearly, he knew she would find his messages on the wall, and with them, this room, and the papers. But did he really believe she would have any idea about what he was talking about?

Obviously, he did, she mumbled to herself, because here she sat. Ellyce let out a heavy breath and looked across the room to where a framed picture sat on an end table. Grabbing the picture from its resting spot, Ellyce realized she had never seen it before. Thomas and Vanessa were so young and in love, as evidenced by her beaming smile. Her long red hair spilled over her shoulders and rested right above her visibly pregnant stomach. It was odd to see her that way; Ellyce had a hard time imagining her mother smiling or with any other hair color besides the deep brown she wore throughout Ellyce's childhood.

Thomas had always maintained that childbirth had done a number on her mom, but Ellyce thought he had it wrong. She always thought it was the other way around—and Vanessa was the one who had done a number on him.

She gingerly set the picture back into its place and walked over to the pile of books she'd knocked to the floor. Picking them up and setting them on the desk, she felt guilty for having knocked them over in the first place. As she sat down to think again, she couldn't help but notice that the first letter of the first word of each book was offset from the rest, and the spines of these books were different than the published versions she had upstairs. These spines were more intricate with what appeared to be the same golden bees as those on the wallpaper, woven on parts of the spines, encircling the front covers.

"Keep the bees safe," she said aloud, rearranging the

books to see if the bees lined up in some way. They didn't. When she stacked the books on top of each other, all but two of the bees disappeared from view. She pushed them away from her, then shifted them slightly. The large, intricate first letters read: *INEF*. She cocked her head to the side and quickly rearranged the books once more, setting them on top of each other in the order they were published, and read their titles aloud: *Find Me. In Salem (New). Never Stop Searching. Endings Are Found at the Beginning.*

F.I.N.E.

In disbelief, she stared at the books on the table. Her father had left her clues to where he was—Salem—and he didn't want her to give up searching for him. But why go through all this cloak and dagger stuff? Manically, she flipped through the four books, searching the dust jackets and the back pages for more clues, wondering what he had gotten himself into—and, more importantly, what he had gotten her into. Italicized words and capital letters in the middle of sentences popped out as she read through each description. These books *were* different from the published versions.

But why?

She pushed back from the table and shook her head. “No,” she said, slapping her hands against the table. “They weren't different. They couldn't be.” She inhaled loudly. She was making this up—wishing for something that wasn't there. These books had been written over a period of years. How could he have known ten years ago any of this was going to happen? And if he did know something was going to happen, why hadn't he taken her with him?

Ellyce fired up the laptop again and started searching for fan sites, wondering if anyone had any clues or theories about his novels. To her surprise, she hit a treasure trove. There were literally hundreds of websites dedicated to the multiple

conspiracy theories running through her father's work. How had she never known this? How did she not know that people across the world thought her father—the man she called *Dad*—was some sort of ancient-prophecy, treasure-hunting hero?

Ellyce typed in “Derek” and “Salem” and scanned the results. There was a photographer in Salem, Oregon, named Derek, but his work primarily focused on cats *and* clowns which was cute, yet *creepy* at the same time, and not exactly what she was hoping to find. She then typed in the word “New” in front of “Salem,” and found fifteen listings.

The top result she dismissed immediately, but the next result leaped off the screen at her—*New Salem, Illinois*—historic home of—you guess it, *Abraham Lincoln*. Conspiracy sites told her this book was a story within a story, with more than a few clues about Thomas' life, hidden in plain sight. Thomas had been born and raised in Illinois, and the second book dealt with Lincoln and something called the *Year of Jubilee*—whatever that was. She scanned the web for more details. One site that set itself apart by apparently debunking everything Thomas had ever written said, *no one of real notable distinction besides the sixteenth president has ever lived in New Salem*. Ellyce suspected that her father and the other residents of that small Illinois town might disagree with the author, James Buckner, III, whoever he might be.

Out of all the sites she reviewed, the majority of them suggested that New Salem was a vortex—some sort of strange energy zone on the earth. At that thought, Ellyce rolled her eyes. She had been to New Salem before, and that town was about as energizing as a park bench. New Salem, Illinois, was a tiny village stuck in the 1800s, and it certainly hadn't given off any Bermuda Triangle vibes while she'd been there.

But *whatever*.

With more than a few hours to kill before morning light, she scoured the internet for other clues and wrote down any details that seemed promising. At one-thirty in the morning, the document on the desk with her birth date kept pushing to the front of her mind, so she typed in “McIsh” and “Derek,” and pressed enter.

As she waited for the web page to load, someone from inside her father’s closet shouted her name, and then the power went out.

The smell of something fried filled the room, rousing Ellyce from a heavy sleep. She stretched and bolted upright, relieved and thankful that, as evidenced by the smell of whatever deliciousness was being prepared downstairs, the power had been restored. She bounded out of bed, grabbing her black and white Cage the Elephant t-shirt and her jeans from the chair in the corner and hummed to herself, making her way down the stairs.

From the dining room table, Benson's father, Jim Monroe peered at her over the instruction manual he held in his hand. He was not a large man, but his square jaw line, solid muscular frame, and short haircut tended to give him an air of being a military drill sergeant—which he was not. He was the Southern California regional Snap-On Tools Sales Manager, and a very successful one at that, as evidenced by the shrine of tools and toolboxes that lined the Monroes' garage.

Jim didn't say anything to her as she sat at the table across from Benson, but the fatherly look of disapproval on his face was evident. It was the same look that had met her from the other side of the door last night when she arrived at their

house at two in the morning with Benson. Ellyce didn't know which had been more troubling to the Monroes, the fact that Thomas had disappeared nearly two months ago, and she hadn't told anyone she'd been living alone. Or, the fact that she and Benson weren't dating anymore, and he was now with Sydney Parker, but had never bothered to tell them.

Talking with them about the whole ordeal was something she had planned to do last night. But after the shouting match began, she gave up any notion of sharing her plans of flying to Illinois today because she knew where her father was. Well, *knew* was a bit of a stretch, but trying to explain it at three a.m., would have just prolonged the conversation, so she decided against it.

Had Benson just kept the events of the evening to himself; everything would have been fine. But no, he decided to go the typical Benson route and spill all the sordid details, just for effect. He explained how he had been at Sydney's for most of the evening, which elicited several eye rolls and then a sigh from his mother—before he moved on to talking about what happened after he left her house. He told them how he'd driven past Ellyce's house "*just because*," and then launched into the elaborate details about how it had been a good thing. Had he not taken the time to drive past her house—*even though* he had blown his curfew, then he wouldn't have seen the two men perched outside on her front porch. And of course, not knowing who they were, he *had* to turn around to see if he could be of "help" in any way.

At that, his mother, Jessica, began mumbling under her breath and praying, which meant that he had a captive audience. He concluded his tale by assuring his parents that by the time he had parked the car and made his way to the front door, the men were long gone. Ellyce thought it would have been smart for him to have stopped there—no

sense in rocking the boat any more when it was already precariously swaying. But he continued on, giving them the blow-by-blow details of what happened next. Benson dramatically laid out how he found the front door wide open, and then, of course, needing to carefully and cautiously search each ransacked room for fear that someone might be hurt or dead, he continued inside, scouring each room for clues. He ended his fanciful tale, with a bit of anticlimactic regaling, mentioning that the only exciting find during the whole ordeal was Ellyce hiding in her dad's closet with little more than a piñata stick and a letter opener to protect herself.

And so, with that bit of news, Ellyce had decided it was probably best to wait until later—like when she was on the airport runway taxiing away—before telling them she was fleeing the state to find her dad.

“Elle,” Benson said, clearing his throat. “All joking aside, I was really scared for you last night. Why didn’t you tell me you were alone?”

She sipped from her juice glass, glaring at him over the rim. “Well, for starters, you and I haven’t been doing a lot of talking lately. And I wasn’t alone.”

“You weren’t?” Jessica asked. “Who was with you?”

“Baxter was around.”

“The neighbor’s dog?” Benson asked. He feigned a look of relief at his parents. “Okay, well, I’m sure we all feel much better now.”

“Ellyce,” Jessica started, but Ellyce cut her off.

“Look, I know how it sounds. But I didn’t feel like I was alone. And Benson embellished what he told you earlier.” Ellyce turned to face his mother. “Really, he’s making it a bigger deal than it was. I was managing.”

“Yeah, well,” Jim Monroe said, “with the power out, and

men hanging around your house, I think it's best that you stay here until your dad gets back."

"He didn't give you a hint at all about where he was going?" Jessica asked. The dishes clattered in her hands as she cleared the table.

"No," Ellyce said, looking around at all the things using electricity. "What do you mean the power's still out?"

Jessica returned from the kitchen and wrapped her petite arm around Ellyce's shoulder, giving her a tight squeeze. "When I think about what could have happened to you, Elle, it makes me so scared." She shuddered, pushing the thoughts from her mind. "And even though I know why you didn't confide in us," she added, shooting a disapproving look Benson's way. "Going forward, please don't keep us in the dark." She nervously chuckled, and then took her seat at the table, across from her husband. "No pun intended."

"Wait," Ellyce said, "if we have no power, how do we have all this?" She waved her arm across the table like a game show hostess revealing the grand prize.

"Generator," Jim said, sipping his hot, steaming coffee as if it were any other normal morning. "And when that runs out, we have the old camping stove." He pointed to the green Coleman portable stove on the kitchen counter.

"Well, aren't generators supposed to last a long time? I mean, how long do you expect the outage to last?"

Benson gaped at her—mouth opened wide, while his parents looked on in quiet disbelief. "Elle—"

"Ellyce, honey," Jessica interrupted, knowing this type of news was best delivered by a parent, "the power isn't—well, the truth is the power isn't gonna be coming back on." Her springy, ginger curls bobbed against her shoulders as she talked. "Not any time soon, anyway."

Ellyce laughed a little, thinking they were trying to scare

her into staying. But their stoic frowns didn't break into a smile. "Seriously, you don't have to worry about me. I said I'd stay here 'til my dad gets home."

"They *are* serious. We got hit by a solar flare. It was all over the news. Everybody started reporting on it like twelve hours before it hit. You didn't hear anything about it?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. Ellyce pushed back from the table and ran to the window, throwing open the curtains. "But what about—?" Her voice trailed off as the faint, soft blowing wind chimes from the Nelsons' porch next door provided an eerie, yet suitable soundtrack for the gray and pale green fast-moving clouds that had taken over the sky. "Are those auroras?" she asked. When she was twelve, her dad had taken her to see the Northern Lights while researching one of his books. She had scoured the internet for images before they left and was excited to finally see them in person. But the excitement was short lived when the realization of what they actually looked like to the naked eye paled in comparison to the manipulated or photo-shopped versions of them that filled the internet.

It used to be said that the camera never lies. But, these days, it seemed as though the camera rarely told the truth.

"A form of them, I suppose," Benson said. At six-foot two, he towered over her by enough that when she used to lean against him, he could rest his chin comfortably on the top of her head. He stood behind her, caressing her shoulders, trying to comfort her as he had so many times before in the past, but Ellyce pulled away from him and crossed her arms. "Do you remember when we learned about the Carrington Event in history last year?" he asked, standing next to her awkwardly, unsure of what to do.

"Yes," she said, and turned around so she wouldn't have to look at him. For a brief moment, she was tempted to slip

into their familiar ways, but he was dating Sydney now—and he couldn't touch her like that—no matter what sort of world crisis was happening.

“So, you remember what happened,” he asked. He leaned against the window, crossing his arms in front of himself, then crossed his feet at the ankles.

Ellyce nodded her head slowly, watching as he struggled with himself. He was annoyed, but she knew that if he didn't purposefully keep himself crossed, he would reach out and pull her close. And she would let him—and that decision would not be good for anyone. She focused her attention to their history lessons from last year as the memories of the class lecture bubbled to the front of her mind.

In 1859, the sun unleashed a burst of gas and electrically charged particles toward the earth that had the energy and intensity of ten atomic bombs. It fried electrical circuits all along the west coast. “But the power came back on, Benson,” she said, her voice wavering as she searched for answers.

“Yes, but that's because the whole world wasn't as dependent on electricity as we are today,” Jim said. “People back then didn't base their whole lives around an electrical grid infrastructure.”

Tears began welling up in her eyes, and she turned to stare out the window. “I don't understand. What are you saying?”

Jim and Jessica stood beside her as they all stared out onto their new landscape. “What I'm saying,” he whispered, “is that the power's not coming back on. The grids are fried. And they're not only fried in Hayvenhurst, or on the west coast. I think they're fried all over.” He cleared his throat, hesitating. “Look, I know this is hard to hear, but it's difficult to say for sure how many people have been affected at this point.”

“But they’ll fix it, right?”

“Who?” Benson asked.

“The electric companies. Or the government. The people in charge. Isn’t it their job?” Hot, salty tears streamed down her face. If she couldn’t fly out to find Thomas, how was he supposed to fly home from wherever he was to get back to her? She frowned and closed her eyes. Ellyce already knew the answer. He wasn’t coming back. She was supposed to find Derek. And *then* she’d find him. But if Ellyce couldn’t get online, what was she going to do? She drew in a deep breath. She’d have to get back to that secret room to search for more clues. But that would take time, and with everything that was happening—and with Benson’s not-so-fantastic tale, there was no way the Monroes were gonna let her out of their sight.

If she couldn’t get back to her house to find the clues, then what? How was this going to work? She could go the old-school route—research things like her dad did, at the library, or at the bookstore, or through personal interviews. Thanks to growing up with her dad, she knew how to research. But would the Monroes even let her do that? She would reason with them. Surely, they wouldn’t object to a little time at the library. If there was no electricity, what else was there to do?

But how do you search for a man you don’t know—whose only clue to existence is his first name? Where do you even start? What sort of book do you look in? Or who do you talk to find out that information?

And then there was the *other* issue. Was she just supposed to stay here indefinitely like nothing had happened between her and Benson? No, that wasn’t happening. There was no way her nemesis was going to be okay with this. If the situation was reversed, she wouldn’t be.

“Nobody could really prepare for something of this magnitude,” Jim continued, slicing through her rapid-fire thoughts. “The entire world is built and maintained around those power grids, and if the grids go down, well, then, the world as we knew it goes away.”

“But we can't be stuck like this,” she disputed. “I mean, people have lived without electricity longer than we've had it.”

“Well, yes and no. Things were different back then. And in the span of one day, we've been catapulted back to the eighteenth century.”

“Well, they just need to fix it. We have people smart enough to do it, don't we?”

“Ellyce, I understand your passion, but the issue isn't so much the grid as it is the transformers.”

“Like the movie?”

“No,” he chuckled. “Not like the movie.” Jim made his way back to the table and sat down, picking up his manual again. “Transformers are the machine parts that run the grid, and there aren't any spares. They're also expensive as hell, so you can't just keep 'em lying around.” He paused when he saw that Ellyce was about to burst into tears again.

“So, they'll put people to work to make them,” Benson reasoned.

“Listen, guys, this is such a one-in-a-million scenario. Nobody could have predicted lightning would strike twice. We came close to a big one in 2012, when all that end-of-the-world Mayan calendar hoopla was going on, but that flare missed us. And since these things usually follow a patterned schedule—every 150 years or so—to be fair, I'm sure the government thought they had another 150 years to figure it out.”

“But they *have* to fix this. I *have* to find my dad.”

"I'm sure they've got people working on it, honey," Jessica said, wrapping her arm around Ellyce's shoulder.

"Jess," Jim scolded, "honestly, we talked about this last night."

"Well, I just thought that given the new information we received today that maybe we—" she said, nodding in Ellyce's direction while pleading with him from across the table.

"We said we weren't gonna lie to the kids. And I'm pretty sure Thomas would agree." He turned in his chair and kicked his right leg over on top of his left leg. "You guys, here's the deal. The damage has been done, and by the time anyone gets those transformers built and the grids back up and running, it's gonna be too late."

"Too late for what?" Ellyce asked, but Jim didn't respond.

"Too late for what, Dad?" Benson demanded.

"For survival."

Benson and Ellyce both faltered toward the table, wide-eyed and panicked. "What?"

"What do you mean, *survival*?" Benson asked. He lowered his quivering voice to a bare whisper. "Like, this is it? Like we're all gonna die?"

Tears streamed down Ellyce's face. "I'm never gonna see my dad again." She shook her head and fell into Benson's chest.

"Jim," Jessica scolded. "I told you that you could be honest with them, but can we maybe dial back the end-of-the-world diatribe?"

He waved his hands in the air, surrendering to her pleas. "B," he said, trying to speak rationally with his son, "eventually we're all gonna die, but I don't have plans to go anywhere anytime soon. And your mom and I have a contingency plan. We've always had a plan."

“So, you knew this was gonna happen?” Ellyce asked, between sobs.

“No,” Jessica assured her. “But we have our cabin. And, well, we tried to build it so that we would be prepared for whatever happened.” Jessica walked over to the edge of the table and sat down in the chair, fidgeting with the corner of the tablecloth. “Though I have to honestly say, I never thought we’d need to use it for anything more than our family vacations.”

Jim took Jessica’s hand and gave it a tight, loving squeeze. “Look, you two, I know I sound like Dudley Downer right now, but B, you know I’ve never lied to you. I’m not about to start to now.” He exhaled slowly before continuing. “Now, the next few days—maybe even the next few weeks or so—are gonna seem fine. But listen to me carefully. There’s going to be a turning point, and when that time comes, it’s gonna be time to go. So, I don’t want any hesitations. And no crap. Because if this plays out like I think it will, once things start to go south, it’s all gonna happen pretty quickly.” Benson nodded his head silently in agreement, staring into the living room past his dad. “But we’ll manage,” Jim continued, turning to the last page he had read of his manual before this whole conversation started. “The Monroe family’s been around a long time, and if I have my say, we’ll be around a lot longer.”

“So, what’s the turning point going to look like?” Benson asked without looking at his dad. “I mean, how will we know?”

“Trust me, you’ll know. But until then, you just need to be ready.”

“Dad,” Benson pleaded, staring into his dad’s eyes. “Can you stop being so cryptic and just tell me?”

Jim looked up, hesitant to confirm what he knew Benson

was really asking. “Look, B, you’re a bright kid, and I’m sure you’ve already got it figured out. But in case you don’t, let me break it down for you. We have a generator. And so, we have power right now. But it’s only good for about 500 hours max, and that’s pretty standard for most generators. And since no one has really gotten on the solar wagon yet, the hospitals and other essential buildings that are needed for modern survival have at the most two, maybe three generators to run the place.”

“*And ...?*”

“And,” Jim continued, “generators aren’t a long-term solution. They’re a band-aid. And a band-aid ain’t gonna fix a bullet hole.”

“What’s gonna happen to everyone at the hospital once the generators stop working?” Ellyce asked, terrified by where the conversation was going. “What are you saying?”

“What I’m saying,” he said, “is—”

“What’s gonna happen to all the people who don’t have a clue as to what’s going on? Or all the people who aren’t prepared?” Benson interrupted.

“Bingo,” Jim said, nodding, knowing that his son understood. “So, now you know what’s gonna happen when people realize we have power and provisions that they don’t.”

“What?” Ellyce asked.

“I get it, Dad.”

“I don’t. What’s gonna happen?”

Jim sighed. “Ellyce, think about it a minute. What’s going to happen when all those people out there realize that the banks are closed, and they aren’t ever reopening because we live in a mostly cash-less society?” Ellyce’s eyes were wide and fixed on the words coming from his mouth, but she said nothing. “And even if they did have money to spend, where are they going to spend it? The stores aren’t gonna be open—

there's only a limited amount of food stocked on the shelves each day. And then there's all the sick people in the hospitals. Some are just sick, but some are truly dying. The hospitals don't have an endless supply of emergency power. You saw the devastation in New Orleans, and in Puerto Rico after the hurricanes. Those events were isolated issues. Now multiply that by the world."

"A thousand hours is like two months, Dad." Benson said, quickly calculating the numbers.

"Right. So, when things start to get hairy, they're gonna get hairy real quick. And *that* will be our cue that it's time to bug out."

"So, if the generators at the hospital only have two months of power, what happens to all the people who need them to live?" Ellyce asked again, but no one in the room answered. "Are you telling me we're about to plunge into our own version of the Walking Dead?" Their downcast faces gave her the answer she didn't want to hear. "I think I'm gonna be sick," she said, throwing her hand over her mouth as she bolted up the stairs to the guest bathroom.

After thirty minutes of alternating between vomiting and sobbing uncontrollably, Ellyce flung herself onto Benson's sister's bed and buried her head in the pillow. Bailey had been away at college—in her final year—and, as far as Ellyce could tell, she hadn't slept in her bed in over six months. According to Bailey, she hadn't planned on ever sleeping in it again.

Engaged to Shawn Patterson—the son of Benson and Ellyce's match-making kindergarten teacher, and her husband, Charles, the Mayor of both Woodlake and West Hills—Bailey stayed at Shawn's palatial six-acre estate in Woodlake whenever she came home for visits. She had said she liked staying at his place instead of her own family's modest rancher in the middle of Hayvenhurst because she liked the way she could get lost roaming the house and grounds. But, more importantly, she liked how the staff treated her.

Charles was serving his third consecutive term as mayor of Woodlake, and his family owned half the town. Bailey had told her parents that staying at Shawn's house was her way of

getting accustomed to the finer things in life, but her attitude never sat well with Ellyce. Then again, Bailey always seemed to be a little different from the rest of Benson's family. She'd given off a vibe that Ellyce could never quite put her finger on; but it was probably just that she was pretty and popular, and so very unlike Ellyce.

But, at this moment, Ellyce was glad that Bailey was living it up somewhere else because her bed was a welcomed comfort. She stretched out and inhaled deeply against the pillowcase, letting her nose fill with a delicious mixture of honeysuckle and chubby baby. Jessica used baby laundry detergent instead of regular detergent even though Benson, the "baby" of the house, was now in high school. He had developed an allergic reaction to some unknown thing when he was in the seventh grade, and his doctor recommended ditching everything that wasn't natural. Jessica had started using baby detergent, and she continued using it long after he'd outgrown whatever the issue was just to be safe. On numerous occasions, Jessica claimed it was safer and worked so much better than the other brands. Personally, Ellyce thought that maybe she had already lost one kid when Bailey moved out, and she wasn't so keen on letting another go so quickly. Whatever her reason, with the pillowcase smelling like what Ellyce pictured *calm* would smell like, she couldn't disagree with Jessica's decision to stick with the detergent.

But it wasn't enough to keep her from thinking about them—the nameless, faceless people who would be dead within two months if someone didn't turn the power back on. The thought of it brought tears to her eyes. First, it would be those in need of the lifesaving power once the generators ran out of gas, quickly followed by the sick, and then the elderly. That was one-third of the Chumash Valley's population, and the thought of so many people dying made her stomach sour.

She pulled the pillow from under her head, flipped over on her back, and held it over her face. Between throwing up and sobbing about everything that had happened in the past two months, she couldn't cry anymore. She didn't *want* to cry anymore. But what else do you do when the world you know suddenly and irrevocably changes without warning? And what do you do when your father disappears, and you have no way of knowing how to find him? There was no way her father could have known this was going to happen.

But *what if he did?*

That single thought sent her spiraling down a bunny trail of “what-ifs.” What if he had learned this was going to happen from one of those ancient prophecies he was always going on about? What if Derek was her provision—her rescuer and life preserver when things got crazy? But what made *him* so special? Why not just have her stay with the Monroes? Why send her off to someone she'd never met? *Because Thomas said not to trust those she thought she could.*

But he wasn't talking about the Monroes. Ellyce shook her head, dismissing the thought. Surely his warning didn't apply to them. The Monroes were their longest and closest friends, *and* clearly capable of handling whatever life threw at them. Thomas would have told her if he didn't trust them, and he never would have let her date Benson if there had been a problem. She swiped the side of her cheek, wiping away the start of another flood of tears, and turned on her side.

Illinois held the answers to all her problems, but how was she going to get there? The only car she had access to was her dad's old 1970's Jeep—complete with a manual transmission. Maybe that's why he was adamant about her learning how to drive a

stick-shift. Why had she been so stubborn about not wanting to do it? Now the only way to get to Illinois was to walk or have someone drive with her, and how was that supposed to go over with Benson's family? *Like a lead balloon*, she imagined.

Was it possible to walk two-thousand miles? How many lifetimes would that take? And if she could convince someone to go with her, what about getting gas? How would that work? Didn't gas pumps use electricity to pump gas from underground?

On the *Walking Dead*, they siphoned gas from the abandoned cars left on the dealer lots. In theory, that would work—there were plenty of auto malls between here and Illinois. But the thought of it made her anxious. Did she really want to suck gasoline into her mouth? Or ask anyone else to do it? *No*, she grimaced. *That was too much to ask*. And too gross to think about.

There had to be another way. But how?

She didn't know. And honestly, at this point, she couldn't think about it anymore. Or cry about it. Or do anything but sleep. Maybe if she took a nap, something in her brain would shake loose. Maybe she'd come up with some way to get to Illinois that didn't involve anyone else. Ellyce tucked her arm under her head and stared at the walls in Bailey's room, looking for textured patterns and familiar shapes to distract herself. She had always wondered what it would be like to live in the middle ages. Now, she supposed she was going to get her chance.

Be careful what you wish for, she thought, and then blinked, holding back the deluge of tears that welled up again. *I will survive this. I just need to change my perspective*. "And get some sleep," she whispered to herself. And then with that, Ellyce closed her eyes and let the sweet

honeysuckle scent of chubby baby overwhelm her senses until she drifted off to sleep.



WHILE THE BIRDS were still cooing, and the hummingbirds flew gracefully plucking the bounty from the inside of trumpet vines that crept along the wall, he took two tablets—one fashioned of brick, and one made of bronze, and wrote down everything he knew. This story wasn't his, but he, like everyone else, had a part to play.

And the warning—these words—*this* was his part:

I should like that you would read the original words, but I know that you will not. Because I know of your stubborn disdain for all things of old. But the Shopkeeper has a secret—and not simply one. It is your duty as a royal heir to search out the matter. The key will rest squarely upon your shoulders. So, find it, but don't withhold it. It's a matter of the utmost importance.

And then, just like that, the brightness of the day turned cloudy and a storm filled the sky overhead. The charged particles pinging off his body, created an exciting rush of adrenaline that he welcomed yet hated at the same time, because he knew what was about to befall him.

The man tossed the brick tablet into the water and picked up the bronze tablet, holding it close to his chest for a moment before dropping it into the fire that had erupted from the water's mouth. The ground he stood on quaked and crumbled beneath him as an ocean of water overwhelmed him.

The man fixed his gaze straight ahead—focused on the

mission at hand. Peering into her eyes, he continued his warning:

*For your world will not always be bright and blue and clear.
It will turn one day, like the roar of a queen-less beehive, the
sound of chaos and death—an ever-increasing fever-pitched
hum—marching the world into oblivion will be unmistakable.*

First by water.

Then by fire.

Seek Derek. Because when you remember ...

The man paused, choking back the last bit of water that bubbled up over his face. As the water overtook him, he murmured one final word:

Run.



BENSON'S HAND was still on her shoulder when she opened her eyes. "Elle, get up. We gotta go."

Ellyce studied her surroundings while Benson fumbled around the room, gathering her jacket and shoes. She heard the words coming from his mouth, but her foggy mind was busy, scrambling to recall and remember the details about the man and the dream. The dream was a strange mixture of her father and his books, and someone else—someone familiar, but she couldn't quite place him. The man's odd familiarity put her mind at ease—almost like she'd known him or, at the very least, had seen him before. But she couldn't remember where.

"Put your shoes on," Benson nudged parentally.

"Why? Where are we going?"

“The Mayor’s called a meeting. They’ve declared a state of emergency,” he said, pulling her backpack off the chair so she could sit down. “What are you carrying in here, bricks?”

Bricks. That was a funny choice of words, she thought. “Just a few things from my house. Some books, Penelope, you know, the usual.”

Benson snorted, shaking his head in disbelief. “Civilization as we know it’s on the brink of extinction, and you bring over books and an old stuffed animal. Ellyce Jensen, you *are* your father’s daughter.”

She made a face—*guilty as charged*—and shrugged her shoulders. “So, who calls a meeting at night?” she asked, slipping her feet into her canvas shoes.

“Yeah, see, that’s the thing,” Benson said, throwing open the curtains to display vividly bright colored auroras lighting up what should have been a darkened night sky. Ellyce slowly pulled her sweatshirt over her head, staring in disbelief. “People are freaking out all over town, talking about the end of the world, and stuff like that. So, that’s why they’ve called the meeting. My dad said Sheriff Bowman wants to start some precautionary measures to make sure people stay calm.”

“Precautionary. Like what?”

“Curfews, seeing who’s missing. Things like that.”

“Missing? Benson, what if somebody asks about my dad? What do I say?”

He pulled her close to his chest and wrapped her in a tight hug, refusing to let her push him away this time. “It’s gonna be okay. My dad said we’d tell them your dad was out of town doing some research for one his books and he left you with us while he was gone.”

She tried pushing away, but she couldn’t. “You know Sydney’s never going to agree to be a part of that lie.” He clutched her tighter. For a few minutes she gave into his

embrace, knowing that somehow Benson would work his magic and take care of things.

“Come on, you two,” Jim yelled from the bottom of the stairs. “We gotta go. We don’t wanna be late.”

Benson gently released her and clasped his fingers between hers, giving her hand a squeeze. “How about you leave Sydney to me. I’ll take care of everything. I promise. You’re gonna be fine, Elle,” he said, kissing her forehead softly before pulling her out of his sister’s bedroom and down the stairs.

Thomas Jensen leaned against the old wooden shed and studied the night sky. A long time ago, he had learned the secrets of the Mazzaroth. Although he knew the time was short, and there was still too much that he had to do, he couldn't help but marvel at the fact that the people of this land dwelt under a clear blanket of stars in a perpetual state of summer and thought nothing of it.

This place, Thya, was reminiscent of his childhood—those Midwest summers where wild prairie flowers blossomed under delicate and perfectly temperate conditions, leaving an intoxicating fragrance in their wake. This fact alone could have made concentrating on the task at hand—the completion of his last novel—difficult, but Thomas knew what he had to do.

Thya was a holding land; the gateway directly between the Tower Lands, home of the Vulpine, and Sart, the Land of the Red Sleepers. Because of that, Thya was a challenging place. The people here didn't live by what was, or what was to come, but by what *is*. As much as he tried otherwise, Thomas found living in the now something of a challenge.

It was difficult being a stranger here, knowing that two opposing forces were battling for the land, so they could control the gate; but he never spoke of such things to anyone except the Shamash. The purple ones of Thya weren't supposed to know about the opposing forces either, but there was a remnant—a small group—who remembered what Thya and the rest of the realms had been like in their previous glories when the original king occupied the territory. This small remnant remained faithful, though they never dared to mention those days, except amongst themselves. They simply went about their daily lives, pretending to be in the moment. But if you knew what signs to look for, you could easily recognize them.

Thomas hated that he had to leave his daughter behind, but he took some small comfort knowing that as crazy and impossible as it seemed, they were both looking up at the same night sky full of stars and dancing auroras. He also took comfort in knowing he would see her again, just perhaps not in the way he had hoped. In order for the Howling to be stopped, Thomas knew he had to be in Thya, and Ellyce had to be in Hayvenhurst. And so, he would do what he needed to do. But that didn't make the task any easier.

“Questioning your decisions?” a voice called out seconds before a sturdy hand slapped his shoulder, startling him.

Even though he knew the Shamash's voice, Thomas' first reaction was to stiffen and ready himself for a fight. He relaxed a little before answering. “No, just pausing a minute to take in the scenery.” Thomas smiled at the Shamash, this land's attendant, the most faithful and trusted companion to the rightful heir and king of the realms. “It's just a little bit of a mind-bending notion knowing she's looking at the same sky,” Thomas said. “Though I'm sure her reaction is a little different than mine.”

The Shamash gave Thomas a hearty pat on the back. “Cheer up, Thomas. All will be well. You’ve raised a smart girl.”

“But you won’t tell me her choice?”

The Shamash picked up two smooth stones, one white and one black, and shifted them gently over each other in his hand. “It doesn’t work that way here, and you know it. What I’m telling you is what is happening now. In this moment, she’s a smart girl. And when she decides which way she’s going to go, then you, and I, and the rest of the realms will know.”

“I know. But I wish I could have bypassed all this and brought her with me.”

“In Thya we don’t wish, and you know that. You left her the clues. That’s all that can be asked of you right now. Whether or not she accepts the offer is her choice.”

“But what if I wasn’t clear? What if something happens and they get to her first?”

He laughed. “Thomas, you agreed to the match. You’ve done your part. You can’t decide for her—she must do it. She must decide whether she believes what you’ve told her.”

“And if he fills her mind with doubt, then what?”

“You, my friend, worry too much,” the Shamash said, laughing heartily. “It does no good to dwell on the storm, for it gives the Vulpine power.” He wrapped his arm around Thomas’ shoulder, pulling him close. “Enjoy the summer. But know that the time is near. Winter will come, and with it, the rains.” As if by cue, lightning cracked in the distance over the southern tip of Lydia where Thya connected to the Tower Lands. Thomas drew in a deep, heavy breath. The Shamash gave him a hearty side-hug, pressing him close. “But they’re not here yet. It’s not their due season. And nothing—I repeat, nothing—happens out of season.” With those words, as

quickly as he had arrived, the Shamash disappeared amid a cacophony of birds, crickets, and croaking frogs, leaving Thomas alone with his wandering thoughts and the warm summer scents that wafted through the air.

His nose was filled with the fragrances of fresh-cut grass, sweet mulberry, rain, and warm apple pie. Thomas chuckled, knowing where that last scent had come from. Only the Shamash would thwart the misguided thoughts that wreaked havoc on his mind with something as comforting as warm apple pie. He watched the lightning battle against the bruise-colored sky in the distance a little while longer before deciding that eating would be better than standing around worrying about all the things he didn't have control over.

After the lightning cracked overhead, splitting the sky in two, he counted in his head—*one-one thousand, two-one thousand*—and made his way through the lush forest of flowers toward the Baker's cottage. If someone would have told him years ago about this place and the other realms of the Kingdom, he would have said it was a fantastic story, and in no way real. But that was before her betrayal, and before the reality of the situation had been revealed to him. With a single act, his whole world and everything he *thought* he knew had changed. What Thomas had once believed to be a fantasy was crystal clear, and with his new-found clarity, he'd been given a second chance.

With full understanding, he knew what he had to do. And so, he drank the cup that was offered to him, and agreed to the match for his daughter as well. The decision though, he would learn later, was hardly a done deal. Ellyce would have to agree to accept the offer as well; and that, he knew, would be when and where the Vulpine would strike. The pain of betrayal and being lied to by someone he thought he could trust had been devastating but knowing that the Vulpine

would seek Ellyce when the time was right had been the catalyst for his decision to reinvent himself.

Writing was not simply an avocation, but his way of helping. The stories that he had spent his life writing were not really his creations, though most people didn't know that. The stories he wrote were treasure maps to an older story—the original story—that had become fragmented and hidden. And it was this story that, when told in its native tongue, provided far more details about the grand scheme of things than any translation of it could.

Translations—like people, Thomas had learned, could be easily manipulated and twisted to suit an agenda. But the original story couldn't be manipulated. It had been so deeply layered and the tale's outcome had been so intricately woven throughout its pages, that it was impossible for someone—or something—to redact all the details.

On the King's behalf, every letter and every sentence of the original story was laced in such a way that every sentence was pregnant with meaning. And while each of those sentences could be understood in four different ways, even that number—the number four—referred back to the King and his original plan.

It was genius, really, what he had done. The story of the Land of Finish was the ultimate “choose your own adventure” novel, with one caveat: that everyone in all the realms, including Earth, would participate. The information was passed down from generation to generation that there would be a *war* and a *wedding*, and Thomas had spent the latter part of his life writing stories to help people choose which side they were going to be on. He wanted to help people see through the secrets—which weren't really secrets at all—so he provided a map for navigating the realms. Thomas' stories

were the opposite of all those superhero stories that flooded the theaters and bookstores.

Those books and stories lulled people into accepting the supernatural as common, making it easier for the Vulpine to add confusion into the mix. There was nothing common about the supernatural realm, and the sooner people realized that, the better. As he cut through the prairie grass field with the Baker's cottage in sight, Thomas' mind returned to the one concern he'd had all along—that after all these years, and all these stories told, he would fail the one person who needed to understand the clues inside those books more than anyone else on the planet.

Thomas prayed that Ellyce would figure out his clues and codes, and that she would find Derek—like he had—*before it was too late*.

The fast moving, wickedly eerie shades of gray that painted the sky during the day gave way to faster moving hues of deep green, purple, and red as Ellyce and the Monroes walked the two-mile stretch down Sequoia Avenue towards City Hall. As a few older cars and trucks snaked through the crowded streets, Ellyce still wasn't clear as to why some cars were working while others weren't. Jim had explained the mechanics behind electrical circuits and components and what all that had to do with cars built after 1980—*twice*. But she hadn't understood it any better the second time around, so bringing it up a third time seemed pointless.

He did, however, answer her question about the gas pumps. It turns out that it didn't really matter if she found a car she could drive; the gas pumps wouldn't work. Which meant, leaving this valley tonight or any other night in the near future wasn't going to happen unless someone turned the power back on. From the conversations she overheard as they walked toward City Hall, that didn't seem likely to happen any time soon.

Before the flares, the most exciting thing that had happened in Hayvenhurst and its two sister towns, Woodlake and West Hills, was a six-month-long debate between the school board and parents about what kinds of books should be permitted in the high school library. For months, it seemed like everyone in the Chumash Valley, as well as those in the surrounding Los Angeles area, had something to say about it, though the most vocal proponents were the ones who didn't even have kids in the area.

These three adjoining towns were exclusive communities that spilled over into one another—nestled between two mountain ranges and the beach, twenty-five miles up the road from Los Angeles. Until forty years ago, these towns had been nothing but farmland. But then some Hollywood socialite moved to the area because she thought the valley was quaint, and now these bedroom communities were home to all sorts of celebrities—and people who *thought* they were celebrities.

It was for that very reason Thomas had chosen Hayvenhurst.

With everyone else vying for the spotlight and drawing attention to themselves, he said they could live close to Los Angeles, which was important for his work, and remain relatively anonymous. “Nobody cares about writers,” he had told Ellyce one afternoon a few years back when she was lamenting their life choices. “Unless you're Jo Rowling or Stephen King, and even then, it was debatable if there was a movie star in the same room to ogle over.”

Ellyce chuckled to herself as they turned the corner, but the happy memory of her dad was quickly replaced with anxiety. The scene before them was an introvert's worst nightmare. The City Hall Complex sat on the grounds of an old

theme park the city bought after it went belly up in the late sixties.

The new developers, wanting to distance themselves from the old Western motifs *and* the lawsuits that followed from a string of animal attacks and escapades, decided to upgrade the grounds with a wide modern amphitheater, two world renowned rose gardens—pompously titled, *Garden of the World*—and a magnificent building that held over 250 seats and sat regally crowned above the grounds. The updated building had become a star jewel in what many considered a blight on the town's name and reputation.

Jim held Jessica's back, navigating her through the crowds, while Benson slipped his hand into Ellyce's and pulled her along behind his parents. The courtyard, abuzz with indistinct chattering, wailing babies, and kids of all ages chasing each other around while crowds swarmed the streets, was cordoned off so everyone entering had to funnel into the tightly barricaded entrance of the amphitheater, like sheep going to the slaughter.

Ellyce couldn't hear anything specific, but it was obvious from the thick tension hanging in the air that a lot of these people were as frightened and concerned as she was—though she suspected she was the only one who also had a father who was MIA. Jim directed them to a spot past the play yard where the noise levels were more manageable, and they slid into seats in the middle row.

Hayvenhurst's celebrity mayor, Alexander Jenkins, along with Sheriff Bowman, the Fire Chief, and other members of the City Council, stood on the stage waiting for the last of the residents to trickle in. Even as they tried to present a united front, Ellyce could see the cracks of their façade. Sheriff Bowman and several members of the council stood off from the others, talking comfortably amongst themselves. They

had lived in Hayvenhurst all their lives and could tell stories of the days when Hayvenhurst was a small town of two hundred people in the middle of nowhere, which was honestly, the way they liked it. They weren't thrilled with the Fire Chief or the Mayor, who were fairly recent additions to "The Haven," as Bowman and the others called it.

The new Fire Chief had only been in town about six months, and Alexander Jenkins only about five years. Prior to his election, Jenkins had been a B-list actor in Hollywood. Originally, people from all three towns questioned his motives for going into politics, but as more and more celebrity types moved in from LA, the people in Hayvenhurst, Woodlake, and West Hills seemed to like having someone they considered to be "one of their own" in office.

Jenkins' political aspirations had not been all that altruistic. Two years before his victory, he had approached the former City Council about installing a new privacy fence on his property, but they had told him it was impossible. Officials said it would disrupt the integrity of the communities' design, but, more importantly, a 150-year-old tree would have to be sacrificed to accommodate the new fence.

Hayvenhurst residents were weird about their trees. They didn't just like them—they *worshipped* them. It was their version of the *Save the Whales* campaign. Because of that love, only city crews were allowed to maintain the trees within the city's borders. Anyone caught tinkering with the trees—even on their own property—was subject to fines and penalties exceeding \$100,000 per offense. So, the Council's denial of Jenkins' request launched a feud so hotly debated it was only overcome by his narrow win in the general election. As everyone suspected, Jenkins' first order of business as the town's new mayor was to pass a resolution allowing for the installation of the new fence and the sacrifice of the tree.

Thomas had often wondered how Jenkins would do in the event of a real issue, and, as Ellyce could attest, even in the midst of a natural disaster, Mayor Jenkins was flawlessly put together. “I want to thank everyone for coming out tonight,” he said, positioning the bullhorn microphone closer to his mouth. “We know this is a stressful situation for everyone, and that’s why we’ve called this meeting. We wanted to let you know first-hand we have assessed the situation and we are doing everything we can to restore power.”

Ellyce cast a hopeful glance in Jim’s direction, but he crossed his arms and whispered, “He has to say that.”

“But we need transformers for that,” a man shouted from somewhere in the front. “And I know for a fact we don’t have any.”

Hushed murmurs rippled through the audience, and Jenkins waved his perfectly tanned arm, trying to quell the uproar. “Yes, yes, yes. That is true, but we are working on the situation. We also know that some of the best minds in the country are working on tackling this problem as efficiently as possible.”

“Have you been in contact with the federal government? What are they doing to help us?” a young woman shouted from the middle of the crowd.

“Folks,” he said sharply, trying to keep control of the meeting, “I know you have questions, but let us finish our briefing. If by the end I haven’t answered all your questions, then I promise we’ll do a peaceful Q-and-A session in the time allotted.” He faced the worried woman and sighed, then answered anyway. “Because of the lack of power, our communication systems are a little hit and miss right now, but we are trying to contact Washington through other channels.”

The murmurs grew louder, and he stepped to the front of the stage and smiled as if he was speaking in front of a live

studio audience. There was something charismatic about the way he held himself and spoke that captivated most of the crowd, but Ellyce could tell from their raised eyebrows that the Monroes weren't so charmed.

"Now, the next few days are going to be critical," Jenkins said, walking around the stage. "We need to work together. So, I've invited Sheriff Bowman to say a few words on how we are going to coordinate our efforts."

Compared to Jenkin's soft features, perfectly tanned skin, pressed jacket, dress jeans, and loafers, Sheriff Donald T. Bowman was a brute. Rough around the edges, he towered over his colleague. He was at least a foot taller, and just as wide across the middle. Bowman also had a no-nonsense attitude to back up his badge. If Mayor Jenkins was playing the role of Good Cop, there could be no doubt in anyone's mind that Bowman was the Bad Cop. "I know everyone is scared and, in times like this, there's a bit of uncertainty, but our departments," he said, pointing to the Fire Chief, who awkwardly waved to the crowd, "are asking you to help keep the peace. This is a temporary situation, and we need you to remember that." He stood at the edge of the stage and tried softening his stance a bit. "What we know for sure is that approximately 36 hours ago, NASA and other governmental agencies issued a warning stating they believed the sun would unleash a Coronal Mass Ejection—or CME as they are called—and the flare would miss the earth. But as we all know, it did not miss. Unfortunately, predicting these types of things is not an exact science. The flare breached our atmosphere within 18 hours, and, for the most part, set off a chain reaction of events that disrupted radio transmission signals and dropped satellites from Boston to Beijing."

Bowman stepped away from the edge of the stage and paced back and forth, interacting with both sides of the stage

rather than just his left side, which he clearly preferred. “There were early reports of a few commercial airliners that didn’t get the memo about ceasing operations until the flare’s trajectory could be determined with certainty. Fortunately, the majority of passenger airlines heeded the warning and grounded all flights. On that front, human casualties, as far as anyone can tell, have been minimal.”

Gasps bubbled up from the crowd, and he waved them quiet. He paused, trying to smile a wide, accepting smile, but his demeanor and stance were not as effective as Jenkins’. “Once it was determined that the flare would hit the earth, steps were taken to minimize damage to the grids, but there wasn’t enough time to shut everything down properly. From what we can tell this early on, the grid systems took a pretty severe hit.”

Once again, unintelligible noises rose as people tried shushing their children and the others talking around them.

“What are we going to do?”

“Are there backup generators?”

“What’s going to happen to us?”

“How are we going to live?”

The questions and concerns flooded the amphitheater and the courtyard. Mayor Jenkins grabbed the bullhorn, trying to calm the rising panic. “We can’t emphasize enough how important it is for us to work together,” Jenkins reiterated. “Residents of Hayvenhurst, Woodlake, and West Hills—Fellow Citizens. *Friends,*” he paused, punctuating the last title. “Please. Let me finish. Let *us* finish. We can and will get through this. But we need to have this briefing so we can keep you safe. Your safety is our top priority.”

As the noise levels died down, Bowman took the bullhorn again. “We’re a tight-knit community, so I don’t expect there to be any looting or rioting. We heard some reports of

violence and problems in Los Angeles. But, people, listen. We are not LA. We are the Chumash Valley, and we're going to have to work together." He continued his awkward, intentional pacing across the stage floor. "We have met with various community leaders, and we've put together a system for allowing people to get supplies for their immediate needs. We don't want a run on the markets or the banks. We need to stay calm and united. And, again, I want to stress that *we need to work together.*"

Ellyce nudged Benson's arm, nodding to the back of the amphitheater where police deputies lined the exits, standing guard at the doors. Jim quietly acknowledged the deputies, crossed his arms over his chest, and motioned for Ellyce and Benson to pay attention to the stage. Ellyce had seen that same deflective look in her father's eyes enough times when they were traveling to strange places and visiting foreign lands to know what Jim was doing. He was cautiously watching the scene unfold and eyeing a way out should the need arise.

Jessica leaned over Benson and gave Ellyce a little squeeze. "It's going to be okay. I promise," she whispered, smiling warmly. "I won't let anything happen to you."

Ellyce did her best to smile back, hoping everyone would be cooperative and everything would be okay, but she couldn't shake the uneasy feelings welling up inside her. She didn't know where her dad was—was he even alive? And she didn't know how to handle the questions she was sure she was going to get.

"We are in agreement with the governor and with Mayor Patterson of both Woodlake and West Hills that, temporarily, we should declare a state of emergency." Groans echoed throughout the complex. "Again," Jenkins said, trying to calm them, "we ask for your cooperation in this matter."

“The guards make sense,” Jim told Jessica, putting his hand over hers. “We knew this was coming. And we’ll take it one day at a time. We’ll be fine. If we need to, we’ll bug out sooner, but let’s hear what else they have to say.”

“What exactly does that mean for us?” a young man asked. “Am I supposed to stay at home? What do we do?” He looked at his young wife clutching their small son and pulled them close to his side.

“That’s a good question,” Sheriff Bowman said. “What we are asking is for everyone to stay inside their houses for the next forty-eight hours until we can get things a little more straightened out. Right now, your safety is our first priority. To that end, we need everyone to stay home until we have a better handle on the time frames for getting the power back up and running. If you’re at home, then the first responders are available to be where we need them to be instead of running all over the place, helping folks who should be at home.”

“How many people have been affected?” someone asked from the front.

“Folks, let me be real for a minute. From what we know about these types of things, this looks to be a Stage II event—which means people all over the globe have been affected in one way or another. Here in the U.S., our best guess is that three-quarters of the country have lost power.”

“What if we need supplies or other things? I have small children. How will we get food and milk?” a woman from the middle of the crowd asked. Her questions were followed by a barrage of similar concerns.

“See, son,” Jim, whispered, leaning over his wife towards Benson. “Those are the people I’m worried about. No mother is going to let her child starve to death. What do you think she’s going to do when push comes to shove?”

Benson didn't respond, but grimaced and shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Friends, please," Jenkins said, grabbing the bullhorn from Bowman's hands. "If you do not have adequate supplies of food and water, let the officers stationed at the exits know, and they will get your name on the registry list so we can get you what you need."

"Registry?"

"What do you mean, registry?"

"What kind of registry?"

"People, please," Jenkins said, appealing to their emotions. "We are going to get through this. We will persevere. This thing will not beat us. Over the course of the next forty-eight hours, we hope to have it figured out. But in the meantime, we are going to need to coordinate with all residents through a registry system. If people are missing, we need to know about it, so we can search for them. We need to make sure all our residents are safe and accounted for. It's our job as your elected officials to make sure that the people here in our quiet, peaceful part of the world are supposed to be here." He smiled again, but this time it was a wide, politician's smile, and it pushed up into his eyes.

Jenkins was a man convinced of the story he was telling—and *selling*. "And if someone comes in from the highways, we need to know about that, too. We'll need to determine their level of need and why they are here, and the registry system will help us do that. Our first priority is to our local residents. And this type of system is the thing that will keep us all *safe*."

"What types of *information* are we going to have to include on this *registry*?" a crusty older gentleman from the third row asked. The man held the brim of his hat in his hand as he stared Jenkins down, waiting for his answer.

An officer crossed the stage armed with a second bullhorn and handed it to Bowman. It crackled to life as he turned it on. “Folks, it’s really more like a questionnaire. What we need is your name, address, and a count of how many people are living in your home. Only the head of the household needs to fill out the form. We’ll run this information against the paper records we have on hand at the county office to see which families and homes are unaccounted for. This way we can send the first responders to see if those who have not registered need aid, or if they simply aren’t home.”

“Again, folks,” Jenkins pled, “this is for your safety. If you know of friends or neighbors who are missing, let the deputies know when you fill out the form. It will make the process quicker, and it might just save someone’s life.”

“It sounds like they’re making a big deal about missing people,” Ellyce whispered to Benson.

“Let me take care of that,” Jim said, answering for Benson. “I’ll talk to the Sheriff, or even Mayor Patterson if I have to, but it’s all going to be okay. Remember what I said, we’ll all be fine.”

She smiled and chuckled—hearing that word again. Maybe this was a new trend, and she’d come to like the word. Maybe things weren’t as bad as they seemed, and they *would* get the power restored in the next forty-eight hours. Benson put his hand over hers and smiled at her like he used to when they were dating. For a brief moment, Ellyce returned his smile, thinking the world could be good again. But then out of her periphery, something shiny caught her attention, and she spotted Sydney Parker, sitting two rows away, holding up a tiny mirror and glaring at them.

Ellyce pulled her hand from under Benson’s and slid closer to the woman sitting on her left side. Benson reached for her, but she jerked her hand back into her lap. Closing her

eyes, she whispered that Sydney was sitting behind them. Benson turned, casually threw his head back, and nodded at Sydney while Ellyce tried to refocus her attention on what the Sheriff and Mayor were telling the crowds.

They were discussing their plans to make the hospital the command center of all city and governmental activities when a thunderous, convulsive explosion rocked the street behind them, sending everyone in the amphitheater running for cover.

From the shadows, he watched Ellyce and the others scramble, filling buckets of water to help the firefighters stave off the raging fires. Even under all the sweat and soot, he wanted her. No, he *needed* her. The thought of what that meant made him cringe. He'd never needed anyone—especially not someone like her. But he couldn't help it. There was something about her that drew him in—something that made him not think clearly when she was around. He didn't like the feeling; it complicated things. He needed to figure out a way to get close to her without losing all his senses.

A slim, shadowy figure wandered up beside him and crossed her arms, leaning against the side of the brick building. "Did you do what I asked?" he asked, without breaking his gaze on the scene unfolding in front of them. Staring up at the night sky, the woman grunted out an answer without looking at him.

While not many people paid attention anymore, he understood his companion's feelings of pleasure and *contempt*.

Though they couldn't hide from the night sky's secrets, they could at least take comfort in knowing that any physical presentation of the Mazzaroth had been reduced long ago into something inconsequential—something that fortune tellers used for their own foolish gain. Which suited him perfectly well. In many ways, the perverted corruption had made his job easier. “Good,” he said, then scolded her. “And stop staring out there so longingly. We all had a choice.”

She snapped her attention from the sky to his face and scowled. “With false promises and coercions, some of us had less choice than others.” She murmured something else as she walked away toward the crowd.

He started to follow after her to remind her who was in charge, but he changed his mind when he caught a glimpse of Ellyce smiling at something the old man next to her had said.

He knew she would never fall for someone like him. She was too timid to delve into the seedy world he belonged to. So, he had to devise another way to get close to her.

At first, he hadn't been sure which route he would take, but when Benson broke up with her and the flares hit, he knew that the moment was his. It was as if the stars had aligned—as if they had granted him some small token of hope—but that was a joke. They would not be helping him today, or any other day for that matter. The stars had done all they were going to do. But still, he wouldn't complain. He'd take what he could get, *and then some*.

Leaning against an old oak tree, he chuckled, watching as the professionals loudly expressed their opinions about the best ways to stamp out the fires and slow the destruction of the hospital generators. Oh, how he loved *professionals* and their need to “tinker” and question everything. It was through these people that he could really work his magic. They were

the best tool for concealing the truth because few dared to dispute the word of a “professional.”

And how many lives had been destroyed because of it?

In the last century, he could think of so many instances. Looking at the night sky, he thought of Pluto. That poor, dopey little planet had been declassified because some scientific group of “professionals” decreed it so. And while this decision had originally made him nervous, apparently nobody really cared about the dull little planet named for the underworld hovering out there in the Kuiper Belt.

So, he thought he was pretty safe, and he could do whatever he wanted. But humans are such fickle, superstitious things. Nothing makes the front page of the newspaper or the conspiracy boards light up faster than a good political or Sci-Fi mystery. Never in a million years would he have guessed or believed that the one thing that would cause them to turn on the so-called professionals would be the introduction of another Zodiac sign.

The madness was ridiculous, and it was enough to drive him insane. Carrying on about how one minute they were a Sagittarius, and then the next they were an Ophiuchus, he grew so tired of hearing all the wailing and moaning about how their whole lives had been built upon lies—and how their tattooed bodies were wrong. People had literally *lost* their minds over this one event—this one grand trick perpetuated by the elite masterminds who ruled the world: The *Illuminati*, or whatever it was they called them.

If only they had remembered the secrets they’d been given, that the sky had been made for signs and for seasons, and that there had *always* been 13 signs. Then maybe they would have known why 3,500 years ago the Babylonians had silenced the thirteenth symbol: Ophiuchus, the Snake Bearer.

But they didn’t. They hadn’t remembered their history,

and they hadn't remembered the original story. He had made sure that they wouldn't. He laughed out loud and turned from the chaotic scene in front of him. They certainly weren't prepared for the significance of it all.

The significance of *his* return.

In the hours after the generator explosion, the community worked together, passing water buckets down the line, while Mayors Jenkins and Patterson assured everyone that over the next few days, when things had calmed down, they would get the opportunity to stand on their designated soap-boxes and the “end of the world” talks could resume.

With a face mask on to help her breathe through the thick, black smoke that filled the air around her, Ellyce, along with Benson and his family, helped schlep buckets of water from the hydrant on the corner of the street to the firefighters at the edge of the fire. As she scuttled back and forth, she caught bits and pieces of conversations and rumors, though she didn't pay much attention, until she heard Thomas' name and talk about his disappearance. She tried ignoring what they were saying, working and pretending she didn't know what they were talking about, or *who* they were discussing. But when Sheriff Bowman and two of his deputies pulled her from her tasks, she could no longer deny her suspicion that Benson's way of fixing things with Sydney had been to tell her about Thomas' disappearance.

“Ms. Jensen,” Sheriff Bowman said, pulling her away from the crowd. “We need to ask you a few questions about your dad. And we’d like it if you came with us.” Ellyce nodded, setting down her bucket, and then glanced over at a guilty looking Benson.

“Hold up,” Jim shouted, pushing his way through the crowd. “Sheriff, what’s the meaning of this?”

A brash deputy not much taller than Jim stepped between him and Sheriff Bowman, drawing his club as he barked out his command. “Sir, this doesn’t concern you. You need to back up.”

Jim barked back, standing his ground. “The girl’s staying with my family, so I’m sorry, but this does concern me.” The people around them stopped what they were doing and turned to listen.

“We just need to talk to her,” Sheriff Bowman said, not wanting to cause a scene or disrupt the work. “We received a report that her father is missing, and, well, that he might have some information about what’s going on.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Ellyce scoffed. “My father doesn’t know anything about this.”

Sydney and Mrs. Parker wormed their way to the front of the crowd, watching as the scene unfolded in front of them. “That’s not true,” Ellen Parker smacked out. “Jim’s son told us himself,” she said, pointing to Benson. “He even told us there were some strange men camped outside her house. They were probably planning this thing weeks ago.”

“That’s not—” Benson said in protest, but his dad’s glare shut him up. He shook his head and shrugged at Ellyce, trying to assure her that he hadn’t told Sydney that. But the hushed rumors and murmurs had already started flowing through the crowd.

“Sheriff, it’s correct that Thomas is not present in

Hayvenhurst as this moment, but I can assure you he's not missing."

"So, you know where he is?" Mayor Jenkins asked, joining the fray.

Jim hesitated before blowing out his cheeks. "No, not at this present time. But she's a minor. You can't question her without parental consent." Sheriff Bowman ignored him, pulling Ellyce along with him away from the crowd as Jim scrambled after them. "Or at least not without an attorney present."

Bowman turned and stood face to face with Jim and grunted, sizing him up. "You see, that's where you're wrong. Because this is a matter of national security, and I assure you, I can, and I *will* ask her some questions."

"How exactly is an explosion at a local hospital a matter of national security?" Ellyce asked, refusing to move.

Bowman glared at her but ignored her question. "We need to get this wrapped up," he said to Jim. "If she has the answers we need to stop this, then we're gonna do everything we can for the safety of everyone involved. Is that clear?"

"Then I'm coming with you. You're not speaking to her alone."

"Suit yourself," Sheriff Bowman said and pulled Ellyce along beside him. Onlookers stepped out of their way. It was like Moses parting the Red Sea as they made their way toward the hospital's west entrance.

Benson chased after them, trying to explain, "Dad, please. I didn't—"

Jim turned back towards his son. "Not now, Benson. You've done quite enough. We didn't need this kind of attention, and you knew that." Jim caught a glance of his worried wife standing behind them. "Stay with your mom. I'll get this sorted out."



WHILE THE TOWNSPEOPLE had been dragging buckets of water from the hydrants to the firefighters for hours on end, the local authorities from all three towns had been quietly consolidating their operations into one centralized location. They hoped that by merging their resources into one secure place, they could deter any more acts of terrorism, while pooling their resources to make the most of the remaining generators and stretch the little time they had left. In one fell swoop, the hospital had become the Chumash Valley's center of survival.

Bowman led Ellyce and Jim up to the twelfth floor—the psych ward, which had been cordoned off into two sections. With its controlled access, one side was kept open for those who required hospital services, while the other side had become a makeshift police station.

Bowman handcuffed Ellyce's right wrist to the plain wooden table in what used to be a break room and pushed her into a chair. "When was the last time you saw your father?" he asked, pulling his pen from his pocket.

"I'm not sure," she curtly replied, trying to cover for him. She shifted in her seat. "Is this the best use of your time? I mean, I can assure you that he had *nothing* to do with this. And it seems like you have lots of other things to be dealing with that are way more important than my missing dad."

"So, you don't know anything about his clandestine meetings? Or why he would want to harm the residents of Hayvenhurst?"

"Clandestine meetings?" Jim scoffed. "What are you talking about?"

"This was caused by a solar flare—not by my father. He's a good writer, but you're giving him way too much credit."

Bowman stared at her. "The power outage was caused by

the flares. But the generator explosion was caused by human tampering. So, again, I'll ask you, Ms. Jensen. Do you know who your father has been conspiring with to harm the citizens of Hayvenhurst?"

"This is absurd," Ellyce said, crossing her free arm across her chest in protest. "You have people out there dying, and you're asking me questions that I don't have the answers to."

"People are going to die? Tell me more about that. What do you know?"

"Whoa," Jim said, slapping his hands down on the table. "She doesn't know anything about people dying. She's just talking about what's happening with the flares. It's a natural disaster. It's pretty safe to assume someone died, or is going to die. So, don't try to twist this into something it's not."

"Sir, I'm assuming since she's staying with you that you know her father fairly well?" Jim nodded in agreement as Bowman continued. "And so, you know about his *works*."

"What do my dad's books have to do with anything?"

"Well, that's what we're gonna find out. We've sent deputies to your house to see what we can find."

"You're gonna search my house? You can't do that," she huffed.

"Yes, actually, I can. Is that going to be a problem?" He studied her carefully, noting her reaction in his notepad.

"I don't understand what you're getting at," Jim said, holding back the questions forming in his mind. "Thomas is a fantasy writer. And a dang good one. I know about a couple of his stories. But what does this have to do with the flares?"

"Again," Sheriff Bowman grunted. "It's not about the flares."

Jim leaned against the cabinets lining the wall and crossed his arms in front of him. "Well, I have to agree with Ellyce.

This seems like a waste of time. Where's your evidence that he's involved in this?"

Bowman grunted again. "That's what we're trying to ascertain. You may not know what I'm talking about, but I think she does," he said, motioning to Ellyce.

Ellyce looked away from them while another deputy knocked on the door and then entered, quickly leaning over Bowman's shoulder. He whispered something about a secret room in a closet, and Ellyce's stomach flipped. "Mr. Monroe, can you get me a glass of water?" she asked. "I'm not feeling so well. It's really hot in here."

Jim hesitated, but then noticed the beads of sweat forming at her hairline. "Okay," he said. "But I'll be *right back*." He looked at Bowman and the deputy, "Don't ask her anything while I'm gone." He turned to Ellyce. "Just keep quiet, okay?"

When Jim was out the door and around the corner, Bowman broke the silence. "Do you want to tell me what you know?"

"I don't know anything," she began.

"Ms. Jensen—"

"I don't know anything, except—" she interrupted, "that my dad disappeared a couple of months ago and I've been trying to figure out where he went ever since."

"And the room?"

"I didn't know it existed until a few days ago." She sighed. "There were some men at my house—they were looking for something."

They were interrupted by Jim shouting outside the door. He had returned with her water in hand, but his entry into the room had been blocked by two deputies outside the door. "This isn't right!" he shouted, struggling with the men. "You can't question her without an adult present." He grabbed the

doorknob, trying to pull it open. “Ellyce,” he shouted from the other side, “don’t say another word. We’re gonna get this figured out.” The sound of him being tackled and pinned to the floor filtered through the door. “Where’s Patterson?” he screamed. “Somebody get Patterson! I want to talk to the Mayor.”

Ellyce glanced through the small glass cut-out in the door and saw Benson standing outside in the hallway. Jessica was there, too, busy trying to calm Jim, but it was no use. Ellyce wondered why he would have betrayed her this way, but she knew it wasn’t entirely Benson’s fault. It was Sydney’s—and Ellyce hated her. She would pay for this—just as soon as Ellyce figured out how to get out of here.

Sheriff Bowman snapped his fingers, breaking her connection to the commotion outside the room. “Ms. Jensen,” he said, “the sooner you answer the questions, the sooner this will all be over.”

Ellyce shifted in her seat and frowned. “I told you what I know. I don’t know where my dad is. And I found out about the room two days ago. What more do you want me to say?”

“I want you to tell me the truth. Tell me what your father’s plan is,” he implored. “What were the men looking for at your house the other night?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look, we just want to help you.”

“Help me how?” she asked, petulantly. “By getting me to confess that my dad’s some guy who blows up buildings in the middle of a crisis? Or that maybe he’s part of a secret society wanting to control the population. Is that what you want to hear?”

His expression was unmoved. “Is that the truth?”

She blew a heavy breath out of her cheeks and shook her head. “No, that’s not the truth.”

“Well, if you’re hiding your dad, we’ll find out. It’s called conspiracy, and we’ll put you both away for a very long time. Do you understand?”

“I understand that I still have rights. Correct?” she asked. Sheriff Bowman nodded. “Good. Then I want a lawyer,” she said, kicking against the table. “*Now.*”

Bowman stood up and motioned to one of the deputies outside the door. “We’ll see what we can do. But it’s a bit chaotic right now, with, well, you know—everything that’s going on.” He slowly uncuffed her from the chair, gathered his papers, and turned to leave.

She rubbed her wrist where the cuffs had been and stared at him. “Sheriff Bowman. You’re wrong about us. We didn’t do anything. Neither my dad nor I have anything to do with this.”

“Well, you know the saying, Ms. Jensen. People who protest too much.” He picked up his hat and flipped it onto his head. “I don’t know what’s going on here, but I plan on finding out. Before more people get hurt. And before this gets any worse.”

“Do what you need to do. But you’re wrong about us.”

“Is that so?” he said, pausing at the door, unmoved by what she was saying. “I guess we’ll just have to see.”

“I’m sure you will. You wanna know the saddest thing in all of this?” She turned in her chair so she could look him directly in the face. “I can tell that it doesn’t really matter, does it? I mean, when the story’s good, and someone needs to be the fall guy, why let a little thing like the truth get in the way?”

“How old are you again, Ms. Jensen?”

“Sixteen,” she said, then corrected herself. “I mean seventeen. I just turned seventeen.”

“Well, that’s a pretty well-rehearsed speech for a seven-

teen-year-old.” He tipped his hat in her direction. “You go ahead and make yourself comfortable. I’ll be sure to let you know when that attorney arrives.”

Bowman walked past Benson, and Ellyce caught a glimpse of him mouthing the word “sorry.” She turned away and sighed before climbing onto the cot that was housed in the corner of the room. Clearly seventeen-year-old boys didn’t have the most carefully constructed plans, but foolishly she thought Benson might have been the exception. Never in a million years would she have guessed that his way of fixing things with Sydney would have resulted in making her dad public enemy number one.



AFTER THE FIRE had been tamped out and everyone had gone back to their homes, and the hospital staff assured Jessica that Ellyce would be well taken care of, Benson and his parents begrudgingly left the hospital to get some sleep and a fresh change of clothes.

The thought of Ellyce being under the watchful eye of Dr. Gary Carver made Jessica cringe. She went into medicine to help people, not play politics, but Dr. Carver was a different breed. Jessica had been a nurse longer than he had been in school, but he had a title and some letters behind his name, so he outranked her—and her opinions when push came to shove. She supposed that being friends with Mayor Jenkins helped him get and keep his influential position, but she couldn’t think about that now. “Benson, what were you thinking?” she asked as they rounded the corner to their street.

He shrugged his shoulders and kept walking.

“Benson, this is serious. What did you tell Sydney?” Jim asked.

“I just told her that Thomas had disappeared. I thought she’d totally understand. I didn’t think she’d be so mental about it,” he bemoaned. “And I certainly didn’t think they’d drag Ellyce in for questioning and lock her up.”

“Sydney’s a teenage girl, Benson,” his mother lamented. “What did you expect her to do?”

Jim pulled Jessica’s sleeve, slowing her. “Let’s not talk about it now.” He motioned to the front porch where Sydney sat.

She bounded off the top step and greeted Benson with a perky kiss. “I’m so glad to see you. Oh, my gosh. Things are so crazy right now.” Benson’s response was cold. “You’re not mad at me, are you?” she asked, taking a step back.

Jessica cleared her throat and walked toward the front door, pausing before stepping inside the house. “Benson, you’ve been up all night.” It was more of a command than a statement.

“I’ll be right in.”

“Okay, well, don’t be too long,” Jim added, pushing his wife through the front door. “We need to rest and regroup.”

“Okay. I said I’d be right in.” He pulled Sydney towards the road. “Why would you tell the police that Ellyce’s dad had something to do with the explosion? That’s not what I told you.”

“That’s not what I told my mom,” Sydney pouted, pleading with him. “But you know how she is. She twists my words.”

“Well, then tell her to untwist ‘em. I know you don’t like Ellyce, but she doesn’t deserve this.”

“So, I sneak out to see you, and all you do is defend her. That’s just great.” She crossed her arms and clenched her jaw, not wanting to hear his reply.

“She didn’t do anything wrong, Syd.”

“Well, you’re gonna have to choose, Benson,” she said looking him directly in the eye. “Me or her.”

Benson pushed her aside. “Not now, Sydney,” he said, heading back to the porch. “I’m tired. And I need some sleep. We can talk about this later.” He didn’t want to fight with her and he knew he couldn’t tell her how there was never going to be a choice. Being with Ellyce felt so natural, but he knew he had to stay away—and stay close to Sydney. This was for Ellyce’s protection as well as his own, even if he hated the way it made him feel.

“So, can I stay here?” she asked, tapping her foot on the concrete pavement. “I mean, I don’t wanna get caught trying to sneak back home.”

Benson turned around and sighed. “Sure. You can hang out in my sister’s room. But I’m going to sleep. I’m exhausted.”

Sydney’s face lit up as she followed him inside the house and up the stairs to Bailey’s room. Once she was safely inside, she locked the door and began scouring the room, searching for a red backpack and a set of books that didn’t belong to her.



IN THE FIRST few hours of Ellyce’s imprisonment, after Mayor Patterson had smoothed things over between him and the police at the hospital, Jim stood by watching as they tore Ellyce’s house apart, hoping that something inside Thomas’ computer or study would provide a clue as to why he had tampered with the generator, and what his next move might be.

By the end of the second day, when they had found no evidence that Thomas was anything more than a novelist, the

police hauled Ellen Parker into their makeshift station and questioned her about the information she had provided to them on the night of the explosion. She didn't know much—only enough to be dangerous. And then she claimed her only real reason for being adamant about Thomas' involvement had to do with the fact that he had thwarted her advances last summer—something she deemed as definitely “strange.”

Her reasoning didn't matter though. The damage had already been done. Within a span of four days, Ellyce had gone from being a person of interest, to a prisoner, to staying at the hospital for her own safety and well-being. While Mayor Jenkins and Sheriff Bowman had done what they could to squash any other rumors that came up about the Jensens and Thomas' involvement, their refusal to speculate on further theories only fueled the conspiratorial fires that made people more edgy and cautious.

Which, in turn, fueled the fanatics—the ones in town who couldn't be convinced that neither Thomas nor his daughter had anything to do with their lives being turned upside down. And thus, began the second raid on her home as some of the townspeople searched for clues they were sure the police had overlooked or missed. When the fanatics found nothing, they resorted to carrying away anything that might hold value, like the front door, medicine, and Thomas' tools.

“In all honesty,” Bowman said quietly to the Monroes, “we've told her she's free to go anytime she likes. But she insists on staying here because she has no other place to go. With what your son did, she can't stay at your place, and the Parkers keep riling everyone up, so I have to agree that I don't think it's wise for her to be out there on her own.” Bowman watched Ellyce wander down the hall, checking with the staff to see if there was anything she could help with. “If we're all in agreement, I think we should let her stay here

and help out until things quiet down. Or until Thomas returns.”

“I think the odds of that happening are slim,” Jim confided. “And I understand her not wanting to stay with us anymore.”

“Sydney’s been at our house every night since the explosion,” Jessica said, swirling the remaining coffee left in the cup in her hand. “You’d think she’d want to be at her own place during a time like this.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not sure what your boy sees in her,” Bowman said. “But young love kinda makes us dumb, doesn’t it?”

Jim sniffed and turned to watch Ellyce. “Well, can you at least get some folks over there to board the place up?”

“Jim, you know as well as I do that there’s no way we can do that. We’ve got too many other fires to put out, and our limited resources are becoming more so every day. We’ll do what we can to keep her safe while she’s here, but that’s all we can do at this point.”

Jim crossed his arms, nodding, though he didn’t like the answer. “I understand. Maybe I’ll take Benson over there with me. He needs a break from Sydney, and I’ll tell him repairing her house is part of his restitution.”

“Hey, listen, Jim, whatever you do, do it quickly. I probably shouldn’t say anything, but consider it a heads up, if you will. We’re implementing the registries by the end of the week.”

“The registries?” Jessica asked. “Isn’t that just going to cause more problems?”

“Well, we figure if we get everyone focused on a job to do, then maybe we can get things back to some type of normal,” he paused, hesitantly. “Well, a new sort of normal, anyway.”



ON FRIDAY AFTERNOON, Sheriff Bowman, along with Mayors Jenkins and Patterson, held another townhall meeting to explain and reiterate how the registries were going to work. They assured the residents of all three towns that they were not ushering in a New World Order and the end of the world simultaneously, but there were still some holdouts among the residents. They reminded them that *someone* had tampered with the hospital generator, but because of misinformation that had been passed around, they got their eyes off the real work, and the *real* suspect was still out there, which was problematic for everyone.

These registries, therefore, were a good thing, Mayor Jenkins had said, and would restore peace and stability into their lives.



ELLYCE WAS one of the few people who didn't attend the mandatory meeting; she was busy helping the hospital staff prepare for the onslaught of people they knew would be coming, and Sheriff Bowman had already filled her in on how the registries would work and what her role at the hospital would be.

The household registry would be implemented first. Each household was to be registered: listed by number and last name and then located on the county planning survey map. Any household not accounted for was marked on the map, and those houses were the first to be searched. Ellyce's house had already been marked on the map as empty with no casualties, but that wasn't exactly true—at least not in her mind.

The next step was for the city council members of all

three communities to create an independent search-and-rescue team to begin the home searches in a grid format across the county. They determined this would be the best course of action since the first responders were already overwhelmed and overworked putting out fires—literally and figuratively—that seemed to pop up on every street corner.

By the end of the first week, the second registry, the worker's registry, had been enacted. Every able-bodied person over the age of twelve was required to work.

Ellyce had been assigned to the children's wing under Jessica's direct supervision. Anyone with a degree in medicine or a good working medical knowledge was assigned to work at "the Hub," the hospital's new nickname. Jessica had worked there part-time as a nurse prior to the flare and the explosion, but now, with the advent of the registry, she was designated as full-time care manager.

She wasn't exactly sure how she landed the job or the title, but she suspected it had something to do with Sheriff Bowman. She was able to work alongside Ellyce daily, which was a perk, given that she reported directly to Dr. Carver, who had been put in charge of the whole hospital.

Pastors, priests, imams, and rabbis, along with any and all other clergy, of the three towns were assigned to handle the social, spiritual, and emotional needs of the residents, while women over the age of fifty were assigned to manage the food banks. The rest of the women and girls over the age of twelve were assigned to the children's wing of the Hub or to provide assistance with any other domestic duty that arose. The towns' men were assigned to the search and rescue teams, emergency response backup teams, or to the teams that were in charge of burying the dead. Boys between the ages of twelve and nineteen were assigned to teams searching for

anything salvageable that could be used to prolong the generators.

The breakdown of assigned duties ushered in yet another round of debates and dissension as people voiced their displeasure about being assigned traditional gender roles, which they thought were antiquated and unnecessary. People who had anonymously voiced their opinions online before the flare, were now trying to find their voices again. But in the real world, anonymous rants didn't work without a screen to hide behind or when there was a crisis that needed handling. Several people—including one whole family—had spent three days in jail, forcibly detained until they cooled off and the situation diffused.

By the end of the second week, the crowds quieted and fell into the new routine as the task of removing bodies from the houses marked with the bright orange Xs began. Mayor Jenkins didn't waste the opportunity to reiterate and expand upon the success of the registries and their importance in the lives of all citizens, but the somber mood didn't last long.

By the end of the first month, with the grid system still inoperable and the refrigeration and sewage systems failing, the level of unrest and uncertainty in everyone's lives had reached a new high. And so, looking forward to what they knew was coming, city officials implemented the firearms registry and the blood bank database. While Jim got worked up about the blood bank database, it was the firearms registry that sent the majority of law-abiding citizens into a tizzy.

It was also around this time that three strangers from the highway arrived—bringing with them out-of-season torrential rains and mudslides that the residents of these three communities had not seen since 1948.

Others had wandered into town within the first few days after the flare, but most had been homeless, merely looking for a place to sleep off the end of the world. And none of them had looked like this trio.

Traveling down the coast, the Pacific Ocean's murky blue waters stretching on for miles to the right of them, their pre-1980s muscle car finally ran out of gas, leaving them with an eight-mile hike over the mountain range to the closest town—*Hayvenhurst*. Before staggering into town under the careful eye of an armed escort, their journey over the rough, mountainous terrain, took them six hours and twenty-two minutes in the 85-degree weather, which felt more like 100 degrees.

At the Hayvenhurst border, they were greeted by an armed guard of men protecting the city while rain pelted and drove at them from all sides. Though they were tired, hungry, dirty, and disheveled, there was something about these three—or maybe it was the combination of events that had happened over the past few weeks—that immediately set the town gossips ablaze.

By the time they had reached the reception desk at the

hospital, a crowd of curious, rain-soaked onlookers had gathered in the lobby, convinced that these three young people had something to do with the governmental conspiracy that had taken over their lives.

After receiving word from one of the guards who ran ahead to report that they were en route, Mayor Jenkins stood behind the reception desk in the lobby and waited with his arms crossed and a stern, curious look on his face. It wasn't until the trio was standing directly in front of him that he dropped his countenance and extended his hand to the tall, Mediterranean-looking one. "My men told me your car broke down and you had to hike over the mountains. That must have been some adventure," he said, pausing for the young man to introduce himself.

"Aleph," he said, extending his perfectly olive-colored hand toward the Mayor. "But everyone calls me Al." Rain soaked and muted by dirt, his warm smile pushed into his chocolate-colored eyes despite his slightly aquiline nose. Although he couldn't have been more than nineteen, the hypnotic, heavily accented words rolled off his tongue with clarity and authority that gave pause to everyone in the room. "These are my friends, Lamad and Yarah," he added, pointing to his less-polished-looking companions.

"It's quite odd weather we're having. You know, it never rains like this in California," Mayor Jenkins said, handing them each a towel.

"Well," Lamad said with a snort, mumbling under his breath, "you're about to see all kinds of odd." Like Al, Lamad stood well over six feet tall. Though his speech was less eloquent than Al's, there was a quiet authority about him as well. Lamad took the institutional white towel and draped it over his head before extending his hand to Mayor Jenkins.

Jenkins ignored Lamad's comment as he glanced at his

extended hand. He looked up and down at his tattered tuxedo suit pants and the once white ribbed undershirt held down by black suspenders. He could barely contain his disbelief. He limply shook the boy's damp hand, then wiped the dampness away on the side of his pants.

"What's it like out there?" he asked, glancing up at Lamad's face again. His eyes zeroed in on the top of his head, tracing downward from the neatly parted cornrows draping over his shoulders to his ears, where two large diamond earrings were housed. The earrings glistened under the florescent lights.

Lamad stifled a chuckle as Jenkins eyes finally came to a rest on the ornamental staff hanging from the gold chain around his neck. "Well, it was really hot. And then it wasn't," he said sarcastically.

Jenkins *hmm'd* him, and then corrected, "No, I mean what's it like outside of town? When you were driving?" Jenkins glanced at Yarah. A strange sensation washed over him, and he paused before continuing. "You know, we should probably start a file on you," he said. "In case anything comes up. Can someone get me some paper and a pen?" He snapped his fingers, and one of the young nurses came running with a notebook and a pen. "Do you have any identification on you?" he asked Lamad directly.

Lamad chuckled and rolled his eyes at his companions. "Why ya directing that comment towards me?" He started patting himself down, reaching for where his wallet should be. "Huh," he huffed. "I guess I lost it when we *Hiked. Through. The. Mountains.*" The tenor of his voice reverberated off the pipes overhead, sending a shockwave of sound over the crowd.

Jenkins was not pleased by his outburst, but he ignored it

and quickly shook hands with their female companion. “And your name again?”

“Yarah,” she answered. She stood two inches shorter than the men. The dusty rose-colored A-line toile halter gown she was wearing had, at one time, been floor length, but now, the dress was jaggedly torn above her knee except for a small sliver of fabric that had been wrapped around her right wrist. Even in her disheveled state, Yarah carried herself with grace and style and gave the impression that she was some sort of Latin princess who had just happened to be traveling with a handsome Mediterranean male and his rapper companion.

Jessica tried directing her attention to the tasks at hand, but this trio of kids didn’t appear to be much older than Benson or Ellyce. She couldn’t help but wonder where they had come from. Or if they’d had any contact with their parents in the past month. Jessica’s mind drifted to thoughts of all the kids separated from their parents when the flare hit. Most would probably be able to make it back home with a little ingenuity, but what about the kids who were off on vacation? Or who were in some other part of the world—studying or working abroad. Were they all alone?

She shook her head as she shuddered, and tried to refocus on her work. Her thoughts drifted back to Ellyce. She couldn’t keep living and working in this hospital forever. Soon, the generators would give out and this place would tumble into chaos. But Ellyce was *stubborn* and hopeful, saying she was going to stick around until there was nothing left, or until her dad returned, whichever occurred first. Jessica had wished he would, but she knew that would never realistically happen.

Wherever Thomas was, Jessica hoped it had been worth it, because she couldn’t imagine what would be so important to cause him to abandon that beautiful girl.

She turned back to her charting as the trio continued their stilted small talk with Mayor Jenkins, waiting for Dr. Carver to arrive. When it was obvious that he was going to be held up, Jenkins escorted them behind the reception area. Jessica knew what would happen next.

They would be given food and water while waiting to be examined by Dr. Carver. Once cleared of any physical ailments, they would be questioned by Sheriff Bowman about their intentions and why they were in town. Though in this case it seemed pretty clear. They were just three lost kids, looking for shelter.

When they were ushered into the exam room next to her desk, Jessica tried to not stare at the them through the observation window. But the girl's oversized arrow-shaped diamond earrings peeking from behind her damp brunette locks kept sparkling off the lights overhead. The rainbow effect danced across the wall where Jessica was working. She couldn't help but be curious about what kind of event they were attending before the power had gone out, and why they hadn't changed into something more comfortable. Surely at some point on their journey they would have had time to stop and change.

Hours later, when they had been cleared of any medical issues, the travelers were given a change of clothing—prison gray sweats and white tee-shirts—before being led upstairs to where they'd be sleeping for the night. Jessica learned that they had been on their way to a wedding when the flare erupted, and the sliver of dress Yarah wrapped around her arm was a reminder of the life she'd left behind.

In the room across the hall from Ellyce, they sat on three makeshift beds and listened while Jessica gave them a brief introduction of how things in Hayvenhurst worked. As she was explaining how the job assignments worked, the lights

flickered and flashed overhead, and then suddenly went out, plunging the entire hospital into thick darkness.

“Wait here.” She fumbled into the hallway only to return a few minutes later with a flashlight and Ellyce following close behind. “The generator is out, and the backups aren’t kicking on. I need to get the critical patients moved, and the younger kids all need to be gathered together until this is fixed. If you follow Ellyce; she’ll show you where to go.”

Jessica raced out of the room towards the critical care unit as the hospital descended into panicked chaos.



THE LAST THING Ellyce remembered was stepping into Timmy Alvarez’s room, and then everything went black. Her pounding head throbbed over her right eye, and when she touched the corner of her eyebrow, she wiped away something wet and tacky. Putting her fingers up to her nose, she winced at the metallic scent on her fingers and quickly wiped her hand on her pants. She must have hit her head in the darkness, but she couldn’t remember how or when.

“Welcome back, Ms. Jensen,” a man’s voice called from the other side of the darkened room. Ellyce scurried backwards, trying to make herself small and find safety in the corner of the room, but she didn’t know where she was. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not going to hurt you. It’s just me—Charles,” he said, flicking on a lighter so she could see his face. “Patterson,” he added for clarity.

Ellyce relaxed a little and moved toward him. “What happened? Where are we?”

“We’re in the tunnels that my company owns. Under the old Hall of Records.”

Charles opened the door from one of the cabinets lining

the wall and pulled out a candle. Lighting it, he set it on the countertop and then sat on an old camping chair in front of her. “Do you know why you’re here?” Ellyce shook her head. “Well, you’re here because I need something from you.”

“I—I don’t understand,” she said curiously. She tried to focus on what he was saying, but the pain in her head made it difficult to concentrate.

“You see, your father—”

Ellyce stiffened and moved away from him. “How many times do I have to tell everyone my dad doesn’t have anything to do with this?” She looked around the room, trying to find a way out. “Where’s Mrs. Monroe and the others?”

Mr. Patterson ignored her question. “Well, you see, Ellyce, you and I are going to have to agree to disagree about your father. Yes, it’s true that Thomas didn’t tamper with the generator, but he does know what’s happening.”

Ellyce screwed her face up, wincing from the pain, and from his persistent insistence. “Mr. Patterson, this was all caused by a solar flare. Nothing more, nothing less.”

He stood and opened a second drawer, pulling out a small first-aid kit. Limping toward her, he held out the kit as an offering. “Oh, my dear girl. I’m not talking about the flare. The flare was just the warning shot. You know, kind of like when someone wants to get your attention.”

“And who wants to get our attention?” she asked, rubbing her head with an antiseptic wipe.

Mr. Patterson hooked his cane over his arm and helped clean the blood from the side of her face. “Sorry about that. I guess I don’t know my own strength these days.”

“You did this to me?” she asked, pulling away from him. “Why?”

He stared at her, bloody wipe in hand. “Because I need you to do something for me. And since you wouldn’t leave that infernal hospital on your own, I had to do something to get you out; to get you away from them.”

“What?” she asked, wrapping a piece of white gauze around her head. “Away from who, Mr. Patterson?” She tied it off with a small knot, and then patted it down to make sure it was securely in place. For once she was thankful for all those stupid survival training classes her dad made her take as a kid. Maybe they weren’t so useless after all.

“Never mind that now,” he said, waving away her question.

“Mr. Patterson, you’re scaring me. And I don’t feel so good. Can you just take me back to the hospital, please?”

“I don’t mean to scare you, Ellyce. But if you can do me this one simple favor, then you can go back, and I guarantee that every member of the Monroe family will come out unscathed.”

“Favor? Mr. Patterson, really, I don’t understand. Have you done something with the Monroes?” Her dad’s reminder not to trust people was rising in her panicked mind.

“Ellyce, listen to me. It’s a very important task, and you’re the only person who can do it. I know this now. I should have known Sylvia was right, but I didn’t believe her.” He returned to the camping chair and sat down, rubbing his knees. He wasn’t a young man, and his knees appeared to be reminding him of their age. “But I do now, believe me.”

“Mr. Patterson, please just take me back. Where are the Monroes?” She slid back against the concrete wall as waves of nausea rolled over her. The nausea wasn’t caused so much by the bump on her head as it was from the adrenaline pumping through her body. There was only one way in and

out of this room, and Mr. Patterson was sitting between her and freedom. “I don’t understand what you’re talking about or why you have me here.”

“Clearly,” he said with a huff. “Had Thomas laid out the details and instructions more clearly, then we wouldn’t be in this predicament. But he had to be *creative*,” he mused. “I guess he thought you were more like him and would have found the way sooner.”

“What are you talking about? My dad and I are not alike at all.”

“Well, again, you and I will have to agree to disagree on that point as well.” He stretched his legs out, leaning back in the chair. “You see, there’s a map. Your father knows where it’s located, and he’s shared that information with you. And it’s imperative that you give me the details of its location before anyone else stumbles upon it.”

“My father’s gone, Mr. Patterson. And he didn’t leave me a map.”

“No. He didn’t leave you the map, but he did leave you clues to finding it. But, of course,” he added, talking *at* her instead of to her, “where he is, time doesn’t work the same way it does here.”

“Mr. Patterson, you’re not making any sense. If you know where my dad is, just tell me.”

“I suspect that your father is in Thya. But listen to me, girl, this is important.” He sat up and leaned in close, whispering. “He’s left you the clues that will lead you where you’ll need to go.” He shifted slightly in his chair, moving it closer to her. “You’re the only one who can get inside that door, because you’re the only one who has the key. The doors are off limits to us—believe me, I’ve tried.”

“Us?”

“Yes, Shawn and the rest of the family. I am assuming this is Sylvia’s work, but that’s a story for another time.”

“Mr. Patterson, I don’t have any keys, and I don’t understand what Mrs. Patterson, or Shawn, or anyone else in your family has to do with this.”

“Do you know what *Sylvia* means?” Ellyce shook her head. “It means *spirit of the woods*. And do you know what the doors in this building are all made of?” Ellyce rubbed her aching brow and leaned forward, looking at the door.

“That’s right,” he said, “wood.”

“Mr. Patterson, my head hurts. Can we please just go back?”

“Not until you do what I’ve asked.”

Ellyce closed her eyes. “So, you’re saying your wife put a spell on the door—”

“Spells are for human beings,” he corrected. “Enchantments are for objects.” He waved his hand, swatting the air as he sighed. “My wife was very special, Ellyce. She didn’t put a spell on these doors, she enchanted them. But that’s not the point of this conversation, and that’s not what matters right now. What matters is that you get me that map. You’re the only person with the clues to its location.”

“I already told you, Mr. Patterson, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, but you do. I didn’t believe Sylvia before when she said you—and Benson, too—were special. But over the past month, I’ve come to see the error of my prideful ways.”

Ellyce rubbed her head and began to cry. “Mr. Patterson, please.”

He sighed and grabbed a book from behind him. “Your father left the instructions, Ellyce. If you don’t understand them, you’re going to have to figure it out. But you don’t

have a lot of time. Things are changing quickly now, and I know what Thomas told you. I've been to your house with the police, and I've seen that room."

"Then you know what he said. You have the clues, too, Mr. Patterson."

"No, I have nothing. It's just gibberish to me—symbols and words on a wall above some stairs. But that doesn't mean that the people who are after you are in the dark. If they haven't seen it already, they'll know about it soon."

She perked up. "People? What people? What are you talking about?"

He stood up and walked towards her. "I'll do everything I can to help you, but I can only give you a few days."

"Who's after me, Mr. Patterson? Tell me now!" she screamed, kicking at him.

"Ellyce!" he shouted, clapping his hands in front of her face. "Listen to me. This is not a game. I'm going to explain this for you the best I can, because even I don't understand all of it. But you need to find that door, and then I need you to give me the location of that map. Do you understand what I just said?"

Ellyce sniffled and stared at him, but said nothing.

"Because if you don't, it will be catastrophic for all of us. And your quest to find Derek will be all that much harder."

"Did you say Derek?"

With a small nod of his head, Mr. Patterson smiled at her, pulling something small from his pocket. "I know about Derek. And I know why your father did what he did. So, there's no more need to play coy." He handed her the small, smooth capsule. "Take this for now; it'll help with the pain. There's a box of water in that cabinet," he said. "It'll also help you sleep, which is what you need. In an hour, an alarm

will sound and the door locks will open. In the hallway, you'll find someone who can help you." He pointed his cane forward and walked toward the door. "I'll make the arrangements for our cover story, but Ellyce, it's important that you do exactly as I've instructed."

The fire started like they always do—with a tiny ember dancing its way into the world, licking across the oxygenated air, consuming everything—including the house—in its wake.



THE LOUD TIMER buzzed its way into Ellyce's dream, waking her from a fitful sleep. She checked the bandage and cleaned her wound again before pushing her way through the door and into the hallway.

With its pale pink walls running into the black-and-white-speckled marble flooring, she got the impression that whatever this place was—whatever these tunnels were that Mr. Patterson owned, they had been built sometime back in the 1970s.

At the end of the corridor stood two doors—identical, as far as she could tell, with the exception of their colors. The right one was the color of raw umber—muddy looking dirt, and the door on the left was the color of corn. Neither door

had knobs or door knockers; both were made of some weird glass that swirled and changed patterns as you stood near them. They reminded her of mood rings. As she reached out to push open the door on the left, she heard a woman's voice crying out from behind one of the closed doors behind her. Ellyce called out in return. The woman shouted again, banging from the other side. "Ellyce? In here! I can't get out! The door's locked!"

Ellyce turned the knob and the door clicked open, surprising Jessica, who stood on the other side, staring at her. Jessica reached out and pulled Ellyce close, happy to see that she was okay. "How did you do that?" she asked. "I've been trying for hours to get out of this room."

Ellyce shrugged her shoulders. "It just opened." Her heavy eyes were glassy. Jessica pulled the bandage back and grimaced.

"What happened?" she asked. She pushed Ellyce into the hallway so she could study the wound better.

"I fell, I think," she lied. "Do you know where we are?"

"No clue." Jessica pulled the corner of her shirt up to dab Ellyce's cut. "I'm assuming we're in the basement of the hospital. It looks like you might need some stitches. But in the meantime, this will have to do." She pulled a small tube of superglue from her pocket and twisted the cap open with her teeth. Ellyce winced as Jessica pinched the flesh over her eyebrow together, dabbing glue along the cut. Holding the cut together, she looked around. "Did you see any signs, or an exit?"

"Nope, just those two weird doors," Ellyce said, pointing at the end of the hallway. "Should we divide and conquer?"

"No," Jessica snapped. "We stay together."

"Yeah, I was only kidding." Ellyce smirked, half-delirious

from the pain and adrenaline. “Creepy basements and small spaces aren’t exactly my thing.”

“I know, sorry,” Jessica said, softening a bit. She smiled and helped Ellyce to her feet. “That should help for a bit until we can get you fixed up. “So, what’ll it be?”

“What?”

“Which door?” Jessica asked, motioning to the end of the hallway. “I’m guessing that’s our way out of here.”

“Well, if I’m forced to choose, I guess I’ll go with corn.”

On the other side of the swirling patterned door was another row of doors in a variety of shapes and sizes. This hall of doors teed into another corridor running perpendicular to where they stood. In that hallway, each door was marked with a room number, but the first ten doors they tried were locked. At the next intersection, they decided to turn right since that wing only had five doors, and the opposite wing had at least seven that were visible. Again, the first three doors they tried were locked. To their surprise, the fourth door was open and they made their way inside.

Overhead, the fluorescent lighting flashed and buzzed, clearly on the fritz. They stood in the middle of the sterile room, looking around. Ellyce knew what she was supposed to be looking for, but this room contained nothing but four naked walls. Disappointed, they made their way back into the hallway and tried the fifth door.

In the corner of this room sat a military cot, boxes of food rations, and a crate marked “medicine.” Ellyce ran to the crate and threw open the lid, hoping the box contained something that would help her nausea, but there was nothing inside except large bandages and shredded paper stuffing. She tossed the crate aside and grabbed the food boxes.

Packages of MREs—military-issued ready-to-eat meals—along with dehydrated vegetables and fruits filled the first

box. The MRE packages contained multiple bags of meals marked one through twenty-four, along with a small heater. Ellyce hastily opened one box after another while Jessica helped. After an hour had passed, they sat on the floor, munching on military protein bars, surveying their handiwork. “There’s enough food in these boxes to feed a lot of people. Why isn’t it being passed out?” Ellyce asked.

“And how many more boxes of food and supplies are hidden behind those locked doors?” Jessica asked. “I wonder where this all came from.”

“Jessica, I—” Ellyce started, but the door flung open, catching them by surprise.

“Mr. Patterson,” Jessica said, and hurried over to him. “Are you hurt? What are you doing down here?”

“Hello, Mrs. Monroe.” He waved her back into the room and she acquiesced to his demand.

“We must have somehow gotten into the basement during the commotion, but look what we found.” She showed off the bounty of supplies and food. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Yes, it is wonderful,” he said, bending down to pick up one of the dismantled lids. “But ‘found’ is such a relative word, you know.” He slipped the lid back on top of the crate. “I mean, I already knew these were here.”

Jessica stared at him. “But I don’t understand. Why keep all this hidden? Why not help those who are struggling?”

“Because that would be a waste, dear.”

“What are you talking about? A hospital and the people in it are supposed to help.”

“Most of the people in the hospital, and in this town for that matter, are going to die. These supplies are going to help the survivors start over.” He smoothed his salt-and-pepper hair and sat on one of the crates. “And you’re not in the

hospital any longer. You're on property that belongs to Patterson and Company Holdings."

"I don't understand," Jessica said, shifting her stance. She pushed Ellyce behind her slightly.

"You see, as a businessman, I have to think ahead. But more importantly, as a family man, I have to think of my interests. Your interests," he said, looking at her affectionately. "Now that Bailey and Shawn are engaged, she's part of the family, too." He studied her expression. "Oh, I see. So, Bailey hadn't told you yet."

"I'm sure with everything that's been going on, it must have slipped her mind."

"Well," he said, nudging one of their empty protein wrappers with his foot. "I'm sure that's what it is. But either way, I guess, now technically, what's mine is yours." He winked and then smiled at her. "This is just a smattering of the items we've discovered."

"There's more?" Jessica asked.

"Of course. But the real treasure lies behind one of these doors."

"And what's that?"

"Something that will save us all. But finding it requires a map." He picked up the wrapper and smashed it in his hands.

"A map, huh?" Jessica said doubtfully.

"Yes, but it seems that only a few people know its whereabouts."

He looked at Ellyce with a twinkle in his eye that sent a cold chill down Jessica's spine. "Look, I don't know how we got here, or even why we're here," she said, quickly putting the lids back on top of the crates. "But it won't happen again. I'm sorry that we trespassed—we didn't know." She grabbed Ellyce's hand and pulled her to the other side of the room, past Mr. Patterson.

“Things happen for a reason,” he said, shifting on the crate. “Isn’t that what you always say?” He stood up, slowly walking after them. “Jessica, what you don’t understand is that I brought you here for a reason.”

She froze in place. “You what?”

“I needed to keep you safe. But now that things are going in a different direction, I need you to come with me.” He looked past Jessica toward Ellyce. “Both of you.”

“That’s a kind offer, but I think if it’s all the same to you, we’ll just go home.” She started back down the hall, retracing her steps, desperate to find her way out.

“Jessica,” he said, calling after her. “I really wish it were that simple,” he added, sympathetically. “But what’s done is done, and it can’t be undone. Please, just wait. I’m not going to hurt you.”

She staggered down the hallway, tugging on knobs, but nothing would open. “Damn it!” she cried, pulling Ellyce along behind her.

“Jessica!” Mr. Patterson shouted, walking after them with slow, measured steps. “Today’s been very unproductive for us all. But now I need you to come with me so you and Ellyce can get a good night’s sleep before we start again tomorrow. Your family’s waiting for you at my house, along with Dr. Carver.” Jessica slowed, but continued walking down the long winding corridor, in case it was a trick. “Since the fire, we don’t have much time. Please stop.”

“Fire?” she yelled out. “What fire?”

Charles stopped walking. “The one at your house.” Jessica turned on her heel and ran towards him as he braced himself for the impact.

“What do you mean, at my house? What have you done? Where’s my family?” she asked, battering his chest with her fists.

He grabbed her wrists, closed his eyes, and patiently counted to ten while restraining her from striking him again. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, but there was nothing that could be done. Your house is gone, but I didn't start the fire. I merely protected you for your own good."

"*Protected* me? How?" she choked out. "Please tell me no one was hurt."

He sighed heavily, but Ellyce wasn't convinced he was sincere. "There was some smoke inhalation," he said. "That's why I've called Dr. Carver in."

Jessica covered her mouth with her hand, shaking her head. "Jim?" she asked, but Mr. Patterson shook his head and looked down.

"No," she cried, trying to hold herself up, but her legs were wobbly under the weight of her body. She collapsed before him, sinking to the floor. "Not my baby."

Mr. Patterson kneeled and wrapped his arm around her. "Dr. Carver said we'd know more in a few days."

"Tell me what happened," she cried. Charles coaxed her to stand and the three of them made their way down the hallway and out of the tunnels.

"Apparently, he went back inside for something. He said there was something important he had left in Bailey's room?"

Ellyce froze in her tracks. Her red backpack filled with her dad's books, Penelope, and her music box had been in Bailey's room. She had forgotten about them until now. Was that what Benson had gone back inside to get? Did he get hurt because of her?

"Come on, Ellyce. Keep up," Jessica said, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I need to see my son."

Ellyce squinted as they emerged from the tunnels, holding her hand over her face to shield her eyes from the setting evening sun. Springtime in California was a mixed bag of weather. Typically, midday temperatures were deliciously warm, but once the sun fell behind the mountains of this semi-desert landscape, the temperatures fell too.

Ellyce rubbed her bare arm, wishing she'd been wearing a sweater—or something a little thicker than the t-shirt she had on—as they climbed into Mr. Patterson's club cart and began to drive away from the Hall of Records parking lot.

Wilson, Mr. Patterson's driver, turned the cart south and slowly headed toward the Patterson estate via the old Barnes and Noble shopping center. At the hospital she had heard that the center had become an oasis, but she didn't exactly understand what that meant until they drove past. The only visual Ellyce could conjure up was the one from that movie, *Titanic*, but instead of people wandering around on a boat waiting for someone to rescue them, these people filled their days wandering around an old shopping center, reading books and

old magazines, and drinking Folgers coffee from paper cups, warmed by an old Coleman camp stove.

At the very first town hall meeting, Sheriff Bowman had warned the townspeople that they didn't want a run on the banks or the markets, but the run happened anyway. After the dust had settled, the only thing lining the supermarket shelves were the big, red cans of Folgers Coffee that nobody wanted. But as the days grew longer and everyone's patience grew shorter, people found themselves gathering at the bookstore. Here in this pretentious enclave, Folgers had become in vogue again. It was now the drink of choice for those mingling around the abandoned stores pretending that their lives and everything around them was all right.

The club cart turned off the main road onto Maple Street—a lesser traveled road. Ellyce purposely focused on the dotted lines of the windy road that lead out of Hayvenhurst into Woodlake. She didn't want to be reminded of the houses marked with bright orange Xs, indicating someone inside had died. She also didn't want to be reminded that her house was only a couple of blocks away in the opposite direction. And though it didn't carry the mark of a bright orange X, there was certainly loss there. Jessica seemed to have been thinking something similar, because she leaned over and gave Ellyce a tight squeeze.

"I think once we get to Mr. Patterson's house, you'll feel much better." Jessica held her tightly and Ellyce nodded. But inwardly, she knew the only thing that would make any of this better was finding Derek and that map, and putting a stop to all the craziness that had overtaken her life.

They arrived at the Patterson compound twenty minutes later. And while Mr. Monroe had been concerned about people knowing there was a generator, food, and supplies on

the property, Mr. Patterson, it seemed, was not concerned at all.

Perhaps this was because his house and six-acre property sat behind locked gates under heavy guard. Whatever the reason, the Patterson home ran as it normally would; and one would never guess that the end of the world had come.

Dr. Carver stitched Ellyce up and prescribed a warm bath and rest. After she quickly ate a dinner of left-over steak, potatoes, salad, and bread, Ellyce sank into a large bubble bath, realizing how much she missed having a decent meal, running water, and electricity that wasn't connected to a three-minute timer.

Ellyce closed her eyes and held her breath, letting the water envelop her body until her chest and the back of her head were fully submerged. Seconds later a pair of hands pushed her all the way under the water, pinning her shoulders to the bottom of the tub. She flailed, trying to keep the breath in her lungs as she kicked the side of the tub and struggled against the person standing over her. From under the water, she could hear talking and the girl's laughter, deep and twisted—almost maniacal. She flung her foot upward, striking the girl's arm. As suddenly as she had pinned Ellyce under the water, the girl let go.

Ellyce rose out of the tub and pushed herself against the wall opposite of where the girl was standing, gasping for air. "Are you out of your mind?" she shouted between gulps.

"You should have seen your face." The girl held out a plush towel and Ellyce grabbed it from her as she continued to stare. A smile spread across the girl's lips. "I'm La'anah, Mr. Patterson's niece. You know, like "*lay-on-a*—" she motioned toward the closed door across the hall, where Benson was sleeping, "*bed*."

Draping the towel in front of herself, Ellyce stood up.

Bubbles and water rushed down her body into the tub. “Do you mind?” She waited for La’anah to move, but she didn’t. Ellyce blew out a heavy sigh and secured the towel around her chest. “What was that all about?” she asked, pushing past La’anah.

As Ellyce stood in the middle of the bathroom, La’anah walked to the vanity and studied herself in the wall-length mirror. Her aquamarine eyes glimmered brightly in the reflection. “After-dinner entertainment,” she smirked. “Just checking out the competition.”

“Competition?” Ellyce asked, grabbing another towel from the rack. She dried her feet, waiting for the girl to either apologize or leave, but it was clear La’anah had no intention of doing either.

Instead, La’anah mused at her reflection, pouted her lips, then hoisted herself onto the vanity and continued her stare down. “Lily,” she shouted to the open bedroom door on the other side of the Jack-and-Jill bathroom. A moment later, another raven-haired waif bounded into the bathroom and leaned against her leg. “This is the bashert,” La’anah said, curling a strip of her straight black hair around her finger. “But she’s sorta plain, don’tcha think?”

Lily circled Ellyce, studying her from all angles before taking her spot next to La’anah. “Yeah. I just don’t see it.”

“See what?” Ellyce asked coldly.

“Why he finds you so utterly attractive.” Lily laughed, pulling an old Polaroid camera from the vanity drawer. She snapped a picture of Ellyce. “Either way, this should be fun.” She fanned the picture in front of her face. “Maybe we should see if he’s up for visitors.”

“No, leave him alone,” Ellyce shouted. “He needs his rest.”

“Oh, isn’t that sweet? She’s concerned about the boy.”

La'anah grabbed the picture from Lily's hand and blew on it, quickening the exposure. "Her mouth says 'no,' but the heart says 'yes.' This isn't very flattering," La'anah said, showing Lily the picture. Ellyce looked startled in the photo, shielding herself from the flash.

"Whatever," Ellyce said, exhaling loudly as she moved toward her bedroom door. "Do whatever you want. I'm not playing your game."

La'anah quickly grabbed her hand, squeezing it tightly, and pulled her close to her face. Her breath was hot and sticky as she whispered, "All of this—," she circled the space in front of her with her free hand, "I can promise you, is a game. Because games, my friend, are *deliciously* fun." She threw Ellyce's hand back towards her body and winked at her before bursting into laughter and strolling off with Lily into their room. Ellyce clutched the towel wrapped around her while she rubbed her sore hand and quickly tiptoed into the room she had been given.

In a bedroom that was as big as two full rooms in her own house, Ellyce pushed an oversized armchair in front of the door that lead into the bathroom and slid the heavy square ottoman against the door that lead into the hallway before curling up in the king-sized bed. With those girls just on the other side of the bathroom, she knew it was going to be a long night with little sleep. Which was unfortunate because her head had started to pound again.

She sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed, looking at the clothes that had been laid out for her. Mr. Patterson had given her a few days to find the map, but without her backpack or her dad's books, she didn't even know where to begin.

Ellyce changed and then settled under the large duvet and leaned against the headboard, thinking about the word that

La'anah had called her. She'd never heard it before, but it was no doubt something derogatory. She glanced across the room to the bookshelf, where she spied an old dictionary sitting stoically on the top shelf. Exactly what she needed to solve this problem.

Pulling the covers back, she slipped quietly across the room, grabbed the book from its resting place and then jumped back into bed. It wasn't a clue to finding the map, but it was one less thing for her skittish brain to think about. Ellyce flipped to the Bs, trying to remember exactly what the word was. The only word that screamed out at her was "bastard," and she knew that wasn't right. Scanning each page, she searched diligently until she came across the word La'anah had said. She read the entry out loud:

Bashert: Noun. Origin: Yiddish for fate, destiny, or soulmate, when considered as a predestined marriage partner.

Ellyce slapped the book shut and glanced across the room to the closed door. There was no way she was Benson's soulmate. Sure, they had been together in one capacity or another forever, but that didn't make him her soulmate. Ellyce frowned. The whole idea was stupid. She didn't even believe in soulmates. And she had never considered Benson to be *the one*.

Not because she didn't want him to be the one—it was just that she wasn't blind. She knew that when they went off to college, he'd realize there was a big ocean out there with much prettier fish in it, and he'd swim away. It was really very simple. And she was smart enough not to believe in fantasies.

Besides, as fate or destiny would have it, Benson had swum away much sooner than she expected. As much as she

hated to admit it, Sydney was the perfect example of the type of girl she thought Benson would end up with—at least on the outside. Beautiful and well-educated about the world in a way Ellyce would never be, Sydney had everything going for her—except that inwardly, she was a horrible person. Sydney couldn't have been more different than Ellyce if she'd tried. Of all the girls on the planet Benson could have chosen, *why* did it have to be *her*?

Ellyce tossed the book aside and laughed quietly at herself. She was being stupid.

The reality was that the world was ending, and everyone knew it—whether they pretended they did or not. In the grand scheme of things, did it even matter that her high school boyfriend—her best friend since kindergarten—had dumped her?

Probably not. Except, without his family, she was completely alone. Ellyce sank back against the pillows and thought about the clues her father left her. She needed to find the map so she could move on with her life, and find Derek and her dad. If Benson was happy with Sydney, well, that was his decision.

After all, she'd learned a long time ago that you couldn't make anyone stick around if they didn't want to. And if they didn't want to stick around, you were better off without them.

Ellyce reached for a book on the nightstand and flipped it open to the first page. Her eyes fell to the word *destiny*, and she snapped it shut. “Bashert,” she whispered to herself. Maybe the universe was trying to tell her something. Or maybe it was all just a big coincidence.

Her dad believed that everyone had a destiny to follow, and maybe La'anah *was* right. Maybe Benson *was* her destiny, but not in the way that she thought. Maybe Benson, and this whole thing with Sydney, was simply the catalyst she

needed to propel her forward to find her destiny. And from where she sat, her destiny was tied up in a guy her dad had called *Derek*.



BENSON LAID SILENTLY in the bed that had been made up for him, drifting in and out of sleep. In moments of consciousness, his thoughts drifted to Ellyce. He wondered where she was and what she was doing. She'd never gone that long without her things—particularly Penelope—but he had promised himself he would not tell anyone where or how he'd hidden her backpack. The best thing he could do for her right now was keep her things safe, *and* keep her away from this house and these people.

He felt guilty that she had been taken in for questioning, but never in a million years had he expected them to keep her. Or for them to ransack her house. Or for there to be a fire at his. He had tried to tell himself that nobody could have predicted any of it, but that wasn't true. Mrs. Patterson had predicted it; she told him about it before she disappeared. He had always thought that her disappearance was questionable, but then Thomas disappeared, too, and the flare happened, and Benson knew he couldn't dismiss or hide from what was coming.

He fought against the twilight of sleep, trying to push the thoughts of what might be happening to Ellyce from his mind. He roused himself momentarily, and thought he saw someone in the room with him. But his eyes were heavy and full of sleep, and he couldn't maintain the connection. As he drifted into the peace of sleep's twilight, he realized there *was* someone in the room. But it wasn't Ellyce standing watch

over him. It was someone else—someone who looked like an angel, and who quietly sang a lovely siren’s song.



ELLYCE WOKE early and thought for a moment that she had been dreaming. But as she stirred in the oversized bed, she opened her eyes, remembering she had only escaped from one prison to another—though this one was more aesthetically pleasing.

She dressed, made the bed, and set the dictionary back in its rightful spot among the other reference books before wandering down the hall toward the stairs that led to the dining room. From the doorway, she saw Benson sitting next to his parents—which surprised her. And then she saw *Sydney*.

Benson’s knife clattered against the china plate and fell to the floor as he saw her. “What’s she doing here?” he demanded, bending to retrieve the knife. Ellyce recoiled and considered retreating, but it was too late. Everyone else in the room was already looking at her. “She can’t be here,” he said, glaring at his mother.

“Benson. What’s gotten into you?” Jessica snapped back. “That’s no way to treat your friend.”

“Yeah, well, things change, Mom.”

“Um,” Sydney spoke up. “I’m not comfortable with her here, either. I mean, what if her father tries to do something to us here? Then what?”

Anger replaced the hurt feelings Ellyce felt, and she stood up straighter and crossed her arms. “Don’t worry, Sydney, there are lots of armed guards around the property, and my father’s a terrible shot.”

“Charles, this is highly inappropriate,” Ellen Parker announced, adding her voice to the narrative.

Charles stood up and winked at Ellyce as he motioned to the empty chair beside his. “Ellyce is my guest, and the last time I checked, this was still my house. So, do have yourself another mimosa, Ellen. It’ll help you be quiet.”

Jim choked a little, then cleared his throat as he and Jessica tried to cover their snickers with their napkins. Ellyce started into the room, then redirected her steps around the side of the table opposite of Benson, Sydney, and Ellen. She quickly dove into her seat and accepted a fresh-squeezed orange juice from Carlton, Mr. Patterson’s butler.

Drinking the juice slowly, Ellyce pretended along with the rest of the table that she couldn’t hear Benson and Sydney’s loud-whispered argument about why she was there. After what seemed like an eternity, Jim nudged his son’s leg. The arguing stopped, but not before Benson shrugged his shoulders one last time and adamantly said, “*I. Don’t. Know.*”

La’anah must have known last night that Sydney was here. So that was the game she was referencing. Ellyce rolled her eyes at the thought, then tucked a strand of her springy reddish-brown hair behind her ear, doing her best to ignore the fact that Sydney was staring at her. *Why did beautiful people have to be so awful?*

Ellyce carefully sipped from the fat glass in front of her again, trying to not let everyone else know how nervous she was or how mad she was about Benson’s outburst. As she surveyed the room’s occupants, it wasn’t lost on her that everyone sitting at the table seemed to complement each other. Everyone, that is, except *her*.

While she tried looking relaxed, she was sure she wasn’t pulling it off. Everyone else in the room had a sort of relaxed California-cultured look about them that she definitely did

not have. As if to prove her point, her hair sprang out from behind her ear. Rupert, the boy sitting next to her, who was introduced as Lily's brother, chuckled and sweetly tucked the wayward curl back behind her ear for her. He was pleasant, consolatory, and less refined than the others, but even he was still out of her league. And no matter what she tried to do with it, her hair had a mind of its own. No amount of product or styling would ever make her look or feel as polished as these people.

Her gaze fell across the table to where La'anah and Shawn were sitting. Had she not known better, she would have sworn that La'anah was his twin, or at least his younger sister. But she knew Charles and Sylvia Patterson didn't have any other children.

La'anah favored Mr. Patterson's commanding, confident features, and it was probably for this reason alone that she and Shawn were his only family members staying with him in this big house while everything around them was going to hell. La'anah easily could have been a runway model in her pre-solar flare end-of-the-world life. In this world of decadence and beauty, Ellyce couldn't help but notice how the Monroes, along with Sydney and her mother, seemed to fit right in.

"I'm glad you're feeling better, Benson," she said cautiously, trying to break the deafening silence.

"Oh, well, when dealing with smoke inhalation, looks can be deceiving, Ellyce," Dr. Carver said. "He may seem fine today, but tomorrow could be a totally different story."

"Yes, Dr. Carver," Jessica scowled. "Thank you, for reminding us of that."

"I'm sorry, Jessica," Ellyce said, knowing that her ineloquence was just another reason she'd never fit in. "I was just happy that he looked okay—"

“Well, you shouldn’t be looking,” Sydney mumbled, slamming her fork down. She crossed her arms and glared across the table.

“I just meant it in a general sense of the word,” Ellyce corrected.

Benson stared straight ahead. “People, I’m sitting right here. And I’m fine.” He took another bite, chewing loudly. “Just stop. Everybody.”

Mr. Patterson cleared his throat. “All right, I think we’ve established that Benson’s still got some recovering to do. And Ellyce, my dear, there are many things we need to do today, so we can’t rest on our laurels.” He set his coffee cup on the table. “Since it’s half-past eight, we should probably head out to the tunnels and be about our business.”

“Tunnels?” Jim asked. “What tunnels?”

“Oh, yes, that’s right. I forgot that not everyone is familiar with the tunnel system here in our little corner of the world,” he said. “They’re quite storied, and the tale of how we came into possession of them is an interesting one, but we don’t have time for it right now. The abridged version is that my company purchased the old Hall of Records building, and the tunnels came with it.”

“Why do you care about some old dirty tunnel?” Sydney asked.

Mr. Patterson slapped his napkin onto the table and crossed his legs, looking dismayed. “Because they’re valuable.”

“I can’t imagine how, but okay.”

“Not all things of value shine,” Rupert said and turned towards Ellyce.

Mr. Patterson grimaced and cleared his throat. “Like Rupert said, some things are diamonds in the rough. You might not know their value until it’s too late.” He patted

Ellyce's hand, and she blushed, looking down at her plate. "The entrance is under the Hall of Records, which you know is now owned by Patterson Holdings. But the tunnels are quite amazing. They go all the way to Los Angeles, and some even have connector feeds that cover the U.S."

"So, you can get across the U.S. underground?" Ellyce asked, her interest piqued.

"According to what my guys tell me, you can go lots of places. But without a proper guide—or *map*—" he said, emphasizing the word, "it would be difficult to know the way."

Well, why's Ellyce going?" Sydney asked.

"She could just hang around here with you and Benson, if you'd prefer," La'anah suggested, which provoked a laugh from the table.

"Well, that's really impressive," Jim said, changing the subject back to the tunnels. "Have you found anything of value yet?"

"A few things, but many of the doors are locked, and we haven't found the key. From the looks of the keyhole, it's an odd-shaped thing. And no one seems to be able to manufacture it." Everyone at the table listened with rapt attention, but Sydney and Ellen, more than any of the others, seemed to be intrigued by the thought of an adventure involving treasure. "The legend says a group of people known as the Lizard People built these tunnels. And somewhere in the tunnels there's a room that leads to the ultimate treasure," Mr. Patterson said, pausing for dramatic effect. "But in order to get into that room, you need to have a map."

"Well, why haven't we heard about these tunnels before, Charles? If they were under a government building, don't you think they would have cleaned them out?"

"I'm sure they did their best, Ellen. But the tunnels go for

miles. They were designed as a bunker—a place where the Lizard People could keep their food and herbs, along with stockpiles of treasures for when the fires and the flood came to decimate the world. Or was it the flood, then the fire?” he asked, turning to his son, Shawn.

Ellyce choked on her water, spitting it out on the table.

“Are you okay, dear?” Mr. Patterson asked, patting her back gently.

She nodded and covered her mouth, not daring to tell them about her dream of the man with the tablets drowning in a flooding sea of fire. “Just went down the wrong pipe, that’s all.”

“Certainly, you don’t believe these stories to be true, do you, Charles?” Jim asked, cautiously intrigued.

Mr. Patterson set his folded hands on the table and smiled. “Oh, I believe that the tunnels hold many secrets.” He glanced at Jessica. “What about you, Jessica? What do you think? Am I a crazy old fool?”

Caught off guard, Jessica smiled and set her fork on the plate, composing herself. “I think it’s an amazing story, and I’m fascinated by the idea of what you might find.”

“Yeah, my dad’s always telling me that the doors are locked,” Shawn said, and then looked over at La’annah. “We were beginning to seriously think that he was trying to keep us out of the tunnels so he could keep the treasure and our inheritance for himself.” An awkward silence fell over the room until Shawn laughed jovially, and the rest of the table joined in.

“Well, it all sounds intriguing.” Jim polished off his last swig of coffee. “And I’d be very interested in seeing what you’ve got for yourself down there.”

“Well, let’s do it,” Shawn said, slapping the table with his

hands. “We’ll all go. Right, Dad?” The request felt like more of a demand.

“Sure.” Mr. Patterson smiled weakly, agreeing to his son’s request. “I’ll make the arrangements. But we’ll have to venture down in two groups. The club cart has a limited capacity, and with the arrival of Ms. Jensen, we’re now thirteen.”

La’annah smiled widely, giddy with anticipation. “Ah, lucky number thirteen.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it’s a grand number,” Ellyce said sarcastically. She looked at Jessica. “So, is Benson okay to venture down there? Or should he maybe stay here?”

“And miss out on looking for treasure? Not a chance,” Sydney shot across the table. “If you’re going, we’re going.” She stroked Benson’s arm and smiled, whispering, “You can go, right?”

“Benson, I’m not sure wandering around underground in a damp, dirty place is the best thing for you,” Jessica said. “You should probably stay here and rest.”

“I’m fine, Mom. Stop overreacting.”

“Benson,” Jessica said, taken aback by his reaction.

“I’m sure he’s fine, babe.” Jim put his hand on Jessica’s knee to calm her as he gave Benson a look.

“He does look pretty healthy today,” Shawn quickly added. “And besides, Dr. Carver’s going too. So, if nothing else, he can stay with Wilson on the cart and enjoy the sounds of my songbird cousin.” Shawn beamed at La’annah. “She sings every time we unlock a new door or tunnel. It’s kind of her thing.”

“She sings?” Benson asked.

“Yeah. Most beautiful voice I’ve ever heard—I’d swear it’s celestial.”

Benson shifted uncomfortably in his chair and Sydney

reached out and squeezed his hand. “You’re gonna be fine, babe,” Sydney said, parroting Jim’s response to Jessica. “You heard him. The doctor’s going.”

“Benson,” Jessica said one last time.

Benson scowled at her. “I said I’m fine.”

Jessica forced a smile and threw her napkin on the table. “Fine. But you’re staying close by.”

Shawn clapped his hands and pushed away from the table. “All right, then it’s settled. Let’s get this party started. Meet out in the motor court in twenty minutes. And grab anything you need—jackets, water, *backpacks*.” He glanced in Ellyce’s direction, but she didn’t acknowledge him.

She was busy focusing on the note that Mr. Patterson had placed in front of her: *Don’t be fooled. This is not a game. You must find that map*. Ellyce slid the small scrap of paper into her palm and pulled her hand from the table into her lap. She sipped her water, then nodded to him in understanding.

“And dress in layers,” Mr. Patterson told the group, following them as they filed out of the dining room and into the hall. “The temperature fluctuates from hallway to hallway and room to room down there.”

With her glass in her hand and a heavy smile across her face, La’anah lingered at the table, waiting for everyone else to leave. “I can tell you’re pleased to find the bashert here,” she told Shawn, flashing a wide grin at him. “So, what will your first move be?”

Shawn took the water glass from her hand and raised it to his lips, pausing as he caught a glimpse of Ellyce listening through the crack in the door. “My first order of business will be what it always is—for you to watch and learn.”

A wicked smile curled up on his lips. Without another word, he downed La’anah’s drink in one gulp.

Pale green pipes ran over the entrance to the tunnels, winding over the slabs of yellowy-gray concrete that extended a mile ahead of them. Shawn sat in the front seat of the club car while Wilson drove, but he glanced back at Bailey and Ellyce every few minutes. “It’ll take 15 minutes to get to the rendezvous point,” he told them.

Ellyce smiled and nodded, though she already knew.

“It’s lucky we came across some of these rooms when we did, because I heard my father’s workmen telling him it wasn’t safe outside of town. In Los Angeles and some of the other bigger cities, there’s been lots of looting and rioting, and people killing each other over things like aspirin, cigarettes, and baby formula.” Bailey stared at him, wide-eyed and concerned, and he quickly slid his arm over the seat, wrapping his hand over hers, giving her a tight squeeze. “But don’t worry, Babe. We’re gonna be okay.”

Bailey glanced at Ellyce and frowned. “I’m sorry that my brother was so mean to you today. I don’t know what’s gotten into him. Between you and me, I hate that he’s dating Sydney.

I mean, she's pretty to look at, but there's not much else going on, if you know what I mean."

"Thanks. But it is what it is," Ellyce told her, only half-listening.

"And don't even get me started on her mom. Can you imagine our two families sitting down for a meal like we did with you and your dad? I mean, my mom would be drunk after like five minutes."

Ellyce raised her eyebrows. She agreed, but decided it was probably best if she kept quiet.

"And you have no idea where your dad is?" Shawn asked.

"Not a clue," she lied.

"Well, I'm sure your dad's doing everything he can to get back here. I'm sure you'll see him soon."

"Yeah, I'm sure I will." She crossed her arms and looked away.

Shawn brushed her knee. "Hey, you're always welcome to stay with us. I mean, it's probably been a relief to have a safe, comfortable place to lay your head." His grin lit up his face and, for the briefest moment, he had an eerie look about him. It made the hairs on Ellyce's arm stand on end. But then Bailey grabbed his hand and the moment passed. Shawn pointed up ahead. "There's the spot. They should be waiting for us right around the corner."

Wilson navigated the cart to where the slab concrete gave way to the marbled office flooring—the place where Mr. Patterson had told Jessica that her house had been destroyed in the fire. To their surprise, no one was waiting for them. But that was okay with Ellyce. She wasn't exactly interested in being forced to spend the afternoon with Benson and Sydney. The three disembarked, and Wilson positioned the cart off to the side of the main corridor. "I'll wait here, Sir, until further

instruction,” he said with an air of subdued speech that one would expect from a man of service.

“Thank you, Wilson.” Shawn stretched, trying to touch the ceiling as the group studied the two moody-looking doors at the end of the hall. Shawn wrapped his arms around Bailey and guided her toward the door on the left. “All right, ladies, let’s do this. Bailey, my love, which door would you like to explore first?” he asked, pushing her again toward the door on the left.

“Shouldn’t we wait for your dad and the others? Which door did they go through?”

“This one,” he said. “He probably couldn’t stand the suspense and took them on ahead. Besides, I’ve been down here a million times.”

“Well, why do the doors look like that?”

He shook his head. “No idea. But my dad had ‘em analyzed, and get this—that material is like nothing on earth.”

Bailey looked at Ellyce. “Can you believe this guy? The stories he tells to try and impress me.” She kissed his cheek quickly, and grabbed his hand, mentally preparing herself to walk through the door.

Ellyce nodded and bent down to tie her shoe. Bailey stood two feet away from her, making it a bigger deal than it needed to be. Who cares where the material came from? She’d already walked through the door on the left and she was totally fine. Bailey would be fine, but she wasn’t going to risk telling them that. Ellyce decided it was probably best to let Bailey experience the disappointment of the ugly tunnel and locked doors all on her own.

And so, with one small push and a giddy gasp, Bailey and Shawn disappeared through the corn-colored door. Ellyce stood up and prepared to follow behind them. But as she

reached out to touch the door, someone grabbed her, covered her mouth, and pulled her through the other door.

Ellyce held her hands in front of her face, shielding her eyes from the bright light cascading down, blinking and flinching at the sound of hands clapping in her face. “What the hell?” she murmured.

“Oh, I can assure you this isn’t hell.” Al extended his hand to help her up from the concrete floor. “Are you okay?”

“I think so,” she said, frantically looking around in the dark, wondering where everyone else was, and if the light she saw when she woke had been a hallucination caused by the bump on her head. Disoriented, she fell forward into him as the room spun around her. “I’m sorry.” She took in a deep breath, trying to right herself. “Do I know you?” Al nodded, helping her to the wall. She leaned against it with her arms to her sides, trying to ground herself. “Patterson’s gotta stop doing this.” She opened one eye and then the other before quickly shutting them again. “You’re that guy who hiked over the mountains with his friends?”

“Guilty,” Al said, standing next to her. “I didn’t mean to scare you. Are you gonna be okay?”

She opened her right eye and peered at him. He was standing close to her—a little too close. She inched away. “Yeah, but why would Mr. Patterson bring you here? What do you have to do with this?”

Al scoffed and pushed himself off the wall. He stood in front of her. “*I brought you here.*”

Ellyce’s eyes flew open wide. Even though everything was spinning, she inched closer to the corner of the room. “What do you mean, *you* brought me here?”

“Don’t be afraid. I’m not here to hurt you.” Al put his hand on her shoulder, trying to calm her. “Really. I promise. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m here to help you.” Ellyce

pulled away from him, and the back of her shoulder bumped against the cinderblock wall. “Look, I know this probably sounds crazy to you, but you need to trust me.”

“Yeah? And why would I do that? I don’t even know you.”

The light from the room flickered on. In the light, she could see the warmth of his brown eyes. He was just a little older than she was, but he was a little too calm and collected for someone in his late teens. He crossed the room and leaned against the opposite wall—a gesture meant to show Ellyce that he wasn’t dangerous and he wasn’t going to hurt her. “You can’t give the map to Patterson. No matter how much he insists, and no matter what happens.”

“How do you know about the map?”

“We all know about the map—and the girl it’s going to be written for.”

“What do you mean? Who’s we? And what girl are you talking about?”

“I could try to explain it to you, but I’m not sure you’d understand.” He stepped forward and extended his hand to her. “I don’t think we’ve properly been introduced. I’m Aleph, but you can call me Al. You don’t have to fear me,” he said again, bowing in her direction.

She shifted slightly, studying him. He seemed innocent enough; if he really wanted to hurt her, he could have easily taken advantage of her while she was out. “You’re not from around here, are you, Al?” She gave his hand a brisk shake.

“No,” he said, smiling. “Why do you ask?”

“Because when someone repeatedly tells you something, it usually means the opposite of what they say.”

“Well,” he bristled, “that’s not how I work. We all have jobs to do, and mine is to watch out for you and make sure you stay on the straight and narrow.”

Ellyce laughed. "You're not helping your cause."

"So, do we have an understanding?" He studied her, but she kept her expression guarded. "Don't pretend you don't understand."

"Right," she said and walked over to the door. In her head, she knew she shouldn't be so comfortable with the boy standing in front of her, but there was something about him—something truthful and calming that she couldn't quite put her finger on. "So, how much is Patterson paying you for this performance?"

Al recoiled. "I already told you, I do not work for Patterson. Nor will I *ever*. My job is simply to keep you safe and help you find the map. That's it."

"Right, like you'd tell me the truth," she snorted as she opened the door. "All right, you win. I'll play along."

"Ellyce, we both know that Thomas left you specific instructions."

"Uh, huh," she said, walking down the long corridor. "Well, since you know about my father's instructions, then I don't have to remind you that he said not to trust anyone."

"Actually, he said, don't trust those you think you should," Al reminded her, smugly. "And you don't think you should trust me; therefore, you should." He walked a little faster, trying to keep up with her. "But it's great advice for most everyone else around here."

"Right, everybody else," she spat out. She stopped and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Except you."

"There are a few others, but yes, most definitely me." He began walking in circles around her, reminding her of a dog trying to find that one perfect spot before settling in. "It's truly like I said. I am here to keep you on the straight and narrow. I don't need to see your house to know that you're supposed to find Derek, and that winter is coming."

“We just got out of winter, Al.”

He stopped circling and stared at her. “Winter is coming to the Kingdom. Along with the war. Do you understand that?”

“Al, there’s always a war. Wars have been going on since I was born. Since before my dad was born. Heck, wars have been happening since the beginning of time.”

His eyes lit up, and he snapped his fingers. “Ah, I understand what’s going on here. You’ve been desensitized. You don’t understand what’s at stake.” He started circling the floor again, mumbling to himself. “It’s a brilliant tactic. Wars *have* been going on since the beginning of time, and there will be the war to end all wars, but if wars are commonplace, then it won’t be that big of a deal. And if things aren’t that big of a deal, then she won’t remember and—”

“—and, earth to Al,” Ellyce said, snapping her fingers at him.

He looked up at her quizzically. “Yes, what?”

“How do we get out of here? Which way is out?” She wasn’t interested in playing games. Whatever she needed to do to get rid of this guy, she was going to do it. When push came to shove, she really just wanted to be left alone.

“I can’t leave you alone, Ellyce. It doesn’t work like that. You and I are stuck together until the end.”

“Did I say that out loud?” she asked, stepping back toward the wall. “And what do you mean, we’re stuck together?”

“It means you and me. Or as they say in your Vegas town, we’re it, baby.”

Great. She was being held hostage by a loon. Mr. Patterson had hired a freaky Vegas performer. This was all she needed. “Can we just get back to the task at hand?”

“Sure,” he said holding a door open for her.

“Good. Do you have any clues about this map that I’m supposed to find? What it looks like, how big it is, where it might be? Anything?”

Al opened another door and studied both directions of the hallway before stepping out. “Mr. Patterson’s not who you think he is. Benson and his family are in real danger, along with everyone else.” He turned around and frowned, noticing he was alone in the hallway. “Ellyce,” he called out, walking back toward one of the rooms. “What are you doing? Do you understand what I’m saying? Patterson cannot be allowed to get that map.”

“I don’t want to be a part of this. I’m just a girl—”

“—And Benson’s just a boy. And I’m just a messenger.” He pushed her against the door. “Everyone has their part to play in this, Ellyce, and this is yours. For once in your life, can you just do what you’re told?”

She smacked him across the face and walked into the hallway. “You know nothing about me. So, don’t show up here and pretend that you do.”

Al rubbed his cheek and grinned at her. “And there she is. I knew you had it in ya. Now come along, my little Dustling. We have work to do.” He waved his hand in the air, beckoning her to follow. “Our date with destiny calls.”

Destiny. The word rang through her head, and she ran to catch up with him, though she wasn’t exactly sure why she should.



ELLYCE FOLLOWED Al out of the Hall of Records and across town to her house, dodging the armed patrols as they went. She hadn’t been home since the power outage, and her heart sank when she saw the front screen haphazardly thrown

across the front porch. The front door was completely missing, and the entire house had been ransacked and left in ruins. Her heart wrenched as she stepped over the piles of books that had been scattered and abandoned across the floor, but movement down the hallway near her father's room stopped her in her tracks. Al nodded that it was okay, so she continued down the hall to the bedroom.

"Ellyce," Jessica cried out from the doorway of Thomas' closet. "I'm so glad you're okay." She stepped over the mattresses and bedding on the floor to embrace her. "Do you know why we're here?" she whispered, lingering in her embrace.

Ellyce gave her a tight squeeze and nodded before pulling away. Ellyce smiled at Yarah and Lamad who were standing behind Jessica near the closet door. "I think so. But I don't know why *you're* here."

"You both have a lot of questions," Lamad answered. "But we don't have much time. This wasn't how this was supposed to work, but he's left us with few other options."

"He?"

"Don't ask," Ellyce said. "It's all a little crazy, but I'm sure it's not going to be the only crazy thing you see today." She swallowed hard as Lamad clicked the floorboard that opened the mirrored door in the closet. "Just don't hold it against me. Or my dad, okay?"

Jessica enveloped her in another hug, holding her tightly. "Ellyce, I have never thought you were anything but a smart, level-headed girl. Young woman," she corrected. "I know I'm not your mom, and I know you and Benson are clearly not dating anymore, but you've always been like a daughter to me, and nothing is going to change that. Do you understand?"

Ellyce gave a half-hearted nod in reply.

"I'm serious, Elle. Nothing's gonna change that. Besides,"

she said, bumping her shoulder. “We have to stick together, you know?”

Ellyce agreed, then took a deep breath, pushing her way inside the closet. “This was supposed to be a secret, but they know about it.” She hesitated and looked past Jessica to where Al and Yarah were standing. “Somehow lots of people know about it.”

Jessica turned and eyed them with suspicion. “Ellyce, honey, what are you talking about? I feel like I’m missing something, here.”

“You are,” Yarah said, stepping forward. “We didn’t just wander into this town, Jessica.”

“You didn’t?” Jessica asked, instinctively putting herself in front of Ellyce.

“No. We were sent.”

“Sent? Why?” With every step Yarah took toward them, Jessica swayed protectively, searching for a way out.

“For her.”

Jessica’s eyes widened and she quickly looked around the room, looking for an escape route. There weren’t any good options, but there was a piñata stick leaning against the wall. She decided it was her only chance, so she grabbed it.

“Don’t do it,” Al urged. “We’re not here to hurt either of you.” The trio stepped back into the bedroom away from the women, and with the flick of his hand, Al transferred the piñata stick from Jessica’s hand to his.

Jessica shook her head and pressed closer to Ellyce. “How did you do that?” she demanded, searching for something else to use. “I’ll die before I let you touch her.”

“We know,” Yarah said, rhythmically waving her hand through the air. She slowly moved towards Jessica. “That’s why we brought you here. And that’s why we showed up at the hospital. We need her to move quickly, and you’re the one

person she trusts. You're also the one person who won't be fooled by him." Yarah stood one foot away from Jessica and held her palm in front of her, motioning for Jessica to place her hand over hers. "We're not going to hurt you. Take my hand, and I'll prove to you that I'm telling the truth."

Jessica wavered, but then held her hand over Yarah's. A hot, tingling sensation transferred between the two of them. Though she couldn't explain what was happening, she somehow knew that they weren't there to hurt Ellyce—and that Ellyce was in real danger.

Al pressed his hands against the bedroom wall and closed his eyes, wincing from what he felt. "He's been here. But he didn't go into the closet. He's trying to throw her off track. He knows that if he can make her doubt, he wins. The Howling is very skilled, and unfortunately, he doesn't often lose."

"Make her doubt? What do you mean?"

"Yeah, I doubt things every day. Can you be a little more specific?"

"This is about doubting your destiny. Doubting who you are."

"Howling? What is that?" Jessica asked Al.

"Not a what, but a who." Yarah shivered. "He's the leader of the Vulpine. The mastermind behind the chaos and the cold. He's the one behind the storms."

"The bottom line is that he wants her," Lamad added, pointing to Ellyce. "And our job is to make sure that doesn't happen. There's nothing she can do to stop the storm. She can't outrun it. She can't ignore it. But she can learn to fight it."

"Fight a storm? How do I do that?" Ellyce asked.

"With lots and lots of practice. But don't be fooled. Anyone who he thinks will give him an advantage will be

used. He has one mission, and one mission only: to see that Ellyce fails.”

“None of this makes any sense,” Jessica said, leaning against the door frame. “We don’t even know who this mysterious Howling is that you’re talking about. So, how can he use us?”

“Jessica, the only way for us to get out of this alive is for her to go all in,” Yarah said, pushing Jessica toward the entrance of the dark space before them.

“Aren’t you being a little overdramatic?” Jessica asked.

“No. There’s nothing overly dramatic about the war that’s coming for her—for us all.”

“Jessica, follow me,” Ellyce said, as she stepped over the threshold into the dark. Quickly poking her head out, she added, “But watch your step.”

Jessica stepped inside and hugged the wall, waiting with the others on the cramped landing while their eyes adjusted to the dark.

Ellyce fumbled around on the floor below Jessica’s feet. “There should be a flashlight here somewhere. I left it in here last time.”

“What do you mean, the only way for us to get out of this alive?” Jessica asked, feeling around in the empty space. “Ellyce, what is this place?”

With a couple of shakes and a hit to the edge of her palm, the flashlight beamed on, illuminating the space around them. Turning the light toward Thomas’ handwritten words, she read them aloud to Jessica. “My dad wrote those words. I don’t know when,” she said, starting down the stairs. “But he knew I’d find this room and—”

“So, you never knew this was here? How did you find it?”

“The night of the flare. I was hiding here.” She paused to

gauge Jessica's reaction, then continued, "From the men that broke into the house."

"What?" Jessica exploded. "So, Benson wasn't lying? He wasn't embellishing like you said?" She glanced back at the trio, who all shrugged and urged her on. "So, there *were* strange men in this house. Ellyce, you could have been hurt, or worse—" Jessica didn't finish her sentence. "Was it him?" she asked the trio. "Was it the Howling?"

"No," Al replied.

Ellyce touched her arm and smiled. "It's okay," she assured her. "I'm okay. Whoever they were, they weren't interested in hurting me. One of them even slammed the door in my face so his friend wouldn't see me. In a weird way, I think he was protecting me." Midway down the stairs, the flashlight died. "Damn," she said, banging it against her palm. "Sorry," she added, reaching out for Jessica. "Maybe there's another one in the kitchen. Wait here."

But before Ellyce turned around to take a step up, a warm, soft glow illuminated the space they were standing in. Jessica turned and glanced at the glowing arrow bracelet wrapped around Yarah's arm. "That's kinda handy, isn't it?" Jessica turned Ellyce around and they continued down the stairs. "I'm gonna go out on a limb and say that's not a *solar*-powered product, right?"

Yarah smiled a little and followed them down the stairs. "Well, yes and no. But it's not advisable for me to try and explain it to you. The last time Dustlings were made privy to our secrets, it didn't end well for either of us."

"Dustlings?" Jessica asked, then shook her head, waving them forward. "Never mind, I don't need to know." She clutched the staircase handrail and descended slowly, taking each step with care. "Ellyce, we've known you and your dad

a long time. I know Thomas was imaginative and eccentric about some things, but this is a lot to take in.”

“We’re almost there,” Ellyce said, counting the sixteenth and final step aloud.

“And where’s that?”

“Here,” Ellyce said as the glow of Yarah’s bracelet grew brighter, filling the room with abundant warm lighting. “I think this was another office for him. Or something. I’m not really sure.” She walked over to the credenza and pulled out the document that had her birth date and the name Monroe written on it. “Look at this,” she said, “It’s weird, huh?”

Jessica agreed. “Thomas went to great lengths to keep this room hidden, and he seems to be pretty specific about not trusting anyone.”

“But he’s not talking about you,” Ellyce said, resting her hand on Jessica’s. “I’ve never doubted you. And neither do they.”

“Well, how do you know you can trust *them*?”

The trio stood in front of the fireplace, ignoring Jessica’s inquiry. “This is it—the door to the *Hub*.”

“Al, that’s a fireplace,” Ellyce said, joining them. “I’m assuming you don’t have those where you come from?”

“No, it’s the entrance,” he said adamantly. “The key that opens this door opens the door that leads to Efes—the land of Desire. Each of the seven realms has its own key that leads to the next one. With the exception of the sixth realm, that’s the realm of the Beloved. Only he has the key to that world.” He stopped himself, realizing Ellyce and Jessica weren’t following what he was saying. “Don’t worry about that yet. You’ll gain access to that world when you’re supposed to. For now, let’s just get you through the first door. Now give me the opener.”

Ellyce stood wide-eyed and smiling, holding up the dead

flashlight. “I brought this. I didn’t get the memo about an *opener*.”

“At a time like this, you’re joking?” Al said, pacing the room. “She’s joking.”

“It’s gonna be okay, Al,” Lamad said. “We just need to think.” He looked at Ellyce. “She has to have it somewhere close. It would be something special.”

“Did Thomas give you anything? Or leave you with anything?” Yarah asked.

“He gave me lots of things. Can you be more specific?”

“It would be something special. Something you would never lose.”

“Not helping, Yarah. What does this *opener* look like?”

“Ellyce,” Jessica said, eyeing the fireplace. “Let me see that necklace Thomas gave you for your birthday.”

Ellyce pulled a chain from underneath her shirt and slipped it from around her neck. “This?” she asked, watching the odd silver pendant dangle in the space between them.

Lamad and Al looked at each other, smiling. “The key,” they said in unison. Al grabbed the metal object from her hand and slipped it into the hole under the mantle. With a turn to the left, the faux fireplace clicked open towards them.

Jessica laughed, holding her hand her to mouth. “Whaddya know—another Murphy door.”

“A what?” Ellyce asked, staring into yet another strange hallway.

“A hidden door. They’re usually bookcases or wall panels like the one upstairs, but a fireplace is ingenious—less predictable.” Jessica peeked inside the entryway. “They’re very popular in historic castles and homes of nobility.”

“Yeah, that sounds like my dad.”

“Alrighty then. Off you go,” Al said, holding the door

open for them. “No time to waste.” He gestured for them to make their way inside.

“Wait, you’re not going with us? I’m not going in there by myself. You said I wouldn’t be alone. You and me ‘til the end. Vegas, remember?”

“And you won’t be. But you have to go. *Now.*”

“How do I know it’s safe?”

Al sighed. “Nothing in this world is safe. But you’ll be fine. Jessica’s gonna be with you.”

“Why can’t you come? What if we need another light? Statistics show it’s best to travel in groups.”

Yarah laughed. “Ellyce, we need to make preparations here. But there are others inside who will help you.”

“Simply follow the signs, and you’ll be okay,” Lamad assured her. “You can do this.”

Ellyce hesitated. “I really just want to find my dad.”

“And I’ve told you,” Al said, steering her toward the door. “All in good time. Your dad is in the fourth realm. So, get through these first three, and then you’ll see him again.”

“Just follow the signs,” Ellyce repeated, walking toward the entrance.

“That’s right. Just follow the signs.”

Right, she thought. Ellyce looked to Jessica for guidance, but she simply shrugged as if to say, *your guess is as good as mine*. Ellyce took Jessica’s hand and held her breath, crossing the threshold. On the other side, she looked down the hall of the cold, empty corridor. It left her feeling oddly underwhelmed.

“The mysterious realms are an old office building in Mr. Patterson’s Hall of Records?” Jessica asked. This time, though, it was Ellyce who simply shrugged.

Although the trio denied it, both women, standing inside a corridor that looked identical to the ones in Mr. Patterson's tunnels, were convinced that Al and the others were somehow working with Patterson and Company Holdings.

"Mr. Patterson wants me to help him find the map, so we'll find the map," Ellyce said, standing in the middle of the hallway. Following Al's instruction, she and Jessica were waiting for a sign or for someone else to show up and lead them to where they needed to go. "I know why I'm here. But why are you? Benson and I broke up. Why involve you?"

"I don't know. But something of this magnitude took a lot of planning." Jessica wandered down the hallway, looking for anything that stood out. "Did he tell you why he needed the map?"

"No. Just that there would be lots of complications if he didn't get it before anyone else." She followed Jessica down the hallway, jiggling doorknobs as they walked. "How could Mr. Patterson have known about the flare and all that? I mean

isn't that a little complex? He doesn't seem psychic or like he has any special superpowers."

"Look," Jessica said, pointing to the doors. "These doors aren't as intricately painted as the ones in Patterson's hallway. They're just simple, plain wooden doors."

Ellyce froze. "Did you hear that?" She wasn't really sure if she had heard a voice calling out to her, or if it was her mind playing tricks on her.

"Hear what?" Jessica asked, craning her neck to the side to listen.

"Never mind," Ellyce said, and continued strolling down the silent hall. The hallway was silent—too silent. There were absolutely no sounds, not even the hum of an air conditioner.

At the end of the hallway, on the left, they were greeted by an uninviting black, padlocked door. They veered right and ended up in a space that appeared to be used by shopping mall parking attendants to practice their holiday light decorating skills. With each step they took down the hallway, the walls and floors lit up—changing and shifting colors seemingly based on their moods. They jiggled a couple more doorknobs, but those, too, were locked. Halfway down the hall, they reached another crossroads. This time, the hallway on the right was completely blacked out, while the hallway on the left was lit up with lighting fixtures that resembled giant octopus tentacles or locks of Medusa's hair, flowing outward and downward from the middle of the ceiling.

"Ellyce," a gentle voice called out again. This time, Jessica heard it.

Holding her index finger to her mouth, she pushed Ellyce behind her as she glanced up and down the quiet hall. The voice rang out again, this time, *lyrical*, like the sound of wind blowing across an open field. Ellyce's heart raced with each

step they took as Jessica led them back to the darkened hallway—the one that didn't look festive or inviting.

“What are we doing?”

Jessica clutched Ellyce's hand tightly, pulling her behind. “The voice is coming from there,” she whispered. Ellyce shook her head, refusing to go any further.

“It's one of Mr. Patterson's people.”

“No, I don't think so,” Jessica said, peering into the darkness, squinting to see if she could make anything out.

“Well, Al said others would be here,” Ellyce said. “What if it's one of them, then?” A cramped feeling roared up inside her and she bent over, holding her stomach. “I think I'm gonna be sick. I can't go any further.” She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. “We should go back the other way. I don't know about this.” She started shaking her head, hyperventilating. “Oh my gosh, I can't move. I can't do this.”

“Elle,” Jessica said softly, trying to sooth her. “Breathe. Look into my eyes and listen to the sound of my voice. It's gonna be okay.” She spoke slowly and rhythmically. “I'm here with you. You're not alone, and we're gonna be fine. Someone's calling your name, and we need to find out why.”

“No, we don't. I don't care why,” she said hysterically. “What if it's the guys from the break-in?”

Jessica started to speak, but the sound of soothing waters washed over them, cooling and calming them both. Ellyce sniffled, then stood up straight and stepped into the dark, dreary hallway. With each step she took, glowing yellow and green flowers unfolded before her, creating a trail that led her to the fourth door on the right. Both women stopped and studied the door.

There was nothing special about it, but the flowers surrounding it extended across the wall, creating a dazzling firework show on the walls and ceiling that literally

announced to Ellyce that she had arrived at her destination. After the final cannon sounded, exploding colors across the wall, a loud knock rang out from behind the door. The handle glowed a brilliant bumble bee yellow. Ellyce hesitated to take hold of the knob, but when she did, it clicked open with little effort.

Inside the hazy, smoke-filled room, buzzing with the sounds of typewriters, a red-headed woman wearing a blue pantsuit sat behind a small, wooden desk. The woman, who appeared to be in her mid-thirties, didn't seem nearly as surprised to see them as they were to see her.

"Hello, Dolls," she said before bounding up from her chair toward them. Her blue pantsuit was accessorized with a wide black belt, cutting across the middle of her body, and black combat boots. Bright pink bubble gum smacked between her teeth and gums as she spoke. "How are you, Sweetheart?" she said, engulfing Ellyce in a full-body hug.

"I—I'm good," Ellyce stammered. "I think."

"Well, that's no good. If you don't know, how can anyone else?"

"I am good," Ellyce asserted and pointed to herself. "I'm Ellyce. And this is Jessica."

"Pleasure to finally meet you," the woman said, taking Jessica's hand. Before Jessica had time to ask how she knew of her, the woman popped a big pink bubble and guided them to a couple of chairs in the reception area across from her desk.

"We're looking for a map, my dad, and someone named Derek. Do you know how we can find them?"

The woman put her hands on her hips and shook a little bit, blowing another large bubble and letting it pop loudly. "Well, I'd really like to help, but I'm not sure if today's the day to accommodate your requests." She pushed Ellyce into a

chair and gestured to the chair next to Ellyce's, commanding Jessica to sit. "But I do know we don't have any dads down here. Just a Malak." She waved to a man hunched over a filing cabinet, wearing a similar uniform. As if on command, he smiled and waved back.

Ellyce absently waved back, trying to recall whether or not she had seen anyone else in the room when they walked in. She didn't think that she had. Malak strolled over to the counter dividing their desks from the reception area and leaned across it. "I'm Malak. How may I help you?"

"I'm looking for a map, my dad, and his friend Derek," she repeated. "Do you know anything about them?"

"Hmmm," he said, tapping his index finger against his cheek a few times. "I might. But let me ask you a question. What's stronger than knowledge?"

Ellyce studied him for a moment, then turned to Jessica for help. Jessica shrugged. When they both concurred they weren't sure of the answer, Malak tsked and walked around to the other side of the counter. "Okay, well, maybe that was a hard one. Let me give you something easier. What does not grow with time?"

Ellyce thought for a moment then sheepishly answered, "Eyeballs?"

Malak beamed, and she thought she had given the correct answer, but then he curtly said, "No, I'm sorry. That's not correct." He turned to the woman. "Ishy, darling, didn't you think that was a great answer?"

Ishim (the woman's name according to the name tag that had appeared out of nowhere) nodded enthusiastically. "What about you? Would you like to take a guess?" she asked Jessica.

Jessica shook her head and meekly replied, "I have no idea."

Just as Ellyce was wondering what version of the Twilight Zone they had stepped into, Ishim's pink bubble gum popped and Malak made a pouty face. "Aw, that's too bad," he said, leaning with his back against the counter. "We really did want to help you, but," he whispered, "it's important we don't let just anyone behind the curtain." He thumbed over his shoulder to the wall behind the desk, which now housed a heavy, blue velvet curtain swaying gently against the wall.

"That wasn't there a minute ago!" Ellyce shouted. "Nothing was there. What's going on here?" She turned to Jessica. "That wasn't there. That wall was blank—you know that, right? That wall didn't even have a picture on it."

Jessica let out a half-snort. "Ellyce, I'm sorry. But I can't honestly recall."

"Well, this has been fun," Ishim said, grabbing Ellyce's arm and ushering her towards the door. "But we've got to get back to work."

"So, that's it? You're not going to help us?"

"Well, we *did* try to help you." Malak gestured to Ishim, who agreed. "I mean, we couldn't have been any clearer, could we?"

"At least tell us what this place is," Ellyce said, refusing to be pushed out the door.

"Oh, yes. We'd be happy to," Ishim said, blowing another large pink bubble and popping it loudly. "But, let me ask you a question."

"A question?"

"Yes, dear," she said, a large grin plastered across her face.

"Okay," Ellyce said, preparing for another crazy question.

"Can you answer Malak's last two questions?"

Ellyce frowned. "Well, I don't think we've had any epiphanies in the last twenty seconds."

“Now, see, that is a bummer,” Ishim said, pushing Ellyce and Jessica out the door. “Better luck next time.”

Jessica grasped the door frame. “Wait. Al sent us here and said there would be others to help us. Do you know who he is?”

“And my dad. He left me some clues and—”

“Ooh,” Malak said clapping his hands, excitedly. “A scavenger hunt. You know how I love a good scavenger hunt,” he said to Ishim. “It reminds me of that time—”

“Stop,” Ellyce growled. “I’m sure you were going to launch into a wonderful story about an amazing adventure, but I’m wondering if there’s someone else here. You know, a manager or something?”

“Someone a little higher on the totem pole we could speak to,” Jessica added. “You know, perhaps someone who gets us and speaks our language?”

Malak’s eyes widened, and his face fell flat. “Well, I thought for sure that was English. Maybe that explains why you couldn’t answer the questions.” He turned to the woman standing next to him, chomping her gum, “Ishy-girl, let’s see if we can fix that.”

Ishim snapped to attention. Her eyes rolled back in her head before Ellyce and Jessica had time to react. “Stop her when you recognize your language,” Malak told them as she began spouting out random phrases in various foreign languages.

“She sounds like an airport greeting,” Ellyce said, burying her head in her hands.

Jessica drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes, counting to ten before yelling “Stop!” When she opened her eyes, a girl Ellyce’s age stood before them. Practically glowing, the girl had long blonde hair, the deepest blue-green eyes

she'd ever seen, and flawless, pure white skin. "Ellyce," Jessica said, nudging her with her elbow.

"Ha-low, Ellyce," the girl said with the sweetest Australian accent Ellyce had ever heard. "I'm Sophia. How ya going?"

Ellyce sighed and closed her eyes, thinking Ishim had stopped on an Australian dialect, but opened her eyes when Jessica nudged her again. "I'm, I'm not well," she said to the girl standing directly of her. "But never mind. We're leaving."

"Then you'll miss out," Sophia said. "I'm sorry for the trouble. But they were just having a bit of fun. Well, actually, they're just doing their job—a sorting the wheat from the chaff kind of thing." She took Ellyce's arm and guided her back towards the center of the room. "They're actually very nice and rather helpful once they know that you're supposed to be here."

"Yeah," Ellyce lied, "I can see that."

"Would you like a biccy?" Sophia asked, pushing a tray of warm cookies under Ellyce's nose. Ellyce hesitated for a moment, then decided she *was* a little bit hungry and swiped a coconut-and-chocolate-crusted one from the edge of the tray. "I hear you're looking for your dad. And, more importantly, Derek."

"Well, first I'm looking for a map," she said, biting into the cookie. "And then my dad, and then Derek. Or maybe the map, then Derek, and then my father. I don't know if the order matters." She grinned with delight as the cookie dissolved in her mouth. "Wow, these are really good."

"Thanks," Sophia said, setting the tray on the counter. "Order always matters. And I can help you. I mean, I will, if you let me."

"You know where they are?"

"Oh, I know lots of things. Knowing things is my job."

She stood innocently in front of Ellyce. “Can I get ya a cuppa?” she asked before guiding them into a pair of oversized leather chairs that had seemingly appeared out of thin air.

Ellyce took her seat and waited for Sophia to bring her a cup. “What exactly is this place?”

“It’s the Hub. Or the situation room, if you will, of the realms.” She picked up a peppermint tea bag and patted the package against her hand before tearing it open and popping it into the empty cup.

“That’s funny. There’s a Hub in town, too.” Ellyce waited to see if Sophia would say they were related or the same place, but she simply smiled while nodding her head. “So, what are these realms that everyone keeps talking about?”

“You remember your father’s stories, don’t you?”

“Sort of,” Ellyce hesitated. “I mean, I honestly stopped paying attention after book two.”

Sophia let out a little laugh as the kettle whistled. “Yes, well, that does explain some things.” She stirred two sugars in Ellyce’s tea—just the way she liked it—and fanned her hand across the top to cool it a little. “The worlds that Thomas wrote about are behind that curtain.”

Ishim and Malak’s desks parted as the blue curtain opened, revealing a large domed table containing a sizable map that read: *The Realms of the Old Castle—The Land of Finish*.

Clearly the centerpiece in an otherwise ordinary looking room, the map sat squarely below a second-floor landing. The balcony surrounding the edge of the room, created an onlooker’s gallery, but in order to view the map from above, it was clear that someone would have to enter from one of the twelve narrow wooden doors that encircled the outer wall. As the map table lit up and began turning, four of the doors

opened. Several people made their way onto the landing floor and patiently waited, watching while the table hummed to life.

The first ones to enter were a man and woman whose skin was translucently pale. The crystalline tunics that they wore complimented their long, glowing white-blond hair that flowed around them like wisps of white Christmas angel hair tinsel as they moved. A peachy band of French-braided hair crossed their foreheads and ran down the length of their tall, slender bodies. Seven pinpoints of light danced freely over their right shoulders, following them wherever they went. They were joined by a second couple who brought the intoxicating scents of peony and wild jasmine with them. The fragrance filled the room and tickled Ellyce and Jessica's noses. Peacock masks of gold and turquoise held back their black-and-blue-streaked hair, while their chocolate-colored necks housed lacy diamond necklace wraps, each accented by a single dropped pearl.

Next to them stood two others that captivated Ellyce. Their sapphire blue eyes stood out in striking contrast against their steely gray bodies, which were tastefully hidden under two-piece wrapped shrouds. Their hair—silver and blue Ombre—flitted with an invisible wind, reminiscent of a bird's feathers in flight.

Directly in the middle of the group stood a woman in a flowing purple linen dress. She stared intently at the spinning map, waiting for it to lock into place.

“Did Mr. Patterson put you up to this?” Ellyce asked Sophia. “Is this some sort of reality thing?” She looked around for a camera or some other recording device. “I mean, this is awesome, but I'm sure it took a lot of work.”

Sophia set the tea on the desk next to her and pulled Ellyce aside. “You mustn't speak of him. And you mustn't let

him know where this room is, or where this map is. He knows its approximate whereabouts, but he's—he's searching in all the wrong places." As she rambled on, her accent grew thicker and more lazy. "But, listen to me, Ellyce, it's extremely important that *you* do not lead him here. Do ya understand me?"

"But he owns the building. How do you plan on keeping him out?"

Sophia scoffed, aghast, and rested her hands on her hips. "He most certainly does *not*. This is the Shopkeeper's land, and Patterson does not own it. He is but a servant, no matter what he says or thinks."

"Shopkeeper?" Ellyce asked, rubbing her head as her dream came rushing to the front of her mind. *The Shopkeeper has many secrets.*

"You remembered something, didn't you? I knew it wouldn't take much."

Ellyce shook her head. "It was just a dream. It was nothing."

"It most definitely was *not* nothing. *Nothing* is what people say when they refuse to believe the truth. But you know better."

"Excuse me," Jessica interrupted. "But how does it do that?" She pointed to a storm cloud that had risen off the map, hovering over the space in front of them.

"Reality of Duality," Sophia said. "It mirrors your *Hub*. Whatever happens there is also happening here, though here it always looks a little different."

"So, is that the storm that Al keeps carrying on about?" Ellyce started to sip her tea, but then stopped. "That guy is really annoying, you know."

Sophia giggled. "I'm sure he can be, but he's very good at his job."

“And what exactly is his job?” Jessica asked, curious of what the answer would be.

“Protecting her. He wasn’t lying about that.” As she moved closer to the map, the din of buzzing typewriters grew louder, and smoky haze billowed into the room around them. “Things are not always the way they seem,” she said, grabbing a handful of the cloudy haze.

From her palm, Sophia blew the haze across the room toward the map, where it reformed into delicate white flowers, which, moments later, were snatched up by several hummingbirds launching out from the trees on the left side of the map. When each bird had a flower in its mouth, the other flowers faded, falling into misty particles on the floor in front of Sophia. “The world of the Realms isn’t about what they do, or what something looks like. But rather about what they are, and how they function.”

“How they function? What do you mean?” Ellyce asked.

“Watch,” Sophia said.

Separated into three sections, the large map contained several sizable land masses that became more clearly detailed as the map ground to a halt and locked into place. The map was divided into three sections. The section on the right side labelled *What Was* contained lands one, two, and three. Lands five, six, and seven were located on the far-left section of the map, which was labelled *What Will Come*. And the land in the middle section, directly in front of where Ellyce stood, was labelled *What Is*.

Ellyce watched the woman in purple nod to the couple with the piercing blue eyes. The woman never spoke; but simply waited, watching the rain as it poured over the first three lands. Spots of precipitation sprang up over the southern tip of the fourth land labelled, *Thya, Lydia’s Land of the Purple Ones*, while snow fell on the cedars of the fifth land-

mass—the one the hummingbirds came from—which was also labelled *Land of Sart: Home of the Red Sleepers*.

“That’s Lydia,” Sophia said, pointing to the woman in purple. “She is the keeper of that land—that portion right there.” She directed Ellyce’s attention to the center landmass, currently sitting under a warm, sunny glow. “And that is where your dad is right now.”

“My dad’s there?” Ellyce reached out, longingly to touch the land, but she quickly pulled back, wincing in pain from the burn that immediately seared her finger. “Ouch!” Ellyce pushed her index finger in her mouth to cool it. “That’s Thya?” she asked. “So, he was right?”

“Yes and no.” Sophia pulled Ellyce’s finger from her mouth. “Sucking on it won’t help.” She flattened her palm and slowly fanned her hand over Ellyce’s generating a cooling air that immediately faded the red-hot glow. “You need to be careful. This is a live map.”

Ellyce examined her perfectly healed finger. “So, how do I get to my dad?” She motioned to Lydia standing on the balcony. “Does she know him? Will she tell me?”

“She does. But she will not. Nor will the Red Sleepers, nor will Ionia, nor Myrna,” Sophia said, singling out the people standing on the second-floor balcony. “What I will tell you, and what they would tell you as well, is that you need to be prepared. As you can see, the storm is already making its way over the southern tip of Thya. The Vulpine think they own these lands, so they do what they like. But they don’t own them. In reality, these aren’t even the key lands—that one is.” She pointed to the sixth landmass on the map. “The Vulpine are trying to take control of the White City.”

“Why?” Jessica asked.

“Because it’s the most sacred land—it’s the land of the

Beloved.” She turned and sipped her tea. “But they’ll never get there, because they don’t have the map or the key.”

Ellyce held up her necklace. “So, it’s not this thing?”

“No. That is not the key of Dod. The key to the White City belongs to the rightful heir. And even if you happened upon the key, you couldn’t open the door. That’s what the Vulpine don’t understand. There’s an order to things. And there’s only one person who has the ability to open that door.”

“So why get all uptight about it if they can’t ever go there?”

“Because the Vulpine don’t care about order. They just go about things in a haphazard manner. And, that’s how people get hurt. She gestured to the land of Sart, pointing to the snow falling over the land. “Which is why it’s snowing in the Land of the Red Sleepers. The Vulpine are of the mindset that if they can’t have the land, they’ll destroy it so that the heir to the throne cannot have it either.”

“But why go through all the trouble? If you’re gonna lose anyway.”

“The White City is a bridal gift from the heir to his bride. The Vulpine think that if they can desecrate the land or the people of the land, then they’ll stop the wedding. And if they stop the wedding, they’ll stop the war.”

“But Jessica and I don’t have anything to do with these people or their lands.”

“That is where you’re mistaken. You have *everything* to do with this. If you want to find your dad, you’re going to have to start at the beginning and you’re going to have to find *Derek*.”

“You sound like my dad now.”

“Ellyce, it’s important that you memorize this map, so you can follow the path. You’re going to be required to find

the keys from each of the first three realms—in order—that’s important. Order is very important. No matter what anyone says, you must start from the beginning, and then you’ll be on your way to finding Derek. And, along with Derek, you’ll find your dad.”

“And you’re not going to give me any clues, are you?”

Sophia smirked, prompting a giggle from the girl from the Tower Lands. “There are clues all around you. But what I can tell you, Ellyce, is that Derek is not what you’re expecting. And Derek will be found at just the right moment.”

Dark clouds swirled off the map, creeping up the Land of Thya, growing closer to the area where Thomas was waiting. The smell of a summer rainstorm filled the smoky room, and a gust of wind blew off the table, splattering several droplets on Ellyce’s shoes. “I’ve smelled that before,” she exclaimed, but her excitement was short-lived as a white-hot crack of lightning flashed before her face.

Hushed whispers about someone named Daniel filled the second-floor landing. “Okay, it’s time for you to go,” Sophia said, taking her hand. She hurriedly pushed her back to the waiting room with a pleasant smile. “But next time you come to visit me, bring Benson.”

“Benson?” Jessica asked, stubbornly staying in place. “What does he have to do with any of this? And what does that lightning mean?”

“Benson is very important in helping Ellyce find Derek and her dad. And I suspect they know that too. It will be difficult, but you’re going to need to get him here. Do whatever it takes to convince him, okay? He’s not himself right now. I’m sure you see that. But don’t be discouraged. All will be well.”

“They?” Jessica asked. “Who’s they?”

Sophia escorted them to the door. “Jessica, I wish I could

tell you more, but I suspect that you already know the answer to your question.”

“Well, I have a couple more questions,” Ellyce said, grabbing the counter, refusing to be dismissed. “That smell—I know it from somewhere. And that lightning has something to do with him, doesn’t it? I know you can’t tell me who Derek is, but who’s Daniel? There’s no harm in knowing that, is there?”

“Ellyce, you need to go now. But I promise we can talk more when you return.” Sophia paused, pulling a small capsule from her pocket. “Give this to Benson when you get home. It will help counteract some of the effects of what he’s already been given.” She prodded them out the door. “Now, please. You really must go.” She waved as she closed the door. “See you soon. And don’t forget to give that to Benson.”

The door closed for two seconds, leaving them alone in the dark hallway before it hastily opened again. “Oh, I almost forgot,” Sophia said, whispering. “Ellyce, next time you come, bring the bees. And don’t be worried about things you might see. You’re going to start remembering a bunch of stuff, but just go with it. It’ll be okay, I promise.”

“Bees?” Jessica asked, quizzically studying Ellyce.

“Yes,” Sophia answered. She peered down the hallway, looking in both directions, then leaned in close to Ellyce. “We’re going to need them. They’re important. But not the ones upstairs. Bring the other ones.” She winked at both of them one last time, and then closed the door. The colored leaves on the wall slowly faded, and the two women stood alone in the cold, dark hallway, wondering what had just happened.

Thunder cracked overhead seconds after white-hot lightning split across the sky, drenching the area with a burst of hot rain. Outside his cottage, Thomas dropped to his knees, knowing what rain this far inside the realm meant.

There had been a change in status, and Ellyce, like the inhabitants of this land, was no longer safe. The Vulpine had begun their advance from the Tower Lands, and in the coming days, the dark mist would spread across the southern tip of Thya and filter throughout this land. He would do whatever it took to protect the gate to Sart, even if it meant sacrificing himself to save them.

Sacrificing himself wasn't something he wanted to think about, but it was something that had always been on his mind, even as a kid. He remembered lying in bed at night, playing out the fantasy about how, if push came to shove, he would choose to save someone else's life. He wished things had been different for him and his beautiful daughter—that he could have been the one to lead her to Derek, but that wasn't how it worked. Nor was that part of the plan. And he knew it.

With the last word of his prayer whispered into the night,

the Shamash appeared at his side, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder. He silently acknowledged Thomas' pain—the knowledge that Ellyce would not come out of this ordeal unscathed—while they both stared out onto the Tower Lands. Thomas didn't doubt the success of the plan, the parts that they were to play, or that the Vulpine would never succeed. But what he did question was why the Vulpine's leader and his band of merry fools continued on, knowing they would never win. He tried to rationalize it over and over again, but whatever answers he could come up with never made any sense.

"Hope," the Shamash answered in reply to Thomas' unspoken thought.

"But why? He'll never be king."

"Because everyone believes their convictions are the right ones—even the Vulpine."

"But it makes no sense. The prophecies have already foretold—"

"Prophecies are nothing more than truths coming to pass. You know that. You also know we all have a part to play. The Vulpine must advance," the Shamash said. "It's what they do."

"But we need to help her. Can't we send someone?"

"We have."

"Well, she needs more. And we need to fortify the gate. We can't let them get through. We need to hold them off until—"

The Shamash chuckled, swatting him on the shoulder. "Oh, my friend. You're very well intentioned, but your thinking is still wrong. The Vulpine will not be held. In fact, they're already here. They walk among us." His eyes pled with Thomas to admit the truth.

"I know Izabal is trying to lure the people to her side, but

they resist. I've seen it. I know we're not supposed to talk about it. We're only to be in the present, but I've seen it."

"Thomas, you would be surprised by the company that Izabal keeps." He turned and gazed over the waters dividing the lands of Sart, the White City, and the Old Castle. All was calm in the White City as it should be.

"I've warned Ellyce to trust no one, and now you're telling me that those I trust are enemies?"

"I'm saying there are friends and there are foes, and both serve a purpose in the Kingdom."

"But why allow it?"

The Shamash didn't answer, but instead pointed off into the distance. "Look, your request has been answered."

"The Knife," Thomas said, cheering a little. "That's a good sign. It means her skills will be sharpened and honed. All is not lost."

The Shamash laughed again. "Thomas, you worry too much. Do not be a doubter. No king desires loss, and our king is absolutely no different. The storm is coming, but he is not slack. He will wait until the appointed time to strike. And until then, the Vulpine will do what they are going to do. And *we* will do what's required of us." He pointed to Thomas' unfinished map. "Have you considered how you will give it to her?" Thomas shook his head.

"Well, you must. She has seen the map, but it's too nuanced to remember all the details. Think about the gates. Without a copy to refer to, she will be vulnerable. Certainly, you know that." Thomas nodded slightly, staring at the mostly completed document on his desk. "Then be quick and decide how you will send it to her. No amount of hesitation or wishful thinking will stop what's coming. Even if you wish it were so." With that, the Shamash was off again, disappearing into the night under a bright, foggy cloud of mist.



MR. PATTERSON'S house was unusually quiet as Ellyce and Jessica made their way in through the servant's entrance. Ellyce kicked off her shoes at the bottom of the stairs and said goodnight to Jessica, planning to tiptoe quickly past Benson's room so she wouldn't have to see or hear from Sydney. But at the top of the stairs, Jim was waiting for them. He escorted his wife into Benson's room and asked Ellyce to join them. Sick, stale air hit them as soon as they stepped inside.

"He's sick?" Jessica asked, sitting at the side of Benson's bed. He lay still, curled up on the bed. Pangs of guilt overwhelmed Ellyce.

"He collapsed while we were exploring today. It took everything I had in me to get him back to this bed."

Ellyce looked around the empty room. "Where's Sydney?"

"In her room," Jim said. "I told her she couldn't be in here until we know what's wrong with him." He glanced at Ellyce and then to his wife. "I've been worried about you. Where have you two been? One minute you were next to me, and then the next you were gone."

"It's a long story, Jim. I promise to tell you later," Jessica said, grabbing his hand. She gave it a little squeeze and smiled. "Ellyce, will you hand me that capsule?"

Ellyce pulled the multicolored gel capsule from her pocket and started to hand it to Jessica, but Jim snatched it up. "What is this?" he asked, holding the capsule against the light. Inside the translucent gelatin coating, a rainbow of liquid colors moved freely, mingling and mixing with each other as though they were dancing. Yet each color retained its original hue instead of blending with the others.

“I have no idea. But Sophia seemed to know that Benson would need it.”

“Sophia?” he stammered and turned away from her.

“Yes,” Ellyce excitedly volunteered before Jessica could stop her, “she said it would help him.”

“You met with someone who knew he was sick?” Jim shook his head, eyeing them with suspicion. He turned to Jessica, demanding clarification. “How did she know?”

“We were talking with her and she just said it would help Benson,” Ellyce volunteered, again.

“Thank you, Ellyce,” he said, “But I want to talk to my wife about this.” He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. “Maybe you should start from the beginning. What did she look like?”

Jessica exhaled, slowly turning to face him. “She wasn’t a woman, she was a girl about Benson and Ellyce’s age. She was in one of the rooms in the tunnels.”

So, you’re just gonna give your son something from some girl you don’t know? That doesn’t make a lot of sense, Jess. You’re a nurse, you know better than anyone else what drugs can do.”

“Yes, I do.” There was an edginess to her answer, but Ellyce didn’t know why. “I also understand that none of this makes sense. But, then again, nothing I’ve seen in the past few hours makes much sense either. Look, Jim, I don’t ask you for many things, but I’m asking you to trust me on this. I believe this girl, and this capsule—this medicine—whatever it is, will help Benson.”

“Shawn mentioned that you might know why Benson’s sick, Ellyce, but I didn’t believe him.” He rubbed the back of his head and sat on the bed next to his wife.

“Me?”

“Guess I owe him an apology,” he said under his breath.

“Well, before we give Benson anything, I need to understand. Just tell me what’s going on.”

Ellyce nodded. “Jessica, we have to tell him.” She peered into the hallway, checking for signs of anyone stirring. When she didn’t see or hear anyone, she closed the door.

“Well, I wish someone would,” Jim grumbled.

“It’s gonna sound strange, but you need to promise you’ll keep this a secret,” Ellyce said.

Jim exhaled and rubbed his legs, bracing himself. “Your secret’s safe with me. Now start from the beginning, and don’t leave anything out.”

Ellyce told Jim about her father’s disappearance, the notes he left for her, the money, the card, the secret room, and Mr. Patterson’s request to find the map. She even told him about the tunnels that were under her house, and how the travelers were sent here to help her.

“I see,” he said. “So, there are people living in Mr. Patterson’s tunnels—”

“No,” Ellyce interrupted. “That’s the thing. Sophia said Mr. Patterson doesn’t own the tunnels. And she warned us to stay away from him.”

Jim blew out a breath and looked around the room. “Well, it’s too late for that now, don’t you think?”

“So, what are we going to do? How do we get back into the tunnels and find my dad without anyone else knowing?”

Jim shot her a warning look. “Whoa. We don’t. You’re gonna stay away from all of them. We need to be careful, Ellyce. We don’t know those people, and we don’t know that we can trust them. Besides, Mr. Patterson has been nothing but nice to us. We can’t disrespect him in his own home.”

Ellyce sighed. “Okay, but are you at least going to give Benson this medicine? I mean, it might make him better, right?”

“Or it could kill him.” Jim steered her out of the room. “Thanks for telling me everything, but we’ll talk about what’s best for him, Elle,” he said, pausing at the door. “Really, I mean it. I know you’re only trying to help.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome.”

Jim patted her on the shoulder. “Now, go grab some shut-eye, and we’ll talk about all of this tomorrow.”



ELLYCE WOKE to the sight of Benson laying on her bed. She thought for a moment she was dreaming. Propped up on his side with his hand holding up his head, he stared at her, waiting as she stirred. Ellyce stretched, set the book she’d been reading when she fell asleep on the side table, and rolled over on her side to face him. He’d never been this bold before. Ellyce wondered if it was a side effect of Sophia’s liquid capsule.

“What’s with the barricade?” he asked, pointing to the chair blocking the shut door. His breathing had returned to normal, and he was livelier than she had seen him in days.

“You can never be too certain about who’s going to show up while you’re sleeping,” she joked. “You seem to be better.”

Benson reached over and took her hand, caressing her fingers between his. “If you say so.”

She pulled away from him even though she didn’t want to. “Should you be in here while Sydney and the others are out there?”

“You know I didn’t know she was gonna be here.” He sat up against the headboard and straightened his pant legs. “She’s friends with La’annah. She’s also got lots of secrets.”

“I know,” Ellyce said, ignoring his half-apology. “So, you probably shouldn’t be here—alone with me.”

“I don’t want you to hate me.”

“I don’t.” Ellyce pulled herself up and leaned against the headboard next to him. “You know, I have some things I need to take care of, so maybe it’s best for everyone if I went away.”

“What?” he demanded, grabbing her hand in his. “No, you can’t. It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s just that—”

“I said no.” He stood up and started fluffing the pillows. “You’re staying here, and that’s all there is to it.”

“What are you talking about? Just two days ago you didn’t want me here. And now I can’t go?”

“You have to stay.” He walked over to the ottoman blocking the bathroom door and grabbed her sweatshirt off the floor. “We should head down for breakfast. It smells like they’re cooking up a storm.” He handed the shirt to her and she eyed him, considering his choice of words. Breaking the gaze, she slipped her sweatshirt over her head. “It’s just, there’s power and stuff here,” he continued. “And there’s nothing out there for you.”

“But don’t you find it a little odd? That they have power and act like nothing’s wrong?”

“They have their reasons, Ellyce. It doesn’t make them bad people.”

“Well, it doesn’t make it okay, either.” She pulled the hair tie from her wrist and wrapped it around her hair, positioning it in a high ponytail. “You’re really okay with this?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? Why do you think we’ve been spared?”

“Because you’re *family*,” she said, making air quotes.

“Ellyce, this isn’t a game. You’re not the only one dealing

with stuff. Just because your dad ditched you doesn't make you more of a victim."

"What did you say?"

"What?"

"How could you say that? My dad didn't *ditch* me. He disappeared." She put her hands on her hips, waiting for him to apologize or say that the meds were making him stupid. He did neither. "Benson," she said, "how did you get in my room without moving that chair?"

He snarled, baring his teeth and crossed the room quickly, grabbing her arms. "You think you're pretty smart, but you're not. You have a lot to learn."

"Benson, stop," she said through gritted teeth. She tried pulling away from him. "You're hurting me, let go."

He drew in a deep breath and composed himself. "Watch your back, Ellyce. He's coming for you. And you have much more to lose than I do." Benson held his head in his hands, wincing in pain.

"Benson. Benson," Ellyce shouted, grabbing for him. "What's wrong? What are they doing to you?"

As he swatted her away, the slap of his hand connecting with hers jolted her awake. For the second time in less than a week, Ellyce found herself pinned down by La'anah.

Ellyce pushed La'anah off of her and jumped out of bed. Her heart raced. Was she still dreaming? She checked the door. The chair had been pushed out of place. When she looked back at La'anah, she was shushing her. "I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but I think it's only fair that you know."

"Know what?"

"What you're doing—trying to find the map," she said, garnering Ellyce's full attention. "My uncle is sweet, but he's really misguided if he thinks you're the key to this whole puzzle."

"How do you know about the map?"

"Shawn and I both know. We've tried to be kind and indulge him, but it's getting out of hand."

Ellyce sat on the edge of the bed, watching her. "What do you mean?"

"He thinks the map will lead him to my aunt Sylvia. And now he's dragged you into our family drama."

"And?"

"And you can't give in to his strange fantasies. It's bad

enough that Shawn and I have to deal with it, but this is too much.”

“You’re gonna be nice to me now? Is this just part of your game, La’anah?”

“I just think it’s too much to ask of you. That’s all. You didn’t ask to be part of any of this and it’s just not fair.”

“Well, I can assure you, Mr. Patterson doesn’t think I’m the key to anything. And I was just trying to be nice to him. I liked his wife. She was a good teacher.” Ellyce stood up and crossed her arms. “So, is that all?” she asked, waiting for her to leave.

“Well, now that you mention it. You obviously already know that Sydney doesn’t want you here. But now, Bailey has told me that she’s starting to feel a little uncomfortable with you being here, too.”

Ellyce huffed and smirked. “Right. And why is that?”

La’anah shifted provocatively on Ellyce’s bed. “Why do you think?” She crossed her legs, tossing her hair behind her shoulder as she swayed. “I think that it’s probably best if you left. You know, maybe find some people who are a little more like your kind.”

“The Monroes *are* my kind.”

“Well, not *all* the Monroes.” La’anah slid off the bed and stood up. “I’m just trying to consider the wishes of my cousin-in-law-to-be. So, don’t shoot the messenger.”

Ellyce bristled. “What did Bailey say, *exactly*?”

“Just that she’s not comfortable with the way you’ve been looking at Shawn. She said you were staring at him. And then there was the incident on the way down into the tunnels. He touched your hand, and it made her feel—*awkward*. Yes, that was the word she used. Like you were maybe—.”

“Maybe what?” Ellyce shook her head, trying to remember Shawn touching her hand, but she struggled with

that detail. What she did remember was spying on La'anah and Shawn after breakfast—and how their interaction seemed off. “Well, she’s wrong. But whatever.”

“Well, don’t be so defensive. I’m just saying I’m sure you can understand how it makes her feel. You know, in light of everything that’s going on.” La'anah stopped at the door. “When you decide to leave, I could help you, you know. There are extra bikes in the garage, and no one would miss one, and—” she stopped and stared. “You do know how to ride a bike, don’t you?”

“Of course, I do. I’m not stupid.”

La'anah raised her eyebrows and opened the door. “Good. Well, then it’s settled. I’ll meet you in the garage in ten minutes.”



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Ellyce was dressed and checking the bike’s tires for air. She squeezed the brakes to make sure they were working before latching the bike helmet under her chin. “Will you please let Mrs. Monroe know that I’ve gone home, but I should be fine?”

“Sure. No problem,” La'anah said, smiling. “Leave it to me. I’ll even give you a head start; I’ll wait to tell them all after breakfast that you’ve gone.” She patted Ellyce’s shoulder. “It’s really for the best. My uncle can’t be allowed to foster this fantasy any longer, and Bailey shouldn’t have to live in fear that something might happen between you and Shawn.”

Ellyce nodded as she steered the bike out of the garage and down to the side yard where La'anah had assured her the guards wouldn’t be watching. With a sly smile, La'anah closed the side door, hopeful that one of the less polite

guardsmen would grab Ellyce before she made it halfway down the road. This will show him, La'anah decided. She would prove to him that Ellyce was a risk—a loose cannon, and not someone he wanted, or *needed* to have around.



GRAFFITI ARTISTS HAD LEFT their mark throughout Hayvenhurst, tagging one building after another, leaving very few unscathed. One building in particular had been marked up and destroyed more than the others, though why the library would have been the victim of such targeted assaults escaped her. Ellyce was passing through the intersection of Ladyface and Oak Crest admiring the work of one artist in particular when the girl came out of nowhere, plowing into her, sending her and her bike tumbling across the asphalt.

Sprawled out on the road, Ellyce lay still for a minute, trying to determine if anything was broken or severely damaged. When she assessed that nothing was, she sat up and scowled at the girl. “Didn’t you see me?” The girl gave her a deer-in-headlights look before signing something with a grunt. “What?” Ellyce barked, picking herself and the bike up.

The girl grunted again and pointed to the bent wheel.

“Yeah, that’s what happens when you run somebody over.” Blood ran down Ellyce’s arm, and she bent her elbow up toward her face to inspect the damage. Hobbled off to the side of the road, she dragged the broken bike along with her. “And now that’s pretty useless, too.” Casting the bike aside, Ellyce breathed out a heavy sigh and sat on the edge of the curb. With her head tilted to the right, she scanned the road for signs of life but found none.

For being her self-proclaimed protectors, Al and the

others were pretty MIA when she needed them. She closed her eyes and tried thinking. But the sound of something—a sub-human hum—pierced the silence. Ellyce turned her head toward the girl, standing in the middle of the road, frenetically pointing at a white pickup truck that was headed toward them.

With each second that ticked by, the girl's hum grew louder. With the truck less than two blocks away, the girl signed something to Ellyce with rapid perfection, pacing back and forth. Ellyce didn't move. When the driver of the truck revved his engine and wailed on the horn, the girl grabbed Ellyce's sleeve.

As two of the men in the back of the truck stood, preparing to jump out, the girl stomped her foot, demanding that she get up and move, *now*. The girl's aqua blue eyes pierced Ellyce and she scrambled to her feet. She followed the girl as they ran between houses, through yards, and over fences snaking their way across town until they had circled back around to the library.

The blue-eyed girl inched her way inside through an open window at the back of the building and motioned for Ellyce to follow. Squeezing through the window, Ellyce dusted herself off as they walked across the books scattered across the floors. Half-emptied shelves were pushed on top of one another as if someone bigger than the library itself had been playing a game of dominoes. Rats and bugs swarmed several of the tables where people had previously gathered, their leftover drink bottles and plates abandoned without care.

The girl led Ellyce down the stairs toward the basement, passing puddles of smelly liquid that could only be urine. Light from the window on the first floor shone through the darkened passageway as Ellyce walked slowly and carefully, making sure not to touch anything. This was not a place she

wanted to be, and she prayed that no one else was in the building. As they crept toward the back of the structure, the girl reached for Ellyce's hand and pulled her close, shushing her as they walked.

They arrived at their destination unscathed—the archives and genealogy room. Nothing more than a glass fishbowl in the middle of a larger room, the room had been left intact. Ellyce thought that even in a crisis, perhaps there was a general decency in people that made them want to preserve the past. But whatever the reason, Ellyce was grateful the room had been left unspoiled. Pulling her to the back of the area, the girl shoved her into a chair in front of the newspaper archive. She grunted and pointed to the stacks of newspapers, then walked across the room and stood guard by the door.

Ellyce didn't know what she was searching for, but it didn't take long before several articles on Sylvia Patterson surfaced. Formerly known as Sylvia Sawtelle, her fairytale romance and marriage to a prominent judge's son, Charles Patterson, were discussed in great detail.

The girl snapped her fingers at a mumbling Ellyce, demanding silence as the sound of something—*someone*—in the hallway coming toward them became more pronounced. She motioned for her to hide under the table, and then grabbed a chair from the microfiche table. Moving closer to the door, the girl held the chair close to her body, ready to strike. For the third time in two months, Ellyce found herself hiding, trying to control her racing thoughts and breathing, in an attempt to save her life.

“Shanan,” Al exclaimed, embracing the girl as the sound of a thrown chair reverberated off the glass walls. Hearing his voice, Ellyce crawled out from her hiding spot.

“So, she's with you?” Though she had never been more

excited to see someone familiar, even if he and the others were strange, she didn't mask her annoyance.

Al nodded happily. "Yes. Ellyce, this is Shanan. She's been sent to sharpen your skills."

"Well, she almost got me killed. So, there's that."

"I'm sure it was part of the training."

"Right, for the war that's coming," Ellyce said, turning on her heel. She marched towards the stack of papers.

"You need to understand what's at stake," Yarah said, joining them. Lamad followed closely behind. "We've cleared the path for now. They won't be able to see us."

"But we need to move, *now*," Lamad added, "Because the clearance won't last long."

Aleph grabbed her hand and pulled her up the stairs and through the library. Stepping over the tumbled stacks, they quickly made their way out of the building and through a series of yards until they reached her block. Outside her house, Ellyce froze. One of the men searching for her was in sight, but Yarah pushed her against the side wall, shielding her as Al opened her bedroom window. Once they had climbed through, Al locked the window and closed the blinds.

“Ellyce, do you know what Russian nesting dolls are?” Al asked. She nodded, following him down the hallway. “So, if I told you that those are a good representation of how a kingdom begins, would you understand what I was saying?” She shook her head.

“Well, it’s kinda like this,” Lamad said. “You’ve got the small one—the start of the family—and then they get bigger and bigger as the family morphs into a clan.”

“And then the clan becomes a tribe,” Yarah added, following behind them.

“And then a tribe becomes a nation,” Al finished, once

they were inside Thomas' room. "And only a nation can threaten a kingdom."

"And?" Ellyce said, staring blankly at them.

"And, part of your job in all of this is uniting the nations of the Realms. Which means that you, and what you stand for, are a threat to the kingdom the Vulpine are trying to build."

"There are two kingdoms?"

"No," Al said. "Only one. But the Vulpine are hopeful, which is why La'anah sent you away."

"La'anah?" Ellyce scoffed. "I don't give a crap about her, or—"

Al and Yarah stopped dead in their tracks. "But that's where you're wrong. You *must* care. Because some of the people in this world belong to the Kingdom you'll possess. Regardless of that, though, don't be mistaken. The Vulpine have the same goal as you."

"To find my dad?"

"To get to Thya. They want to be in that realm just as much as you do," Yarah said.

"But for very different reasons," Lamad added. "We've brought you back here because there's something you need to see. You need to understand why everything you do matters."

"You need to understand what's at stake," Al told her. "And what you're going to be fighting for."

"Why you'll *want* to fight," Lamad said.

"Since Benson's been detained, we'll need to go about things differently. It's going to be extreme, but it'll be for the best," Yarah told her, gently squeezing her arm for comfort. She turned her bracelet on, and they pushed through the closet, making their way into the room downstairs.

Shanan grunted, then mumbled something unintelligible, but the trio seemed to understand her perfectly well. "She

wants to make sure that you know you can't go straight to the Hub and tell them that Benson isn't coming." Al said, holding the banister while turning to talk to her. "If you do, Ishim and Malak will begin weeping." He shook his head, waving away the thought. "And that's just something nobody needs to see today—or any day."

Ellyce nodded her agreement, deciding that he was probably right. "Can I go back without Benson? Sophia said to bring him."

"She'll understand. And I'm sure she'll have an idea about how to handle this mess," Al said.

"Well, if he's so important, why aren't you guys with him instead of me?"

"Ellyce," Yarah scolded. "You're just gonna have to trust us."

Ellyce stopped before reaching the bottom of the stairs. "Yeah, see that's the thing, Yarah. If I recall correctly, my dad told me not to trust those I think I should. And I still don't know you guys," she said, refusing to move off the step. "Ever since the flare hit, and you showed up, I've been accused of blowing up a generator, I've wandered down creepy tunnels, been kidnapped—*twice*, and been lied to—I'm sure more times than I can count. So, I'm sorry, but I'm pretty short in the trust department right now."

"Well, Thomas certainly wasn't telling you not to trust us," Yarah huffed, crossing her arms at the thought. "Al, didn't you already tell her this?"

"Look, I'm not moving off this step until you can give me some sort of proof that you know my dad. And that you're not working for Patterson."

Yarah turned and stood on the step next to her, staring into her face. "Listen, little girl. I get it. You have some trust issues. But the fact is you were born into a war that you

didn't start. And that sucks. We understand; we get it. And we get that you have a choice, but we also know that you don't have all the pieces to this puzzle yet. And it's clear that until you have eyes to see, none of this is going to make any sense. So, go get your music box, and I'll show you the proof that you're looking for."

Ellyce stared her down, matching her gaze. "What music box?"

"Don't push me, Ellyce."

"Or what?"

Yarah took a deep breath. "Will you please go get your music box. The upright antique one with seven doors and placeholders for seven keys—that hopefully you haven't *lost*." Yarah punctuated the last word, clearly keen to Ellyce's imperfections. "There are seven vials for holding liquid, of which, you may have noticed, only four are filled. It's a very special, very unique liquid but I'm not going to discuss that with you right now. On the top, the doors are guarded by what you call a sphinx, but what's really a cherub. Those same doors are inlaid with golden honeybees, which I'm sure you've noticed, match the wallpaper in the room down here," she said, pointing to the opening at the bottom of the stairs. "And inside the box, when wound properly, the loveliest song in all the universe plays while the prince inside dances with his princess. Was that specific enough for you?" Yarah turned away from Ellyce and stepped into the room, waiting for her and the others to follow.

The smirk faded from Ellyce's face as she stepped off the bottom stair and followed Yarah into the room with the fake fireplace. Yarah had perfectly described the music box Ellyce received as a gift when she was four. The unmarked box had arrived on the front porch the day before she and Thomas left Illinois for their new life in California. She had suspected that

her dad had wanted to make the transition special, but Thomas had always maintained that he was just as surprised as she was about the gift. “It sounds lovely, and if such a thing existed, I’m sure it would be kept in a very protected place.”

“Great. Bring it here,” Yarah demanded as the other three watched the exchange, not daring to say a word.

Ellyce crossed her arms and bit the side of her cheek. “I can’t.”

“Oh, but you can, and you will.”

“No, really, I can’t, Yarah.” She looked at the floor. “I kept the box in my backpack, along with the books and Penelope.”

“And?” Yarah said, drawing out the word slowly.

“And,” Ellyce said, pointing to the empty shelf. “My backpack was at Benson’s house the last time I saw it. And the last thing I heard was Benson’s house is now a pile of burnt rubble.”

Shanan started grunting and pointing, Al raised his voice upward, Lamad shouted something and banged the table with his fists, and Yarah glowered at her, blinking in disbelief. Ellyce covered her ears and closed her eyes. The sound of their displeasure overwhelmed and frightened her in a way that she hadn’t felt since childhood.

Al was the first to calm down. When he spoke, it was with gentle, measured sentences. He pressed his hand down against his shirt, trying to keep the anger he felt from rising up. “Ellyce, it’s vitally important that particular music box and those books never get into the wrong hands.”

“Well, I think it’s safe to say that they won’t.”

Al inhaled, a deep, long breath, then pinched the bridge of his nose, murmuring something she didn’t understand, except the word *Dustling*. That word, she clearly understood. “She

doesn't get it," he mimed, turning to the others for support. "Was she dropped on her head as a child? Did Thomas really not explain any of this to her? I mean," he said with a huff, "I knew this assignment was gonna be difficult, but this is over the top."

Lamad waved him off and pulled up a chair, motioning for her to take a seat next to him. "Ellyce, we know this has been crazy, and your world's been turned upside down. But it's important that you understand what's at stake. Do you think you can try to help us? Maybe give us the benefit of a doubt?" Ellyce took the seat next to him but said nothing, waiting for Lamad to continue. "We don't have time to explain all the details to you right now. In many ways, it's a very complex story, but at the same time, it's very simple. And, I know that sounds like a contradiction. Which is why it's so important for you to get a glimpse."

Al's berating and mumbling grew louder as Lamad tried coaxing her into some sort of understanding. Lamad continued, "Because showing you that would be faster than trying to explain everything with words. The honest truth is the time is near. And I can understand your hesitation and your fear of everything that's happened and that will happen. So, I'm not gonna lie to you." He placed his hand over hers. "I suspect you have already gathered that we're not from this place?" He paused, waiting for her to fall over, scream, faint, or do whatever it was he thought a teenage girl would do, but she sat quietly, nodding, waiting for more. "Thomas told you that the supernatural realm was real. And that's true. He was right. And we," he said, gesturing to the group. "We've been sent here to protect you and help you because you didn't—," Lamad ran his hand over his head, trying to find the right word.

“Because you didn’t obey,” Al blurted out. “Because you didn’t do what you were supposed to do.”

Ellyce bolted upright, knocking the chair back. “What? You’re trying to say that all the crazy stuff that’s happening is my fault? You’re trying to blame me? The only thing I was supposed to do was find Derek, but the world went to hell. So, how is that my fault?”

“Ellyce,” Lamad said, trying to right her chair while getting her to sit back down.

“No!” Ellyce resisted, pulling away from him. “He’s so smart and seems like he knows everything. Why doesn’t he just tell me where Derek is, and then I’ll be on my way.”

Lamad glared at Al and continued coaxing her back into her seat. “Because it doesn’t work that way. And you’re right. This isn’t your fault. It’s clear that somewhere along the way, some wires got crossed and you didn’t get everything you needed to handle this situation. I know that now you’re just trying to play the hand you’ve been dealt. But the Howling is using that to his advantage. He doesn’t care about you. Or me. Or anyone else on this little blue planet. And what Al means to say,” he said through gritted teeth, “is that things are not going according to plan, so we need to change tactics. Switch gears, if you will.” Yarah whispered something into Lamad’s ear and he nodded his acceptance of whatever she had told him, and then disappeared through the fireplace door.

Ellyce sat down and crossed her arms, listening only because she felt she had no choice. “Okay?”

“You may have noticed that each of us has a medallion. Al’s is an ox—”

“Because he’s bull-headed.”

Lamad chuckled, shaking his head. “Sometimes. But no. It’s because his job is to show you associations. Oxen, when

they're yoked together, learn together. So, his job is to guide you to the people you need—those who can help you and to persuade you to avoid those who are not going to further your mission. Mine is a staff," he said, pulling out his staff pendant from under his shirt. "I'm here to instruct you. Like a shepherd, I'm here to guide you so you stay on the right track. Yarah has an arrow because she's continually pointing you in the direction you need to go. And Shanan has a knife because her job is help you hone your skills—to sharpen you, and make you ready for the attack."

Yarah swung the door open wide, carrying Ellyce's backpack, soiled from smoke and soot. She was followed closely by a boy with caramel skin and deep brown eyes.

"And this is Yasar," Lamad said, pointing to the newest member of the group. "He's your U-turn," he paused. "His job is to discipline." Concerned, Ellyce stared at the boy, wondering what that meant and how he was going to *discipline* her.

As Yarah placed the red backpack on the table and unzipped it, Ellyce's attention drifted away from the boy, to what she was doing. Pulling Penelope from the top of the bag, she set the crusty looking stuffed animal on the table where Ellyce quickly snatched her up by her raggedy leg. Sliding the worn creature across the table towards her lap, the bell hidden in Penelope's right hoof jingled as she disappeared from view. Yarah then pulled Thomas' books from the bag and stacked them on top of each other. At this, Ellyce breathed a sigh of relief, thankful that they had survived, completely intact.

"Be careful with that," Ellyce exclaimed, feeling compelled to make sure that Yarah knew the final treasure in the bag was not only fragile, but special, too. Yarah raised her brow at the request, and pulled the music box away from

Ellyce, holding it just slightly out of her reach.

Winding the crank on the bottom of it, Yarah set the box on the table in front of them, carefully pushed the cherub down, and then stepped back. They all waited, watching in silent captivation as the box came to life. A loud click opened the doors, revealing a tiny, handsome prince holding his princess as the music started their circular, perfectly timed waltz around the mirrored floor.

“This song is so beautiful, but I’ve never been able to find the name of it,” Ellyce said. “I can’t believe my backpack survived.”

“The song is called *The Love Song of the King*. And the pack survived because Benson put it in an old metal military case under his bed.” Yarah turned to the others, explaining, “Mrs. Patterson must have enchanted the wood around his bed frame, or taught him how to do it. The wood shielded the box, creating a cocoon of sorts.”

“The wood around Benson’s bed protected my music box?” Ellyce asked. “Against fire? How is that even possible?” Ellyce returned her attention to the box. “Do you know who sent this to me?”

“Well, that’s an easy one,” Al said confidently. “The Shopkeeper.”

Ellyce studied him. “As in the fictional character from my dad’s stories?”

“Ellyce, those aren’t fictional characters. Those stories aren’t make-believe. That’s what we’ve been trying to tell you all along. The books were written by the King. They represent an important legal document.”

Ellyce twisted her face. “Are you saying my dad is the King?”

Yarah laughed. “Oh, heavens no. Your dad merely transcribed the King’s books and contracts into what you see

today.” Yarah pointed to Thomas’ books. “He took the original words and translated and transformed them into stories so he could quickly and easily disseminate the information. The plan was somewhat genius, really. And the Vulpine weren’t any the wiser. Well, at least for a little while. But now they know what he did.”

“Oh-kay.” The disbelieving word crept out of Ellyce’s mouth without much effort.

“She’s telling you the truth,” Al shot back.

“Okay, Okay,” Ellyce said, trying to avoid another tantrum, but it was too late.

“Look! My. Entire. Existence—is dependent upon you doing what you’re supposed to do to find Derek. So, this is no time for your silly human emotions to be getting in the way.” He towered over her. “Which, by the way, all stems from the Howling’s betrayal.” Unable to control himself, Al squeezed her arms, pulling her up out of her chair and close to him as he led her to the fireplace. “Yasar, it’s time for you to step in.”

“You’re hurting me,” Ellyce cried, stumbling over her own feet, trying to pull away from him.

“She doesn’t believe us. We told her the enchantment would only work for a little while. She’s left us no choice.” Al pushed her towards the boy. “Yasar, you must show her.”

“Show me *wha—*” she started to ask, but the moment Yasar touched her shoulder, she was gone. No longer was she standing in her father’s creepy subterranean basement, she was someplace new—somewhere dark, and silent, and *unlike* anywhere she’d ever been.

Inside the dark room, Ellyce stood still, hoping to discover one of the crazy travelers in the room with her, but no one was there—not that she could see anyway. The room was so dark that she couldn't even see her own hand waving in front of her face. Ellyce closed her eyes and began to silently pray that she was alone, or, at the very least, that she wasn't with some crazed beast, lurking in the darkness, ready to pounce. She had clearly pushed Al to his breaking point. But then she reminded herself that the trio had been sent to protect her, so they wouldn't purposefully hurt her or put her harm's way—at least she hoped they wouldn't.

A low humming resonated up from the floor and through the room. She opened her eyes slowly, wondering if she could see anything. In the middle of the room, a flaming wisp flickered on, creating a warm glow that lit up the dark room. She was in some sort of a domed room, and she was, in fact, alone. The wisp sparked and shot up into the middle of the room, five feet from where she stood, then it jumped and danced across the room from right to left, until seven more flames hovered in the space around her.

“Move closer,” a booming voice commanded. Ellyce turned to find the source of the voice, but the sound flooded the room, echoing and bouncing off the walls with a stereophonic quality.

With the glowing light to guide her, she inched closer to the center of the room, noticing that the wisps were hovering over icy bases that seemed to be breathing. Ellyce gasped at the sight of them. She didn’t know how it was possible, but these icy lamps appeared to be alive.

With each breath they drew in, a thin vein of fire coursed its way through their icy bodies, creating a veiny patchwork of pathways that twisted down one side and then back up the opposite way. After several seconds following this course, the fire wormed its way back up to the top of the base toward the flame. When the flames sparked, they produced a frosty condensation that left the room in a foggy haze. These beings, fashioned from fire and ice, were amazing creatures. Both parts of their bodies worked in conjunction with the other, but neither the fire nor the ice extinguished the other.

“Hello,” another chorus of voices sang out. “How may we help you?”

“Hello,” she replied, hesitantly looking up toward the source of the voices. “What is this place? Where am I?”

Glowing red pinpoints of light and frenetic energy appeared overhead, growing in size until Ellyce could see each one clearly. They hovered next to the icy fire creatures, pulsating as they spoke. “In the Land of the Red Sleepers.” Ellyce inched closer, trying to see them better. Inside their small shells of hairy looking energy, light burned brightly, sparking outward toward her each time they spoke. “Welcome,” they sang in unison. “We are the stars of Sart. What news brings you to this land?”

“News?” she asked. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“No one comes to this realm unless they are sent. So, why were you sent?”

Ellyce wanted to touch them, but the electric, brightly colored zapping and snapping sound that emanated from them, along with the memory of the living map, made her think twice. She pointed to the icy flame beings. “What are these things called?”

“They are Ishim,” the stars told her.

Ellyce straightened up at the name, recalling Ishim’s red hair and blue pantsuit. “Like the people in the Hub?”

“Yes,” they said. “This is their purest form.”

“And what do they do, here?” she asked, wondering if they were any more useful than the two she had met earlier.

“They do nothing—” the stars blinked out. Ellyce tried stifling her laugh, though she thought their response was appropriate. “Except prove that opposites can exist in harmony within the Kingdom, if the desire is there.”

“The Kingdom,” the Ishim whispered aloud. “The Kingdom.”

“Well that’s something,” she said, hopeful. “Kind of like peace on Earth, and all that?”

“Not quite. Earth is different than the Kingdom.”

“Yeah,” she said, curtly, “well, it’s not working out so well there, either.”

“The Kingdom,” the Ishim whispered again, but louder.

“We’ve been told that it’s time for you to wake up. For you must strengthen what remains before it’s too late. What you are doing is incomplete. Turn. Remember what you’ve been told, and when you do—.”

“*Run*,” Ellyce whispered aloud. A rushing wind filled the room, and a winged creature sailed past her, gently brushing her cheek.

“Would you like to know the story?” they asked.

Ellyce touched her cheek, feeling the hot mark the winged thing had left on her face. Its dark outline cascaded over the fog, and she watched it wind its way up the curved wall toward the intricately designed glass ceiling. She watched in awe, waiting for the airborne creature to slow and dive back toward the ground, but it didn't. Taking aim, it tucked its wings in and spun upward, higher and faster, through the bullseye-shaped glass, etched into twelve perfect divisions. The sound of shattering glass sent her flying toward the icy flames. Ducking and throwing her hands over her head, she hoped these beings would somehow shield her from the glass shards that were sure to rain down. There was no other place to hide.

Their flames flickered out as the whoosh of the rushing wind whipped through the room and followed the winged creature out of the opening. Once again, she was submerged in darkness, waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, she raised her head slowly and watched the icy flames flicker back to life, one by one.

In the space just above her head, the glass shards floated, shining and glistening like the nighttime stars hovering in Earth's atmosphere. Ellyce stood and brushed herself off, noticing that grass had appeared, growing beneath her feet. The smell of fresh earth and dirt filled her senses. Above her head, rushing waters had stretched out across the ceiling, flowing in from all different directions, commingled together in a circular fashion before flowing out the hole left by the winged creature. A short distance from where she stood, trees sprang to life, and she had to jump backwards to avoid being struck by a growing tree branch. She jumped again as a river forged its way into the place she had been standing.

The water teemed with life. In the distance, a fox and lamb playfully wrestled through the new grassy meadow

and came to rest at the foot of another pinpoint of light that had risen out of the fresh dirt. This light swirled and danced around the room, gathering momentum as formed letters pushed by a whirlwind came together creating words and sentences which came together to form the figure of a man. Out of the first figure, another appeared. She stood before him and a castle of warm, mossy earth, willow trees, and flowering plants that had taken shape in the background behind them. Moments later, a single stray sentence whizzed past Ellyce's face before bounding into the shadows.

The couple—the characters from inside her music box, waltzed and swayed across the flora filled courtyard to music that was piped into the room from somewhere overhead that Ellyce couldn't pinpoint. Frogs croaked and crickets chirped, adding to the sweet, haunting lullaby that she instantly recognized as it whispered its tale through the trees.

The entire room was lost in the sweet intoxication of this enchanting world when *he* materialized. Emerging from out of the shadows, the servant appeared subtly, but in a flash of a moment, he grew brighter and more magnificent than anything else in the room. Ellyce's eyes were drawn to him, captivated by his charming aura. The servant rushed towards the dancing couple and crashed into them, sending the young prince spiraling out of control toward the edge of their world. With speed and agility, the handsome servant righted the princess to his chest, ingratiating himself into the dance, and picked up where she and her former beau had left off.

The beauty of this couple and their dance sent shockwaves throughout the land. Ellyce couldn't put her finger on exactly what it was, but there had certainly been a change. As she hummed along with a song she knew by heart, she realized that the melody was no longer hauntingly sweet. This

melody, the one that had overtaken the world, was simply *haunting*.

But the curly-haired servant didn't mind and even seemed to like it this way. He also seemed to like his new beauty, as well. Nestling his lips against the woman's neck, he seductively teased before moving in closer to kiss her lips. But before his lips could connect with the princess', a static charge filled the room and lightning cracked overhead. The woman backed away from him, shying slightly.

He looked upward at the shards of glass and smiled. Daring the sky to unleash its torrent on them, the sky obliged after releasing a single droplet that fell and struck him in the face. The curly-haired servant blinked back the surprise before moving toward the shelter of the trees in front of them. The water had burned into his skin, and as more droplets fell from the sky around him, he kept his head low. He grasped the woman in his arms and continued their dance, enticing her to fall back and embrace this new wonder of her world, while inviting her to trust him fully.

He kissed the gap between her collar bones, knowing that it would cost him dearly, but the euphoria of the moment made him careless. The sky, seeing them splayed out beneath it, revolted and unleashed its fury upon them.

The woman, filled with terror and wonder, squealed with anticipation and trepidation at what all this could mean as the servant clutched her close to his side, promising her shelter. The princess willingly allowed him to pull her under the canopy of the twisted Merorah tree—a poisonous tree coursing with bitterness and dysfunction.

"No," Ellyce whispered aloud, remembering what Thomas had written in his book. It was here, in this moment, that the princess had been betrayed. Only seconds before he pushed her against the tree's trunk, the princess had been

under the impression that the tree would bring about her death if she touched it. But with a simple push, Ellyce knew that this lively and experienced servant had planted a seed of doubt, which would cause her to question all that she had been told.

Huddled with him under the shelter of the poisoned tree, the woman's voice broke through Ellyce's silent memory. "What other experiences in this world have been forbidden for no good reason?" she asked the man as the two settled in, watching the drops of water pelt the world around them. He shrugged, and then after a while, she grew tired and hungry.

The servant smiled—a sly, slick grin, as he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her even closer, offering a cluster of berries for her to eat. She ate, and when she was full and had comfortably drifted off to sleep in his arms, the rain disappeared—and so did he, leaving behind a despondent prince, heartbroken over what she had done.

Not wanting her to suffer her fate alone, the young prince leaned against the tree and slid down beside her. Taking a handful of the sweet berries, he put them in his mouth, and drifted off to sleep next to her, waiting for what he knew was bound to come.

When they woke, they had been changed, and so had their world. No longer a world of bright, beautiful colors, the landscape before them was washed with a sad, institutional gray. At the edge of where their moss-covered castle stood, vines and thorny briars grew, and flaming winged sphinxes flanked the entrance. The new world before them was stark and craggy, just like them. As they tried to cross the threshold to the castle, an earthquake shook the ground, sending a large chasm to divide the space between them and Ellyce, and between them and their castle.

Ellyce steadied herself, bracing against one of the icy

bases, watching with a deep sadness as they continued, trying time after time to return to their former home. Each time they tried, they were met with the impossibility of it. After what seemed to be the four-hundredth unsuccessful attempt, the young prince grabbed his wife's hand and pulled her toward the place of the rising sun, marching her away from their grand estate and from the only life they'd ever known.

Trekking slowly across dry, barren land, they surveyed each dusty step with a mixture of admiration and contempt until they arrived at a new location—the land of their new home. Paling in comparison to what they had before, the two were resigned—knowing nothing could be done about it at this time. The woman held her breath, trying to shield her husband from the look of disgust and anguish that covered her face. In a low, pathetic whisper, she asked him, “What do we do now?”

His answer curt, and almost uncaring, revealed the scars of her betrayal. “We carry on. Until we're able to go back.”

“But the King will not let us return now,” she said, stifling a sniff.

“Then we wait until the return is provided,” he snapped, trying to keep every bit of anger raging inside of him from spilling out. His face, worn and dirty, did not look like his own. Once he had been a good and noble man, but now he just looked worn-out and tired.

“In this place,” she scoffed. “But I don't like it.”

He glared at her, indignant, before walking away in a huff. “Then you should have thought about that *before*—”

She winced from the guilt of his unfinished sentence, knowing the pain she had caused him ran deep. Standing opposite of where Ellyce stood, hot, salty tears flowed down her cheeks. Ellyce felt a deep ache inside her heart for this couple that she couldn't explain. But standing across the

invisible divide from her, Ellyce marveled at their uncanny likeness. She smiled when the prince returned, wrapping his arms around the woman.

“I don’t want to fight with you,” he whispered, turning his wife to face him. Pulling her close, he caressed her.

Ellyce could see the wish of freedom from the pain of their actions on his face. But she knew this was not the wife’s fault. She had been duped, but he had not. He willfully ate—not to be disobedient, but because he didn’t want her to suffer her fate alone. But his reasoning didn’t matter. In that one single act of disobedience against the King, he had become an offender, and he was the one who had caused them to lose their titles, their inheritance, and their crowns.

And even though his disobedience had allowed dysfunction to enter the world, his father—the King, had mercifully promised them a new beginning, and a new crown. But they would just have to wait.

“We need to accept the assurance.” He kissed his wife’s forehead. “The line will continue, and the one will come who will undo all that has been done to us.”

“But what about the servant? You know he will never stop—” she started, but her husband shut her up with a kiss.

“The House will survive. And one day, all the wrongs will be righted.”

“But I did this to us—to *you*.”

“You heard what my father said: Out of many will come the one for whom the storms will come. One storm to atone for all that has been done, and the other storm to purify. A new prince will arise.” He gently lifted her chin with his index finger until their eyes met. “You must believe me. Believe the King.”

She sighed and drew in a little snuffle, resting her head on his chest. As she surveyed the land before her, she nodded,

accepting the promise that he had made to her, and the promise she had made to herself. She stepped away from him and stood up straight. “This place,” she told her husband, “is not our home. But this place will not be the end of us, and *he*—our enemy—will not be the end of me. I may be a princess, but I am also a warrior. And I will live to fight another day. If your father—the King, desires for us to prosper here, then I will build a life here—with you, and with our family. It will be a sanctuary from this harsh, unforgiving world. This place will be a cave of treasures, filled with memories and resources to help the one to come.” She drew up her husband’s satchel into her hands and pulled out two bars of gold and several stones that looked like yellow pieces of rock candy. She smiled as if she knew Ellyce was watching. “And one day,” she added, “this insignificant dwelling will provide the answers for the one who needs it.”

More pinpoints of light-filled words danced around the land beside them, slowly morphing into a small group of people. In the space of seconds, the man disappeared, and the woman grew older and more fragile. “Because one day the love song will never end,” she said, pulling a delicate bottle of perfume from her husband’s bag. She carefully opened it, and an intoxicating scent filled the air around them, making Ellyce feel dizzy. Orange peel and cassia leaves—this was the same scent she had smelled the night of the flare, and in the Hub when the lightning crashed. This was the smell of the gray-eyed man. As the woman lay dying, surrounded by her family, she dabbed the perfume on each wrist and then broke the invisible barrier, handing the bottle to Ellyce.

Ellyce wiped the tears from her face and reached out to take the bottle. As she grabbed hold of it, a deep, penetrating howl rang out across the sky. One by one, the glass shards hanging over her head crashed down around her, springing

into monstrous giants that towered over her and the inhabitants of this land. With these creatures, the curly-headed servant had switched tactics. If he couldn't beat the young couple by seducing the wife, he'd muddy the waters of their family line. As the years progressed, he sowed seeds of discord and confusion, while unleashing the giants—the renowned stars of old—upon the land. These stars morphed and changed as he had, and when those who had not known the young couple's tale grew older, these newly minted beings formed relationships with the King's descendants and knew them in ways that until that time had previously been unknown.

In the fog of chaos that stretched out before them, the servant laughed, thinking he had done it—he had infused into the kingdom his will, his way—his offspring, and there would be no way for any of them to know which kingdom they originally belonged to. Out of the fog of confusion, a woman arose and appeared before them. Tall and slender, her long dark hair gently bounced against her arms as she licked her lips and made her way through the crowds of people towards Ellyce.

A tight knot formed in the pit of Ellyce's stomach as she clutched the perfume bottle in her hands. The princess had broken the barrier when she handed Ellyce the bottle, and Ellyce had no idea if this woman could cross the chasm as well. She backed away slowly, struck with terror of the woman who, as she sauntered through the crowds, turned anyone standing in her way into dust particles that floated to the ground in her wake.

At the edge of the chasm, the woman stood, taking her place next to the servant. As the fog lifted, his eyes twinkled and sparkled in the soft glow of the flaming wisps' light. Locking his arm around the woman's waist, he yanked her

close—an apparent sign of ownership—and licked the side of her cheek with his tongue. For the briefest moment, Ellyce had believed that her mother had been an unwilling pawn in this man's game. But when a smile broke across Vanessa's face, Ellyce knew that she had been a willing participant.

Clutching the perfume bottle tightly, Ellyce stepped back, feeling sick at the thought of her mother and the servant together. Her curly hair sprang forward from behind her ear and she tucked it back, wondering what this meant for her. Was she one of them? Did she belong in the servant's line? Certainly, she wasn't part of the enemy's kingdom. But what if she was?

The room began to spin and she felt dizzy, thinking she might faint. And then she saw him—the gray-eyed man from her father's closet. Standing behind the servant and Vanessa with his index finger to his lips, the man shushed her once more just as he had done previously. And then before Ellyce or anyone else knew what was happening, the gray-eyed man broke through the invisible barrier and touched her on the hand.

The chair that Ellyce landed in buckled underneath her. Wobbling backwards on two legs, she clutched the table and waited for the room to stop spinning.

“Welcome back,” Yarah said, pulling up a chair beside her.

“What. Was. *That*?”

“Informative, don’t you think?”

“I don’t even know where to begin,” Ellyce said, trying to categorize the rush of thoughts that filled her mind. “Am I one of them?”

“One of who?” Lamad asked.

“Do I belong to the curly-headed servant?”

“He was there?” Al inquired, taking the seat opposite of Yarah. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. And so was my mother. So, again, I ask you: am I one of them? Am I one of the bad guys?”

“Ellyce,” Yarah said, opening up Thomas’ books. “You were only meant to get a glimpse into the realms. To show you that they are real.” She hesitated and looked around the room at the others. “I don’t know why he was there.”

“The wisps said they wanted to tell me a story.”

“The wisps?” Lamad asked.

“Yeah, the Ishim.”

“But we sent you to Sart,” Lamad said, casting a curious glance to Yasar.

“Well, the Ishim were there, along with this winged creature, and these balls of red fire, and stars that turned into giants. So maybe he got his wires crossed? But there was something else about that place. Something I can’t explain.” She looked at them for answers.

“Everyone has been given a choice,” Lamad said. “And now that you’ve seen the other side, what you choose to do with that knowledge is up to you. Mrs. Patterson presented Benson with the choice a long time ago, and she was preparing to do the same with you, but Thomas thought it would be best if he was the one to explain it to you. As your father, he could do that. So, he accepted the King’s offer on your behalf, and then he spent the last thirteen years transcribing the King’s contracts into books for *you*.”

“But I thought the books were for the world’s reading pleasure? Now you’re saying they’re for me?”

“Should you choose to accept the offer and agree to the terms of the contract, then the books *are* for you,” Lamad said. “And for the remnant, too. Once a person accepts the King’s offer, they become part of the remnant.”

“So, I’m accepting to read the books? That’s it?”

Yarah put her hand on Ellyce’s hand and shook her head. “No. You’re agreeing to accept a marriage proposal.”

“A what?” she asked, leaning in close.

“A marriage proposal.”

“And who would I be marrying?” She stood up and began pacing around the room. “*Who* did Benson agree to marry?” She didn’t stop long enough to let them answer.

“Great. So, my mom leaves me when I’m a kid to join forces with the dark side, and my dad agrees to marry me off in some sort of arranged marriage thing. That’s just awesome.”

“No,” Al said. “Vanessa chose the dark side long before you came along, but your m—”

“Al, not now,” Yarah scolded, shaking her head. “It’s too much. Can’t you see that?” She motioned to Ellyce’s fragile demeanor.

Al sat down and folded his hands on the table and sighed. “Listen, Ellyce, in every generation, descendants of the Kingdom are presented with the opportunity to choose whether or not they will continue the King’s line. The marriage is not to the King himself, but to one he appoints. You can choose to walk away from this, but right now, in this moment—in this room, this is *your* opportunity.”

“And what if I don’t agree? What if I say I’m good? That I don’t want to be married off to somebody I don’t know?”

Yarah smirked at her. “You Dustlings throw that word around and have no idea what it really means. *Good* isn’t some arbitrary thing based on your feelings. Good denotes function, and when something functions the way it was designed to function, then, and only then, is it considered good.”

“Sorry,” Ellyce told her. “I didn’t realize you were such a stickler for the etymology of the words.”

“Language is the bedrock of any civilization,” Lamad instructed. “When the meanings of words change and language breaks down, so does society. Look at any of your history books—they all tell the same story. A nation’s rise to greatness and its crashing destructive fall all occurs around language. When language becomes corrupt, the decline begins.”

“Do you remember what we told you about a nation?” Al asked.

“Yes, I remember. Only a *nation* can threaten a *kingdom*,” Ellyce said sarcastically. “But I didn’t realize there was going to be a quiz.”

“You have a job to do,” Al said, unamused.

“But why me? What makes me so special?”

“The King is the only one who knows those secrets,” Yarah said. “And as far as I can tell, he doesn’t feel the need to share that knowledge with the likes of us. Ellyce, the time is now. It’s time to decide. After seeing the realms and the opposing sides of the war, what’s your decision? Which side will you choose? The King? Or the curly-haired servant?”

“So, that’s it? I just pick a side, and it’s done? And then what?”

“Well, then you get the team jersey, and a better understanding of what your focus should be,” Lamad said.

“And how to accomplish your mission,” Al piped in. “Which is the same thing it’s always been. Find Derek and unite the realms.”

“So, are there any perks?”

“Yeah, you get some new gear, and access to some training so you can fight better,” Lamad added, with a wink.

“Great. It sounds swell. Sign me up,” she said with a sarcastic smile, leaning against the desk. She glanced over at the paper with her dad’s handwriting on it and thought about what he wanted her to do. “My dad wanted me to do this, didn’t he?”

Yarah nodded. “Whether you know it or not, Thomas spent his life trying to protect you. *And* to prepare you for this moment. But like we said, the choice is yours.” Yarah took the cup that Al presented to her. “Ellyce, do you accept the offer that’s been presented to you?” She held the cup out in

front of Ellyce, but she refused to release it from her grip. “Or do you want to walk away right now and forget this place, and everything you’ve seen so far?”

“And then what? What happens if I walk away?” She blew out a heavy laugh.

“Then you go on living your life with the others around here—fighting for your existence in a post-flare world—that *will* end one day.”

“While everyone around me dies?”

“Everyone dies, Ellyce. It’s part of living,” Yarah said. “But just know this, whatever choice you make, it’s not going to be easy.”

Ellyce snorted. “‘Cause it’s been a walk in the park so far.”

Yarah’s eyes bunched together. “This is serious. You’re making a decision that will not only change your life, but the lives of others around you. You will no longer just be a girl from California, but an heir to the House of Accord, and a warrior.”

“There is a real battle going on out there,” Lamad told her, “like nothing you have seen before. And the moment you drink from the cup and accept the offer, the Howling will know. Your enemy is ruthless and quick, and there will be nothing to stop him from coming for you.”

Ellyce pulled the cup out of Yarah’s hands and held it close to her lips. “I got a glimpse of something in that room, and I don’t understand it completely, but I will *not* be like Vanessa.” She gulped the elixir in one swig and set the cup on the table, proud of her accomplishment. “I will find my dad and Derek, and Benson and I will figure out the rest as we go.”

“Just one more thing,” Yarah said, smiling. She pulled the unintelligible document off the desk that Ellyce had tried to

read the night of the flare. “This document is from the region of Eber—the land of the ones who have crossed over. It follows the lives of those who are part of the Kingdom—the Land of Finish, and it stays with you for life.”

“Okay,” she said, hesitantly. “But I can’t read it.”

“You couldn’t read it *before*,” Yarah said, slipping the arrow bracelet from her arm. She leaned in and pierced Ellyce’s index finger, taking her by surprise.

“Ow,” she yelled, pulling her hand from Yarah’s grip. She pushed her thumb against her index finger instinctively to stop the bleeding, but Yarah grabbed her hand and pushed a single bead of blood out of her finger.

The blood floated over the paper, stretching and thinning in mid-air before splashing onto the document below. Ellyce blinked wildly, trying to wrap her mind around what was going on as the ink on the page mingled with the blood. Shifting and rearranging itself on the paper, the mixture of ink and blood converted the words that had once been gibberish into a legible document.

The document, a certificate of inheritance, stated that Thomas Jensen, an heir of the House of Accord, in accordance with the laws and statutes set forth with, and so on and so forth, by signing the document below, agreed to the King’s offer, and if Ellyce Riley Jensen accepted the cup of inheritance, then she also would become a rightful heir of the House of Accord. The creation of the document had been witnessed by James MacAlvoy Monroe, esteemed and distinguished descendent of the House of Honor.

“You are now an official member of the House of Accord,” Al said, smiling. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder, leading her to the fireplace. “The Kingdom will return. You and Benson will fight to reunite the realms, and

the rightful heirs will take their place. I think this has been a very productive time, don't you agree?"

Ellyce nodded, following them inside, feeling proud of her decision. She smiled back at Yarah, who was rolling up the certificate as she followed behind. "How do we get to the first realm? What do we do now?"

"We go and get your cousin," Al said.

Ellyce stopped dead in her tracks. "Wait, what? What do you mean, *get my cousin*?"

Al looked oddly at Yarah, who stepped up and unrolled the document for Ellyce to read, pointing to the name Monroe. "James MacAlvoy Monroe—that's Bailey and Benson's father. There are two lines of the Kingdom—the House of Accord, and the House of Honor. What did you think you were reuniting?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought about it."

"Well, you are an Accord kid, and Benson and Bailey are Honor kids—which makes you cousins."

A sour feeling welled up in Ellyce's stomach, and she swallowed hard. "But I dated Benson. I kissed him," she said as the color drained from her face. "That's illegal in all but two states, I think. Did my dad know about this?"

"Benson's not your brother. He's a distant cousin. And it's perfectly fine," Al said.

"But," she said, refusing to be led any further. "Does Benson know about this?"

"Benson has always known who he is," Al said. "Why do you ask?"

"And Benson knows about me?"

"As far as we know. But he didn't know what your choice would be. I'm sure he hoped you would accept."

"So, you're telling me he knows we're supposed to work

together to unite the realms—bring the two halves of the line together, right?”

“Yes,” Al said, getting annoyed. “Why are you asking?”

“Because if that’s our sole purpose for living, and Benson has known about this all this time, then why break things off with me and start dating Sydney Parker? Wouldn’t he chance ruining everything? Does that sound like it makes any sort of sense? I mean, unless he thought *this day wasn’t coming*—that I wasn’t going to accept.”

The trio frowned and looked over at Yasar and Shanan, who silently shook their heads. “The Howling must have gotten to him. Or there’s something going on that we don’t understand,” Yarah said. “Which is not good for anyone.” She quickly walked to one of the doors marked NSS652 and opened it. “If the Vulpine have infiltrated that line, then things are going to become much more complicated.”

“So, what do we do?” Ellyce asked, rubbing her temples.

“You have to get back to the Patterson estate and get him out of there. Get him away from that house and those people. You can’t trust anyone.”

“Not even Jessica?”

Yarah shook her head. “I’m afraid not.” Ellyce started to protest. “At least not until we know more.”

“But what about finding my dad and Derek?”

“If Benson has been compromised in any sort of way, then your mission has changed. Finding your dad will have to wait.”

“Well, I can’t just stroll back in there like nothing happened,” she said, following all five of them through the door, which brought them back to the genealogy room at the library. “How?” Ellyce asked, turning around. “Do the doors work both ways?”

“In some situations, yes,” Al said. He touched the book-

case in the room and swallowed hard. “We have to go. But you’re not going to have any trouble getting back to the Patterson house.” He quickly pushed the others back through the door. “We can’t go out the front door right now.”

She glared at him in protest. “What am I supposed to do? You said, Vegas, Al. Vegas.”

“Look, I know I told you that I was going to be with you always, and the truth is, I am. But it’s going to feel like you’re on your own for a little while. So, I need you to remember everything we talked about, and when the time comes and you remember—”

“I know, *run*,” she said, finishing his sentence. “Why does everyone keep telling me that?”

Al smiled at her. “You’re going to be okay. Just wait here for now.”

When they had gone back the way they came, Ellyce resumed looking through the newspapers, trying to find anything that would help her prepare for the task at hand. As she looked through the town news, little phrases and words stuck out and she realized that nothing in this room, or in this town, or her life before this moment, had ever been just a random coincidence.

Ellyce decided to wait until it was a little darker outside so she could sneak back to the Patterson estate hidden in the darkness of the shadows. To kill time, she perused articles related to the Santa Ana winds—the *Devil Winds*, as the townspeople called them, a couple of missing persons reports, and a decent number of genealogy documents, trying to arm herself with as much knowledge about the Patterson family as she could get. She held up the last article in the stack, trying to read it all before the day’s light faded.

Under a large quarter-page advertisement for *Ali Bean Cosmetics*—branded as the cosmetics brand of the future, she found the story. “The family car was found empty and still running, two blocks from their home,” she read aloud to herself. “*The couple’s only son, Shawn, age 17, told investigators that he had seen his mother speaking with an unknown man just the week before. Shawn told investigators that he believed his mother may have willingly run off with the man.*” Ellyce dropped the paper in disbelief. “She was having an affair?” She shook her head and flipped to the back page of the paper where the story continued. “*Shawn—*”

“—described the man as having brown, curly-hair and deep blue eyes.”

Ellyce dropped the paper, startled by Shawn’s appearance in the doorway. He leaned against the door frame and crossed his arms. “Not that it did much good. Nobody believed me.”

“You scared me,” she said, sorting and straightening the stack of newspapers in front of her. “What are you doing here?”

“We’ve been looking for you all day. This was the last place I decided to check before heading home. I heard noises down here, and as I got closer, I heard you talking.”

“Oh,” Ellyce said, anxiously. “Well, I guess I’m glad it was you who found me and not someone else.”

“Yeah. You should really be more careful, Ellyce. You never know who’s lurking around these days.” He pushed himself off the door frame and waited for her to make her way over to him. “It’s getting late. And we probably shouldn’t be out after dark.” He smiled at her, and his eyes caught the last of the day’s light, sparkling ever so slightly. He turned and studied her. “Have we done something to offend you, Ellyce?”

“No, not at all,” she said, shaking her head as she followed him out of the room. “It’s just—”

“La’annah told you some stupid story?”

“No,” she said, quickly, then smiled a little and agreed.

“Well, my cousin needs to mind her own business. It wasn’t her place to interfere. The Monroes have been worried about you all day.”

“Well, there was probably at least one Monroe who was worried about me today,” she said, and then tripped over her own feet. A hot flush washed over her as she picked herself up.

Shawn held his hand out to her. As she took it, a warm,

comfortable tingling buzzed between them. Climbing the stairs two-by-two, he pulled Ellyce along with him, out of the library to where the club cart was waiting. Once he was outside the building, he freed himself from her grip and took a deep breath of night air, letting it settle into his lungs. “All right, Ellyce Jensen. Let’s get you back where you belong.”

She climbed into the cart and settled in next to him, allowing him to tuck a warm blanket over her legs. As they drove back to his house, she listened intently as he told her the story of what he believed happened to his mother. And how that day had changed not only his father, but himself, as well. Though she had never thought of Shawn in any sort of romantic way before now, as she sat next to him in this slow-moving cart, she couldn’t help but notice how he was the only one who cared enough to come find her.



ELLYCE STOOD in the doorway staring at Benson and Sydney for a good minute before Shawn cleared his throat, nudging past her into the living room. “Look what the cat dragged in,” he said, taking a seat on the couch across from them.

Sydney was lazily stretched out across Benson’s lap, and as they turned to see what Shawn was talking about, the playful smile fell from her face. “Ellyce, where have you been all day?” Benson asked, barely moving but adjusting Sydney’s legs on his lap. “Mom, Dad!” he yelled. “Ellyce is back.”

Jim and Jessica padded their way down the hall, and Ellyce inched her way inside, sitting on the corner of the couch opposite from Shawn. Thanks to their quiet nighttime drive, she felt closer to him than she had to anyone else since this whole disaster started. But given La’anah’s speech this

morning, she didn't want to be found sitting too close to him and have Bailey assume something that wasn't true.

"Ellyce," Jim called out as he and Jessica entered the room, "where have you been? We've been worried about you."

The look on Jessica's face said *lie*, but Ellyce didn't know why. "I thought I would check my house for signs of life," she said, complying with Jessica's unspoken request as Ellen Parker and Mr. Patterson joined the party. With the usual drink in her hand, Ellen sauntered in and took her place next to Benson and Sydney, while Mr. Patterson sat in the armchair beside Ellyce. His limping was more pronounced than it had been when she had last seen him yesterday evening. Ellyce wondered what could have happened to him within the span of 24 hours. But when she stopped to think about it, she realized a lot could happen in that span of time—she was living proof of that.

"Mr. Patterson's had people out looking for you all day," Sydney spat out. "And everyone's been worried sick."

"Yeah, I can tell," she mumbled under her breath. She turned to Mr. Patterson. "Are you okay?"

He settled into the chair, waving off her concerns. "This is nothing more than an overzealous old man attempting to regain a bit of his youth." He laughed at himself. "I thought I would be a hero today while I was out looking for you." He gave his chair a little rock back and forth, inching it closer to her. "Seems that doors aren't as easy to kick in as they make it seem on television." He stopped moving the chair and looked over at her. "But the real question is, where have you been, my dear?"

"She already said where she was," Sydney impatiently said, rolling her eyes as she pressed her long and lean body close against Benson.

Ellyce tried to ignore them. She knew it was wrong, but she allowed her thoughts to drift to Shawn. He had been so open and kind to her. She'd never really thought of him as anything other than Bailey's boyfriend, but he really was more than that. He was a sweet guy who understood her in a way that Benson clearly never could. Shawn knew and understood what it felt like to have a parent disappear—to have a parent abandon you. A part of her even understood Mr. Patterson better. And while she didn't agree with his methods, she at least understood his compulsion to find his wife—and his son's mother—a little better. "I know it was stupid, but I just wanted to see if my dad had turned up."

"We had the Sheriff leave him a note," Jim said. "Don't you think he would have come straight here if he made it back home?"

Ellyce looked down. "Yeah, you're right. I know it was foolish. I was just—"

"Homesick," Jessica said, moving across the room. She sat next to Ellyce on the couch and rubbed her arm for support. "You were homesick, honey. And I'm so sorry."

Ellyce glanced up, agreed quickly. "I *was* homesick. And I wanted to curl up and pretend that everything was normal, but—," she said, knowing that if Jessica wanted her to lie, she'd need to carefully craft her story. "But, my house has been destroyed, so I went to the library. It was the next best thing. The library was as close as I could get to feeling him around me, given the circumstances."

"So, you've spent the whole day hanging out in the library?" Sydney asked, twirling her hair in her fingers. "Oh my gosh, what a waste. Seriously, Benson, what did you even see in her?"

Shawn jumped off the couch. "Don't be so dismissive, Syd. Not everyone believes intelligence is overrated." He

walked across the room and poured water into a glass before turning to hand it to Ellyce. “Knowledge is sexy, Ellyce. Don’t ever forget that.”

Ellyce took the glass, trying to conceal her happiness as La’anah, Lily, and Rupert slowly wandered down the hallway toward them, followed by Bailey, who had her nose in a book. She glanced up at Ellyce and smiled. “Oh, good. You’re back.” She pecked Shawn on the cheek before taking his place on the couch next to her mom. “We were all worried about you today.”

Ellyce whispered “Thank you,” and then caught a better glimpse of the book in Bailey’s hand. “That’s my dad’s book.”

Bailey’s face beamed. “Yeah. I found a copy lying around the house today. It’s so good, I can hardly put it down.” She set the book in her lap, her index finger marking her place. “This doesn’t feel like fiction at all. And he talks about the tunnels and these worlds that exist inside of them. It’s almost like he knew this was going to happen. Is that why Mr. Patterson recruited you to help him? Do you have some insider secret we should all know about?”

Jessica instinctively rubbed Ellyce’s arm, quietly signaling for her to lie again. But Ellyce didn’t need to be reminded; she had no intention of letting them know the truth. “I haven’t read those books since I was little. That first one frightened me, and I just couldn’t get into them.” She shifted slightly on the couch and put her hand to her forehead, not wanting to answer any more questions about Thomas, or the tunnels, or anything else that she had seen. She wasn’t sure who she could trust. Everyone in this room had an agenda, she reminded herself. “Is it hot in here?”

Jessica lifted her hand to Ellyce’s forehead. “Oh, goodness. You feel clammy and warm. I hope you’re not catching

something.” Jessica rose, reaching for Ellyce’s arm to lift her from the couch. “We should probably get you off to bed.”

“Oh, here we go again,” Ellen Parker said, downing her drink. “Has anyone else noticed whenever this girl’s around, the drama starts? I mean, really. Am I the only one?”

“I’m sure she’s fine, Mother. Just leave her alone,” Benson protested. “You’re always thinking somebody needs to be rescued. We’re all fine. And Ellen’s right, stop with the drama.”

The smile faded from Jessica’s face and Ellyce flushed, feeling the hot rash of embarrassment climb her neck. She’d never seen Benson be so mean, and he had never spoken to his mother that way before—so cold and flat. He had been rude to his dad, but it was just the kind of thing that happened when a boy was learning to be a man and spread his wings.

Benson and his mom had this weird bond that most girls would consider odd had it not been for Jessica’s ability to put you immediately at ease—as if she wanted to protect everyone within his circle of influence. There was something definitely not right with him, but Ellyce didn’t have the strength to figure it out tonight. “You’re probably right, Jessica. Either way, I’m sure a good night’s sleep will help.”

“Let’s get you into bed,” Jessica said, wrapping her arm around Ellyce’s waist. Shawn tried helping, but Jessica thanked him for being sweet and insisted that she had it under control. As the two women made their way up the stairs and out of sight of the others, Jessica whispered into her ear, “When we get to the room, tell me what happened.”

Ellyce clutched Jessica’s arm and stopped in the hallway. “I will, but there’s something you need to know. It involves Benson.”

Patting her hand, Jessica urged her on. “It’s all right, I already know about Benson.” Jessica continued guiding her

down the hall into the bedroom. “Things in this house are not as they seem.”

“He’s going to be fine, though,” Ellyce assured her. “I know it.” Drawing back the covers and the top sheet, Ellyce climbed into bed and waited for Jessica to close the door.

“Benson’s not my only concern, Elle. There’s something else—”

In the doorway, Benson cleared his throat and startled them. “Mind if I come in?” He didn’t wait for an answer. Crossing the room quickly, he perched on Ellyce’s bed before Jessica had time to disagree. “I’ve got her,” he told his mother and smiled widely. “You can go now.”

Jessica swiped the bedspread and smiled as she stood up. At the door, she cast a hesitant glance over her shoulder at Ellyce. “I won’t be far, Elle. And I’ll check on you soon.” Ellyce didn’t know whether she was saying it as a promise or a threat.

Ellyce was back in this house to get Benson and to take him back with her to the tunnels. But she didn’t like this. There was something different about him. Something unfriendly and hard and very un-Benson-like that left her with an unsettled, creepy feeling.

“I was worried about you,” he said, resting his hand on her covered knee.

The blanket resting over her knee blocked any sensation between them, leaving her emotionless and unsympathetic toward him. “I’m sure Sydney was helping you cope.”

Benson turned and looked her directly in the eyes. “You don’t understand what’s going on. You captured one moment in time. But you don’t know the whole story.”

“I’m pretty sure I do.”

“Then you understand why I’m doing what I’m doing.”

“I think you think you have a reason for it. But why be mean to your mom? She’s never done anything to you.”

“My mom has had a serious case of paranoia since we’ve been here.”

Ellyce stared at him in disbelief, then closed her eyes, trying to slow the waves of sickness peaking in her stomach. She held her breath. Why was she feeling this way? She had been perfectly fine two minutes ago. She rubbed her burning, aching hand and tried to settle in against the pillows. “Benson, can we talk about this later? I don’t feel so well right now.”

He took his hand from her knee and slowly slid off the bed. “It’s not what you think it is, Ellyce,” he said, lingering at the foot of her bed. “If I could tell you, I would. But I can’t.”

She closed her eyes and managed her breathing, waiting for him to leave. “It’s okay, Benson. Just go.” When she heard the door latch shut, she opened her eyes, flipped the blanket off, and held her burning, aching hand up in front of her face. Across the palm of her hand, a blood-stained holographic flame danced, originating from her index finger at the place where Yarah had stabbed her earlier. She cautiously waved her fingers through the flames, but they didn’t burn. Nor did the flames burn the bed, or the pillows, or anything else around her.

The fire’s light was clearly visible on the outside, but only damaging her on the inside? Why was this happening? What was the point of this wild, fiery display? Ellyce wanted to scream, to writhe in pain, but she couldn’t. With any one of them right outside her door, and La’anah and Lily right on the other side of the bathroom, if she made any noise they’d rush in. How would she explain what was happening?

Ellyce clinched the sheets with her non-burning hand and

focused on her breathing, drawing in deep breaths as she counted to ten. When that didn't work, she resorted to humming the song from her music box. She was an important part of this plan. So, whatever this was, it wasn't going to hurt her—at least not permanently. Ellyce watched the fires dance around her palm and did the only thing she knew to do at that moment: she willed herself to fall asleep.

She awoke to find Shawn resting in the plush, oversized Bergère chair beside her bed. His arms were crossed in front of his chest, and his feet were perched on top of her bed, but his head was tilted to the right in a position that looked less than comfortable. While she couldn't stop the feelings bubbling up inside her, she knew that if she didn't wake him from his cute and protective position next to her bed, he would be hurting when he finally did wake.

He slowly opened one eye and then another before stretching. "Do you feel better?" he asked.

She leaned back against the padded blue headboard and rubbed her palm. The fire was extinguished, but the tenderness of where the hot flames had pushed through her flesh was still there. "I think so, yes. Why are you here?" she asked cautiously.

"You were screaming in your sleep, so I stopped in to check on you. Everyone else had already gone to bed," he said. "But I assure you it was perfectly respectable. I left the door open."

Ellyce pulled the blankets up further against her chin and smiled. "Thank you. I appreciate you sitting with me, but I don't remember anything."

"Well," he said, getting up and pushing the chair back into place. "that's because there's nothing to remember. You were screaming and flailing, and I sat with you until you

quieted. And then I guess I fell asleep myself. It's not a big deal."

She rubbed her palm, worried that he had seen the fire in her hand. "Well, I should probably get up and see what the day has in store for me."

"Right," he said, picking himself up. He lingered for a moment taking in the sight of her before making his way to the door.

"Oh, Shawn," Jessica said from the hall abruptly, trying not to sound surprised. "What—what are you doing in Ellyce's room?"

"I had a nightmare," Ellyce said, innocently. "And he came into check on me and I guess he fell asleep in the chair." She purposefully turned from Jessica's curious gaze. "It was really sweet of you. Thank you, Shawn."

"Yeah. Not a big deal," he said assuredly, sliding past Jessica. "I better go find Bailey and get her ready to hit the tunnels again."

Jessica closed the door behind him and then threw Ellyce's jeans on the bed. "Get dressed," she said, loudly and for effect. "It's a lovely day to go for a walk."



JESSICA LOCKED her right arm through Ellyce's left, holding her close as they strolled through the gardens at the bottom of the hill, away from the house and the listening ears that seemed to find their way into conversations that didn't pertain to them. "I'm not acting weird toward Benson," Jessica said, relaxing a little. "But, can I be honest with you? I don't think he *is* Benson."

Ellyce stopped walking. "What do you mean, you don't think he's Benson?"

“Have you ever heard Benson raise his voice at me? Or heard him dismiss me so carelessly?”

“We’re teenagers, Jessica, it’s what we do. Besides, our lives are super stressful right now.”

“There’s something else going on, Elle. Have you ever seen Benson flaunt around the house the way he is with Sydney?” Ellyce screwed her face into a tight ball, conceding. “No, there’s something going on here, something that I can’t put my finger on.”

They slowed again near the large oak tree at the edge of the property, looking around for signs of the guards, and talking about the things that Ellyce had seen during her time away from the estate. “Benson has to go with me,” she told Jessica. “He’s a lot more important than we knew, and so we’re gonna have to do whatever we can to get him to change his tune. Al and the others haven’t been wrong before.”

“How do you know you can trust them, Ellyce? I mean, he changed after we gave him that capsule. I have no one to blame but myself, so don’t think I’m blaming you. Because I got caught up in it, too. It seemed like what she had said was right. But now, I just don’t know.”

“Sophia said it would help him. And what if it is? What if this attitude he’s developed would have been much, much worse without it?”

“I don’t know, Ellyce. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“The one thing I can’t put my finger on is why did it seem like Mr. Monroe didn’t know anything about this?” Ellyce stared out at the roses which were just starting to bloom. “That certificate—the jumbled up one that I showed you—that document has his name on it. He knows what’s going on. He signed it for my dad.”

“That can’t be true. He would have told me.” Jessica drew in a deep breath, changing the subject. “Charles told us that

Sheriff Bowman heard from the LA County police that the riots and looting have gotten so bad that people have started moving out of the area.” She looked Ellyce directly in the face. “They’re moving toward us. You can’t go around by yourself anymore. Do you hear me? Promise me you won’t go out again by yourself.”

“I promise,” she said, crossing her fingers behind her back as she bent down to smell a newly opened pink peony. A solitary bee landed beside her, buzzing and collecting its reward. “What was it you wanted to tell me last night? Before Benson interrupted us?”

Jessica hesitated. “I don’t know, Ellyce. There’s something about this place that’s not quite right.”

“I already know that. But, please tell me. We can’t keep secrets from each other. You’re the only one I can trust.” A slight pang welled up inside her. She knew what Yarah told her, but she didn’t feel as though Jessica was a part of the people out to get her.

“I don’t know. It feels like I’d be crossing an invisible line. I just don’t know if I should.”

“Well, maybe if we talked to Mr. Monroe. Get him to tell us more about the certificate.”

“No,” Jessica snapped. “You can’t. You can’t talk to him about anything.”

“Why not?”

Jessica started walking again. Directing her attentions up at the sky, it was clear that she was debating with herself about whether or not she should tell Ellyce what she knew. “They’re just— I don’t even know what I saw.”

“Just tell me.”

“Until yesterday, I thought—,” she started, but she stopped as a lump in her throat left no room for her forming words. Jessica swallowed hard, pushing the lump back down.

“I thought I was being paranoid. She is a beautiful girl, after all. But—”

“But, what? Who is a beautiful girl, Jessica? What are you talking about?”

“After breakfast yesterday, when La’anah told us you had left, I rushed out of the room to grab my things to go after you and bring you back. But as I made my way back down the hall toward the dining room, I saw them talking—Jim and La’anah. At first, I thought I was being silly.” She turned away from Ellyce. “But there was something about the way they looked at each other and the way they were talking that conveyed something else.”

Jessica shook her head at the thought, trying to blink away the tears that were forming in her eyes. “Something decidedly old and very friendly. It was much different than anything Jim and I have ever had together. I told myself I was just being silly, but when I decided to push the thoughts aside, then it happened.”

“What?” Ellyce asked. “Jessica, tell me what you saw.”

Jessica pursed her lips together as if willing her mouth to be quiet, but the words escaped anyway. “I saw him kiss her.”

Ellyce froze in place. “Jim kissed La’anah?”

A tear rolled down Jessica’s face, and she wiped it aside. “I just—I don’t know what to think. Before all this happened, Jim and I were good. We weren’t great, but what couple is?”

“What were they talking about?”

“See, that’s the thing—and why none of this makes any sense. Jim was talking about you, and something about a package. He said he was confident you would accept the offer and that you’d come back for it. So, they needed to get to it first.”

“Those were his exact words?”

Jessica nodded. “Yes. They are forever, permanently

etched in my mind.” She turned away from Ellyce. “Along with that kiss.”

Ellyce embraced her in a hug. “I’m very sorry that happened to you, Jessica. But listen to me. You have to push past this. You have to ignore what you saw.”

“But I can’t.”

“Well you have to. Because this isn’t about Mr. Monroe.”

“It’s not?” Jessica asked, the tears freely flowing as confusion shattered everything she thought she knew.

“No,” Ellyce said confidently. “And we need to get back to the house right now. Where’s Mr. Patterson?”

“Why?” Jessica asked, quickly following after her.

“Because he didn’t hurt his leg trying to kick in a door.”

“He didn’t?”

Ellyce shook her head, quickly stepping over the soggy grass. “No, I don’t think so.” She stopped and looked Jessica squarely in the face. “Did you give Benson that tablet yourself?”

Jessica’s wide eyes searched Ellyce’s face, trying to understand why she was asking about the capsule. “No, Jim did. He said he would, and—” Jessica grabbed the sleeve of Ellyce’s jacket as she walked away. “He didn’t, did he?” she asked, waiting for the confirmation that she was right. “Jim never gave that capsule to Benson.”

“No. And Mr. Patterson isn’t the enemy we thought he was,” Ellyce said quietly, rounding the house toward the motor court. “But I know who is. And, so do you.”

Jessica stumbled, but she pushed forward to keep up with Ellyce. “So, whoever that person is—he’s not my son?”

“No,” Ellyce said, shaking her head. “Your son is the package that Mr. Monroe was talking about. And we need to find him right away because I’m pretty sure Benson’s in a whole lot of danger.”

Inside the house, Bailey and Shawn were screaming at each other. Jessica rushed in through the front door, not knowing what it was about but intent on breaking it up. Ellyce hung back in the foyer, pretty confident she knew, but she wasn't prepared to take on both Monroe children at this moment.

With Jessica's arrival, all twelve of the house's occupants were camped out in the living room, essentially being held hostage as Bailey and Shawn hurled accusations at each other. Stealing a peek from the foyer, Ellyce saw Jessica glared at Jim who was standing in the corner next to La'anah, before moving to the couch. "What's going on in here?" Jessica asked, trying to calm Bailey. But it was no use. Bailey would not be consoled.

"It's about that girl again," Ellen said and rolled her eyes, letting out an exaggerated sigh. "I told you, she creates drama everywhere she goes. Now she's got Shawn thinking that maybe his engagement with Bailey isn't such a good idea."

"And I told you to shut up," Shawn yelled at her. Pacing

the floor, he circled the room, trying to keep his anger and feelings under control.

Taking advantage of the commotion, Ellyce tiptoed through the hallway to the stairs and quietly opened the door to the telephone closet. Hidden neatly under the stairs and dividing the living room from the foyer, Ellyce climbed up onto the long, padded bench against the wall and stood on her tippy toes, peering through the small metal grate in the upper corner of the room.

“You always want what you can’t have,” Bailey sobbed. “Why can’t you just be happy with me? With what we have?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Bailey. So, just stop talking,” Shawn screamed.

Jessica looked across the room at her husband and then to her son, wondering why neither of them was doing anything to help. “Shawn, what’s happened to make you want to call off the engagement?”

“I told you already, it’s that girl,” Ellen retorted.

Shawn raced across the room, snatching Ellen from her chair. He pulled her close. “And I told you to shut up. You don’t know what you’re talking about. If it weren’t for your daughter, you’d be out there on your own with all the others.” He shoved her back in her chair, and walked back to the middle of the room, continuing his circular pacing. “I don’t want to call off the engagement. I simply made a comment.”

“A comment that you shouldn’t have made,” Bailey cried.

Ellen sat in her chair, dumbfounded and shocked, but she said nothing as Sydney pulled a red backpack from under her seat. She stood up and handed it to Shawn. “Calm down before you do something you can’t take back,” Sydney said. “Everything you want is right here.”

Snatching the pack from her hands, Shawn’s expression lightened, but then soured again as he opened the bag and

pulled two books from inside. “No. No. No. These are not what I’m looking for.” He threw the books across the room and scowled. “You know what, I’ve had enough of this.” He stretched, looking over at La’anah. “I just need out of this bag of bones.”

Jessica scowled at Jim. “Why are you just standing there?”

“Where is she?” Shawn demanded, turning his attention to Jessica. Drawing a gun from under his shirt, he pointed it at her. Bailey screamed, throwing her hands over her ears as she closed her eyes.

“Shawn, let’s think about what you’re doing,” Jim said, inching towards the couch.

“I know exactly what I’m doing. And I know exactly where I fall on the food chain.” His face flashed a warning which stopped Jim in his tracks. “You,” he said, directing his attention back to Jessica. “Come here. *Now*.”

With her hands in the air, Jessica rose from the couch and moved toward him. “You see, after talking to her yesterday, I know Ellyce wouldn’t come out of hiding for Bailey. Or for you,” he said, pointing the gun at Jim. “Or even for Benson at this point. But she will try to save you.” He grabbed Jessica’s arm and pulled her close. Twisting her arm behind her back, he pushed her to her knees. “So, do you hear me, Ellyce?”

He laughed, pointing the gun at Jessica’s head. “I know you do. I can smell your skin wafting through the house.” A thin smile curled up on his lips, then he quickly frowned, sickened by the thought of how she made him feel. “I know you’re close by, and I know you won’t let anything happen to her. She is, after all, like your *mom*, wouldn’t you say?” He glanced over at La’anah, who was frowning with her arms crossed.

“What are you doing,” Lily asked, inching towards him, but Rupert held her back.

“Son,” Mr. Patterson said, softly, careful of his words. “I don’t think she’s here.”

Shawn pointed the gun at him. “We can probably stop the charade now. I’m pretty sure everyone here knows I’m not your son.” He tilted his head from side to side, cracking the bones in his neck.

Jessica snapped her head up towards his face. “What do you mean?”

Shawn laughed, an evil, maniacal laugh. “Well, I stand corrected. I guess not everyone knows.” He turned the gun back on her, pushing it into her temple. He spoke slowly, enunciating every word. “I am not Shawn. And I am certainly not *his* son. But that’s not why we’re here. We’re here because I want Ellyce. And I want her now.” He cocked the gun.

Jessica closed her eyes, not wanting to watch as Bailey sobbed hysterically, begging and pleading for Shawn to stop. Jessica tried hard to conceal the fact she was terrified and heartbroken, but Ellyce could see it written on her face.

As Jessica glanced over to where Jim stood, anger rose up in her at the fact that he was standing five feet away from his wife and daughter doing nothing to intervene. The thought that he was a part of whatever this was had sickened her. How could he do this to them? How could he betray his own family this way?

A loud pop sounded from the dining room, and everyone turned, Shawn included. It was in that moment that Mr. Patterson pulled the cane he had been using and swung as hard as he could. The hard, brassy end of the cane struck Shawn across the face, causing him to stumble and fall toward Ellen.

She did nothing to stop his trajectory; and simply moved out of the way to avoid getting blood on her outfit. She hmped as the built-in bookcase broke his fall.

With not a moment to lose, Jessica grabbed Bailey's hand and darted for the front door, throwing it wide open, running for her life. Halfway down the drive, a single gunshot sounded from inside the house.

Both women froze in place, but neither looked back, even as the sound of a small, motorized cart gained ground on them. "Keep it moving, ladies!" Lamad yelled out, pulling the club cart beside them.

Dressed as one of Mr. Patterson's guards, he slowed the cart just enough for them to jump on as he drove across the yard and down the side of the gardens to the golf path.

"We have to go back," Jessica screamed, pulling on his uniform shirt, urging him to turn around. "Ellyce is still inside. He's going to get her. We have to go back!"

Slowing the cart near the fence, Lamad raised his hand to calm her. "She's not. We have her."

Outside the fence, Al climbed aboard the cart and took a seat next to Lamad. "Charles is gone," he whispered, then turned and pursed his lips. "We won't have much time. They'll be after us soon. We need to get them to a safe place." He motioned to Bailey. "She doesn't look well."

Bailey leaned motionless against her mom, black streaks of mascara soiling her face. "She'll be fine," Jessica assured them, clutching Bailey in her arms. "She's a fighter. She just needs a minute to regroup."

One hundred yards away, Ellyce and Yarah stood behind a grove of trees, waiting for them to arrive. As the cart slowed enough so they could jump on, Ellyce hugged Jessica, then glanced at Bailey, catatonic next to her mother.

The six of them drove on toward the center of town, navi-

gating the golf and bike trails that crisscrossed the valley, slowing each time someone or something came into view. Or when they heard the sound of a gunshot in the distance.

“How did you know she’d be in danger?” Jessica finally asked, breaking the silence.

“We told you. We’re here to protect her. It’s our job to know,” Yarah replied.

“But you sent her back there. Why would you do that if you knew that this would happen?”

“We’re not omniscient. We don’t know *everything*. But we knew he would strike once she accepted the offer. There was no way he’d be able to stop himself—it’s his nature. Once a course of action was taken, however, we knew how to respond.”

“Well, what now?” Jessica asked. “Is he the Howl—,” she couldn’t bring herself to say it. “Well, I mean, is he, you know?”

“No. But a commander in his army.”

“So, he never loved me?” Bailey asked quietly. “All of this was just about getting to her?”

Jessica frowned and blinked away the forming tears as she pulled her daughter closer, hugging her tightly.

“I’m sorry, Bailey,” Ellyce said, touching her hand, trying to console her. “I know—”

“You don’t know anything,” Bailey said, pulling away. “So, don’t pretend that you do. This was all I wanted—just to be his wife. Up there in that house, it was going to be just me and him. He said it would be perfect. We’d have everything we ever wanted. A simple kind of life.” She focused her gaze on a house marked with a bright orange X. “What’s my life going to be like now?”

“There was nothing simple about that house,” Jessica huffed. “No matter what that boy had led you to believe.”

“I was going to be his wife, Mother,” Bailey said flatly.

An image of Thomas flickered across Ellyce’s mind. She grabbed the metal handle in front of her seat and squeezed, willing herself to stay in her seat as the urge to run to her house welled up inside of her. “Lamad, take me to my house,” she demanded.

“No. We need to get you somewhere safe.”

“But I remembered something. And if you don’t take me, I swear I’ll jump out of this cart and run there myself.”

Lamad slammed on the breaks and stared at Al who nodded a quiet affirmative. Turning off the golf paths, the cart raced across the main road to the other side of the street, snaking along side streets and the backyards of houses that hadn’t been fenced in.

“I’m sure it’s another clue. But I didn’t understand its importance until now.” Ellyce turned to Bailey. “I am sorry for what happened, Bailey. And I hope that one day you will forgive me.”

Bailey didn’t respond. Ellyce understood her anger, even if it was misplaced. She knew it wasn’t the right time to say anything, but Bailey *was* her family. And she really did hope that she would grow to forgive her one day, but right now she just needed to get to her house.

It might be a long shot, but she had to know if there was something to that *No Doubt* CD she had hidden beneath her bedroom floorboard. “Lamad, I’ll be in and out in no time.”

He slowed the club cart two blocks away from Ellyce’s house in the park where she and Benson used to play. The group disembarked and moved quickly and quietly across the yards, surveying the landscape as they went. An orange tabby cat jumped out from its resting spot, scaring Jessica, who stifled a scream. She closed her eyes and held her hand across her heart as she calmed herself down.

Bailey followed along, though not in any sort of hurried pace. Yarah hung back with her until they reached Ellyce's front porch. Bailey dropped onto the top step and let out an exhaustive sigh. Yarah left her and walked around to the side of the house and stood guard there.

Lamad and Al entered the house first, sweeping it to make sure no one was inside. When the coast was clear, Ellyce ran to her bedroom, tossing aside the piles of clothing that had been pulled off their hangers and left on the floor. She shoved her bed to the side and pried open the loose floorboard with a pen she found on her desk. Grabbing the CD from inside its hiding place, she opened the jewel case and found a slip of paper with the words, *Kilo Flips*.

"Elle, if this CD was important, why did you leave it hidden all this time? What if somebody had found it?"

Ellyce shook her head and stood up. "I didn't know it was important—not until Bailey mentioned that phrase, anyway. I hid this CD from my dad, or at least I *thought* I had hidden it from him. I hated how sad he got when he listened to it. So, I figured if it wasn't around, he couldn't play it. And I knew he wasn't going to buy another one." She pulled the paper out of the case and smiled, turning to her closet.

"Kilo Flips? What does that mean?" Jessica asked.

Ellyce searched the closet floor until she found what she was looking for. "Kilo Flips," she said proudly, holding up a pair of flip-flop sandals. "My dad bought these for me on one of his trips." She frowned, sitting on the corner of the bed. "But what do flip flops have to do with this?" Ellyce sighed, pushing her lip into her mouth with her fingers.

"Well, we'll have to figure that out another time," Al said. "We have to go. Shawn and the others won't be far behind."

"Maybe they have something to do with his location?" Jessica asked on her way out of the room.

“That was across the world. There’s gotta be another clue here. What am I missing?”

“Ellyce,” Lamad commanded. “We can’t stay here any longer. It’s time to go.” He pulled Ellyce along, but she stopped on the way out, grabbing the dark red blanket that Benson had given her off the floor. Clutching the shoes and the blanket tightly in her arms, she followed them out of the house.

Outside, the porch steps were empty, and Bailey was gone. Fear and panic washed over Jessica as she bolted from the doorway, frantically searching for her daughter. “How could you let her go?” Jessica demanded of Yarah. “Why didn’t you watch her?”

“I’m sorry, Jessica, but she’s not my objective,” Yarah said, as the three encircled Ellyce, searching the area for signs of Shawn and his men. “I was busy guarding the side of the house. And as I told you before, I’m not omniscient. I can’t be everywhere at once.”

“She didn’t go far,” Al said, trying to diffuse the situation. “We’ll find her. And I’m sure she’ll be okay.”

On heightened alert, the five of them took off on foot toward an abandoned house not far from Ellyce’s, which had been their basecamp. While Ellyce had been distracted trying to survive on her own, and then at the Patterson estate, the Others had been busy digging a tunnel from the abandoned house to the Hall of Records tunnels, and then another tunnel from this house to the fireplace room under her house. Based on how precise and clean the tunnels appeared, Ellyce suspected they hadn’t dug them manually, and probably had a little supernatural help.

Once she knew they were safe, Jessica broke down. “Do you think they took her?” she asked, falling into an oversized loveseat. “I should have stayed with her.”

“Then both of you would be gone,” Yarah fired back. “And Ellyce would be all alone.”

“They don’t have her,” Al said, placing his hand on her shoulder, calming her. “I would have felt it, and I didn’t.”

“So, she just wandered off on her own?” Jessica shot back.

“Ellyce,” Lamad said, pulling out a chair at the table. “We need you to try to figure out what all this means. The Howling’s going to do whatever it takes to make sure you don’t succeed, so we have to be prepared. And from here on out, we need to be hypervigilant.”

Shanan and Yasar joined them from the basement, wiping dirt from their brows. Ellyce sat in the chair, took the Kilo Flips, and put them on, waiting to see if something would happen. But nothing did. She even clicked the heels together three times while saying, “there’s no place like home” for good measure, but still nothing happened. Pulling them off, she studied each shoe, curious if the clue was hidden under the delicately stitched lining. Turning the flip-flops over, she spotted the number 125 written in black permanent marker across the sole of the right shoe. “125?” Ellyce said, “that could mean anything.”

“No, you need to think,” Jessica said. “Your dad’s been very intentional. The clues he’s leaving you aren’t random.”

“In the Land of Finish, letters and numbers have concrete meanings. So, if you add the numbers together, they total eight—which signifies regeneration and beginning,” Al said.

“Since you accepted the offer, you have a new beginning—a new life, if you will,” Lamad told her. “But I don’t think that’s what Thomas meant when he wrote 125 on your shoe. I agree with Jessica that it’s something specific. I would bet it’s something related to the map.”

With a paper and pen in front of her, Ellyce scratched out

the words, Simple Kind of Life. She crossed off the letters that spelled out Kilo Flips and studied the ones that were left. “They’re anagrams. Look,” she said, showing them. “The letters that are left over after removing Kilo Flips are: *I. M. E. N. D. F. E.*”

“I mend fe? I’m end fe?” Jessica asked.

“No. Find Me, E,” she said and then grinned widely.

“Well, why are you smiling? We already know he wants you to find him.”

“Because *Find Me* is the title of his first book. And I’m E.” She turned to Al. “Where are my dad’s books?”

Shanan disappeared and returned a moment later with the four books in hand. She set the books on the table and then signed, “Turn to page 125.”

Ellyce flipped to the page and then scoured it for clues, writing down all the capitalized letters and italicized words. Jessica joined her at the table, and they played around with them for fifteen minutes, but couldn’t make heads or tails of what Thomas was trying to say.

“It’s gotta be another anagram. But it doesn’t make sense. And what do we do with the italicized words?”

Two voices outside, heavy and loud, stilled their conversation. Al held his finger to his lips and crept to the window, peering outside. When the couple passed the house, he relaxed a little, letting the curtain in his hand fall.

“That song,” Jessica said, pacing the floor. “There has to be more to it than just using the case to hide a clue.” She picked up the jewel case and studied it. “You said you hid it because it made him sad.”

Ellyce pulled the jewel case from Jessica’s hands. “My parents met at a No Doubt concert in Chicago. My mom was at the ticket counter trying to persuade the guy at the counter to let her in, and my dad was supposed to be meeting some

girl there—a blind date, I think—but she never showed. He ended up giving my mom the extra ticket. After the concert, they grabbed something to eat, and then, from what I hear, they hung out well into the morning.” Ellyce rolled her eyes at the thought of Vanessa being smitten with anyone but herself. “It seems like they had a pretty romantic start, so I get why he was devastated when she left him. The CD just reminded him of her all the time,” she said, handing the CD case back to Jessica. “And I just wanted to stop the pain.”

“Ellyce,” Lamad said, sliding the book in front of her. “You need to read this, and not just search the text for letters. The passage has context and meaning.”

“*It was a case of mistaken identity,*” she read to them. “*He wanted to believe that it hadn’t been planned, but the more he learned, the more he understood that the root cause was jealousy—wanting something that wasn’t supposed to be.*” Ellyce put the book down. “I don’t know what this has to do with anything, Lamad.”

“Keep reading,” he said.

Ellyce drew in a deep breath and held the book up to the light of the candle. “*Joseph stayed in bed for days—in a prison of defeat, caused by her betrayal. There were things he remembered, and things he would have liked to have forgotten. Even his small child was not enough to coax him from the spell that he was under.*” Ellyce raised an eyebrow, but she continued on. “*She was an imposter. Someone pretending to be someone he loved. A stranger in his life. But what would he have changed if he could?*”

Ellyce snapped the book shut. Was Thomas talking about an imaginary character named Joseph, or his own life? Her mind drifted back to the realm. She couldn’t shake the image of Vanessa standing next to the curly-haired man, and she

wondered if it was easy for Thomas to leave because she wasn't his child. She wasn't his daughter.

Several dogs barked violently in the distance.

"Is that it?" Jessica asked, wanting more.

"No, there is more," Lamad said. "You need to continue."

Yarah grabbed the book from Ellyce's hand and held it close to her chest. "No. Not like this."

"She has to know. She's going to find out sooner or later. And Thomas clearly wanted her to hear it from him."

"I know," Yarah said, hesitantly. "But something doesn't feel right."

A crack of thunder pealed outside, rolling toward them in the distance. Yarah grabbed Ellyce's hand and quickly steered her towards the basement while Jessica followed closely behind. Hurrying to the window, Al and Lamad scanned the yard for the Howling, or one of his minions. The changed weather told them someone from their camp was close by. And they knew that it was the scent of Ellyce's skin—the mixture of dust and blood—that was drawing them. Before they did anything else, they'd have to figure out a way to conceal it.

At the basement door, Shanan grunted, gesturing and signing to Yarah that the coast was clear. Her blue eyes glistened more deeply blue than Ellyce had seen before. Yasar guided Ellyce and Jessica down the dark staircase to the dirt floor landing at the mouth of the tunnel. "Wait here," he said, gently pushing her against the wall.

"There's been a change," Al said, making his way towards her. "Ionia has agreed to open the first gate without the key as a favor to the King and his son, but the opening won't last long—" he said, and then hesitated.

"*And?*"

“And you need to find Benson because she won’t grant you passage into the realm without him.”

“So, what’s the contingency plan?” Ellyce asked, following Al and the others down the dirt path toward the tunnels.

“There is no contingency. You must make him come with you.”

She stopped abruptly. “I don’t trust her. There’s something not right. Why would she grant me access now? You’ve seen Benson. He’s pretty content right where he is up in that big house. I don’t know what they’ve done to him, but he’s not interested in anything I have to say. This feels like a trap to me.”

Al turned, grasping her arms. “You may be right. But there’s only one way we will know for sure.” He coaxed her on. “Benson’s your best friend, right?” She nodded. “So, then figure out a way to convince him to go with you. This is important. Our lives depend on it.”



UNDER THE WARM comfort of a heavy plaid blanket, Bailey sat in Sheriff Bowman’s candle-lit kitchen, clutching a steamy cup of Chamomile tea between her hands. Bowman’s modest single-story rancher, built in the 1980s, sat in silent rebellion against the newly renovated million-dollar European-style estates that littered the streets of Hayvenhurst. And Sheriff Bowman was married to the job; so, there was no Mrs. Bowman.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he said, pulling up a chair next to Bailey. “It would be helpful if you started from the beginning.”

“The tunnels are located under the Hall of Records,” she

said, sipping slowly from the mug. “There is enough food and supplies down there to feed the whole town probably—and then some. And there’s power, water, and heat, too.” Bailey stared straight ahead into the living room. With the way the house was laid out, in the hushed glow of the candlelight, she could almost pretend that she was sitting in her childhood home. But that was something she would never do again. She was pretty sure that it was Shawn who had made sure of that. Even though anger raged through her veins, there was a part of her, deep and well-hidden, that wanted to go back to the estate and pretend like nothing had happened between them. There was a part of her that was warring with the other—a dark part that she feared would win.

“And Charles knew about this the whole time?”

“Yes,” Bailey murmured softly.

“Bailey,” he said, resting his hand on her arm. “You did the right thing.” He smiled, and she attempted a half-hearted smile in return, but she couldn’t do it. “You should get some rest. I’ll check this out in the morning, and we’ll take it from here.”

She nodded absently, taking one last sip from the mug before depositing her cup into the sink. “Do you think I could stay in the tunnels and help out?” She turned and stared him directly in the eye. “I mean, I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“I’m sure we can work something out.” He turned and headed toward his room. “See ya in the morning, Bailey. Try to get some rest.”



FROM A COT IN the corner of the room, Benson stood up slowly, convinced there was something wrong with his body.

But there wasn't, as far as he could tell. His head hurt; it felt achy and full, like a cold medicine hangover. The fog of the past few days weighed heavy on his mind. He had not been himself, but he didn't know exactly why. There had been something off—something strange about his behavior—but he couldn't put his finger on it.

He stumbled around in the dark room, trying to get a handle on where he was. This was a place he wasn't familiar with. Taking two steps forward, he tripped over some crates, then pushed them aside with his leg. Feeling his way through the dark, he reached the wall and patted along, feeling around for a door. Finding a light switch, he flipped it on out of habit. Light flooded the tiny room.

The room appeared to be some type of military bunker. Benson suspected he was somewhere on the Patterson property, but how he got here, and why he was here, were both a mystery.



BAILEY HAD DISAPPEARED before the sun came up. With Bowman's heavy plaid blanket draped over her shoulders, she stopped at the gates of the Patterson property. She wasn't really sure what to expect, but one of Mr. Patterson's men came out to meet her and drove her up to the house in one of the carts as if nothing was wrong.

Once inside, Bailey took the side staircase and made her way to the second floor. She couldn't bear to go through the living room, not after what had happened. But what if it wasn't as bad as she thought? What if her emotions were simply playing tricks on her? How did she even know Mr. Patterson was dead? Al said he was *gone*, not dead. It was

possible. Anything was possible. Bailey opened the door and slipped inside the room.

“You disappoint me, Bay,” Shawn said from the armchair opposite of the door. “I thought we had something.”

She settled her nerves before shutting the door behind her. “And I thought you were someone else.”

“Did you love me for my name, or for who I am?” He stood up, making his way across the room to her. “I’m the same, you know. I just have a different name.” Standing in front of her, he started to reach out and pull her close, but he held back. “Not that it should matter.”

She stepped into him, wanting him to take her in his arms like old times, to make her feel safe and secure. “Tell me your name.” A nervous fluttering rose in her stomach. She didn’t really want to believe that it mattered, but she needed to know.

He grimaced. “Well, it’s not Shawn. That’s a rather plain and unenlightened moniker.” Closing his eyes, he brushed the hair from her face and inhaled the scent of her sweaty skin. The intoxicating aroma almost overwhelmed him, but he was able to keep his wits about him. That is until she leaned into his hand and pushed her face into his palm.

“What is your name?” she whispered longingly.

He kissed her lips. Between gentle touches, he whispered his name into her mouth. “Kasdaye,” he said, relieved to have it out in the open. The thrill of her knowing his name excited him in a way he hadn’t expected. He pinned her against the wall, letting the passion of the moment overwhelm him.

“What does it mean?” she asked, letting him push his hand under her shirt.

Her skin was cool and clammy, the opposite of his own. His skin ran hot, a side effect of being trapped in a body he wasn’t meant to occupy. He hadn’t possessed the boy. He

simply assumed his identity as one of his functions. “Kasdaye means *hidden*, or *to conceal*. Where I’m from, your name is your character. And being hidden or concealed means I’m able to take on the characteristics of anyone I want—*within limits*.” He peered into her eyes. “Shawn is just one of the people whose identities I’ve assumed. But I didn’t kill him. He and his meddling mother had died a quick and painless death years ago, much to the Howling’s dismay and delight.”

“Why him?” Bailey asked. “Why did you choose to be Shawn?”

“His mother,” he said, embracing her. “Sylvia was someone with the gift. She had the ability to discern who was an heir and who wasn’t. With her position at the school, she’d been responsible for uncovering hundreds, if not thousands, of heirs, but none of them have been as important as Ellyce.” He turned and leaned against the window frame, crossing his arms. “Usually an heir would make their entrance into this world, and it would take years for them to meet their Bashert. But that wasn’t the way it worked in Ellyce’s case. Ellyce had met her Bashert—her *destiny*, as a child. That was the signal to all of us—the start of the beginning of the end.” He smirked and looked away from Bailey’s gaze. “Had Sylvia just kept her mouth shut and kept her special talents to herself, then maybe she could have survived. But she didn’t. And in the end, she had lost everything and everyone she was trying so desperately to hold on to.”

Bailey listened without saying a word. As Kasdaye looked into her eyes, he knew she could never know the truth of why the Howling had sent him here—or that he had been the one who caused *her* to fall and lose everything that had been destined to her. And she could definitely never know his plan to bring down Benson and Ellyce.

With them out of the way, the Howling could take his

place on the throne and then perhaps he would grant him a little mercy—and allow him the pleasure of her company forever. But first, in order for any of that to happen, he'd have to make sure that Benson and Ellyce never knew the depths of Sylvia's devotion and loyalty.

Sheriff Bowman woke and found he was alone. Which didn't really surprise him. He could tell from Bailey's behavior that she was a girl walking a thin tightrope between hope and despair—two worlds that were on the verge of collision. Bowman dressed, and he grabbed his gun and his badge from the counter. Though he didn't need the badge anymore, he still believed in the significance of putting it on every day. Glancing at himself in the mirror one last time, he hurried out the door, and headed to the Hall of Records.

Twenty minutes later, he stood at the entrance of the tunnels with Mayor Jenkins and the Fire Chief, Galen Connors. As they made their way inside and began surveying the rooms and their contents, Bowman was struck by how much Bailey had underestimated the number of supplies and goods contained in each of these rooms.

Two hours later, when the men decided it was time to go to the Patterson estate to find out what exactly was going on, they opened the large exterior door and were met outside by thick, orange colored smoke. Chief Connors pulled his shirt over his nose and rushed out towards the road, followed close

behind by Bowman. Smoke clouds billowed off both of the mountains that surrounded these towns, and they looked at each other, knowing what that meant.

Running back to the building, they pulled Jenkins inside the Hall and closed the doors. “There’s smoke coming down from both mountains,” Chief Connors said, shaking his head.

“And?” Mayor Jenkins asked.

“And, there’s no way to stop it. We simply don’t have the resources. And even if we did, we don’t have the manpower to fight two fires that are surrounding us and making their way down the mountains.”

“So, what do we do?” Mayor Jenkins asked.

Bowman leaned against the wall. “We round up everyone we can and we get them down here. And we hope and pray that these tunnels provide us some level of protection.”

“We can’t do that. This place is a death trap,” Jenkins said, stomping his foot down. “Do we even know if these doors are fire resistant? No. We have to get everyone out of town.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Bowman asked.

“They walk. They run. We can’t bring them here.”

Connors shook his head. “While these doors are not fire resistant, the tunnels go on for miles—you said so yourself. And there’s food and supplies. We can move everyone deep inside. At least we would have a fighting chance down here.”

“You can’t be serious, Connors,” Jenkins retorted. He was pacing in circles with his hands on his hips, trying to come up with a better option.

“Oh, but, I am. Quite serious. We need to round everyone up. Do whatever we gotta do right now. It won’t take long—a couple of hours at the most, for those fires to crest the top of those hills. Once that happens, we’re out of time. There’s nothing to stop them from coming.”

“And you agree with this assessment?” Jenkins asked Sheriff Bowman.

“I do. I think this is the only option we have in order to save as many lives as we can.”

Jenkins sighed. “Okay. I’ll go to the Patterson estate and find out what’s going on with this place and I’ll bring them back here. You two get the word out to everyone you can. Tell them all to come here.” He opened the door and peered out at the angry sky. “Heaven help us if this isn’t the apocalypse.”

Conners pulled two masks from the emergency kit that had been sitting on the counter in the large gathering room. He gave both men a mask and they all went their separate ways. Sheriff Bowman started at the Barnes and Noble shopping center, and from there, the news spread across the towns faster than the wildfire that was threatening them. By nightfall, as ash rained down on them like snow falling in December, huddled masses arrived at the tunnel entrance, hungry, tired, and scared, but *hopeful*.



WHEN MAYOR JENKINS had arrived at the Patterson estate, he was escorted into the living room where Jim and La’anah sat by the fireplace, entangled in each other’s embrace. On the table beside them sat a glass with a curious-colored liquid inside. Jenkins suppressed a shudder, certain that he didn’t want to know anything about what they were doing, or what was in that glass.

“Jenkins, why are you here?” Jim asked as Bailey and Kasdaye made their way into the room.

Caught off guard by Bailey’s presence, Jenkins hesitated, but he pulled himself together. He was, after all, an actor,

and this was the biggest role of his life. “It appears that someone has been speaking to people—Bowman in particular—about the tunnels. He eyed Bailey, sitting across from where he stood, appearing as if she was in her own world. Her face and demeanor gave no indication that she even noticed he was in the room. “But that’s the least of our concerns right now.” Jenkins wondered what she had been given, or what had been done to her, but he silenced those thoughts as quickly as they arose. Best to not provoke the beast in his own territory. Besides, he wasn’t even certain how the whole thing worked—could they get inside his head and hear his thoughts? Or could they only whisper desires into a person’s head, and then sit back and watch, waiting and wondering if their devious schemes would take root and grow?

He didn’t understand the mechanics of it all, but he supposed it had something to do with their understanding and knowledge of time and space. For a moment, they were defined by it, but they also had access to knowledge about how to manipulate it and make it work to their advantage. They weren’t all knowing and all powerful, that he knew well enough. But they certainly had access to powers that were otherworldly. If he had been of stronger character, he wouldn’t have made a deal with the devil in the first place. But he wasn’t, and so he did. Which was the reason he was now standing in their lair.

“The hills are on fire,” Jenkins continued. “And right now, Bowman and Connors are gathering the townspeople and taking them to the tunnels. It’ll only be a matter of time before they take over.”

Jim pushed La’anah to the side, picked the glass up, and inhaled deeply. “It couldn’t be helped. I mean, we can’t fault her for doing what she did.” He glanced over at Bailey, lost in

her own world, and grimaced. “It’s just part of what makes her human. You can’t fight your nature, can you?”

“But what about the mission? What about finding the entrance to the realms? These people are going to ruin everything.”

Jim laughed. “The Howling is many things, but dumb is not one of them. You don’t think he was prepared for this? Years of study have led him to know how people work—they are predictable. This is no surprise to him. He’ll use this opportunity to our advantage.”

Mayor Jenkins was pensive for a moment, then took a seat on the couch. “So, he started the fires? I don’t understand. But why?”

“He has his reasons. You let them come, and then we wait for her to make a move.”

“Her?”

Jim stood. “My wife. She’d never leave Benson behind. It’s actually quite an endearing trait,” he said, pouring Jenkins a drink and handing it to him. “One that you and I, my friend, don’t possess. But that is why I sought her out all those years ago.” He pulled the Mayor to the corner of the room, whispering so no one else could hear what else he was saying.



BAILEY SAT on the couch straining to hear as her father spoke to Mayor Jenkins, but there was something about his behavior that didn’t match the words coming from his mouth. She couldn’t make sense of it, but she knew she wasn’t mistaken. Wondering how things had gotten so off course, she grimaced. How long had her father been like this? How long had he been betraying her mother?

Kasdaye squeezed her hand and smiled at her, as if

reading her mind. Bailey smiled back, thinking to herself that no matter what had happened to them, she was not going to end up that way. She would not be tossed aside so carelessly. Things were going to be different for her—she was sure of it. Kasdaye loved her. Even though he was disappointed in her actions, he would fight for her. They would leave this town and this place and let whatever was happening here, happen. Kasdaye had promised to take care of her, and she believed that he would.



RUPERT AND LILY sauntered into the living room and leaned against the wall lazily, listening to Jenkins' concerns. Jenkins shifted a little and they knew he wasn't excited to be in the same room with the lot of them, but they were aware that he knew better than to voice his feelings. "I haven't seen Ellen or Sydney," he ventured curiously. "Are they still with us? I mean, Ellen is a horrible woman, but she has a reputation around town, and she would certainly be missed if—"

Jim waved the thought away. "She's still with us. It didn't take much to convince her that for her own wellbeing, and her daughter's, she needs to stick to the script." He laughed a little. "Actually, after seeing what happened to Charles, her desires for self-preservation kicked in, and she was very eager to help us. She and Sydney should be joining the masses at the tunnels shortly."

Jenkins set the glass on the table and turned to leave. "I see. Well, I should be getting back then. I'll tell Bowman that Charles—"

Jim waved him quiet. "That's already being handled. You will simply go back and tell Bowman that Charles was

nowhere to be found, and the rest of us had been overtaken by Jessica and Ellyce, but we're okay."

"You were overtaken by two women? Who will believe that?"

Jim snorted. "Are you not an actor? Can you not come up with something believable? Drugged, poisoned—there are a number of ways of incapacitating someone. I'm sure you can be trusted to come up with something that they will believe."

"Will you be joining us in the tunnels?"

"We will. Before you arrived, we were in the middle of making the final arrangements."

"I see. Well, I'll let you get back to it."

Rupert glanced Jenkins' way and raised his eyebrows, motioning for Jenkins to follow his cue. "Let me walk with you to the door." Rupert gestured for Jenkins to lead the way out of the room, and Jenkins obliged.

"It's important for everyone concerned that you continue to remain in control," Rupert said, whispering as the two made their way down the hall. "You are a man of great importance, and a necessary component for this mission. Keep your wits about you, and don't be overly frightened of Jim. He's important, but he's not the leader. The Howling is very appreciative of your efforts, and he wants you to know that." Rupert reached out to shake his hand.

"He's pleased? You're sure?"

Rupert beamed. "Absolutely. Things are falling into place just as he expected. Jim is just edgy because he knows what must be done, and it's hard on him. He's developed attachments and feelings—that sort of thing."

"I understand." Jenkins hesitated at the door. "Please let your leader know that I am happy to be of service."

Rupert smiled. "I will. But he's already aware of your commitment and dedication."



WILSON DROPPED Ellen and Sydney Parker off five blocks from the entrance to the tunnels. Fearing they might be seen, he ducked into an old Jiffy Lube bay and parked the club cart. They would all walk from here, making their way inside the tunnels just like any other resident of Hayvenhurst.

They all had a mission. Wilson's was to gain Bowman's confidence so he could be leveraged when the appointed time came, while Ellen and Sydney were to infiltrate the townspeople, spreading rumors about Ellyce and Jessica like they had before. This time, however, Bowman wouldn't thwart their efforts. Ellen looked around at the crowds. If she was going to be forced to live amongst the commoners again, she was going to need something a lot stronger than the water that was in the tunnels. She popped a pill into her mouth and chased it with a shot of vodka from the water bottle she'd brought from the house. She had been given the freedom to choose her own fate, and she would do what she needed to do to survive.

When all of this was over—when Jessica and that vile girl were taken care of—she would take her reward and her rightful place in one of the realms and never, ever think of these people or this place again.

Standing before their newly made entrance to the tunnels, Al pulled Jessica aside while Lamad, Yasar, and Yarah prepared Ellyce for what she was going to face. Shanan stood guard at the door, her eyes piercing through the darkness like she had so many times before. “Jessica, this isn’t just about finding Benson. I mean, that’s a huge piece of it. But now that the Howling is here, the danger is closer than you can know. You must do whatever it takes to protect them both—Ellyce and Benson, even when doing so is difficult, or it seems that protecting them is at odds with what you know to be true.”

Jessica searched his face, looking for a clue as to who he was talking about, but deep inside she realized she already knew. “What exactly am I up against?”

“Whatever happens, make sure that those books, the music box, and her stuffed animal, do not fall into the wrong hands.”

“Al, I feel like you’re not being completely upfront. What am I missing?”

“Jessica, listen to me. You were right about the books—there was more to that chapter. Ellyce is going to face some

demons, literally and figuratively, and she's going to need your support and guidance in dealing with that."

"What sort of demons?"

"Jessica, you're a nurse. You've seen what happens when the cracks in the façade of people's lives are exposed. You know what happens when the reality they have believed in and built their lives on is not reality at all."

Jessica nodded, slowly accepting the dagger he held out to her. She had taken enough psychology courses to know that when these cracks occurred in children, they did everything in their power to protect themselves, which was where a whole host of psychological disorders stemmed from. She glanced at Ellyce, wondering if that was the same fate that awaited her, and then Al confirmed her suspicions.

"Everything that Ellyce has known has been built upon a very carefully crafted lie. And when the truth of that lie comes to light—and it will, very soon—she's going to need you to lean on. You are going to have to get her through this." He handed her a small bottle of liquid. "Take this, and use it only—I repeat, *only*—if there is no other option."

Jessica held the bottle up to look at it. Similar to Sophia's weird capsule, the liquid inside this bottle danced and churned its way around inside the glass container. She slipped the bottle into her pants pocket. "Got it."

She joined the others and smiled at Ellyce, wondering what it was that would cause Ellyce such pain, and when the revelation of the carefully crafted lie would rear its ugly head. She knew it had to be pretty significant if Al felt the need to warn her about it up front. She needed to keep her head clear and focused, because that's what moms did: they protected their children whatever the cost—even when those children weren't their biological ones.



BENSON OPENED the door and wandered down the brightly lit corridor. He could hear people moving around, but the sounds of their voices and activity bounced off the ceilings, distorting his perception of where they were. He paused, listening for any familiar voices, but he couldn't make out any single one with clarity. As he stood still in the middle of the hallway, the lights flickered off, leaving him in total darkness. He closed his eyes, trying to trick himself into believing that he had some modicum of control of his environment. He hated these periods of darkness—had hated them ever since he was a kid.

But he reminded himself of what Sylvia had told him. *Even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is bright as day, for the darkness is as a light with you.* Benson opened his eyes, and the darkness had given way to the light. It was not a bright light, but it was light, nonetheless. He continued down the hall and turned to the left, studying the door placards as he went. He needed to get out of this place and to his house so he could pull Ellyce's backpack from the rubble. He was sure that the measures he'd taken to protect it would have worked. He would retrieve it, then he would make his way back inside the tunnels and meet in the room that Sylvia had set up for them all those years ago. He was proud of himself, and amazed, quite frankly, that he had been able to keep the location of the ayin—room 70—a secret given all their attempts to pull it from him.

He smiled to himself and made a quick right turn, then turned another corner to the left, heading toward the exit sign. But Benson's boasting was short lived. A hoot-owl chirped, then screeched, landing behind him. He felt the flap of her

wings against the back of his head and froze. Realizing that he had only one option, Benson turned to face her.



AT THE ENTRANCE of the tunnels, Bowman and Conners were in the process of passing out blankets, food, and water to the residents of all three towns by the time Mayor Jenkins returned. As he walked past an older man waiting in line for a blanket, he caught a few words of what the man was whispering to his son. “The Weather Service calls them *Santa Ana* winds. But we know what they really are.” The man nudged the boy with his elbow and held his index finger to his lips, giving a cautious glance.

Jenkins inhaled deeply and kept walking, trying to keep his composure. He knew, too, what they were called—the *Devil Winds*. He had heard the stories from Hayvenhurst’s older residents—the ones whose families had lived in this valley for generations. According to local legends, the winds were supposedly responsible for affecting moods and behaviors and bringing about “Valley Fever,” an influenza-like virus. These tales weren’t confined to this part of the state either. Up north, they were called *Diablo Winds*—and the legends there said the winds were caused by a “giant” standing between the mountain ranges. Regardless of what anyone believed, the winds were dangerous, unpredictable, and always destructive.

Jenkins smiled though as he walked over to Bowman and Conners. He knew that his carefully crafted tale and the right amount of human superstition would give him the edge he needed to drive his story home. “It seems that Charles is gone—*deceased*,” he added for clarity, as he began telling the two men the story, he had perfected on the way over. “The others

had been drugged and bound so they couldn't escape or help. The Parkers were the only two to make it out before the commotion. I don't know where they are right now."

Bowman passed the blanket in his hand to Wilson, then pulled Jenkins aside. Connors followed, and stood between the two men, with his arms crossed. "So, it's possible they were involved?"

"No," Jenkins said, shaking his head. "It seems the Jensen kid isn't quite as innocent as you believed. From the sounds of things, she was part of this conspiracy with her dad, and Charles stumbled upon their plans. He was going to expose their plot once he knew the extent of how deep it ran. So, of course, when she realized what he was going to do, she had to take action."

"You're saying that the girl acted alone?" Bowman asked.

"Oh, no," Jenkins added. "Jessica Monroe is involved, too. I mean, it only makes sense. She was a nurse at the hospital and had access to the drugs they needed to pull it off. And, well," he whispered, pausing for effect, "it seems that Jessica and Thomas were *involved*."

Bowman shook his head. "Involved? Like she was cheating on her husband, *involved*?" He leaned against the wall. "Well, I can say for sure that I didn't see that one comin'."

"So, what do we do now?" Connors asked, looking over his shoulder. Wilson had been eavesdropping while passing out the blankets, and Connors closed the gap in the circle, making it clear there was something he didn't trust about him.

Bowman motioned for the men to take their conversation around the corner. "Do we know the plan? Did Jim or any of the others give you any indication?"

"They said they overheard them saying they needed to get into these tunnels to obtain a "package," he said, using air

quotes. “Nobody at the house knew what the package was or what they meant, but they wanted us to know since they thought the women would head here.” He leaned in closer. “And there’s something else. Thomas’ books aren’t just books. Apparently, they are some kind of a map or clues to a map.”

Bowman raised an eyebrow at him. “The books are a what?”

“The books are clues—you know, like old-time ciphers and propaganda. I don’t pretend to understand it all—or any of it, really. But whatever it is, I think we should spread the word that everyone should be on the lookout for Jessica and Ellyce.”

“I agree,” Connors said. “If they’re coming here, then we need to warn the residents. If they see them, they need to let us know so we can handle it.”

Bowman blew a long, hot breath from his cheeks, trying to come up with the best plan. “And how do we do that? You’re sure they gave you no indication of what this package is?”

“None. But it’s gotta be something important if they’ve gone through all this trouble.”

“Are you saying they started the fires? Why? I mean, they didn’t create the flare.”

“No,” Jenkins blurted out. “But they blew up the generator—twice, I might add. I mean, they could have chosen any natural disaster, it just so happens that they picked this one.”

“But this one was world-wide. And why pick a place like Hayvenhurst? Why not LA or Frisco?”

“Because LA and San Francisco don’t have *these* tunnels with *these* provisions.”

“And how do you know that?”

Jenkins pursed his lips together. “We would have heard

about them. It would have been national news. Look, it's really not that complicated, if you stop to think about it."

"But what's the end game, Alex?"

"I don't know, Donald!" Jenkins shouted, waving his arms around frantically. "Does crazy need a reason? Maybe they're part of one of those doomsday cults. You know, like that Wacky Waco guy?" He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. "Look, it doesn't really matter *why* they did it. The point is they have, and these citizens are looking to us for protection and guidance. We have a duty to uphold."

Bowman conceded a little. "I suppose you're right, but—"

"Sheriff Bowman," Wilson interrupted. "The Parkers have arrived, and Ellen is asking to speak to you. She said it's urgent."

"Thanks, Wilson," Bowman said, raising a suspicious eyebrow at the men. "I'll be right there."

Visibly shaken, Ellen stood in front of Bowman and recounted the story of what had happened in the Patterson home, throwing Ellyce's name out as the perpetrator of the violence against Charles. She warned the Sheriff that Ellyce and Jessica had vowed that nothing would stop them from getting what they were after, and they would do whatever it took to find the package.

"And do you know what this package is? Explosives or some other device?"

Ellen shrugged. "I wish I could be of more help, but I can't even begin to tell you the nightmare that we've all endured at the hands of that girl and her crazy father. I hope you believe me now," she said smugly.

Bowman bit his tongue and eked out an apology. "She gave a very convincing performance, Ellen. We'll do everything we can to make sure you and Sydney are safe from here

on out.” He escorted her into the main meeting room with the others. “Now be sure to get a blanket, and some food and water. I don’t suppose you would consider taking on some responsibilities and helping set up some of the other rooms?” Ellen looked at him like he’d lost his mind. “No, I didn’t think so,” he said. “You’ve had a very traumatic time of it, so it’s probably best if you just rest and keep to yourself.” Ellen nodded and wandered off down the corridor to find a room out of sight.

“Folks,” Mayor Jenkins called out. “Please. Listen to me. I’d like us all to gather in the meeting room. I have a very important announcement.” He waited for the mass of people standing in front of him to quiet down, then stepped up on a wooden crate at the front of the room. “It seems that the girl we were holding on suspicion of tampering with the generator has struck again. But this time, she’s not working alone. She’s in the company of Jessica Monroe. Now, most of you know Jessica from the hospital, but if you don’t, just be on the lookout for anyone suspicious looking. If you see something, say something. Let us know immediately. We must stop these two before any more damage is done. Your cooperation is of the utmost importance.”

On the other side of the door, the trio stood, waiting for Ellyce, Jessica, Shanan, and Yasar to come through. The lights flickered as the women crossed the threshold. With the way that Al looked, they could only surmise that the Howling had crossed into the tunnels as well and was lurking somewhere close by. “Don’t let her out of your sight,” Al urged, grabbing Jessica’s sleeve. “Remember what I told you earlier.”

Jostling her backpack into place on her back, Ellyce saw Jessica nod to Al, and wondered what she had agreed to. She hadn’t been afraid up until that point, but standing here now, looking as Al—putrid and sickly, led the group down the hallway, she wondered about the power that the Howling possessed.

Yarah pulled the arrow bracelet from her arm and grasped it tightly in her hand. It glowed, white hot, sending up an invisible shield in front of them. As they made their way down the hall, she shuddered and grimaced. “She was here. With Benson.”

“Benson. Is he with Sydney?” Jessica asked.

Al sucked in a deep breath and held his side. “No. He’s with Lily.”

“Lily?” Ellyce asked. “What does Lily want with Benson?”

“Ellyce, Lily is a member of the Vulpine. They’ll stop at nothing to keep you two apart.”

“Where are they now?” Jessica asked, anger bubbling up inside of her.

“I can’t say,” Al answered. “But they’re not going to hurt him. That would defeat their plans. They need both Benson and Ellyce alive and well.” Al clutched his stomach and doubled over. “Yarah, can you do something about that shield?”

“I’m doing the best I can, Al.” The sound of someone walking down the corridor stopped them in their tracks, and they each dove into the doorways, hoping that the depths of the individual entryway would conceal them. Or at least keep them sheltered long enough that the person wouldn’t know they were there. Ellyce held her breath as the footsteps slowed, then stopped.

“I can see the black straps of your backpack, Ellyce,” Sydney said. “You might as well come out now.”

Ellyce drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes. Of all the people to find her, it had to be Sydney. She stepped into the center of the hallway. “What are you doing here?”

“The entire county is here, thanks to you,” she said, inching her way forward toward Ellyce.

“What are you talking about?”

“The fires outside. It was really kind of a genius plan.”

“Fires? I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ellyce said, moving closer so she wouldn’t reveal the others.

“Of course, you don’t. But that’s not really the point, is it?”

“What do you want, Sydney?”

“He never would give you up. Even after all my persuasions and enticements. It was kind of sweet, really, though maddening at the same time. I mean, he could have had *this*,” she said, gesturing to herself. “But instead, he chose you.”

“Benson seemed pretty content with you the last time I saw him,” Ellyce said, grasping the straps of her backpack.

“Well, like a lot of things, Ellyce, looks can be deceiving.”

“I’ll make a note. Now tell me what you want?”

“Give me the backpack, and I’m sure I can persuade the Howling to be gentle when he catches up with you.”

“I’m not giving you my stuff,” Ellyce huffed. “I’d rather die.”

A wide smile spread across Sydney’s face. “Well, that can be arranged, too.” She pulled a whistle from her pocket and she ran back toward the main hallway. “She’s in here,” she screamed, pointing at Ellyce. “I’ve found her. Get the sheriff.”

Ellyce turned around and ran down the hallway, back the way she had come, sliding around the corner to the left, moving as far away from the main corridor as possible. The Others, along with Jessica, took off after her, but they lost sight of her as she rounded the second corner and made her way down a hallway that she had not seen before.

Al and Yarah ducked into a room and locked the door. There was no way he could outrun them at this moment. Sydney raced after them, followed by a group of men who were anxious to catch the girl who had turned their lives upside down.

“She can’t get away,” Sydney demanded as they overtook her in the chase.

Word reached the main room and Ellen stood up and

headed out the door. “We can’t let her take away this place. We have to protect it—at all costs. It’s all we have left.” Already on edge, it didn’t take much coercion to stoke the crowd’s fears.

Shoes and keys jangled in the distance, while an occasional bark followed by an “Attaboy,” bounced off the walls. As the townspeople and Sheriff Bowman gave chase, Ellyce found herself winding further into the tunnels, towards what she hoped was another way out. She took another left and then another, grasping doorknobs, looking for any door that would open. Down another long corridor she found one, threw the door open, and rushed inside.

She was immediately greeted by Lily and Jim, who had made their way through the door from the other side of the room. Jim raced across the room after her, but Ellyce threw the door open and raced down the hall. She turned to the right, then turned right again, and then took her first left and saw what she was looking for—the exit sign over the wooden door at the end of the hallway. She ran as fast as she could, passing door after door until the sound of Benson moaning and calling out to someone stopped her in her tracks. Ellyce whipped around, opened the door marked “Private,” and went inside.

Hoisting him up off the floor, she draped his arm over her shoulder and peeked out the door before heading into the hallway again. Together, they slowly hobbled toward the door marked with an exit sign.

“Ellyce!” Sydney yelled from behind her.

Ellyce struggled under the weight of the backpack and Benson’s heavy body. She glanced over her shoulder to see how close Sydney was. She was closing in on them, but they didn’t have that far to go. Ellyce grasped Benson’s waist tighter, but his feet gave out from underneath him, and they

tumbled to the floor. Ellyce struggled against his weight. With his arm draped around her neck, they both stood and faced Sydney.

Jim and Lily joined her, and then, from the hallway that bisected with the one she was standing in, she saw the large crowd of townspeople and the Mayor closing in on them.

Ellyce stepped backwards toward the door with the exit sign, determined that they were going to make it. Somehow, some way, she knew that her protectors were going to swoop in and fix this. All she had to do was just *believe*. She clutched Benson tighter, struggling to walk backwards.

“Hello, Ellyce,” Rupert called out.

Ellyce spun around, and pressed herself and Benson against the wall, refusing to let go.

Rupert was standing in front of the exit door with La’anah draped across his shoulder. Or at least what appeared to be La’anah. Ellyce looked into her eyes and saw something familiar—and then she knew. She remembered what Thomas had written about the mistaken identity, and she knew who La’anah was. And who Rupert was, for that matter. She knew why he had gone to extra lengths to be nice to her. Why he had reached out at the breakfast table and touched the springy curls on her head. Ellyce closed her eyes. The thought of it made her shudder. She didn’t want to believe it was true. She even prayed that it wasn’t. “When you remember,” she whispered aloud. Ellyce snapped open her eyes and looked around, wondering where they could run. There was an escape plan—there had to be, because this wasn’t how things were supposed to go.

Rupert cracked his neck and his fingers, slyly taking a step forward. He grinned at how easy it had been. The heirs to both houses were standing in front of him. And once he possessed her backpack and Thomas’ books, he would learn

the location of the map, and then he could make his way across the land of Thya to the gate that led into Sart. From Sart, he would advance his troops to the White City, lay siege to its bridal chamber, and put his own bride in place. He would be master of the realms, and nothing, including this timid, scared girl standing here, would stop him.

The thought of how easy it was made him laugh. She'd been foolish. But she was quite the little obedient follower—even to her own demise. He bet that she hadn't even realized that with the two of them together, they possessed all the power they needed to summon the support they needed. Though with Benson slightly incapacitated, they probably weren't going to be summoning much of anything, let alone the companion.

"Ellyce," La'anah said. "Just give up now while you still can. You could even join us."

"Oh, I don't think so," Rupert said, annoyed with La'anah's boldness. He raised his left hand, circling the air, silently signaling to Jenkins and Jim and Lily. The mad dash towards Benson and Ellyce had begun.

As they raced towards her, Ellyce closed her eyes and said these words aloud, "I am the heir to the seven realms of the Kingdom. I believe in the one true King. There is nothing they can do to me."

And then it happened. Time slowed and the door in front of where she and Benson stood snapped open, startling her. "You!" she exclaimed, staring at him in disbelief.

The gray-eyed man held his finger to his lips and shushed her once more. Then he quickly pierced the expanse between them, pulling her and Benson through the door and into a world that looked like nothing she had ever seen before.

Rupert sat back in the chair with his feet crossed at his ankles extended over the edge of the desk, staring at the doll in his hand. Every time he moved it, the little bell in its right hoof jingled—reminding him of how much he hated her.

La'anah opened the door slightly and slipped inside. "I thought this might help," she said, placing a cup of tea beside him on the desk. "I don't understand how they did it. Benson was out of it. So, how did they summon him?"

Rupert swallowed hard and growled. "Well, it seems that your scared, little timid girl is neither."

"You're blaming this on me?"

"No, dear. Not at all." His words were smooth and glassy.

"So, now what?" she asked cautiously, sitting on the corner of the desk at his feet. "What's your plan?"

Rupert pushed the chair back, letting his feet fall to the floor with a thud, and jovially smiled. "Now we wait."

"Wait?" she asked, not understanding. "Wait for what? They got away. He pulled them into the realm."

“Yes,” Rupert agreed. “But only into the first realm. And they have to find the key to the next one.”

“But that will lead to the next realm and put her on the path to finding Derek, and them uniting the realms.”

“Perhaps” he said, as he stood up. “But she’ll be back.”

He wrapped his hands around her shoulders and La’anah shifted uncomfortably on the desk. “How can you be so certain?”

Rupert bent over her shoulder and nuzzled his mouth against her ear. “Because I heard her say she’s an heir to the seven realms of the Kingdom.” His whispered words chilled her flesh, and then he bit down on the hanging portion of her ear lobe.

“Ow,” she cried, pulling away from him. Rubbing her earlobe, she pushed herself away from the desk and stood next to him. “So what? She could have gotten that information anywhere.”

“No, she’s seen the map,” Rupert told her flatly. “And she knows where it is. And because my sources tell me that she’s never been to any of the realms except for when his lackeys sent her to Sart, I know that the map is *here*.” Rupert stood up straight and smoothed the wrinkles of his button-down shirt. “And because I have this,” he said, pinching the stuffed animal’s foot between his fingers.

The matted creature dangled upside down by its hoof in the air between them. “It was a gift. And she’d never leave this ragged thing behind.” He dropped Penelope onto the desk and reached for the scissors. With quick precision, he tried stabbing the doll’s front foot, but his attempts to pierce the animal’s fabric were thwarted.

“It’s been enchanted,” La’anah exclaimed, enthusiastically.

“Yes. So, the importance of this *thing*,” he said, jiggling

the doll slightly, “should not be discounted.” He sat back in the chair and clasped his fingers behind his head. “So, you see, my dear, we still have a hand in play. And all of this—has simply been a series of moves, *in a much larger game*.

The End



Thank you for reading **The Promise** Book 1 of the series, *A War and A Wedding*. Developing a relationship with my readers is the very best thing about writing. So, if you enjoyed this book, please join my reading club. I occasionally send newsletters with details on new releases, special offers, and other tidbits about me and what I’m working on right now. You’ll find me online at www.melissaservice.com.

And then, please be sure to leave a review with your favorite retailer. If you’re reading this book on an e-reader, you can jump right there by clicking this link: [US](#). Thanks so much!

Here's a sneak peek at **THE CONGREGATION** Book Two
in the series, *A War and A Wedding*.



Histories and genealogies are a strange sort of thing. They record facts, such as names, dates, and places, but rarely do they record the truth of how any of the details on the page came into existence.

~ Thomas Jensen



Ellyce Jensen dangled her head off one side of the oversized velvety indigo wing-backed chair while her feet hung off the other. An exasperated sigh escaped her lips as she let her father's book fall to the floor.

It wasn't that Thomas' book was bad. On the contrary, the book had become quite entertaining now that she knew it was a series of puzzles that needed to be solved. But after three weeks of captivity with little to no answer as to why the gray-eyed man had pulled her and Benson through the tunnel door and why he had saved her—*again*—she was growing a little bored with this daily routine.

She had yet to meet someone who had enjoyed being forced to read, no matter how exciting the book was or how many new things they were learning about the author. And after the first week of being held hostage in this castled prison, she had expected to get some answers from her keeper, the tower guardian. But the old man barely spoke. He simply hobbled around her room instead, tinkering with pipes and other things and shushing her.

A lot.

So, there she sat in her room, day after day, staring up at the decoratively painted ceiling, wondering if all the shushing was an employment requirement of the man with gray eyes. She decided it must have been because when the tower guardian did speak, it was only to remind her that she needed to keep acquainting herself with her father's work.

"To prepare for the battle that is coming," he kept saying, as if that was the only phrase he knew. The man was literally worse than her English teacher at Hayvenhurst High, and he made Mr. "Comatose" Combs seem like a Rhodes Scholar.

Ellyce had naively thought that the man had been assigned to help her figure out the clues Thomas had left for her in his books. Clues that would lead her to Derek and then to Thomas himself. But it was clear after yesterday's afternoon visit that the old man had expected her to do the work of finding Derek and Thomas on her own. And then, to add insult to injury, he casually mentioned on his way out that she needed to stop stalling because once she had exhausted Thomas' books, he had another set she needed to start on.

"No way around it," he said, stopping her objections with his open palm. Neither the comment nor the gesture was well received. Ellyce had rolled her eyes at him as he walked away, but either the old man didn't see her, or he didn't care.

She suspected it was the latter.

Ellyce was beginning to suspect that this was how the Lady of Shalott felt. The woman who was locked away from the world was made famous by Lord Alfred Tennyson's 1832 poem. After spending years of her life weaving on a loom and wishing to be freed from the curse of her towered imprisonment, it was only after catching a glimpse of the brave, handsome knight, Sir Lancelot du Lac (Lancelot of the Lake), riding by the tower toward Camelot that she determined she'd

been without company long enough and left the confines of her tower prison.

Ellyce gulped and stretched out over the chair, retrieving the book from the floor. Things hadn't turn out so well for the woman once she was out of the tower. The Lady had found her knight in shining armor, but not before the tower curse had taken its toll. There would be no happy ending for the Lady of Shalott. But that's where her story and Ellyce's differed.

Ellyce settled into the chair, flipped to page 135 of Thomas' book, *Find Me*, and took a deep breath. Ellyce's Lancelot, the boy she knew as Benson Monroe, knew who she was, and he was in this storied castle with her. But she hadn't seen him since they had arrived, and she couldn't help but wonder what the gray-eyed man and his associates were doing with him.

And why they were keeping them apart.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Service grew up in a tiny, magical town in Illinois—total population: 800. In 2014, she brought her love of books, a Midwest hankering for a good Horseshoe Sandwich (also known as fat-on-a-plate) and Southern Sweet Tea to sunny SoCal.

About an hour north of Los Angeles, she lives with her husband, her kids, and their sweet, yet, slightly neurotic, standard poodle, Eisley. When she's not chasing Eisley or chauffeuring her teens around town, she's writing.

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ALSO BY MELISSA SERVICE

Worthy of Thorns

Anne Greene doesn't know what Peter Van Doorne's life was like back in Savannah. What she does know is that he's the youngest of five children born to a Southern preacher of Dutch origin, and that coercion pushed him from his charmed life in the South. As much as Anne is attracted to him, she sees red flags. *What is Peter not telling her?*

Stephanie

Music. Drugs. Redemption.

Stephanie Carlisle is a musically gifted, but troubled teen. After being delivered from a life of drugs and alcohol, she becomes an inspiration to a subculture that most of society would like to forget. When she befriends the equally talented, but troubled Josh Jacobs, she learns not every story comes with a happy ending.

