



Maria
Romana

The Gifted
ONES
A Reader

Book 1

The Gifted Ones: A Reader

Episode One of The Gifted Ones Series

by Maria Elizabeth Romana

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Prologue

The security guard at the front entrance gave Archer Orucov a polite nod and allowed him to pass. The fake badge, another masterpiece from his talented credentialing expert, had not even raised an eyebrow. More impressive than the badge, however, was the slate gray lab coat with its red and black embroidered logo. The uniform, a perfect replica of Food4Ever Industries' standard issue, had been carefully fashioned for Archer by his personal costuming consultant. Now that girl was a true artiste. Between the badge, the coat, and a pair of wire-rimmed glasses he had stuck on his nose, Archer was as inconspicuous as any other scientist breezing in and out of the building.

He would have to stifle his impatience, however, if he wanted to continue blending in as he was forced to wait in line before passing through the metal detectors. Like Martin Eggleston, the rest of these mealy-mouthed drones were so annoyingly prompt in their arrival to work that they were overwhelming the capacity of the

company's multi-layered security system—a fact that Archer had been counting on. When the RFID chip on his badge correctly registered as a duplicate when he waved it over the scanner, he looked up at the harried guard behind the desk and shrugged. “Sorry, my fault. Double scan.” She barely glanced at him before pressing an override button.

Once past that point, he relaxed, maintaining a carefree cadence as he crossed the sparkling marble floors leading toward the labs and offices. As he strode past the first bank of elevators, he caught a glimpse of his own smug reflection in their shiny mirrored doors. Was it true what they all thought about him? What Lucy's sister had spat in his face so many years before? That he was pure evil? He laughed to himself. No, of course it wasn't. No one is pure evil, except perhaps those poor souls whose genes have rendered them incapable of empathy or human feeling. But everyone bears hatred for that which they fear. And everyone fears power and intelligence and cunning beyond their own. They would be foolish not to.

Still...even he had never hatched a plan quite so cold, so deliberate, and yet so ingenious that his foe had no means of escape. It wasn't really sporting, was it? Unfortunately for dear Dr. Eggleston, Archer believed that all's fair in love and war.

As Archer rounded a corner, he shifted his view downward, ostensibly studying a hand-held electronic device, to avoid making eye contact with a couple of chatty scientists. He lifted his head briefly as he

approached the end of the hallway, mentally consulting the floor map he had committed to memory, then turned to his left. After counting two, three, four doorways, he stopped, waved the badge in front of a card reader, and entered the lab without a hitch.

He paused a moment, confirming that he was alone and verifying the layout. It was just as he'd been told. Modest-sized hyperbaric chambers lined both sides of the room and the back wall. An assortment of plant life blossomed in each glass case—vines, bushes, and saplings, all noticeably over-sized and bursting with colorful flowers, fruits, vegetables, and nuts. Bright sunlight bathed the plants through the room's high glass ceiling, carefully tempered with just the right amount of ultra-violet protection. He had to hand it to Martin Eggleston; the man's work was on the cutting edge of biospherics. Too bad his Nobel Prize would have to be awarded posthumously.

Archer scanned the chambers, then selected one with a couple of dead leaves scattered across the bottom. He slipped his hand into the pocket of the lab coat and withdrew a plastic case. After a final glance over his shoulder, he popped open the case and lifted out a tiny clear plastic disk. He pressed the disk into the corner of the glass top of the chamber, then stepped back to assure himself that it was unnoticeable. Then he pulled out his tablet again and checked that the disk's micro receiver was operating.

With the disk in place, he headed to the observation room to wait. The observation room was a

level above and encased in soundproof glass, so he only had to worry about being seen, not heard, and he wasn't all that concerned about being seen. At least not by Dr. Eggleston. If the good doctor happened to look skyward in his last moments on this earth, at least he would know who was responsible for making it so. Archer knew he wouldn't be able to revel in that moment too long, of course; he would have to get himself safely out the fire exit on the back side of the observation room.

He glanced at the clock through the observation room window. Almost nine. He knew the painfully punctual Martin Eggleston would soon walk through the laboratory door to check on his precious plants, and he also knew that Lucy Eggleston would be on the other side of town, with no hope of fighting her way through Atlanta's morning traffic for at least another hour. For the life of him, Archer would never understand what the lovely Dr. Lucy saw in her goofy glorified gardener.

Archer knew she had run to that little wimp only to hide from her true feelings. Perhaps they were feelings she couldn't comprehend or was not equipped to deal with at the time. She was so young then, still in graduate school, still figuring out what she wanted to do with her life. Archer, of course, had tried to explain it to her, to explain that they belonged together, that he was the only man truly worthy of her love and attention. Together, they could have done anything. Still could. He and Lucy and little Elodie—kind of a Gifted Royal Family.

Granted, he was somewhat younger himself back then, and perhaps a bit awkward in his approach.

He wrinkled up his nose a moment, remembering that fateful evening. Archer had planned it all out—roses, wine, and candles—the perfect romantic encounter. Unfortunately, Lucy had not seen it quite the same way. He shook off the memory of her anguish and tears.

Rapid movement in the lab below pulled him back to the present. Aha, the goofy gardener had finally come to tend his plants. Dr. Eggleston crossed the lab and began studying the contents of the first chamber. Archer debated about how long he should wait and observe his prey, but then decided he was simply being greedy. No one else was permitted in the biospherics lab, but there was no reason to be careless. He made a few quick swipes on his tablet and then focused on the third hyperbaric chamber, where the disk began focusing a tiny band of sunlight onto the floor of the chamber. It would take only moments for the heat from that band to cause a dead leaf to spark, and in that concentrated oxygen environment, only a spark was necessary.

The doctor was too engrossed in his experiment to notice Archer's plan unfolding, as Archer had known he would be, so he supposed he would not have the thrill of seeing the doctor's terrified face before he left. He was about to head toward the exit door when the doctor moved unexpectedly. He was turning back toward the door. Why?

Lucy!

Dear God, Lucy! What was she doing there? How had she gotten into the lab?

Dr. Eggleston appeared startled and angry as he

turned to see who had entered, but she ran to him, and he embraced her. She was distraught, shaken, tearful. They began to speak in earnest.

Archer pounded on the glass. “Lucy, Lucy, GET OUT!” But of course, the room was soundproof. She couldn’t hear him. The couple were completely focused on one another and completely unaware of Archer. Archer grabbed his tablet and began punching in codes. No, no, stop it now! Abort! Abort! He had to shut down the signal. His eyes flew to the chamber with the disk. A tiny line of smoke was rising from one of the dead leaves. There was nothing he could do. He couldn’t stop it now. He pounded with all his might one more time. “Lu-u-u-uc-ee-ee-eeey!”

More smoke. He could see it building, swirling, and they were oblivious. He had to run. He couldn’t stay. Just as he turned to go, Lucy glanced upward, in his direction. Her eyes flew wide with recognition. Archer spun on his heels, racing for the door.

Chapter One: Reading

Seven years later...

“El? Ellie?” Where had she gotten off to? Grace didn’t want to treat her sixteen-year-old niece like a child, but every time Elodie Eggleston disappeared for more than a few seconds, the fear would sneak up on her again.

“Here I am, Aunt Grace.”

Grace spun around to see Ellie just stepping back out from behind a street vendor’s stall. She breathed a sigh of relief, then tightened the thin sweater around her torso, bristling against the chill. March was almost over, but she wasn’t quite going out like a lamb.

“Omigod, you’ve got to see this!” Ellie waved emphatically to Grace, drawing her in. “This guy’s got an original set of the collected works of the Brönte sisters from 1907! Can you believe it?” Ellie pointed to a clear, locked case in the vendor’s stall, behind which could be seen a set of several antique-looking volumes. Ellie

sighed, “How cool is that?”

Grace stepped up behind her, peered over her shoulder, and tried to sound enthusiastic, “Oh my, yes. *Totally* cool.”

Ellie made a wry face. “Okay, so not everybody gets as excited over old books as I do.”

The vendor cut in, “Well, I do, young lady, and I’ve got plenty more back at the shop on twenty-ninth street, if you’d like to look. Even a signed first edition of *Wuthering Heights*.”

Ellie’s jaw dropped. “No way.”

“Way.”

“And it probably costs a thousand dollars,” muttered Grace, interrupting the antique-book love fest.

The vendor looked offended. “Are you kidding me? It’s worth twenty times that! I keep it in the safe.” Then he smiled at Ellie. “Of course, I might take it out for the right customer...”

Grace groaned and pointed to the paperback in Ellie’s hand. “How much do we owe you?”

“Uh, that’ll be six thirty-four with tax.”

“That, we can afford.” While the vendor slid her card through his reader, Grace turned to Ellie and motioned toward a nearby coffee shop. “I think we need a coffee break.”

Ellie nodded her agreement, but then asked, “Can I ple-e-ase get a latte this time?”

“Oh, honey, those things are loaded with caffeine. How about a nice fruit smoothie?”

Ellie just laughed at what she probably

considered overprotective behavior, then grabbed Grace's arm and pulled her into the crowded shop. Most of the tables were filled, and there was a long line for ordering. Ellie gave Grace a little shove towards the line. "You go order. I'll hover obnoxiously until someone clears out, and then jump on their table."

As Grace stood waiting for their drinks to be prepared, she observed Ellie's technique. Ellie stood by the window, looking nonchalant, but with her eyes darting about behind her thick lenses. With no apparent warning, she suddenly dodged through the crowd and pounced on a table just as its occupants stood up.

"Good eye, kiddo," said Grace, as she set their drinks down. "I saw that move to get the table. Impressive."

Ellie shrugged. "It's easy. You just have to watch people and tune in to their intentions. You can tell when somebody's gonna leave. Or when they're mad. Or when they're bored. Or whatever." She unwrapped her straw and stuffed it into the frozen beverage. "Just like with the teachers at school."

Grace was only half-listening. "What do the teachers do?"

"Well, you know, when they're lecturing or giving you assignments or talking about a test, they give everything away. All you have to do is watch their faces, and you can see exactly what they think is important and what they're gonna ask on the test and stuff. Then if you just focus on those things, you can skip all the rest, and still make straight As." As soon as she finished saying it,

she bit her lip, and added, “Uh, not that I do that, of course. I mean, the part about skipping stuff.”

Grace laughed. “El, I don’t care if you’re reading their minds, as long as you make the grades you need to get a college scholarship.”

Ellie rolled her eyes. “Nobody can read minds, Aunt Grace.” She stuck the straw in her mouth and sucked deeply for a moment, her face registering the pain of an icy overload. After she swallowed, she picked up the train of thought, “But people are easy enough to figure out.”

“They are, huh?”

“Uh-huh. Like, look at that cute guy standing in the corner. He’s so-o-o into you, Aunt Grace.”

“Okay, now I know you’re making things up.”

“I am not. He’s been watching you since we walked in here. Look how warm his face is. Like sunset at Hilton Head, ya know? Warm and peaceful and calming.” Ellie’s face took on a warm, peaceful glow as she thought about it. “If I wasn’t here, he would have totally moved in on you.”

“Ellie!” Grace shifted in seat, turning herself more towards the window, so the cute guy in the corner couldn’t see the warm glow on *her* face.

“You know, I could leave,” Ellie offered. “I can go back outside to the book stall, so you can talk to him.” Ellie started to get up.

Grace grabbed her arm, then lowered her voice, “Sit back down, Ellie. Nobody’s going anywhere. You’ve obviously been reading too many of those old romance

novels lately. You're starting to see things! And...my love life, or lack thereof, is nothing you need to worry about."

Grace was always looking for clues to what Ellie's Gift would turn out to be. On a day like today, she was pretty sure she knew—Ellie was clearly a Creator. Imagination beyond belief. She'd probably end up writing the next billion-seller kids' fantasy series like that English woman, J. R. Bowling. All Grace had to do was keep her safe and happy and healthy long enough to let it happen.

"Aunt Grace." Ellie laid a hand on top of Grace's and spoke softly, "You think I'm just goofing around, but I'm not. I'm serious."

Grace gave the girl her full attention. "I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to make light of what you were saying. It's just—"

"I know. You don't have time to date." Ellie made air quotes around the remark. "Or so you've been saying for the last, how many years now?"

"Seven years."

"Yeah, seven years. Mom and Dad have been gone for seven years, and in that time, you've done nothing but take care of me. Me, me, me. I'm okay now, really. I can make it for five minutes without you. You deserve to have a life, too."

Grace shook her head. Such insights from a sixteen year old. "Sweetheart—"

"No. Listen to me. I'm gonna get one of those big scholarships and go off to college in a couple years,

and your job with me will be finished, and then where will you be? You're not getting any younger, you know. You're gonna be, like, what this year? Thirty-five?"

Grace gave her lopsided smile. "Thirty-four," she corrected. "I suppose I *should* start checking out those old folks homes..."

"You know what I mean. You've spent your primo dating years watching out for some stupid little kid —"

"Ellie, you're not some stupid little kid. You're my sister's only child, and I adore you. You know how blessed I feel to have you in my life..." But she could see that Ellie was no longer listening.

"Uh-oh. Don't look now, Aunt Grace, but Cutie Pie is getting his courage up. He's heading this way. I'm running to the restroom." Ellie bolted from the table before Grace could stop her.

"Excuse me, Miss?"

Grace felt her cheeks flush. She gathered her composure and looked up at a friendly, open face. Warm, just like Ellie said.

"Are those your gloves? I believe they fell on the floor." The man squatted down right next to her, picked up the gloves, and offered them to her. "I didn't want you to leave them behind." He lingered longer than necessary in that position, locking eyes with Grace.

Oh my, wasn't he a handsome devil? The kind of guy you'd see on TV or in the movies, like that Cloomey fellow. For a brief second, Grace's mind ran off on its own, imagining herself walking with him, laughing

with him, being held in his arms. Then she shook it off. She gave him a brief smile and accepted the gloves, standing, as she did so. Her voice was flat, “Thanks. ’Preciate it. Well, I’ve got to run. Gotta get my niece home.” She pushed past him and moved toward the restroom without looking back.

Ellie met her halfway there. “Aunt Grace,” she whined. “Why’d you do that? I saw the whole thing. You broke his little heart. Mr. Sunset turned into Mr. Cloudy Skies right before my eyes. You could’ve at least talked to the poor guy for a few minutes. You probably crushed his confidence forever. He’ll never approach another woman. He’s going to live in a monastery.”

Grace started laughing. “Oh, the drama! El, you are so funny. C’mon, I think he’ll survive. Let’s get home.”

The two women stopped at their table to pick up their abandoned cups. Grace grabbed hers and turned to walk out, but Ellie didn’t move. Grace turned back around. “Ellie? What is it? What’s wrong?”

Ellie was staring out the window. She pointed toward the street outside. “That man...”

Grace tried to follow her direction. “Which man? The Cutie Pie?”

“No, not him. Another guy. Watching us. Closely. He’s gone now.” Her eyes were still fixed outside the window.

“Another warm-as-sunset face?” Grace grinned at her niece.

Ellie turned toward her, but she wasn’t smiling.

“No, not warm at all. Cold as ice.”

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“You didn’t see *anything*? You followed them for six hours and saw none of the things we told you to look for?” Archer Orucov sounded incredulous as he dropped back into the soft leather sofa.

Kumika Asano, seated beside him, was not so easily frustrated. She remained upright, her long legs tucked under her, and narrowed her eyes at the tall man in the chair opposite them. Her tone was brusque, “I gave you a list, Wyatt. Surely, you saw something. She’s sixteen; her Gift must be manifesting by now. Come now, think! Was she friendly or snotty? Outgoing or awkward? Who did she talk to? What did they do all day?”

Wyatt bristled under her rapid fire questioning. “I told you, they shopped—street vendors, mostly. Vintage clothes, starving artists, an antique bookseller, stuff like that. Then they went for coffee. The aunt talked to one guy in the coffee shop for like, ten seconds. End of story. The kid did nothing out of the ordinary. Seems like a totally normal teenager to me.”

Archer grunted. “Like you have any idea what a normal teenager does.”

Kumika ignored his input and continued probing, “Well, what kind of art did they look at? Which books? Fiction? Non-fiction? Bestsellers? Did they end up buying anything?”

Wyatt dug into his rear pocket and pulled out his phone. He scrolled through a few pages. “Uh, they spent a long time talking to a lady who makes earrings out of scrap metal, and...” He thumbed his phone a couple times. “The kid was drooling over some books in a locked case. Somebody Brantee? Bruntay?” He looked up at them and shrugged.

Kumika rolled her eyes. “Brönte. Emily Brönte. Or Charlotte or Anne.”

Wyatt wrinkled up his nose. “Who?”

“Oh, dear God, do you even *know* how to read?”

Wyatt started to rise in his chair. “Hey look, you little—”

Archer sat forward and spread his hands out between them. “Children! Cool it. This is getting us nowhere.” He gave Kumika a sidelong glance and spoke under his breath, “Not everyone has had the benefit of a classical education.” Then he looked back at Wyatt. “Did they actually buy anything? Jillian can get us the details.”

“Sorry, Arch.” Wyatt sat back down, pushed his bangs out of his eyes, and consulted his device again. “Yeah, they bought one book, paperback. His sign said Harlan’s Books, somewhere on Twenty-ninth.”

All eyes shifted to a short, curvy woman sitting cross-legged on the floor. She was typing rapidly into one of several devices she had arranged in front of her on the coffee table. She spoke without looking up, “Harlan’s Fine Books and Antiquities, 342 West Twenty-ninth Street in Little Five Points.”

“Yeah, that sounds like it.”

She typed a few more strokes, scanned the results on her screen, and reported back to them, “He’s got 2,312 antique books in the store right now, and 10,845 inexpensive, used books. He also has a very valuable first edition collection of the Brönte sisters, as well as twenty-seven individual first editions—ten from Emily Brönte, two from Anne—”

“Jill!” Kumika interrupted her diatribe. “Just get to the freakin’ point! What book did they buy yesterday?”

Jillian shriveled a bit, then spoke quietly, still staring at her screen, “One sale for six dollars and thirty-four cents at one ten PM on March twenty-third. It was a 2007 printing of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by William Shakespeare, published by Anthem House, and with complete annotations by Dr. Mary—”

Archer waved a hand at her, cutting her off. “Thank you, my dear. That is sufficient. Oh, and when you get a chance, find out what he wants for that Brönte Collection. Then offer him thirty percent less, in cash.” Kumika gave him an odd look, so he shrugged. “I thought it might make a nice birthday present.”

Kumika made the wise choice not to respond, and instead addressed the group, “Okay, so she bought the Shakespeare book for school. So we’re back where we started—which is nowhere.” Speaking almost to herself, she added, “Are we *absolutely* sure this kid’s got the gene? No baby-switching at the hospital or anything?”

Archer turned toward her with an amused look on his face. “Baby-switching, seriously? Aside from the Coke-bottle glasses, that young lady is the spitting image of her beautiful mother, with only the slightest hint of Daddy’s eyes. She *has* the gene.” He reached toward the table for his scotch and took a healthy swallow, then continued, “The only question is, how many copies? One...or two?”

Jillian piped up, finally lifting her eyes to face them, “Statistically speaking, Dr. Orucov, the child has a fifty percent chance of—”

Archer gave her a patronizing smile. “Yes, Jillian, I am well aware that she is equally likely to be a One or a Two.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

Kumika stifled her annoyance. She had little patience for Archer’s charity and diplomacy, particularly with that well-fed techno-fiend or the brain-dead muscle man. Still, she had to admit, the little chubbette was Gifted. No question about it. Talking to Jill was like talking to a lamp, but the girl could make any database give up its secrets. Kumika supposed she would tolerate Jill as long as the little twit never forgot her place.

Archer looked up into his head, then focused on Jillian again. “Jillian, you’ve been keeping up with Ellie’s school records, right?”

“Yes, sir. I check on her progress weekly, even daily sometimes.”

“Good, good. Are you seeing any patterns? Any signs of a preference or particular ease with a subject?”

Math? History? The Sciences? I wouldn't be surprised at all if she turned out to be another Marie Curie." He grinned as he tossed back more scotch. There was a note of pride in his voice.

Jillian grabbed a tablet off the tabletop and ran her finger down the screen. She read the information off without looking up. "As you know, she's a very good student, Dr. Orucov. She makes good marks in all her classes and belongs to a variety of clubs. She also recently took part in the school play."

"The play? Really? Was she any good?"

"Mmmmm..." Jillian returned to the computer, her fingers flying across the keyboard. After a moment, she summarized, "Apparently not. She had a small part in the chorus, and at the third and final performance, she tripped over a footlight and fell off the stage."

Kumika started laughing out loud but stopped herself when Archer mumbled, "Creatives...useless Gift anyway."

Wyatt, who had been quiet for several minutes, made a suggestion. "What about sports? That's where I found my Gift—football, baseball, fishing—"

Kumika gave him a look of disgust. "Fishing is *not* a sport. It's a pastime for old men."

Wyatt spat back, "It is so a sport! Have you ever seen—"

"Enough!" Archer commanded their attention. "Kumi, just because you have a Gift for communication doesn't mean you always have to use it."

Kumika set her chin, folded her arms across her

chest, and shot daggers at Wyatt with her eyes.

“Anyway,” Archer continued, “we’ve already covered the sports issue. The kid tried tennis, swimming, and golf. It’s just not her thing. So...she’s not physically Gifted, and she’s not creatively inclined. Maybe she’s a Healer or a Nurturer.”

Kumika shook her head. “Doubt it. She’s afraid of cats. Hates ’em.”

Wyatt shrugged. “Nobody likes cats.”

But Jillian contradicted him, “Oh no, Wyatt, that’s not accurate. Research shows that over sixty percent—”

“Jill!” Kumika threw her an aggravated look.

“Sorry.” She shrank back into her shell.

“All right, fine.” Archer was apparently ignoring them all and moving on with the discussion. “We’ve established that Elodie is most likely a Scholar of some type, like her mother. We don’t need to know exactly what her Gift is. We just need to make sure that we’re the ones to nurture it. She needs to know who she is and what she can become. It’s time to get planning. I know what we have to do, and we can’t let that dim-witted aunt of hers get in our way. Her work is done. Elodie is ours now.”

Chapter Two: The New Kid in Town

“You ready, El?”

Ellie was seated at her aunt’s white, antique dressing table, leaning in toward the mirror and struggling to insert a contact lens into her eye. “Hang on, Aunt Grace, I’ve almost got it.” Ellie dropped her hands, sat back in the chair, and blinked several times. “Whaddya think?”

Grace, who was now standing behind her, met her eyes in the mirror. She smiled softly. “It does make a big difference, honey. Now people can see those beautiful gray eyes of yours.”

“Thanks so much for letting me get them, Aunt Grace. I know they were expensive, but at least now I don’t have to be a total freak.”

Grace laughed and picked up the curling iron. As she wrapped the first section of Ellie’s hair, she began, “Okay, honey, so tell me again, exactly where are you girls going tonight, and who will be there?”

Ellie let out an exaggerated sigh. She had long

since accepted that the death of her mother Lucy had left baby sister Grace fearful of the world and everyone in it. She answered dutifully, “We’re going over to Nathan’s house to eat pizza and watch *The Vampire Duchess III*, and then we’re just gonna hang out for a while and play foosball and stuff, okay? And before you ask, yes, Nathan’s parents will be there.”

Grace rolled the next section of hair and held it carefully away from Ellie’s head. “Good. I like them.”

“You should; they’re even stricter than you are.” Ellie gave her aunt a devilish grin in the mirror.

Grace gave her one back. “I know. That’s why I’ve always encouraged your friendship with that boy. So who else will be there?” She unrolled the iron and laid the curl along Ellie’s neck.

“Well, me, Karen, Wanda, and Liane, of course. And Liane’s baby brother, ’cause otherwise her parents wouldn’t let her come, and Nathan and Tommy and Jammer, and this other kid, Aiden.”

Grace looked up in her head. Ellie assumed she was mentally matching faces with names. “Tommy, I remember, and Jammer...is he the boy who wants to be a professional surfer?”

Ellie giggled. “Uh, yeah. Not the sharpest bulb in the chandelier, but he’s really funny.”

“Okay, now I remember. You know, I think he has a crush on you—”

Ellie cranked her head around and looked directly up at Grace, nearly yanking the curling iron out of her hand. “Aunt Grace, get real! Surfer Boy forgets

I'm alive until he needs help in Geometry. He only chases cheerleaders." She turned back toward the mirror and picked up one of Grace's lipsticks. She spoke matter-of-factly as she played with it, "Guys don't go for dorky girls like me. I mean, not *that* way. Especially not ones wearing big ugly glasses and with a face full of stupid freckles." Ellie wrinkled up her nose, studying her reflection in the mirror.

Grace rolled some loose tendrils around Ellie's face. "Honey, you just wait. You've already gotten rid of the glasses. The rest will come. Believe me, your science-geek mom was a bit awkward in high school, too, but she was extremely popular in college, and fighting them off with a stick after that." She leaned over, placing her face right next to Ellie's, and spoke into the mirror, "And you look just like her."

"Oh, yeah, I wish." Ellie reached across the dressing table. She touched the photograph that sat just below the mirror, a youthful shot of her mother. In it, Lucy's strawberry-blonde hair fell gently over her shoulders, surrounding her oval-shaped face and accenting her pale skin. Her clear blue eyes jumped out of the image, as though she could see right through to the present day. Ellie felt her nose tickling and saw it turning red in the mirror. She quickly shifted her eyes over to some of Grace's jewelry and make-up. Anything to get her mind off her mother.

She supposed that Grace had noticed it as well, since she promptly changed the subject. "So, uh, who was that last boy you named? Aiken?"

“Aiden. Aiden Orcutt.”

“Right. I’m having trouble placing him. When did I meet him?”

Uh-oh. Ellie bit her lip. She’d been so hoping that lack of familiarity would slip by unnoticed. “Um, I don’t think you have. He’s new. He just moved here from, uh, Kansas, I think. But he’s really nice, Aunt Grace. Nathan said so. They’ve been hanging out.”

Grace set the curling iron down. “Now, wait a minute, Ellie. You know our rules—”

“I know, I know, but I haven’t had a chance—” The doorbell interrupted them, and Ellie jumped up. “Please, Aunt Grace, just this once, okay? I promise you can meet him at school next week, when you come pick me up. I’ll make sure. And I won’t be late coming home, not even five minutes. And I’ll text you every hour. Okay? Please?”

Grace sighed deeply and closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she gave her head a little shake. “Okay, sweetheart. Go on. But I do expect to hear from you, every hour, on the hour.”

Ellie grinned, giving her aunt a quick kiss on the cheek. “Thanks, Aunt Grace, you’re the best!”

She raced out of the room and started down the stairs, but not without hearing her aunt’s final helicopter warning, “And grab your sweater on the way out. I know it’s April now, but it’s still chilly!”

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As Ellie bounded down the stairs, Grace hurried across the hall to watch out the front window. The street below was lined with tightly-packed row houses, mostly early twentieth century in soft pastels with ornate trims. The tall skinny houses with their minimal lawns and scraggly trees—often ringed with black iron fences—gave the neighborhood a semblance of small town community, despite being minutes from the big city of Atlanta. Grace was happy enough here. She wasn't a fan of densely populated metro living, but if one wanted to disappear, it was a swell way to do it.

Ellie's friend Wanda had pulled up right out front, double-parking long enough for Ellie to run out and hop in. Grace could see the three other girls and the tag-along baby brother packed into the car as they drove off. She scanned the street, of course. Nothing out of the ordinary. Reluctantly, she stepped away from the window, hoping that Ellie understood that all her Mother-Henning had nothing to do with trust; it was just about keeping the girl safe.

Grace made her way down the stairs and into the parlor, stopping for a moment to admire the way the setting sun was bouncing around the room as it passed through the stained glass bordering the front window. This pretty old Victorian had so many layers of charm, no one would ever guess the kind of security system that lay beneath it. Nor would she want them to; if people knew how well-protected their home was, they might start wondering what there was to be protected.

Grace walked over to the old rolltop desk in the

corner. The top stuck, as usual, as she tried to unroll it, but she liked to think of that as just one of the many charms of an antique. She'd learned a lot about antique furniture since moving to this artsy-fartsy section of Atlanta—mostly which pieces were truly valuable collectibles, and which pieces, like the rolltop desk, looked just as nice, but could be had for a song. Once she got the rolltop to behave, she pulled up the matching chair, opened her laptop, and headed straight for Ellie's school website. She used her parent login to do some basic recon on Aiden Orcutt, then started a wider search. She found his FacePlace page and ferreted out some general information—previous schools, sports, friends, a few awards, a few photos. He appeared to be a good student, respectful, articulate, and apparently, never in trouble. Not a bad looking kid, either. Maybe he and Ellie would hit it off a bit, and Ellie would stop thinking that “boys don't like dorky girls.”

So good, she could let it go now and relax. Well, almost. She took her search just a little deeper, to Aiden's parents. That is, she tried. But she couldn't find a name or a picture or even a reference to an occupation or employer. Odd. But not that odd. Not everyone wanted their whole life story on the internet for all the world to see, especially folks in Grace's generation. Maybe Aiden's parents weren't into social media, or maybe they had different last names, or maybe they were dead, like Ellie's parents. Now wouldn't that be an unfortunate thing to have in common?

Grace shook her head, clearing out the morbid

thought, and pushed herself away from the desk. Surely, she was just being her usual paranoid self. She felt it was a forgivable trait, considering the experiences that had led her to this life.

She decided she needed to take her mind off of it, and headed into the kitchen. A bowl of popcorn and a couple movies would do the trick—maybe for once, she could indulge in a silly comedy or a chick flick, instead of those classic black and white films that Ellie adored. By the time she was finished watching, Ellie would be home again, safe and sound. Grace walked into the kitchen, got out the popcorn, and poured some oil into the popper. She stared absently out the kitchen window at their tiny backyard while she waited for the oil to heat. It was almost dark out now. She glanced at the kitchen clock. Not quite time for Ellie’s first text.

The oil was taking just a bit too long. Grace’s mind started tossing out alternative explanations for New Boy’s absentee parents. Frequent travelers? Super religious? Secret service spy jobs? Uh, no, probably not. Dammit. Could she ever shut off the nagging voices in the back of her brain? She hurried back to her computer. She really didn’t want to ask for help, not from *them* anyway, but Ellie’s welfare was more important than any old grudges Grace was hauling around. She typed a few keystrokes, then waited until a familiar face appeared on the screen. She adjusted the volume so she could comprehend the Indian accent.

“Grace Nagle! It has been so long. Good to see you, mishti!”

Mishti. After all these years, he still greeted her with Indian pleasantries. Grace gave him a weak smile. “Hello, Rishi. Yes, sorry I haven’t been in touch. You know how it is—busy, busy, busy.”

“No problem, my friend. Your face is always a welcome sight. What can I do for you today?”

“I need a little background check. I’m sure it’s nothing, but you know I don’t have the reach you do.”

He grinned. “No one does, my lady. You have come to the right place. So, which young man are we checking up on tonight?”

She gave him a wry grin. “How did you know?”

“The lovely Elodie is sweet sixteen now. It is not hard to figure out what you would be wanting.”

“Mmm, s’pose not. Okay, his name is Aiden Orcutt.” She started typing again as she spoke, “I’m sending you what I’ve got so far. He’s a new student at Ellie’s school, and he’s been chumming around with her friend Nathan Woodruff. They’re all over at Nathan’s house tonight.” She paused to mentally chastise herself again for asking, then continued, “He sounds like a nice enough boy. I just want to double-check, ya know?”

“Of course, I completely understand. You can never be too safe. Give me a few minutes, all right? I will ring you back.”

The screen went black right about the time the smell of burning oil reached Grace’s nose. “Oh, crap!” Grace jumped up and ran into the kitchen, where a cloud of black smoke was rising from the pan on the stove. She grabbed the oven mitts, pulled the pan off the stove, and

ran out the back door with it, just in time to set off the smoke alarm.

By the time she had dumped the burning oil, reset the alarm, shooed a stray cat off the back porch, and aired out the kitchen, she had to admit, she had managed to get her mind off Ellie's new friend for a while. She checked the clock again. In fact, it had been thirty minutes since she'd spoken with Rishi. The man was nothing if not efficient, so why hadn't he called her back?

The fear returned with a vengeance. Grace hurried over to the desk and started typing without even sitting down. Before she could dial him up, however, an incoming call chimed. She clicked her assent and started speaking, "Rishi, what did you—" But the face that appeared wasn't Rishi. "Elmyra? I-I wasn't expecting—"

"Elmyra." The older woman made a face. "For heaven's sake, dear, I wish you wouldn't call me that. People will figure out how old I really am."

Grace tried to smile. "Sorry, it's just, uh, I haven't got time to chat. I need to make a call—"

"You mean to Rishi? No need. He called us."

Grace couldn't hide her annoyance. "He did? Just because I had a little attack of paranoia..."

"No, dear, not paranoia. You were right."

"Right, what?! What is it? Tell me!" A wave of heat washed over her, and a growing panic snatched her in its grasp.

That must've been obvious to Granny, who immediately jumped into virtual calming mode, "Now,

Grace dear, take it easy. It's under control. Rishi's doing some more research for us, but in the meantime, I've dispatched some assistance—”

“Assistance? What—I don't understand.” Grace gripped the edge of the desk for stability. Her head was spinning. Granny's words weren't making sense. All she knew was that something was wrong, and her Ellie was in trouble. Still holding onto the desk, she pushed back and stood. “Elmyra, I've got to go.”

“Wait, Grace, don't! We've got this. Just sit tight. I sent Angel and—”

“No! Ellie's my responsibility, and I'm going after her!”

Since she was already half-way out the door, it was unlikely that Granny heard her.

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“Now, you will be mine...*forever...* mwahahahaha!”

And with that, the Vampire Duchess dug her long black nails into a handsome young man's bare back, then proceeded to sink her fangs into his neck. As she pulled back to admire her handiwork, the camera zoomed in on the trail of blood oozing out the side of her mouth.

Ellie made a retching noise and jerked her head away from the screen. “Ugh! Did they have to go there?”

Wanda laughed at her. “Oh, El, you're such a wimp. It's not like you didn't know it was coming. You've seen this three times.”

“Shhhh!” Liane chastised them, “I’m trying to listen. This is my favorite part. I love seeing the Duchess get melted by the flame-thrower.”

“Oh, great, now you’ve ruined it for me!” Liane’s baby brother threw his arms up in disgust and then nudged Ellie. “Hey, El, can you pass the Crunchos?”

She picked up the bowl, saw that it was empty, and decided to go refill it for him. She really didn’t need to see the Vampire Duchess get melted this time. In fact, she hated creepy horror movies and would much have preferred an old Tracy-Hepburn flick, or maybe Myrna Loy or Jimmy Stewart. Now those were movies.

She found the Crunchos bag on the counter of the little mini kitchen that Nathan’s family’s rec room offered. His parents had fixed it up with a stereo, a wide screen TV, game tables, and some big soft couches, making it an ideal place for a group of young friends to hang out. It was probably also an ideal way for Nathan’s parents to keep tabs on him, just the way Aunt Grace did Ellie.

“Here ya go, kid.” Ellie slid back into her spot on the floor, with her back resting against the couch, and handed Liane’s brother the bowl. The boy’s only response was to stuff a handful of the chips into his mouth and make some kind of grunting noise as he did so.

“I think that was a thank you.”

Ellie looked up, startled, at the young man who had spoken. It was the new kid, Aiden. He was sitting on

the couch, on the other side of Liane's brother. It was actually the first time he'd spoken directly to Ellie. She gave him a brief smile, and then quickly shifted her focus back to the movie, wondering if she should respond somehow. She was so-o-o not good at interacting with guys her own age. Well, except geeky ones like Nathan, whom she'd known for years.

After two or three more mouthfuls of Crunchos, Liane's brother spoke up again, "Hey, when are we gonna get some food? I'm starving."

Ellie quirked an eyebrow at him. "How could you be starving? You've eaten non-stop since we got here."

"I'm a growing boy!"

Nathan spoke up, "Nah, El, he's right. It's time we got some real food into everybody." He checked his watch. "My mom ordered the pizza for eight. It should be ready in a few minutes. You and I can go get it."

Nathan's new friend sat forward on the couch. "I'd be happy to pick it up...if Ellie will come with me." Aiden looked directly at Ellie, giving her the slightest grin.

Ellie felt her whole face flushing and quickly looked down at her jeans, focusing on an imaginary crumb stuck there. What was up with this guy? He was painfully cute with his dimpled cheeks, hazel eyes, and sandy colored hair tossed every which way. He was wa-a-y cooler than any other boy who'd ever paid any attention to her, and there had been precious few of those—mostly, as she'd pointed out to her aunt, boys looking

for help with their homework or maybe a dependable lab partner. None had ever flirted with her the way Aiden seemed to be doing. If only she had a clue how to flirt back.

“Oh, I don’t know. My Aunt Grace wouldn’t—”

“Oh, go on, El,” Wanda goaded her. “It’s a ten minute ride. You’ll be right back.” Wanda rolled her eyes in Aiden’s direction, telling Ellie she should take a chance on their handsome new friend. Of course, Wanda thought sneaking out her bedroom window at night to hang out at the video arcade was a good idea, too.

“I-I really shouldn’t.” She looked at Aiden, “You don’t know my aunt. She hasn’t met you, and—”

He made a pitiful face. “Really? She wouldn’t approve? She wouldn’t want you to show a little kindness to the new guy in town?”

Cripes. Talk about pressure.

Jammer jumped up, speaking through a mouthful of cheesy puffs, “Hey, if she won’t go, can I come? I’m dying to try that ride.” He moved to the window, pulled back the curtain, and pointed to some kind of snazzy red sports car parked in Nathan’s driveway.

Even Nathan seemed determined to push Ellie out the door. “Oh, go ahead, El. We’ll cover for you, if your aunt calls my mom or anything.”

“Well...okay. Let me just text her one more time before we go, so she won’t worry.”

“You do that, honey.” Aiden put his hand lightly on Ellie’s back and moved her toward the door while she

typed. His touch sent the slightest quiver up her back.
She wasn't sure why.

Chapter Three: Room Service

Ellie could just see Aiden's head through the front window of the pizza parlor. He was talking to the cashier. He turned toward the window and raised a single finger, telling Ellie he'd be just a minute. She had found it odd that he'd suggested she wait in the car while he went in, but she had zero experience being out alone with a guy like Aiden, so she figured maybe this was normal for the A-crowd.

It certainly wasn't normal for Ellie, just as riding down the city streets in a fancy sports car attracting attention wasn't normal for Ellie. When folks glanced her way in Aunt Grace's ten-year-old station wagon, it was usually because the muffler was dragging or one of the tires was losing air. She couldn't help wondering how it was that Aiden had this nice car at his disposal *and* seemed expertly skilled at driving it. Apparently, his parents were not only wealthy, but had complete trust in their teenage son.

When he emerged from the building, he was

talking on his phone and not carrying any pizzas. He did have a drink in his hand in a paper cup with a lid and a straw. As he slid back into the car, he tossed his phone in the console slot. “They’re not ready. They said it would be another ten or fifteen minutes. I brought you something to drink.” He handed her the beverage.

Oh my, another ten or fifteen minutes alone with Handsome New Boy. Ellie felt her heart rate speeding up. What would they do for ten whole minutes? Could she make witty small talk with this complete stranger without boring him to death or having him realize what a total egghead she was? Er, um, assuming he wanted to talk. Oh dear God, what if he tried to kiss her or something? What the heck would she do then? Ellie started feeling a little lightheaded. What had she gotten herself into?

Aiden nodded toward the drink in her hand. “Go ahead, try it. It’s my special mix.”

Ellie gave him an odd look as she sipped, then wrinkled up her nose. “Cherry, cola, and...something else. Orange?”

He shook his head and turned the car on. “Sorry, not giving away my secret. Wanna take a little ride around the block while we wait?”

“Uh...sure.” Ellie bit her lip as he started to drive. What would Aunt Grace think? Maybe she should’ve said no.

“Hey, I know. Aren’t we pretty close to the Chattahoochee River here? I keep hearing about how pretty it is. Let’s have a look.”

“Oh, yeah, let’s do that.” Whew. Ellie let out a breath. She loved the river, and that would give them something concrete to do, so she wouldn’t have to try to be cool or clever. She was so relieved to not just be sitting still in the car with him for ten minutes that at first she didn’t notice, but after riding just a short way, she began to feel it. A chill, like the air conditioning was on. But it wasn’t. And a prickliness, as though she was wearing scratchy wool right up against her skin. But she wasn’t.

She shrugged off the strange sensations, took another sip of the drink in the paper cup, and pointed toward a street sign. “Right up there, near that coffee shop. Just turn down that road. It goes down to—”

He drove past the point she had indicated. “Oh, sorry, Ellie. I wasn’t fast enough. Let’s try the next one.” He turned on the next street, which Ellie had never been on before, and proceeded to the end. The road ended in a T-intersection with a narrow street that ran along the edge of the river. There were a couple of vehicles parked along the waterway, but no other people around besides Elodie and Aiden. “There now, we can have a nice view from here.”

As soon as he stopped the car, Ellie opened her door and hopped out. She stepped up to the railing that stood between the sidewalk and the natural area along the water. There was only a sliver of moon out, but quaint, lantern-style streetlights offered gentle illumination to the walkway, the trees, and the slowly moving river. It was so quiet and deserted. With just the

right company, Ellie imagined it would be terribly romantic. With the wrong company, or no company at all, it would be rather creepy.

When Aiden caught up to her, he stood behind her, looking out over the water with her. She motioned in that direction. “See how pretty it is?”

“Beautiful.”

His voice was deep and soft, and she could tell by the direction of the sound that he was no longer looking toward the water. She cursed her own stupid geekiness. At that particular moment, she would have gladly traded her straight-A average for a few ounces of cheerleader cool. Here she was with this handsome boy who actually seemed to like her, and she had no idea what to do with him. Just being this close to a boy who was not an old chum, like Nathan, was freaking her out. So much so, in fact, that she felt a little dizzy. She took a firmer grip of the handrail and steadied herself.

Aiden seemed to sense her instability and slid his hand up her spine. When he reached her neck, he left it there a moment, then gently turned her head up and toward his and looked right into her eyes. His hair was even more askance, and his eyes, intense and sparkling. He was studying her, and, she supposed, considering kissing her. Thank God she’d finally gotten the contact lenses. How awkward would it be to have great big clunky glasses on right now?

As his eyes bored into her, Ellie’s heart beat faster. For just a moment, she thought she would melt. But just as quickly as it had come, the sparkle faded.

There was a coolness sneaking up on her. She wished she had grabbed that sweater Aunt Grace had mentioned. And, oddly enough, the weird lighting was making Aiden's face look dark. His pale skin had taken on a purplish glow. In fact, there seemed to be a dark haze all around him. Maybe contact lenses affected the eyes in ways Ellie wasn't aware of.

"Elodie." He said her name slowly, sounding out the syllables.

Interesting. Most everyone called her Ellie, and most everyone assumed that was short for Ellen. Elodie was an unusual name, and she hadn't mentioned it to Aiden. Nathan must've told him. But why? Had he asked? Had Aiden picked Nathan's brain for details about her? It wasn't typical high school boy conversation, and she had never even spoken to Aiden before tonight, so why would he be interested? Maybe it didn't matter. Her thoughts did seem to be jumbling a little.

With his free hand, Aiden pushed a loose strand of the curling-iron curls away from Ellie's face, and a hint of a smile formed on his lips.

"Aiden, I-I think—" Cold, cold, cold. A wintry breeze was blowing in from somewhere. The chill caught her tongue and her lips. She couldn't finish the sentence.

But Aiden was having no trouble. "You know, everyone says you look just like your mother..."

Ellie wrinkled her forehead. It was true, but how did he know that?

The hand that had pushed back the curls now

trailed down the side of her face, brushing her cheek. “But you know what I think? All I can see is dear old Dad, right there, right in the eyes.”

What? How would he have any idea what her parents looked like? The coldness became an arctic blast, and the prickles morphed into an army of porcupine quills. Aiden’s face was shrouded in a black cloud. *Something* was not right. She tried to jerk away, but the hand on the back of her neck tightened, gripping her to him. “Stop it! Let go of me!” She felt tears springing to her eyes.

Aiden started to laugh. “Where you gonna go, Ellie?”

“With me!” A female voice rang out from some distance back up the street that had brought them there, and the sound of light, rapidly moving feet accompanied it.

“Aunt Grace!”

Aiden straightened up, still holding Ellie by the neck, and looked in Grace’s direction. “Oh, brother,” he muttered, rolling his eyes, as though Grace’s appearance was merely an inconvenience.

“Let her go!” Grace was within twenty yards of them now.

Aiden turned in the direction of the cars parked along the cross-street and waved his hand, motioning in Grace’s direction. Immediately, the doors on a black SUV opened and two large men stepped out, one black, one white. Grace froze in her tracks momentarily, but then continued moving toward Ellie and Aiden, placing

herself between them and the big men, who were now heading her way.

Ellie again tried to pull away from Aiden. “What’s going on? Why are you doing this?”

Aiden released her neck, but only to reposition himself, so her back was pinned to his front, and his arm was wrapped around her chest. “Shhhh, honey, take it easy. No one’s gonna hurt you.” He pressed his free hand over her mouth and nose so she couldn’t speak, scream, or even breathe very well. She struggled to free herself from his grasp, but it wasn’t much of a fight. Her thoughts felt strangely disconnected, and her legs had turned to gelatin.

The two men from the SUV were arguing with Aunt Grace now, saying something about why didn’t she just leave, and an easy way or a hard way, and, oh no, no, NO! One of the men struck Grace, knocking her down, and then the other one was standing over her as she tried to get up, and...what was that? What was he holding? A knife! Dear God, what in hell—

Ellie’s brain had turned to mush. Her eyelids were getting so heavy. Her knees finally gave way, and she fell against Aiden’s arm, unable to support herself. As her eyes fluttered open and closed, yet another stranger arrived on the scene. Tall, menacing, and statuesque, this one was dressed all in black, maybe leather, and was running straight toward Grace and the big, scary knife guy.

As darkness engulfed Ellie’s brain, a piercing scream cut through the air, and the glint of a shiny knife

Slowly, Ellie pushed herself up off the pillows. Her veins were filled with lead, and her head was stuffed with cotton, but otherwise, no aches, no pains, no apparent bruises or cuts. She threw her legs over the side of the bed, and then stood, holding on to the headboard, just in case. Her jeans and her favorite pink shirt had been replaced by a long cotton nightgown, white with tiny roses. Okay, maybe not something she would have picked out for herself, but at least she wasn't naked. So what the heck was going on? She remembered Aiden saying, "No one's gonna hurt you." That appeared to be the case, but that didn't mean she wanted to hang around.

She knew she needed to make a plan, scope out her surroundings and find a way out. There was no phone in the room, including her own. There were several doors to choose from; one that looked like a closet, one that led to a bath, and a third that had some light coming from underneath, presumably where Aiden or those other creeps were. She made her way to the window and pulled back the curtains just enough to see outside. The sunlight was blinding; how long had she slept? When her eyes finally adjusted, she could see that she was eight or ten stories up in a building surrounded only by rolling hills and trees, with maybe some larger mountains in the distance. She let the curtains fall back into place. Looked like there was only one viable exit.

She stepped up to the door and put her ear against it. There were no voices coming from the other side—no TV, no radio, no conversation, just an occasional low rumble. Maybe they were gone. Maybe

they'd left her alone. Maybe this moment, right now, would be her only chance to get away. She tightened her hand around the doorknob and turned it ever so slowly, releasing the latch without a sound. She opened it just a crack and peered through.

Huh. Whoever had done this crazy thing wasn't as sharp as she might have guessed. On the other side of the door was a beautiful parlor with high-end furnishings and ornate decorative items—paintings, candlesticks, vases, and oh yeah, a hearty basket of fruits and nuts and chocolates on the coffee table in the center of the room. Not that any of that held her attention. What caught her eye was the sleeping body of the black-leather-clad person from the night before on one of the couches. In her bleary and frightened state, Ellie had assumed that person was a man; now, she could see how wrong she'd been. Sprawled carelessly over the seat, back, and arms of an aristocratic sofa was a tall, muscular, but shapely woman, still fully dressed in her skin-tight black leather ensemble, complete with high-heeled boots. Her skin was a few shades darker than Ellie's, and her lips, ruby red. A mass of wavy black hair tumbled over the side of the couch, reaching almost to the floor. If Ellie didn't know better, she'd swear she had stumbled into the Catwoman's lair.

Question was—what would this seemingly peaceful feline do if she caught Ellie trying to sneak past her? Ellie jumped as Catwoman mumbled something in her sleep, adjusted her position, and resumed lightly snoring.

Ellie exhaled softly and tried to calm herself. She needed to focus if she was to get out of here in one piece. There were multiple doors to choose from in the second room, as well. One, directly across from her, was closed up tight and looked like it led into a second bedroom, and another, with multiple locks in place, appeared to be the way out. If she was quiet enough, she was sure she could make her way to that door, but would she wake up Sleeping Beauty managing all those locks?

It was now or never. Ellie opened the bedroom door wider and crept through. The sleeping woman didn't stir. Ellie tiptoed across the room, trying not to breathe. One-quarter of the distance covered. One-half. Three-quarters, and her heart was pounding.

The sound of the other bedroom door opening sent her racing toward her goal. With both hands she clawed at the various locks and latches. How long did she have before some big giant person grabbed her from behind?

“Mouse, wait! Don't go!”

Ellie froze in place.

“Mouse, I mean, Elodie...Ellie? It's okay, don't run.”

Slowly, she let her hands off the locks and turned. It wasn't so much the sound of his voice that stopped her, but the name. Mouse. No one had called her Mouse since...well, longer ago than she could remember. It was a nickname known only to her family—Mom, Dad, Aunt Grace, and...“Uncle Joe?”

A soft smile spread across the man's face. “You

do remember. I wasn't sure you would."

Yes, yes, it was him. Older now, a little tired perhaps, and with a sprinkle of gray around the temples, but yeah, it was Joe. She wrinkled up her forehead, tearing at the layers wrapped around those memories. Her dear Uncle Joe. He wasn't really her uncle, of course. Lucy and Grace had only one brother, and it wasn't Joe, and Grace had never married, but when Ellie was a small child, Uncle Joe was as much a part of their family as anyone. He had disappeared from her life, though, when Ellie was only five or six. A satisfactory explanation had never been offered, only a promise of such, "When you're old enough to understand." A day which had never come.

Ellie dared take a few steps in his direction. "Joe, I-I don't...why am I here? Why are *you* here? And what happened last night?"

He turned for a moment to pull the bedroom door quietly closed behind him, then came toward her. When he was close enough to touch her, he raised a hand hesitantly, as though permission was required. Ellie threw herself against him and wallowed in the embrace. He kissed her head and ran his hand over her hair, whispering into it, "Mousy Mouse, I missed you so much."

She giggled then and pulled away. "Okay, I don't know what's going on here, but no one calls me Mouse anymore. It's Elodie, Ellie, or El, for the really lazy ones."

He sniffled, knocking away a tear. "Fair enough.

Ellie it is. Now c'mon, I'll fill you in." He held out a hand to lead her towards the other couch in the room, the one that did not have a sleeping woman on it.

But Ellie didn't move. "Wait, Uncle Joe, do you know anything about my Aunt Grace? Do you remember her? Mom's sister? She was hurt. They—"

Joe held up a hand and laughed. "Yes, Ellie, I remember her. I'm not *that* old. And she's fine, sleeping. I just checked on her." He motioned back behind him, in the direction of the second bedroom. "She's a little banged up, but Angel got them before they got her." He nodded in the direction of the biker chick.

"Angel? That's ironic."

Joe grinned as they sat down. "Angelica Andrea Sofia Espinoza." He thought a moment, then continued, "I think I got that right. You can ask her later. She's Cuban, French, Jamaican, and maybe a few other things. I think her mother was trying to honor a whole lot of different relatives at once."

With that, the long-legged woman seemed to rally. She opened her eyes, stretched, and shifted to a sitting position. She grabbed a handful of nuts from the assortment on the table between them and tossed it in her mouth. Then she grinned and said, "¡Hola, chiquita!"

Ellie had a couple years of Spanish under her belt, so she understood the greeting; it was more the accent that perplexed her. It was not like anything she'd ever heard before. Of course, what kind of accent would one expect from a Cuban-French-Jamaican-American Catwoman? "Er, um, hola," she answered with a shrug.

Angel laughed openly at Ellie's obvious confusion, then stood up, looking around. "Joe, we got anything to drink around here? And can we get some real food? I'm starving."

He waved in the direction of a mini-fridge. "Sure, honey. There's OJ in the fridge, and you can call room service. Get whatever you want."

Angel was already flipping through a glossy folder with pictures of food on it.

"So...we're in a hotel?" Ellie looked at Joe.

He focused on her again, while Angel rattled off her wish list into a house phone. "Yes, sorry, Ellie. We're at the HearthStone Resort on Lake Chatterly." When she didn't respond, he added, "It's near the Tennessee-Georgia border."

"Oh. Well, how'd we get here? Did you drive us?"

"Private plane."

"Really? Cool." Then she wrinkled up her forehead. "Why don't I remember it?"

Joe made a sour face and shook his head. "We'll get to that, but are you all right now? Any dizziness, nausea?"

Ellie shook her head impatiently. "No, no, I'm fine, but who—I mean, why...I don't understand..."

Joe opened his mouth to answer, but stopped as they both heard the door to the second bedroom open again. Ellie looked up to see Aunt Grace coming through the door. She was also wearing a long frilly nightgown, but the look was counterbalanced by a nasty bruise on

her cheek and the way she was holding the door frame for support.

Despite the frailty in her physical appearance, Grace's voice was as commanding as ever, "Joe, stop it right now. Don't say another word!"

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Grace bit her tongue and stopped herself. She knew Joe was just doing his *thing*. He was a Healer and the leader of his community, so it was natural for him to try to make everyone feel calm and reassured, and to try to give them the information they needed to understand a situation, but this was neither the time nor the place. Now was a time for Grace's thing; maybe she wasn't one of The Gifted Ones, but she knew how to whip a ship into shape. She adjusted her tone, "I'm sorry, Joe, but we don't have time for all that right now. If Ellie's up to it, we need to get out of here."

Ellie jumped up and hurried over to her. "Me? I'm fine. What about you, Aunt Grace? You look..." Her voice trailed off as she searched Grace's face with concern.

Grace reached out and laid a hand on Ellie's cheek. "I'm all right, sweetheart." Then she grinned. "You should see the other guy." Ellie's face relaxed, and Grace assured her, "We'll talk all about it later, okay?" Ellie seemed reluctant, but didn't say anything. She knew better than to argue when Grace had made up her mind about something.

Grace shifted her attention back to Joe. “Have you filed a flight plan yet?”

“No, I was just going to—”

There was a knock on the door, and then a voice called through it, “Room service.”

Grace immediately tensed as Joe moved to the door, holding up a hand towards the rest of them. As he peered through the peephole, Angel assumed a defensive stance against the wall next to the door. Her hand was on her hip, no doubt ready to pull a weapon, if it was needed.

In a second, Joe’s shoulders dropped, he lowered his hand, and he proceeded to unlock and open the door. Angel stepped aside and made way for a member of the hotel staff to enter the room. The young man pushed in a cart loaded down with every imaginable breakfast food—pancakes, French toast, eggs, sausage, bacon, fruit, muffins, sweet rolls, orange juice, and coffee.

“We haven’t got time for this—” Grace started.

But Angel was already diving in. She grabbed a sweet roll off the cart before it even stopped rolling, and waved a hand towards Grace and Ellie. “Don’t be silly, chicas. Come on, eat! I got enough for everybody. I think.” With that, she used her other hand to snatch up a strip of bacon and stuffed it in her mouth with the first bite of the sweet roll. “Mmm, perfect. Crispy, but not burnt.”

The mixture of sweet and savory odors caught Ellie’s attention. She abandoned Grace and joined Angel

in snatching food off the cart with her bare hands. “Yum! This is awesome!”

Grace just sighed. Clearly, she had lost this battle. She would have to trust Joe that they were safe, at least for now. She took a few hesitating steps toward the center of the room, but the aching in her ribs made it difficult to move. Joe noticed, dashed over, and wrapped his arm around her, supporting her weight until she could settle on the couch. “What can I get for you, Gracie?”

She tilted her head slightly as she looked up at him. Yes, it had been years since she’d last seen her sister’s One True Love, and the years were starting to show on him, but the kind and gentle nature that Grace remembered, and that Lucy had fallen so hard for, were still there. She squeezed his hand in appreciation. “Just some coffee, Joe. Just coffee.”

###

“Arch.”

Archer Orucov looked up from the spacious desk in his home office as the three younger men entered the room. Although his son was by no means small, he was dwarfed by the two Defenders that flanked him. Wyatt, with his dirty blond hair, fair skin, and boyish features, could almost pass for a sibling, if it weren’t for the fact that he towered over Aiden by several inches. The long, lanky frame worked to Wyatt’s advantage most of the time. His opponents were frequently fooled by his carefree appearance, and thus, inadequately prepared for

the speed and force of his fists. Willie, on the other hand, never surprised anyone with his power. At something over 300 pounds, his linebacker build, close-shaven head, piercing black eyes, and chocolate brown skin sent even bigger men racing from the room. What they didn't know, of course, was that Willie's greatest weapon was his intellect.

Archer took a moment, making eye contact briefly with each of them before he spoke. He made no attempt to stifle his displeasure as he settled back into his chair. "I don't need a recap, gentlemen. Just tell me what you found at the house."

Willie took a step forward, giving Archer a better view of the split in his lower lip. When he opened his mouth to speak, however, Archer couldn't help but react to the broken tooth; he rolled his eyes and waited for the report. "Nothing, Arch. The place was clean. Most of the personal effects were gone or destroyed. No papers, no tech...nothing but some old clothes, shoes, and toiletries."

Wyatt stood up a little straighter before adding his two cents, "Yeah, we must've just missed them. I swear, the shredder was still hot when we walked in." He grimaced slightly and massaged a place on his rib cage, where apparently, he'd taken on some damage.

Aiden approached the desk and stuck out his hand. "I did find this, though, stuck in one of the books. I thought you might want it."

Archer took an old snapshot from Aiden's hand and brought it closer. Lucy. He recognized her

immediately, despite the fading colors and wrinkled paper. She looked younger than when Archer had known her, and happier than he'd ever seen her, laughing playfully with her photographer. He wondered who that might have been.

He looked back up at Aiden. "Thank you, Aiden. I appreciate this." He set the print down in the center of his blotter, and then shifted his attention to the two larger men. He dismissed them wordlessly with a brief wave of his hand.

When they had closed the door behind them, he invited Aiden to sit in one of the chairs facing the desk. "I want you to understand something. No one blames you for what happened in Atlanta. You did exactly what you needed to do. No one could have anticipated the helicopter aunt calling in the troops over a trip to the pizzeria." Archer pursed his lips a moment and shook his head. He'd always heard Lucy's sister lacked the gene, but he wasn't so sure. Maybe the little witch had some kind of Gift they weren't aware of—like clairvoyance or precognition. "Willie and Wyatt, on the other hand..." He shook his head in disgust, opting not to express his feelings aloud.

But Aiden jumped to their defense, "It wasn't their fault! That chick in the leather...man, she just came outta nowhere. It was like Spiderman or The Flash or—"

Archer sighed, "I know. It was Angel."

"Angel?"

"Angel Espinoza. She's one of theirs." Almost to himself, he mumbled, "Only wish I had found her

first.” He looked at Aiden. “She’s the single most talented hand-to-hand combat Defender...ever.”

“She is? I mean, she was pretty amazing, but she doesn’t look that tough, and she barely touched Willie and Wyatt.”

“She barely touched them, because she didn’t want to break a nail. They knew they were catching us off guard; they knew we weren’t going to fight to the death or risk exposure over one kid. And don’t let her size or shape fool you. I’ve seen her in action. Her skill isn’t so much in brute force as it is speed and cunning. That girl knows your next move before you do. A guy like Willie can pack hundreds of pounds of force with one fist, but Angel would just duck out of the way. She’s a machine; they’ve developed her into this incredible combination of mental acuity and physical prowess.” Archer narrowed his eyes a moment. “I would love to know how they did it.”

He shook off the wistful daydream and refocused on Aiden. “Point is, Aiden, I was pleased with your execution of the task. You gained her trust, you improvised and manipulated the situation, and you even managed to sedate her without killing her. A chip off the old block.” A wicked little smile crossed Archer’s lips. “Probably pissed off Joe Manning to no end.”

“Joe who?”

“Never mind.” Archer nodded at Aiden. “And don’t worry. We’ll get another chance.” Then he stood up. “Are you ready for more?”

The young man jumped up. “Absolutely.”

“Good. Go get cleaned up. Put on a suit and a tie. We’re going on a little trip.”

Chapter Four: Disneyland

“Yes, yes, we’ll be there in time for dinner, Gran. Well, I’m sorry, we didn’t want to take any chances. We’ve been to New Mexico, Saskatchewan, and Michigan already. But we’re almost home now. We’ll see you soon, okay?”

After hanging up with Granny, Joe returned to the main cabin of the plane. He’d left to make the call, because he didn’t want to wake up the girls, and he didn’t want anything he said to ruffle Grace’s feathers. She hadn’t changed position since the plane took off from Fort Dodge. She was still staring out the tiny airplane window, lost in thought, while both Ellie and Angel were crashed out on the leather loungers. They were apparently exhausted, either from the craziness of the previous night or from the carbohydrate-induced comas of their breakfast this morning. Joe had long since given up trying to counsel Angel in her dietary choices, and he expected he’d get no further with his newest charge. The younger ladies had even browbeaten him

into trying one of the French pastries that morning.

Grace was the only one who had not joined in the indulgence, sticking to her black coffee and toast. Joe stole a sidelong glance at her, as he returned to his seat. It had been about ten years since he'd last seen her, but who would guess? She looked much the same as she had back then, which was quite different from her older sister. Lucy was tall and thin as a reed, with fair skin and strawberry-blonde hair, while Grace had a rosy complexion, dark, almost auburn hair, and a softer figure. But that's where the softness ended—Grace's whole demeanor smacked of a no-nonsense fifth-grade teacher, complete with eyes in the back of her head. Even when she was still in high school, it had seemed as though Grace was the mature elder sibling, and Lucy, the carefree wild child.

As if reading his thoughts, Grace turned toward him. “Joe, I hope I don't seem ungrateful. I truly appreciate everything you're doing for Ellie and me.”

“I know, Grace. We all just want what's best for Ellie.”

She sighed, and turned back toward the window. “I hope we're doing the right thing. This is not what I wanted for Ellie. I wanted her to have a normal life. I didn't want her to grow up feeling like she's weird or different, or even special...just normal. Is that so wrong?”

Joe held his tongue. He had never agreed with Grace's approach to raising Ellie. Ellie *was* special, and why shouldn't she know that? But it wasn't his call.

Much as he might have liked it to be, it wasn't his call.
"Gracie, I—"

"Gracie?" She faced him again, allowing a smile to escape her lips. "No one's called me Gracie in...well, since Lucy died."

"No one?" Joe grinned. "What kind of people you been hanging around with down there in Atlanta?"

"The wrong sort, I suppose, or maybe I just never gave them a chance." She shrugged. "I never really got close to anybody. I never felt like I knew who to trust."

His tone was more serious, "I'm sorry, Grace. I should've been there for you. I should've done a lot of things differently."

"Joe, don't. You know I wouldn't have let you. I wanted to do things my way. I wanted to give Ellie that safe, normal life. I would've pushed you away if you'd tried."

"And maybe *I* wouldn't have let you. Maybe..." He softened his voice, "Maybe if I'd done things differently, I wouldn't have lost all three of you."

Grace reached over and laid her hand on his. "You haven't lost us, Joe. And you never lost my sister. You know she loved you. Always. Nothing that happened could ever change that."

He shifted his gaze out the window nearest him, pretending to study the mountain range they were passing over. He fought the gnawing ball of pain that rose in his throat, then finally grumbled a response, "Thanks for saying that, Grace."

Okay, he needed to change the subject. He reached down next to his seat, picked up his bag, and moved over to the the long couch that lined that side of the plane, bringing him close to Grace. He motioned toward the bruise on the side of her face. “Can I at least help you with that?”

Grace glanced across the cabin to where Ellie was sleeping, then nodded at Joe. “Yeah, that’d be nice. I’d hate meeting everybody with a black and blue face.”

He dug around in his bag and came up with a small rectangular package. He tore it open and removed a lumpy-looking blue cloth. He held it up, explaining, “New creation from that kid Spencer. Works like a charm. See, it helps to draw the energy—” He caught himself babbling. “Uh, never mind. Just relax, Grace. Lean back and close your eyes.” Once she was in a more comfortable position, he spread a white salve gently on her bruised face, then laid the lumpy cloth over it. He placed one of his hands on top of that, and the other along the side of her neck to keep her head steady. “Grace, you’re not relaxing.”

She peeked out at him. “Sorry, Joe. It’s just...it’s been a long time...”

“A long time since a man has tried to heal you?”

“No. A long time since a man has touched me, period.” They both laughed at that, Grace wincing from the pain as she did so, and then they tried it again.

Joe talked her through the ritual, as he did with all his patients, reminding her to focus all her healing energy on the injured spot, to increase the blood flow to

the area, and to chase away the inflammation and swelling. Then they did the same thing with her bruised ribs. When they were done, she boosted herself back into an upright position again. “Better?” he asked.

Her eyes looked soft and drowsy. “Yeah. Yeah, it is. Thank you, Joe.”

“Glad to help. Hopefully, you’ll lose some of that awful color by the time we get there.” He wondered if he should return to his seat, if it would make her feel uncomfortable for him to stay so close. He wanted to stay close. He hadn’t realized how much he missed her, too, until he was with her again.

Before he could make up his mind, something caught his eye out the window. He pointed. “Hey, look, remember the old mountain tunnel?”

“The tunnel! Omigosh, I forgot about the tunnel.” Grace laughed. “When I was little, I thought this place was better than Disney. Disney’s just make-believe; Granny’s farm is real.”

“You’ll be impressed with all the stuff that’s been added, and some of the improvements we’ve made, especially to the security features. Oh, and you’ll love our new cook. Some famous chef from Jamaica. He can turn a pile of rocks into a gourmet meal. I think I’ve gained ten pounds since he settled in with us.”

“Joe...”

He ignored the cautionary tone in her voice and ran right over her. “And we’ve got this great room in the back corner of the house where Margo Wilcox used to stay. It’s got a beautiful view of the pasture, and the most

charming—”

She spoke more firmly, “Joe, this isn’t permanent. You know that, right?”

He was silent.

“I mean, it’s one thing to tell Ellie she’s got the gene, meet some of your...*her* people, understand your goals and all that, but it’s quite another to take this on as a lifestyle. That’s your choice, and Granny’s and Angel’s and whoever else, but it’s not Ellie’s. Ellie was happy in Atlanta. She loved her life. She had loads of friends. She joined clubs, performed in the school play, even helped me out at the Animal Hospital when she had time. She’s not going to run away and hide in the hills of North Carolina for the rest of her life, like you.”

Joe turned his head sharply toward the window, biting back the retort that had formed on his lips.

“Ugh. Sorry, Joe. I didn’t mean that the way it came out. I just—”

“I know what you meant.” He sighed and looked at her again. “Like you said earlier—you want Ellie to have a normal life. You don’t want to turn her upside down and inside out, and you want to save her from any more pain. I get that. But isn’t it her choice? She’s sixteen. She’s old enough to—” He stopped himself as he heard a loud yawn and a rustling from across the cabin.

It was Angel, stretching her long, muscular arms over her head. She pulled herself up to a sitting position, then flashed Joe and Grace her signature toothy, bright white smile. “Man, I love this ride. If you gotta shake some bad guys, this is definitely the way to go.” She

glanced out the window. “So, we’re almost home, right? ’Cause I’m starving.”

Grace laughed. “You and Ellie are going to get along well—simple needs: food and sleep, sleep and food.”

Angel looked at the sleeping girl. “You’d never know it. What’s she weigh, like eighty-five pounds? I could help her with that. I could teach her to lift some weights maybe...and then pig out on ice cream together. It’ll be fun. I been needing another chiquita to hang out with.” She reached over and yanked on her new friend’s arm. “Hey sister, rise and shine. Time to land.”

The bleary response was half-mumbled, “Land? Where? Aunt Grace?”

Grace turned to face her. “Hi, honey. Wipe the sleep out of your eyes, Ellie. You’re going to want to see this.” She beckoned toward her side of the plane, and Ellie and Angel crossed over to sit with Joe and Grace.

“Hey...your face looks better, Aunt Grace. You sure heal quickly.”

Joe winked at her, and Grace just smiled. All four buckled their seat belts, then turned to watch out the window as the plane made an abrupt change of direction into a mountain pass. Below them was a valley lined alternately with dense trees and large stretches of farmland and pasture, and dotted with a scant handful of old houses and barns. The plane straightened out, hovering lower, and apparently heading directly for the woods. As if by magic, though, a wide swath suddenly opened in the center of the grove.

Joe grinned at Ellie's reaction. "Holy crap! What the—"

"Ellie! Mind your manners!"

"Uh, sorry, Aunt Grace, but did you see that? I mean, how did...how could..."

Joe touched her lightly on the shoulder. "It's all done with mirrors and cameras and what have you, Ellie. It's really not that big a deal."

"Not that big a deal? It's *so cool!* I mean, that was amazing!"

Angel laughed. "If you think that was amazing, chica, just wait. You ain't seen nothin' yet."

###

"So after all that, we're now in...a barn?" Ellie stepped out of the shiny, mirrored elevator, expecting to be surrounded by marble, glass, and stainless steel, and instead found herself behind a wall of hay and face-to-face with a large cow.

"A Beltie!" Grace seemed unsurprised by their agrarian surroundings, and immediately approached the cow and began stroking its neck. "A real, live Belted Galloway. Wherever did you find her, Joe?" Grace looked like a ten year old in a toy shop.

Joe stepped up next to her and ran his hand along the top of the cow's back. "Gilda here is originally from a farm up in Virginia. We brought her down about five years ago with a handful of others. We've got a nice little herd now."

“Gilda, where are you, girl?” A lanky farmhand-looking person came around the haystacks looking for the cow. “Oh, hey, Joe! Glad you’re back.” The man’s eyes shifted to Grace and Ellie. “And who’ve we got here? Is this Miss Grace and little Miss El-o-die?” He said the name as if he were introducing a celebrity at a supermarket opening. “Been hearin’ all about you ladies today.”

Ellie wondered what the guy had been hearing about them and from whom. She also wondered about his interest in Aunt Grace. The tall blonde farmhand had stepped to within six inches of her and was grinning like an idiot.

“I heard you were a vet, Miss Grace. Maybe you’d like a little tour—”

“Vet tech, actually. I never finished my degree.”

The farmhand shrugged off the difference. “Better than anything we’ve got right now. I’d still like to show you around.”

Joe nudged in between them. “Uh, maybe tomorrow, Doo. The ladies are tired now; they’ve been traveling all day. We need to get them settled in.” He took Grace by the elbow and more or less pushed her away from the cow and the farmhand.

“Okay, Joe.” Doo called after them, “Uh, see you ladies tomorrow!”

“Come on, it’s this way.” Joe was hurrying the group toward a side door, but Ellie couldn’t help but linger. She’d never been on a farm before. The sweet smell of hay and the pungent odor of livestock mixed

awkwardly in the atmosphere. Cows moored, horses whinnied, and somewhere in the distance, chickens squawked and geese honked. And over all of it, Doo could be heard, chattering to the animals as though they were all fluent in English, or at least some twangy Southern dialect thereof.

“Sweetheart, let’s go,” Grace urged, waving Ellie toward the door. “We can come back tomorrow, if you’d like to spend more time with the animals.”

“Huh? Oh, sure...” Ellie followed the others out the door. The sun was low, throwing a warm orange glow across the landscape. A short distance in front of them was the side of a classic nineteenth century farmhouse. It was white and spacious, but not extraordinarily large, and decorated with vines and trellises, arched entrances, and scalloped trim. Tall brick chimneys flanked the sides, and porches wrapped around the circumference. A collection of outbuildings, clustered behind the house, completed the panorama.

Ellie shook her head. This pastoral view was quite the contrast to the space-age private jet that had brought them here, and the super-secret hidden runway they had landed on. What else did this day have in store? She still knew little about what had happened the night before, or why it had resulted in them flying all over the country today and finally coming to rest here in...well, she really didn’t know where they were. After the third or fourth time she had asked, Grace had finally shut her down with a promise that all would be revealed when they finally reached their destination.

Since it appeared they were now there, Ellie caught up to Grace and tugged on her sleeve. “Aunt Grace, where are we? What is this place? And how long are we staying?”

Angel, who was in front of them, spun around and started walking backwards. “We’re in western North Carolina, near the Great Smoky Mountains. It’s a bit rustic for us city gals, but it grows on ya.”

“Wait, what? We’re in North Carolina? We were in the air for eight hours, made three stops, and only traveled a hundred miles? I could have biked here faster.”

Joe laughed. “Probably so, Ellie, probably so. We were just being cautious. We wanted to make sure we wouldn’t be tracked or followed.”

“Tracked? Followed? Seriously? By who?”

“Whom,” Grace corrected.

Ellie stopped abruptly. “Who, whom! Who cares? Aunt Grace, what is all this? Why all the James Bond stuff? Why won’t you tell me what’s going on?”

Before anyone could respond, a voice called out to them from the farmhouse porch. The sound was high-pitched and creaky, yet sternly commanding, “Well, there you are! I was wondering if you’d ever get here. Come on now, let’s get you inside.”

Ellie forgot her questions momentarily, and, like the others, dutifully followed orders. The woman who had called to them was older, sixty-something by Ellie’s guess, and doing as the woman requested did not appear optional. She was tall, bony, and long-limbed. Her hair

was a mixture of black and gray, pulled back in a severe bun that emphasized the sharp angles of her jawline. A simple gray dress, fitted at the waist and high of neck, was a perfect match for her very sensible, laced-up shoes. Ellie imagined this woman would make a good army sergeant, or perhaps, prison matron.

“Ah, Grace, it’s good to see you again, dear.” The woman grabbed Grace roughly and gave her a brief, efficient hug, which Grace only half-heartedly returned.

“Elmyra. How are you?”

“Oh, come now, dear, you can do better than...” The woman’s voice trailed off as she turned her attention to Ellie. She sucked in her breath and let out a low whistle. “Oh, my, my, my. Elodie Eggleston.” The older woman reached out and grasped Ellie by the shoulders. “The spitting image. The spitting image, I tell you.” Her voice cracked slightly, and she blinked back a few tears. Then the old woman yanked Ellie into her bony chest and squeezed tightly.

Ellie winced, eking out a response, “Um, hi, nice to meet you, Miss...”

The woman pushed her back away, still gripping her by the shoulders. “Oh, call me Granny, honey. Everyone does.” She glanced quickly at Grace, then added, “Well, almost everyone.”

Ellie thought she heard a chuckle coming from Uncle Joe, but then he cleared his throat and motioned everyone toward the door. “C’mon, folks, let’s get inside and get everyone organized.”

As Joe pulled open the screen door, a

commotion inside once again stopped them in their tracks. A little girl of three or four, wrapped in an artist's smock, came bursting out. She carried a large piece of paper in one hand, and a thick paintbrush in the other. There was blue paint smeared on her face, and a rainbow of colors on the smock. She was giggling and looking back over her shoulder as she rushed by them and down the porch steps.

"Poppy!" Granny called after her, but Angel waved her off.

"I've got this, Gran." Angel started after the little girl, but in no particular hurry. Her voice was playful as she called out to the child, "Poppy Prentiss, you better run! Angel's comin' to git you." Squeals of laughter could be heard in the distance, as the black-leather-bound beauty chased after the little one.

"That child, I swear!"

Ellie turned back toward the door as yet another unfamiliar voice spoke. A middle-aged woman was standing in the doorway. She was short, pleasantly plump, and had long, tangly hair that hung to her waist. Around the face, she wore a couple of tight braids tied off with intricately shaped beads, that kept the hair from falling into her eyes. In her brightly colored tie-dyed dress, she could have been en route to a Woodstock reunion.

Granny set a hand on Ellie's shoulder and aimed her in the woman's direction. "Ellie, this is Willow. Willow Moonlight Begonia."

Ellie couldn't stop herself from laughing as the

woman extended her hand. Ellie shook, and then apologized, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Bah, don’t worry about it. It *is* funny. My folks were hippies from way back. Trust me, I got the *good* name. My brothers are named after constellations, Orion Phoenix and Corona Borealis.”

“Seriously?”

The woman grinned. “Seriously, and I tell you, they’re fascinating constellations. Would you like to see? It’s almost dark. We could head over to the planetarium...” She pointed somewhere back behind the house, toward some of the outbuildings, and began to move in that direction until Granny stopped her.

“Not now, Willow.” Granny caught the woman’s elbow and spun her around. “We’ll have the grand tour later. Perhaps you could take Ellie inside and show her the art studio? I need to talk to Grace and Joe.”

Grace looked annoyed. “Elmyra, it’s late, and we’re all tired—”

But Granny was herding everyone into the house. “I know, I know. We’ll get everyone situated. Soon. But right now, I need to talk to you two. Alone. Now you run along, Ellie. Go with Willow.” Granny gave Ellie a gentle nudge in Willow’s direction. Ellie didn’t appreciate being treated like a child, but she *was* tired, and her head was swimming with all the new people and places she’d encountered in one day, so she decided to just go along with the program.

Still...she couldn’t help but wonder what was so important when Granny’s hushed words drifted down the

hall after them, “Something’s happened, Joe. We’ve got to act fast.”

#

“So, yeah, Joe. Your first two stops were already on the chatter by the time you guys got back.” Rishi Takoor was speaking to them from a giant screen mounted on the wall of Granny’s office-laboratory.

“Dammit! What the...*how* is this happening?” Joe banged his fist on the granite countertop of Granny’s workbench. A round-bottom flask, carefully placed over a bunsen burner, jumped in its frame. Grace jumped a bit, too. She didn’t recall Joe ever raising his voice back in the days when he and Lucy were together. But that was a long time ago and so much had changed. For all of them.

Granny reached over and stabilized the glassware that Joe’s outburst had disturbed. “Joe!” she reprimanded, as she righted the experiment. “Now calm down. Let the man finish. Irrational reactions won’t help.”

Joe backed down, running a hand through his hair. “Sorry, Gran.” He motioned toward the screen. “Go ahead, Rish.”

The slender Indian man raised an eyebrow, but then continued, “No problem, my friend. It is a disturbing message. I understand. As I was saying, it does indeed appear that we have what you would call a leak. There were only a handful of us who could have known your stopover points—the three of you, me, a

couple of Council members, Angel, Elodie, and the pilots.”

Grace spoke up, “Well, Angel and Elodie slept half the time, so I don’t think it was them.” She looked at Joe. “What about the flight crew? Or the ground crew? How well do you know those people?”

Joe shook his head. “They’re all above reproach. Ditto the Council members. There’s no one in this organization I don’t trust with my life.” He paused, then gave Grace a small smile. “Or yours.”

Granny piped up, “Grace, did you or Elodie talk to anyone on the ground? Maybe in the restroom? Did you buy anything...even a coffee? It could have been the most innocent—”

“No! We didn’t even get off the plane.”

“She’s right, Gran. *I* was the only one who left the cabin. I did all the talking. It’s got to be something else. Someone’s tapping into our communications. Gotta be.” Joe looked up at the screen again. “Rishi, I know you’ve been all over this, but will you review the transmissions for me one more time? Check *everything* that passed through those frequencies for the last twenty-four hours.”

Rishi gave Joe a mock salute. “I will do it, my friend. You know I am thorough, but there is always another stone to overturn.” He looked up in his head a moment. “Come to think of it, there is this incredible new tech that Visnu has been playing with...” A certain sparkle came to Rishi’s eye. “I will call you later, friends.” He made eye contact with Grace and added,

“You will be there still, won’t you, lovely lady?”

Grace forced a smile. “Oh yeah, I’ll be here. Got nowhere else to go.”

“Dee-lightful! I look forward to it then.” Rishi punched a button, and the screen went black.

Grace glared at Joe as he attempted to stifle a smirk. Before he could open his mouth, she raised a finger at him. “Don’t!”

“Sorry, Gracie, but the guy’s had a crush on you since you were like, seventeen.”

She made a wry face. “Don’t remind me.” Joe was right. Back then, when all of this was new and dazzling and a world filled with wonder, Grace was flattered that some crazy computer prodigy from half a world away was apparently smitten with her. The bloom fell off the rose the day her sister learned that her fiancé was a Gifted One.

“All right, you two, back on task.” Granny snapped her fingers, demanding their attention like a school teacher chiding her class.

Grace nodded silently, and Joe responded, “Look, Granny, I think you’ve overreacted a bit. We don’t know that there’s really a problem. Maybe Rishi’s wrong. Maybe his info’s off, or he’s misinterpreting the chatter. Let’s let him take another look and get back to us. We’re not going to solve this one right now, and I know three young ladies who are tired and hungry.” Joe looked at Grace. “Let’s figure out where you and Ellie are going to sleep tonight, and then maybe we can come up with a creative way to tell Ellie she really has no idea

who she is.”

###

Ellie turned her head sideways, trying to make sense of a rather abstract painting on the wall of a large room that Willow had referred to as the studio. The room really didn't look like it belonged in an old farmhouse. The exterior wall was almost floor-to-ceiling windows, and at least half the ceiling had been replaced with glass to allow maximum natural light inside. There were fifteen or twenty easels set up in various locations around the room, and numerous tables and stands, each covered with papers, paints, pencils, chinks, and assorted half-finished sculptures or pottery. It looked a lot like the art room at Ellie's school.

Ellie had been working her way around the perimeter, studying the products of many different artists, some exquisitely talented, and others, like the one she was currently examining, not so much. She looked up as Willow emerged from a doorway at the back of the room, carrying a brightly colored clay pot. She set the pot down on a table near Ellie as she spoke, “Sorry to keep you waiting, hon, but I promised one of the students I'd check on this for her. She's trying to catch up on her Mandarin lessons.”

“Mandarin...”

“Chinese. Maya's a Communicator. Real gift for languages, that one. It's amazing to listen to her chattering away with Ones all around the world.”

“Ones?” Ellie scrunched up her nose. Maybe she was just tired, but this Willow person was confusing her.

“Yes, dear, Gifted Ones.” Willow shifted her gaze from the pottery to Ellie’s face. She wrinkled her brow. “Hasn’t anyone...”

“Hasn’t anyone what?”

“Miss Willow!” They were interrupted by a gleeful greeting from little Poppy Prentiss bursting back into the room with Angel close at her heels. Poppy ran directly to Willow and wrapped her arms around the woman’s long skirt.

Willow forgot about her conversation with Ellie and picked up the little girl, settling her on to one hip. She picked a couple sticks of hay out of Poppy’s hair. “Poppy, have you been running Angel all over the farm?”

“Boy, I’ll say!” Angel collapsed into a chair and brushed a few strands of hair back from her face. “Give me a roomful of Samurai swordsmen, and I’m all over it, but this kid? She could beat down the greatest Defender on the planet.”

Willow grinned. “I thought that was you.”

Angel straightened up in her chair and dusted a little dirt off her leather pants. “Well, it is. Just a little tired from the last twenty-four hours. And hungry.” She looked at Ellie. “How ’bout you, chica? You ready for some supper?”

Ellie’s tummy was growling, but she ignored the food question. “Wait, Gifted Ones? Defender? Am I missing something?”

Angel stood. “Ah, I’m going to let Joe tackle that. C’mon, let’s see if we can find you some clothes. Renni doesn’t allow denim in the dining room.”

“Wait!” Poppy wriggled away from Willow and darted to one of the other tables. “I made you a picture, Angel.” She picked up a paper from the table and brought it to Angel. “Miss Willow told me to draw my favorite person, and she gave me the colored pencils. See? It’s you!”

Angel took the picture and held it up. She grinned broadly. “Quite the imagination! I look like a princess.”

The child was gleeful. “Yes, yes, you *are* a princess.”

Angel reached down to the little girl and mussed her hair. “It’s beautiful, honey, I love it! I’m going to frame it and hang it on the wall.”

Ellie stepped over to see the Princess Angel image, expecting a typical child’s drawing of a stick figure, dressed in a pink triangle and maybe a crown. When she saw the picture, however, she gasped. “Sh-she did this?”

Willow joined them in admiring Poppy’s drawing. “Impressive, isn’t it? Art therapy is such a wonderful way for children to express themselves. And Poppy’s so good with colored pencil. It’s a more complex medium than most people think.”

“Complex?” Ellie blinked in bewilderment. “This is the most amazing drawing I’ve ever seen in my life. It’s just...” Words escaped her. The picture was an

upper body shot of Angel, with soft curling hair tumbling over the shoulders, eyes sparkling, and a smile as sublime as the Mona Lisa. A necklace with a single, simple stone was drawn in, hanging just below the neck, and the top of a pink ruffled gown dipped below that. Other than the ultra-feminine touches, the likeness was remarkable. But the image's brilliance went beyond that, beyond color and contrast and shading. There was a haunting depth of emotion that the most skilled artist could not have captured.

Ellie shook her head again. "How did...I mean, how could..."

Angel just gave her a quick wink and inclined her head toward the door of the room. After they left the studio, Angel led Ellie up the creaky stairs of the old farmhouse and to a small bedroom with antique-looking furnishings, frilly curtains, and the requisite flowered quilts. Unlike the glass-roofed studio, it was pretty much what Ellie expected to see in an old farm house.

Angel motioned toward a door near the back of her room. "They're putting you in the next room over. It connects to mine through the bath there, so I'm never far away, okay?" Angel started to peel off her leather jacket. "Granny dug up some clothes and things for you to use until your stuff arrives. Should be here tomorrow or the next day."

"Wait, my stuff? Like from our house in Atlanta? Someone went there and got it?"

"Oh yeah, don't worry. I'm sure they got everything that would've meant anything to you—

clothes, books, photos, all that stuff.”

Ellie sunk into the bed, confused. “But why—”

By now, Angel had moved to her closet. “I would’ve loaned you something of mine, ya know, but we’re nowhere near the same size, and...” She threw open the closet doors. “Not much the same taste.”

Ellie forgot her question and looked over. She had to smile. There wasn’t a spot of color in Angel’s closet. It was jam-packed full of black leather pants, jackets, and boots, as well as an assortment of t-shirts, blouses, and sweaters—again, all black.

Angel shrugged. “Makes it easy to get dressed in the morning.” She grabbed the bottom edge of her t-shirt and yanked it over her head.

As Angel turned toward the closet to pick a clean shirt, Ellie acknowledged that she was right—they were nowhere near the same size. Angel’s shoulders, back, and arms were broad and rippling with well-defined muscle, and her lacy black bra had some serious work to do, while Ellie’s lightweight camisole struggled not to sag on her barely-there boobs, nor to slide down her pencil-thin arms. And that was beside the fact that Angel stood a good six or seven inches taller than Ellie. Of course, she was older than Ellie, too. Maybe Ellie would catch up.

As Angel began buttoning up a black satin blouse, Ellie shifted her view to the bedside table. She picked up a decorative photo frame and looked at it closely. The picture inside was aged and torn on the corner. It showed an attractive Hispanic woman, thirty-

ish, with an adolescent girl by her side and a toddler in her arms. “Is this your mom?”

Angel walked up behind her and looked over her shoulder. Her voice was soft, “Yeah. Yeah, that’s my mom. And that’s me and my baby brother, Enrique.” She reached past Ellie and touched the edge of the frame. “She passed a long time ago. Like your mom.” Angel sat down on the bed next to Ellie and started trading out her thigh-high boots for a pair of ankle-high ones.

Ellie was sorry she’d asked about the photograph. Dead parents weren’t exactly the topic of choice for a budding friendship. She bit her lip and tried to think of a cheerier subject to bring up. Fortunately, she didn’t have to, as they were interrupted by a low rumbling noise and a vibration in the floor, followed by a loud boom, a little screaming, and possibly some breaking glass. “Omigod! What was that?” Ellie dropped to her knees on the floor and covered her head.

Angel was moving swiftly toward the door of the room, but threw back, “Relax, I got this. Just get dressed and meet me downstairs.” And then she was gone.

Chapter Five: Biology 101

Ellie wasn't sure from Angel's tone if she really needed to be worried about that explosion noise or not. She stayed in her tucked position for a minute or two, listening for signs that all was well and that the house wasn't about to blow up. Finally, she got up and stuck her head out into the hallway. There was no smoke and no sirens, and the disturbance down below seemed to have quieted, except for the intermittent sounds of Angel's voice in what seemed more like a motherly tirade than an act of war.

Deciding she was safe, Ellie stepped to the door of the next room down and peeked inside. Like Angel's room, it reeked of early Americana—a quilted spread covered an old four-poster bed, lacy curtains adorned a large window, and an old desk and dresser completed the ensemble. Ellie wondered whether they were true, valuable antiques, or just really old stuff, like all the furniture in their house in Atlanta.

A pile of clothes and bath items were neatly

arranged on the bed, with one outfit obviously laid out for dinner. Ellie tried it on. Based on the way Granny dressed herself, Ellie had half-expected a Depression-era dress, compression hose, and sensible shoes, but it turned out to be a pretty cool combo—a slim-fitting sundress in a pale lemon color, covered with a tiny daisy pattern, and a white cashmere sweater to match. Ellie had never even seen a real cashmere sweater before, didn't know they still made them. She ran her hands over the soft fabric; it was like petting a rabbit. She donned the outfit and then finished the job with the smattering of cosmetics and hair accoutrements that had been included in the pile. Funny how this Granny person seemed to know just the kind of things Ellie liked.

When she was ready, she made her way back to the stairs. The place looked deserted as she walked down, and she started to wonder if perhaps she'd been wrong to dawdle. Maybe something horrendous had happened, and she was the only survivor...

“Oh, there you are, Elodie! Come, come, dear, everyone's waiting.” Granny beckoned with an impatient look, and then hurried Ellie through an open doorway. “Found her,” she announced to the room.

Ellie stiffened, as every one of twenty or thirty pairs of eyes turned in her direction. She had a sudden urge to turn tail and run under the scrutiny. The room included all the new faces she'd encountered in the last twenty-four hours and a bunch more—folks of all ages, from the youngest, like Poppy Prentiss, to a few gray-hairs who appeared older than Granny, and all staring at

Ellie. She wondered if the floor might do her a favor and just swallow her up right then.

But it wasn't that bad. Most of them waved or nodded a greeting, and a few tossed over a quick hello or welcome, and then returned to what they were doing, which was standing around and chatting, or sitting at one of several tables and filling their plates with food. Most, but not all. Her Uncle Joe was there, staring at her, dumbfounded, and Aunt Grace, who stood next to him, seemed mesmerized, as well. In a whisper that almost escaped Ellie's hearing, Joe said, "Lucy."

His pronouncement seemed to shake Aunt Grace. She stepped over to Ellie and gently touched her hair. Then she dropped her hand to Ellie's shoulder and ran it down the length of her arm. She looked over at Granny. "This sweater, the dress. Where—"

Granny's stern look softened. "She left them behind, a long time ago, when she was in college, I think." Granny shrugged. "I never throw anything out."

Ellie's jaw dropped. "Wait, you're saying...you mean this stuff belonged to my mom?" She ran her hands down the front of the dress, and stopped at the waistline to finger a tiny bow. "She wore this outfit?"

Aunt Grace wrapped her arm around Ellie's shoulder and looked her in the eye. "Yeah, kiddo. I remember it like it was yesterday. Lucy took her gawky baby sister along to the mall to pick it out. She was looking for something special to wear on a first date with a handsome young man she'd just met. When she was all dressed and ready, I thought she looked like a fairy tale

princess.”

“She did.”

Ellie’s head jerked up at Joe’s remark. She wrinkled her forehead, trying to frame the question, but Grace stopped her. “Come on, honey. Let’s grab a plate and go in the other room. It’s time to talk.”

###

It had been so many years since Grace had been told that her siblings—Lucy and Samuel—were different, that they carried a gene that made them special...in a good way. Oh, and that she, Grace, their baby sister, did not. That information, and all that had followed from it, had shaped their lives in ways they never could have imagined. That original conversation had taken place in this very room, the farmhouse library, when Grace was only nine, and Lucy, sixteen, the same age as Ellie was now.

Not that Grace would’ve chosen this age to tell Ellie. In fact, she’d just as soon have kept it a secret for as long as possible. At least until Ellie was in college. Or grad school. Or starting her first job. Or maybe on her thirtieth birthday. Just *sometime* when it wouldn’t disrupt all her life plans, and shatter her world, and crush her dreams.

“Don’t you agree, Grace?”

“Huh? I, uh...what was the question?” Grace flushed under Granny’s scrutiny. All these years, and the old bat could still make her squirm like a worm. She

sighed, “Sorry, Elmyra, I was thinking about...” Joe met her eyes across the room. Yeah, he knew what she was thinking about.

Granny set her jaw. “I was saying that I’m sure Elodie has a lot of questions for us, and that perhaps, we should just start there.”

“Oh, right, good idea. El, honey...” Grace waved her encouragement toward the cushy brown leather sofa, where Ellie sat cross-legged at one end, and Angel, as usual, was draped lazily over the other.

Ellie set her half-finished plate on the coffee table in front of her and pushed it away. She glanced around at each of them in turn as she spoke, “Really? You mean someone’s finally going to answer my questions?”

Angel quickly swallowed another mouthful of food and answered first, “Yep, but don’t look at me. This is his department.” She pointed her fork at Joe for a moment, then over towards Granny. “And hers. Me? I’m just here for the food.” She stuck the fork back into some kind of broccoli casserole and began wrestling with molten cheese strings.

That made Grace smile. How could anyone *not* like Angel Espinoza? Angel was one of the few people at the farm who didn’t make Grace feel like a misfit. She was casual, comfortable, and down to earth; she said exactly what she was thinking, even when it wasn’t quite appropriate; and she wasn’t an astrophysicist or a best-selling novelist or a Fortune 500 CEO. Or whatever it turned out that Ellie would become.

But it looked like Ellie still considered Grace her best source of information, for she directed her first questions at no one else. “Aunt Grace, what the heck is going on? What was that craziness last night? Who were those people? And why we did fly all over the country to get away from them? In a private jet, no less. And what’s with the impromptu vacation? Not that this isn’t a nice place, but what are we doing here, and how long are we staying?”

She stopped for a breath, but before anyone could begin to process the barrage of queries, she shifted her focus to Joe, “And you, Uncle Joe...no offense, but why? I haven’t seen you since I was a kid, and all of a sudden, you show up outta the blue...” She motioned toward Angel, “With your...girlfriend?”

Angel laughed so hard she practically sprayed broccoli casserole. Joe frowned and grumbled, “Well, is that *so* unimaginable?”

Angel hid her grin behind a napkin. “Uh, sorry, Joe, I didn’t mean, uh...it’s not that...” Joe, who had been standing the whole time, dropped into a chair and raised a hand to stop the embarrassing backpedal. Angel returned to Ellie’s question, “Chica, I wasn’t there for *him*. I came to save *you*.”

“Me?” Ellie’s forehead wrinkled in consternation. “Save me from what? My first kiss?”

Grace’s voice was gentle, “Honey, how well do you remember what happened last night?”

“I remember it. I went to Nathan’s, and we watched some vampire movie, and then I went to pick up

the pizza with Aiden, and we stopped at the river, and he, uh, he..." She glanced at the faces around her, and her cheeks started to turn a little pink. "Well, that is, I think he was going to kiss me, and then, Aunt Grace showed up, and there were these scary guys, and then Angel was there, and..." She shook her head out, "It's a little fuzzy after that. Like, really fuzzy. Like...blank."

"Hmph." Joe made a sour face. "That's because that little piece of sh—"

"Joe!" Grace and Granny admonished him simultaneously. Finally, something they agreed on.

Joe rephrased, "Lover Boy drugged you, sweetheart."

"He..." Ellie bit her lip and looked at the floor. Quietly she said, "I thought he liked me. Like he thought I was pretty or funny or smart..."

Grace fought the urge to run over and wrap her arms around Ellie. Why did her first horrible experience with the opposite sex have to be shared with so many people? Virtual strangers, no less. "I'm sorry, honey. I'm sure that's what he wanted you to think. He was trying to gain your trust."

Ellie was quiet for a moment, then she looked up. "Okay, so I'm an idiot. I got tricked by some stupid guy. Why all the cloak and dagger? I mean, did we really have to leave town? And did you have to call in the troops?" She waved her hand toward Joe and Angel.

Granny set her coffee cup down loudly. "She didn't call them, Elodie. *I* did. Good thing, too, or your Aunt might be washing up a few miles down the river

about now, and God knows what would have happened to you.” She sat forward in her seat, bringing her closer to Ellie. “You’re a hot commodity, my dear, and it’s time you understood that.” With a sidelong glance at Grace, she added, “High time.” Grace just frowned and looked away.

“Hot commodity? Me?” Ellie laughed, “You’ve got me mixed up with someone else.”

“No, honey,” Grace said. “She doesn’t. You are, well, Gifted.”

“Gifted? In what? Being a total klutz? What are you talking about?” Ellie’s amusement appeared to be turning into frustration.

Joe stood again, accepting his role. “You’re Gifted, Ellie, as in, one of us.” He made a whirling motion with his finger, indicating the people in the room, then pointed back out toward the hall. “One of them. You have a gene, Ellie. The Gifted gene. I have it. Granny has it. Your mother had it.”

Angel pulled her hand back from where she’d been picking a piece of food out of her teeth, and added, “Even me.”

“Seriously? I have a-a gene, a special gene?” Ellie looked at Grace. “You have it, too, Aunt Grace?”

Grace shook her head. “No, not me. Grampa Ellicott, your mom, and your Uncle Sam, they all had it, not me. You inherited the gene from your mom.”

Ellie seemed tickled by the news. “So what does it do? What is this Gifted thing? Will it make me super smart or give me bionic hearing or something?”

Joe grinned. “Uh, no bionic body parts, but super smart or super talented...yeah.”

Granny broke in, “Everyone who has the gene is gifted at something. They’ll have a superior ability in one particular area that goes beyond anything normal humans can attain, *if* it’s nurtured properly. The skill might be scholarly, such as science or math or languages, or something creative, like writing, music, or art—”

“Poppy,” Ellie said matter-of-factly.

Granny nodded. “Yes, Poppy Prentiss is a remarkably talented visual artist. But there are other, more subtle Gifts, too. Leadership, persuasion, healing... like Joseph Manning.”

Then Joe motioned toward Angel. “And some are physically gifted, as with strength, speed, and agility. They may be sports stars or experts in the defensive arts.”

Ellie raised an eyebrow, “Defensive arts...”

Angel shrugged. “He means ass-kicking. They call us Defenders.”

Ellie nodded, taking it all in, then asked tentatively, “So, why are you so sure I have this gene? I’m not good at anything.”

“Sweetheart, you’re plenty good at a lot of things,” Grace said. “And you definitely have the gene. Your mom and I, we had you tested when you were little. But as far as your Gift...well, we just don’t know yet. The Gift will manifest at different ages for different people, usually sometime in adolescence or the teen years, but sometimes earlier, sometimes later. It depends

on the environment and the life experiences—”

Granny eyed Ellie knowingly. “Your mother was an early bloomer. She whizzed through all the high school science courses and half the collegiate curriculum by the time she was your age.”

Grace threw her an angry look. Could the old woman not see Ellie’s insecurities? The kid already felt like a failure compared to her genius scientist parents. Her Gift would show itself when the time was right. Why not just let her be a happy-go-lucky teenager in the meantime? That was just one reason she knew, no matter what this place and these people had to offer, that she had to get Ellie out of here and re-establish a normal life for her niece.

Angel jumped in, “Look, chica, I never knew I had any special abilities, either—until I needed ’em one day. I was fifteen, this skinny little string bean, and some creep tried to hurt my baby brother. All of a sudden, I turn into Wonder Woman.” She snapped her fingers. “Just like that. I got angry, scared, knew I had to save him, and I started kicking and scratching and throwing punches, and, next thing you know, this big ol’ ugly dude is laying on the sidewalk, groaning and bleeding, and a crowd of people are staring at us. A few days later, this stranger walks up to me,” she pointed at Joe, “and offers me a new life. That was over ten years ago, and I’m still here.”

“Wait, I don’t understand...” Ellie looked at Joe. “You found her? On the streets? How?”

“It’s part of what we do here, El. We keep tabs

on Gifted Ones all over the world.” He inclined his head toward Granny. “Granny has made it her life’s work to track the history and genealogy of Gifted folks. There are thousands of us around the world...that we know of. Undoubtedly, many more that we don’t.”

“And she’ll be happy to tell you a-a-all about it, if you give her enough time,” added Grace, with a roll of her eyes.

Granny made a sour face in response, but then turned toward Ellie. “You have to understand, Ellie, we don’t just do this out of curiosity. Our work is important, for a lot of reasons. Gifts can be misused, especially scientific ones or persuasive ones. Most of the Gifted strive to make the world a better place, to save lives, feed the hungry, help the environment, or just build a better mousetrap, but there are some who use their Gifts for less benevolent purposes. Being Gifted doesn’t make us immune to greed and lust and human frailty.” She pushed herself up from the chair and walked to the window. She stared out into the dark night for a moment, seemingly lost in another time and place, then turned back toward the group. She set her jaw. “We see it as our job to intervene, or at least try to intervene, when those things happen.”

“But the best part is what goes on here,” said Angel, throwing her arms wide open. “This place is amazing. Gifteds from all over come here to study, to work together, to do research, and to teach. Like Willow, and Dr. Jameson, and Maya Petanu—she speaks twenty-four languages. Can you believe it? I only know two, and

I'm not so good with those. And then there's Dr. Draco, and Maury Swan, and—"

"Wait a minute. How many people live here? The place doesn't look that big."

Joe grinned. "You haven't actually seen it all, Ellie. It's, um, larger than it appears. And there are several more buildings out back." He shook his head. "Don't worry, you can get the full tour tomorrow. For now, just realize that most of us don't live here full-time. People come and go."

Grace threw in, "Yeah, kind of like a vacation hot spot for artists and geeks and politicians."

"Hey, you said you loved coming here as a kid," Joe reminded her.

She couldn't help but smile. "Yeah, I did. It is a wondrous place for children, Gifted or not. Arts and crafts, science experiments, animals, crazy inventions... what's not to love?"

"So you came here, Aunt Grace? When you were little? You and Mom?"

"Yes, honey, we came here...after Elmyra and her second husband—"

"Third," corrected Granny.

"Uh, right, *third* husband. They approached my parents, because Granny suspected, through her genealogical traces, that Daddy was Gifted, and therefore, that one or more of us kids probably were, too. They knew we didn't have a lot of money, and they wanted to make sure we'd have the best opportunities to succeed."

Ellie looked confused. “But you said you weren’t—”

“No, as it turned out, the tests showed I did not have the gene, while Daddy and Lucy and Sammy did. But I got to come along anyway, whenever they came here to study and visit.”

“Well, of course you did,” said Granny, as she plunked back down in her chair. “Just because someone doesn’t have the Gifted gene doesn’t mean they wouldn’t benefit from being here. And us, from having them around. We’re not elitists.”

Grace managed to eke out a half-smile for the old woman. No, they weren’t. That part was certainly true; the Gifted Ones had always welcomed her and treated her like one of the family.

“So...this gene thingy,” started Ellie. “That’s the reason my mom was such a genius. Why she wrote all those papers and made all those discoveries and everything. I get it. But what about my dad? He was a brilliant scientist, too. Everybody thought he was gonna win a Nobel Prize for all that hydro-botanical stuff he was doing. Did he have the Gifted gene, too?”

“No!” The firmness of the unanimous response from Granny, Joe, and Grace, all at once, hushed the room. No one seemed quite sure how to proceed.

###

Joe got up from his chair and began pacing. He ran a hand through his hair. He hadn’t really wanted to

get into all this today. He had looked forward for many years to telling Ellie she was one of them, one of the Gifted Ones. At least he could share that with her, an ancient genetic bond. It was better than no kinship at all. He hadn't wanted this night to be about digging up old painful memories and wounds that would never heal.

But she had asked. And he was the Gifted Ones' leader, at least for now. It was his job to tackle these messy questions. He strode to the wall across from the couch that Ellie and Angel were sitting on, then pressed a button and waited. A large painting slid away in its frame, revealing a white board behind. He grabbed a colored marker from a shelf nearby and began to write. "Ellie, you took biology, right?"

"Yeah, sure, but..." She shook her head. "I'm not like my parents. I wasn't particularly good at it."

Joe continued drawing on the board as he spoke, "But you remember Punnett Squares? The gene inheritance diagrams?"

"Uh...oh yeah, I remember. Actually, that part was pretty interesting, like who would have blue eyes or red hair or..." She pointed to herself. "Freckles."

Joe turned back to face them. "Yes, Ellie, freckles." Just like her mother. He waved his hand at what he had drawn on the board—a cross-tab, with the boxes filled in with big Gs and little Gs, intended to show how different pairs of parents would yield different combinations of children, with and without the Gifted gene. He proceeded to explain, "The Gifted gene is a dominant gene. That means if you have it, the phenotype

will express. You *will* show a unique ability in some field. It can't be hidden, like a recessive gene, like the gene for blue eyes."

"Okay, I understand."

"Good. Well, here's what's important to know. All of us here have *one* copy of the gene. We had one Gifted parent and one not." He motioned toward his cross-tab, showing the Gifted gene with a capital G, and the not-gifted as a lower case G. "As long as there is only one Gifted gene in the mix, the children of these people will have at most one copy of the gene, and some will have none." Grace raised her hand in acknowledgment of the fact that she was one of the have-nots.

Joe continued, "In fact, the odds are fifty-fifty that any such child will be gifted." He then erased one of the normal parent's lower case Gs and replaced it with a capital G. "If, however, we have two Gifted parents, well, then we have a problem."

Ellie shook her head. "What problem?"

Joe took a deep breath. He thought he could handle this. He thought he could just stand here and talk about the revelation that had shattered his life, but the words caught in his throat. From across the room, Grace met his gaze. She gave him a small smile, then turned to Ellie and answered the question for him, "Because, honey, the child of two Gifted people could potentially have two copies of the gene."

Ellie looked from one to the other of them. "And that's a problem, because..."

Angel jumped in, "Because the double-G is bad

news, sister.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really, young lady.” Granny stood and walked toward Joe. Even the crotchety old matriarch seemed to know he couldn’t finish what he’d started. She tapped her finger on the board, on his theoretical double-gene child. “These children are...troubled.”

“I don’t understand. Wouldn’t they just be super-duper smart or super-duper strong or whatever?”

Granny shook her head. “No, it doesn’t work that way. We need that normal or not-gifted gene for balance. When people have the Gifted gene, there’s a strong pull toward that Gift; we want to think about science all the time, or be writing all the time, or...” She motioned toward Angel and added, “Working on our physique all the time. The normal gene pulls us back in the other direction, reminds us to be human, to interact with others, to eat and sleep and laugh and play. But when someone has two copies of the gene, there’s a constant struggle. A battle for control...mental control.”

Granny’s description of the Gifted Two mentality helped Joe regain his focus. “Yes, that’s what we’ve found. Those with two copies of the gene are obsessive, unbalanced, often, quite destructive. For example, are you familiar with Vincent Van Gogh?”

“Wait, the crazy artist who sliced off his ear?” Ellie’s eyes were wide. “He was a Gifted gene person? No way!”

Granny responded, “Now, Ellie, we can’t be sure. He lived a long time ago, and there were no genetic

tests back then, but...yes, I think he was, based on a line that I've traced through some illegitimate children that were probably his."

"Whoa. How cool is that? So like, how many other famous people were Gifted Ones? Like basketball players and singers and writers? What about Justin Fever, and...and J.R. Bowling? Are they Gifted? Are we all, like, related?"

"El, sweetheart," Grace drew the girl's attention. "You're getting off topic. We can talk about all that later. Your Uncle Joe is trying to make an important point."

Joe couldn't help but grin. For someone who didn't carry the gene, Grace certainly had a gift for human insight. She'd always had it, but it seemed that time had only sharpened her intellect and sensitivity. A flood of regret for the many years they had not spoken suddenly washed over him.

"Oh, uh, sorry, Uncle Joe. Go ahead."

"Right. So as I was saying, Van Gogh was an incredibly talented artist, but he was also nuts. He suffered from hallucinations, delusions, and psychotic episodes. He's known for the ear incident, but he's also believed to have died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Now, as Granny said, we can't be sure he was a Two, but we've seen similar things happen with people who have the double gene. With the artsy types, it seems to be hallucinations and schizophrenic behavior. The Leaders, Healers, and Scholars tend toward superiority complexes and narcissism. At the deep end of the pool, we're talking Hitler and Jim Jones and Charlie Manson."

Ellie said quietly, “Oh, I see.”

Then Angel piped up, “And don’t forget the Defenders.”

“Mm, yes, Defenders, they’re a special kind of trouble,” Granny admitted.

Ellie wrinkled her forehead, “Why? What happens with the Defenders?”

Angel chimed in again, “It’s a control thing, as in controlling aggression. We’re naturally competitive, we love to fight, and we damn sure want to win. It’s a struggle for all the Defenders to learn to subdue, but not destroy their opponents. In addition to physical training, I spend hours every week doing yoga, tai chi, and meditation. I’m the most Zen Defender there ever was.”

Granny smiled proudly. “Angel is our shining example. She’s proof that any Gifted person can successfully master their skill without letting it control them. Many Twos eventually lose the battle with themselves.” She looked up in her head a moment, then finished the thought, “They end up like Van Gogh. We try to keep that from happening, but not everyone wants our help.”

Granny reached over then and took the eraser from Joe. She replaced another one of the parent’s small Gs with a capital, creating a double-gene parent in the diagram. “But that’s not the biggest problem with the Gifted Twos.” She changed the results in the make-up of the children, replacing more of the lower-case Gs with upper-case, then explained, “Because the gene is dominant, *all* of the children from a double-gene parent

will be Gifted, even if his partner is non-gifted. And if his partner is a Gifted One, they will likely have double-gene children. And if two Twos get together, all of their children are Twos.”

Ellie raised an eyebrow. “So you’re saying if two of these megalomaniacs decide to make babies, they’re going to create a whole little army of megalomaniacs?”

Granny tipped her head to the side. “Yes, that’s a rather concise synopsis of the issue.” She looked directly at Ellie. “I knew you were a bright girl. And I’m sure you see now why we find it so important to try to track down all the Gifted people, and at least keep an eye on them.”

Ellie’s response was quizzical, “Wait, what do you do exactly? I mean, say there are two Gifted people who fall in love and want to get married and have kids. Do you tell them they can’t?”

The room was quiet again. Grace raised a hand to her forehead, as though she was very tired or maybe had a headache. Granny pressed her lips together and appeared to be contemplating an answer. Angel just looked uncomfortable.

Joe put on his brave face and answered the question, “We can’t tell anyone who they can marry and have children with, Ellie. We don’t have any authority over anyone, nor would we want that. We’re just here to make people aware of their own biological make-up and how it could affect their future. We try to help people and encourage them and offer them opportunities to make their lives better, but sometimes, there are unintended

consequences to even the best of intentions.”

Grace dropped her hand back into her lap and locked her eyes on his for a long minute. Then they both looked away.

Chapter Six: Scheming

“Three more are dead, sir.”

“Dammit! Are you sure?” Dr. Ian Spengler blustered, angrily tossing papers aside and causing his young assistant to cringe as though expecting to be struck for being the bearer of bad news.

“Yes, sir, quite sure. I checked; they’ve been dead for hours.”

The older man ran a hand through his unruly white locks. “We were so close...now this.” He plunged his hands into the pockets of his lab coat, then paced a few steps to the right, away from his assistant. He turned back around, feeling the beads of sweat forming on his brow. “They’re going to be here any minute to make their report to the senator. If we can’t come up with—”

“Dr. Spengler, your guests have arrived.”

The two men turned toward the sound of the receptionist’s voice to see her holding the door ajar. Before either of them could say anything, a tall, solidly-built man strode into the room. He was fit, well-dressed,

and carried himself with confidence. His stern face, nearly bald head, and prominent cheekbones did nothing to soften the look. Behind him, a much younger man followed, and though lacking the commanding manner of the first, still managed to infuse the room with a discomfiting arrogance.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Spengler.” The large man looked expectantly in their direction, tacitly expressing disapproval for the less-than-pristine state of the lab. “I trust you are ready for us?”

Spengler straightened up, smoothed his lab coat, and extended his hand. He pasted on a smile and tried to appear unruffled. “Dr. Orucov, how nice to see you again. And this handsome young man must be your son.”

Archer gave him a brief nod and motioned between the two as introduction. “Aiden, Dr. Ian Spengler.” He continued, speaking over their handshake, “Aiden has a real interest in biological energy sources, Doctor.”

Spengler shifted his focus to the young man. “Really? Well, you’ve come to the right place, son. Perhaps you’d like to have my assistant—”

Archer cut him off, “No time for that. I want to see the ponds.”

Spengler flashed a look at his assistant. What had he done with the dead animals? Were they cleaned up? They couldn’t afford to have anyone poking around the ponds and discovering decaying carcasses. “Oh, you don’t want to go out there. I’ve got all my samples right here. With all the rain last week, it’s so muddy—”

“It’s this way, isn’t it?” Archer was already heading to the door that led to the fields.

Spengler gave his assistant a shove in that direction. Maybe if he got out there first, he’d be able to hide the bodies.

As they emerged into the sunlight, Dr. Spengler herded the two Orucovs toward some vertical tanks where new strains of algae were being developed, while his assistant hurried off in the other direction. Spengler began a lengthy explanation of how the new species varied from those they’d been growing for the last several years, but Archer was impatient. “Dr. Spengler, please. You know what we came here to see. Senator Stanhope is not a scientist. He doesn’t care about life cycles and recombinant DNA. He wants to replace dying industries with cutting-edge technology. He wants to bring jobs and security to his constituents. He wants to restore an economy. Now let’s see what you have for him!”

Spengler nodded dutifully and opened his hand, inviting the father and son to proceed him in the direction that his assistant had gone. The three men walked along a path of crushed stones that wound around and between several large algae-covered ponds. As they walked, Spengler pointed out the differences in algal varieties and explained the potential benefits of each for transformation into usable fuels. Aiden, who appeared very knowledgeable on the topic, asked a number of relevant, provocative questions. Spengler found himself increasingly at ease, as the visit seemed to be focusing

on the positive aspects of his research—specifically, the enormous profit potential for inexpensive, home-grown fuels that would thrive in the American Midwest.

Just as they were nearing the end of the tour, however, Archer stumbled in the stones. Aiden and Spengler, who were, by then, in front of him, stopped, and looked back. As Archer recovered his balance, his attention shifted to the long grass on the other side of the path. “Wait. What is this?” Archer picked up a stick and used it to bend back a section of the grass. He beckoned to the other two.

Spengler felt his heart drop into his stomach as he approached. In the opening that Archer had created in the grass, there were a couple of baby bunnies who’d been hidden from view. They would’ve been adorable little creatures were it not for the fact that they were stone cold dead with wide-eyed stares. A feeling of queasiness rose in his throat.

Archer read the expression on his face. “How many of these have you seen, Doctor?”

Spengler dropped his shoulders. “Enough.”

“Only rabbits?”

Spengler shook his head. “Birds, squirrels, even a cat. The amphibians don’t seem to be affected.”

“Not this generation, anyway,” Aiden remarked with a tinge of sarcasm.

Spengler struggled to keep the desperation out of his voice, “Please, Dr. Orucov, give me some time. I’m sure I can figure out what’s happening. It’s probably just one strain, one of the new ones. We weren’t seeing

this in our earlier experiments.” He shifted his weight uneasily. “We’ve come so far. The oil production from these new strains is phenomenal. If you could just see—”

Archer raised a hand to silence him. “Calm down, Doctor. No one’s pulling the plug on your research. It’s still better than anything any of our competitors have come up with. We need results, not perfection. If you can produce the fuel, I’ll take care of the fallout. Just keep your mouth shut about what goes on in this facility, and we’ll all be fine.”

“But the senator...his people...”

Archer narrowed his eyes. “You let me worry about the senator. Now get back in there and start planning your next experiment.” Archer waved him off dismissively, then motioned for Aiden to follow him back around the building and out to the parking lot.

Once there, Archer snapped his fingers to get their driver’s attention. He brought the car to them, and after they’d settled into the rear seat, Aiden finally said what was on his mind, “So, Arch, I don’t get it. The guy screwed up. Those ponds are no use if they’re toxic. That’s exactly what all the greenies are freaking out about. You can’t sell this project to the senator if someone’s tossing pictures of dead birds and bunnies in his face. Why didn’t you rip him a new one?”

Archer pursed his lips and threw a sidelong glance at the boy. Then he pushed the button to raise the screen that separated the front of the car from the rear section before speaking, “Aiden, really. I know it’s just the two of us, but that’s no reason to be crass. If you talk

like that with me, you'll talk that way with anyone. A true leader leads by example."

"Uh, sorry. What I meant was—"

"I know what you meant. You are wondering why I didn't drown Dr. Spengler in that pool of toxic sludge for attempting to hide his horrendous results from me."

"Well, yeah. That's what I meant."

Archer raised his index finger as he spoke, "This is what you need to learn, Aiden, and I intend to teach it to you. I have had to learn many things the hard way, through painful life events. You will have the benefit of my experience." He settled back into the seat and continued, "Dr. Spengler is a very bright scientist, one of our best, but he is no Communicator, no Persuader—clearly, and certainly not a leader, like you will be someday. We use him for what he can do for us and nothing more. 'Ripping him a new one', as you so inelegantly put it, would serve no purpose. If he is terrified that he will be discharged and his work discontinued, he will lie and cheat and try to cover up when things go wrong, as he did today. Instead, we want his honesty and his loyalty. We want him to believe we are on his side." Archer looked up in his head a moment, then back at Aiden, "To put it bluntly, you catch more flies with honey, my boy."

A little grin spread across Aiden's face then. "Okay, I get it. It's really no different than with the girl, right? You told me I would gain her trust by being flirtatious and flattering. And it worked." The grin turned

into a wide smile. “Like a charm.”

Archer laughed then. “Indeed it did. You are a quick study, Aiden.” Then he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a phone. “Now, shall we call the senator together? I’m sure he’ll be delighted to hear about how quickly his state can be profiting from these wonderfully green biological fuels.”

###

Whoever called those things mountains had obviously never been to Colorado. Big hills was more like it. Grace drummed her fingers on the side of a large, empty coffee mug as she stared out the picture window in the farmhouse kitchen. The mountains of North Carolina were certainly pretty, especially in the spring, when they were brimming with vibrant green and patches of colorful flowers, but having spent several years in the Rockies when she was in vet school—and much of that outside—she didn’t see how anyone could mistake those little green bumps for mountains. Still, with an early morning mist twisting in and out their valleys, and a pinkish sky their backdrop, those little bumps were kicking remnant thoughts of the busy streets of Atlanta from her mind.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

The sudden sound and the more sudden nearness of an earthy, masculine presence startled Grace into almost dropping her mug. “Doo! I-I didn’t hear you come in.” She pretended not to notice the bare chest

peeking out from under a shirt he hadn't bothered buttoning yet.

“Well, I'm sorry, Miss Grace. I guess I am right quiet without my boots.” He lifted one bare foot from the old pine floor. “I've learned to move around silently when I need to. The horses and the chickens don't mind so much, but the cows are very sensitive to noise when they're grazing.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Really?” She took a moment to assess whether he was joking with her. Nope. He was dead-on serious.

Doo reached up into the cupboard and pulled out a coffee mug for himself. “Oh, yeah, you should see 'em when Joe or whoever brings the plane in. They get all put out with me. Specially those Belties, like Gilda.”

Grace raised both eyebrows then and opened her mouth to form a question, but couldn't quite figure out how or what she wanted to ask. Good thing, because he continued on as though she was one hundred percent with him.

He nodded toward her empty coffee mug. “Already had your coffee, or just about to pour?”

“Well, to be honest, I couldn't find the coffee. Or the coffee maker. You do have one here, don't you?” She waved her hand in the general direction of the kitchen counters and cabinets, which were a charming blend of mid-century styles, but with a complete lack of modern conveniences.

“Oh, sure. It's just Granny likes the old country look of this place, so we keep the gadgets out of sight.”

He stepped back to one of the counters and beckoned her to follow. “Coffee maker’s in here.” He opened an upper cabinet door to reveal a narrow metallic and glass box. He took her mug from her and set it beneath the box, then asked, “So what’s your poison? Latte, cappuccino, machiatto...”

“That little machine can do all that?”

Doo patted the side of the machine. “That, and a lot more.” He shook his head, “Spencer—one of those little brainiac kids—built it. Man, that kid comes up with some amazing stuff. If you can dream it, he can do it.”

Grace shook her head. “I haven’t met him. Heard about him, but that’s it. I didn’t think he was that old.”

“He’s not. Twelve or thirteen, I think. Just a flippin’ genius, that one.” Doo made a face, “Not a lot of common sense and ’bout as graceful as a buffalo, but he’s great to have around when you find yourself in need of an automatic chicken feeder or an ultrasonic dishwasher that won’t break fine china.” He pointed to a lower cabinet on the other side of the room.

“Handy, but can this thing make a cup of good old-fashioned black coffee, strong?”

Doo laughed, “Sure.” He faced the machine and spoke to it, in a troubled Spanish accent, “Café, Colombino suprema, oscuro, sin crema.” And before she could ask, he explained, “There’s a little glitch in the language module. Spence is still working on that.”

Grace laughed as she tasted the steaming beverage. “I’d forgotten what a continuous stream of

wonders this place has to offer.”

“Say, Miss Grace—”

“Oh, Doo, please, just call me Grace. You make me feel like the old schoolmarm.”

His face reddened slightly. “Sorry, ma’am. Just a childhood habit. Originally from Texas, ya know.”

She wasn’t sure ma’am was any better; it made her feel every bit of her thirty-four years. As if sharing a coffee with a not-quite-fully-clothed man several years her junior wasn’t doing that already.

“So I was thinkin’...being that you’re up early and all, and being that you’re such an expert with large animals—Joe told me that—I was wondering if you’d want to come out to the barns with me and look at some of our research. We’ve got several projects goin’ right now. We’re working on some plant-based antibiotics, and cross-breeding for natural pest resistance, and there’s also this study with the cows...”

Grace’s eyes lit up, and she forgot her earlier questions about his sanity. “Oh, yes! I’d love to see. I didn’t realize you guys had all this stuff going on. Joe didn’t mention it.”

“Well, maybe that’s ’cause he’s worried about the future of the projects. See, we had this great research vet here, Dr. Bianco, for the last ten years, but he left. He went to a veterinarians conference in Vegas and never came back.”

“He never came back?”

“Nope. He met a lady there, exotic animal specialist from New Zealand, and they ran off together.

He sent me a postcard that said, ‘When it’s right, it’s right.’” Doo shrugged. “Can’t blame him. Prospects aren’t so good here at the farm.”

“Prospects...o-o-oh, I see what you mean.” Sure, that made sense. Bright, successful men and women could find a world of joy for their intellectual and creative pursuits here, but their love lives? Not so much. At least not if they were young and healthy and hoping to get married and make babies. Grace was suddenly keenly aware of the fact that she was one of very few women in a fifty mile radius who *didn’t* carry a particular gene.

Doo was now sitting in one of the kitchen chairs, pulling up the leg of his jeans and sliding on his boots, and again, Grace was trying not to notice certain very masculine aspects to his physique: long legs, bulging thigh muscles, broad shoulders...

“Gracie.”

She spun toward the sound of a soft, deep voice. “Joe! You’re up early.”

“I was just about to say the same—” Joe stopped mid-sentence when Doo stood, pushing his chair back noisily. “Oh...uh, sorry, I didn’t realize...”

“What? We were just having some coffee, chatting.” Why did she suddenly feel so uncomfortable? And why did her cheeks feel so warm?

Joe appeared to recover from his momentary fluster. “Right, of course. Good morning, Doo.” He smiled politely and made his way to the coffee machine.

Doo was the only one who didn’t look ruffled.

“So you ready, Grace?”

Joe looked up sharply, and Grace explained, “Doo was going to show me some of the research set-ups out in the barn. He said they have these great—”

Joe’s voice was stern, “Not now. I need to talk to you.”

###

Joe gave Doo an impatient stare. “Doo, would you excuse us? Now, please. You can show her around later.”

Doo looked annoyed, but grudgingly agreed, “Yeah, sure.” He grabbed his Stetson from a hook by the door, gave Grace a brief nod, and headed out.

The minute the door closed behind him, Grace lit into Joe, “Joseph Manning, was that really necessary? What is so important that it couldn’t wait? And did you have to be so rude?”

Joe cringed. She was absolutely right. He’d acted like a jerk. What the hell was wrong with him? He took his coffee and slumped into a seat at the kitchen table. “Ah, Gracie, forgive me. That was totally out of line. I owe you both an apology.” He ran a hand through his silver-black hair. “The last forty-eight hours have been rough. Just seeing you and Ellie, after all these years...” He shook his head. “So many memories.”

Grace softened and sat down next to him, laying a hand over his. “It’s okay, Joe. We’re all a bit rattled right now, but just realize...” She waited until he made

eye contact. “I’m not seventeen anymore. I’m not your girlfriend’s baby sister. I’m a grown woman. I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah, I know.” But did he? When he walked in and saw her drooling over the half-dressed cowboy, some primal instinct had taken over. He shook it off and shifted gears. “Look, Gracie, I know you’ve got your heart set on finding a new place to live, to hide out, at least until Ellie’s grown, but...”

She pulled her hand back from his. “Joe, this is not up for discussion. You know I want Ellie to have a normal life, regardless of her abilities.”

“Yes, Grace, *you* want. Have you thought about what Ellie wants? Especially now that she knows she’s Gifted. Don’t you think you should at least give her a chance to chime in?”

Grace sipped her coffee and didn’t answer. After a moment, she got up, walked back to the picture window, and stared out.

Joe followed and spoke over her shoulder, “I know how you feel about this place and the people in it, Grace. But how long are you going to let your feelings get in the way of what’s best for Ellie? Think of what she could learn here. Think of what she could become here. She could study with some of the most brilliant and creative people in the world. The opportunities are endless.”

She turned her head and looked up at him. “You mean, think about the great career she could build for herself, don’t you? What about a life, Joe? What about

love? Maybe Ellie wants the things you and I never got to have—a home, a *real* home, with a husband and children and...maybe a dog. What about those things, Joe?”

“She can have those things! She won’t be hidden away here for the rest of her life. She can come to Washington with me anytime she wants, and she can travel to our other installations and meet people from all over. *All* kinds of people, not just Gifted Ones.” He took Grace gently by the shoulders and turned her to face him. “Be honest, Grace. You know first-hand what we could do for her here. You know this is the best place for her.”

Grace closed her eyes, sighed, and then opened them again. “I’ll think about it.”

Joe grinned. “Really? Thanks, Gracie. That’s all I ask.” He released her shoulders and motioned toward the door that Doo had walked through. “Now, if you want to go see Dr. Doolittle’s experiments, be my guest.”

“Wait, seriously? His name is Dr. Doolittle? I thought ‘Doo’ was like, a nickname or something.”

“Oh, it is. His real name is Garth Clovis, but we call him Doo, because...”

Grace wrinkled her forehead. “What?” Then her eyes widened. “You don’t mean—”

“Well, he doesn’t *really* talk with the animals, of course, but...you’ve heard of a horse whisperer? That’s Doo. He’s got the Gift, with all the animals. He’s a Communicator, with a twist. Granny flipped when she first heard about him. She couldn’t wait to get him up here, to start studying his methods...and his DNA. He’s

like her pet project now.” Joe looked up in his head. “Uh, no pun intended.”

Grace laughed. “Well, this I’ve got to see for myself.” She headed for the door.

Chapter Seven: Wonderland

“Hey, chica! There you are. Joe sent me to look for you. He needs your help with something.”

Ellie grinned at her new-found friend, as she made her way down the front staircase. After her first night in the old farmhouse, she was feeling a bit lost, and the friendly face of Angel Espinoza was a welcome relief. “Hi, Angel. Have you seen my aunt? I checked her room, and she’s not there.”

“From what I heard, she was up with the sun. Out in the barn with the animals now, I think.”

Ellie nodded. “Oh, sure, that makes sense. Aunt Grace probably couldn’t wait to get out there.”

“I can go get her, if you want.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. There’s nowhere she’d rather be than raking stalls or milking cows or whatever. Let’s go find Uncle Joe.” Angel took a step towards the hallway, but a loud growl emanating from Ellie’s midsection stopped them both. “Uh, could we grab something to eat first? Maybe a little toast or some

juice?” Ellie turned back toward the staircase. “Is that the kitchen through there?”

“Ooooh, yes and no.” Angel turned around and pointed to the little room with the antique-style cabinets. “That’s the original farmhouse kitchen. We still use it for coffee and snacks and stuff, but the real cooking takes place back there.” She pointed down the hall, past the dining room where dinner had been served the night before. Angel looked side-to-side, as though wanting to assure no one would see them, then led Ellie to a swinging doorway. She held her finger to her lips, then slowly and gently pushed the swinging door inwards, peering around it as she went. After a moment, she relaxed, and pushed the door wide open. “C’mon.”

Ellie followed her in, also glancing side-to-side as she went, wondering what it was they were watching out for. Once inside, however, she was too busy looking around to care. “Holy cow! This place is awesome.” The room was outfitted as a large, professional, restaurant-quality kitchen. There were enormous prep tables, multiple refrigerators, and dozens of pots, pans, and gadgets hanging from overhead racks. In the center of one of the prep tables sat a large basket of assorted pastries and a half-empty platter of crispy bacon. “Yum!” Ellie reached over and snatched a piece of bacon off the platter and stuffed it in her mouth, then she grabbed a fluffy baked item that was dripping with icing. She took a big bite of the pastry, and, with mouth still full, exclaimed, “Whoa, this is awesome. This is the best—”

Angel cut her off, making a pressing motion

with her hands, “Shhh, not so loud. He might hear you.”

“Who?” asked Ellie, as she licked some icing off her fingers.

“Renni. Our cook. He doesn’t like anyone in his kitchen, especially when he’s not here.” She wrinkled up her nose. “Trust me, I know from experience.”

Ellie nodded, since her mouth was now busy sucking down a glass of fresh-squeezed juice. After she swallowed, she spoke in a hushed tone, “Well, I don’t want to make anybody mad. Especially a guy who can cook like this.”

Angel relaxed a little and studied Ellie. “You like cooking? Are you any good at it? If that’s your Gift, Renni would love to work with you...”

Ellie choked on an apple fritter. “Wait—you mean, cooking can be a Gift? You mean this Renni person is-is one of you, I mean, us?”

Angel stepped to a countertop next to the giant oven and pulled a large hardcover book off a shelf. She displayed its cover to Ellie. The book featured a dark-skinned man sporting dreadlocks and a bright white smile. He was wearing a candy-striped apron and holding a platter of well-dressed shrimp in his hands. Angel read the title aloud, “The Science of Exotic Spices by Chef Renford Myrie.”

Ellie snatched the book from her and studied the cover, then looked up. “Chef Ren? As in *Real Food with Chef Ren*? The TV show? Are you kidding me? He’s super famous! Aunt Grace loves that show.”

“Oh yeah, he does that, too, but most of the

time, he's here, working on his books and trying to fatten me up." She smacked her own curvy behind, then reached back up to the book shelf and flipped through a few volumes, adding, "He's written fifteen or twenty books about natural cooking and food science and composting and all kinds of stuff. You should check out his video series on YouTube."

Ellie stopped stuffing her face long enough to look through a couple of the books. "Man, this is so great. Aunt Grace is gonna flip when she hears about this. Will we get to meet him?"

A booming laugh suddenly cut in from the hall outside the swinging door. Angel dropped the book she was holding on the counter and grabbed Ellie by the arm. She pulled her toward a small doorway near the back of the kitchen and lowered her voice to a whisper, "Crap, it's him. He will skin me alive and serve me for dinner, if he finds us in here. C'mon!" She opened the door and yanked Ellie through it.

###

When the door from Chef Ren's kitchen closed behind them, Angel and Ellie were shrouded in virtual darkness. It was also damp and surprisingly cold. Angel guided Ellie's hand onto a railing. She whispered, "It's an old stone stairwell, be careful. Just hold onto the railing and follow me down."

"How can I follow you? I can't see a thing." Ellie gripped the railing tightly, and felt her way down

each of the steps. The air got colder and damper with every inch of descent. When they reached the bottom, there was a bit of light filtering through a smudged basement window off to one side. There were shelves along the walls and wooden cartons stacked here and there. Ellie squinted in the darkness. “So where are we now, and how long do we have to stay?” She wrapped her arms around herself, wishing she had worn something warmer than a flimsy tee shirt. Then she checked the floor, expecting to see rodents, or worse, spiders.

Angel ran her hand over one of the old wooden shelves. “Back in the day, this would have been called a root cellar—you know, a place with a consistent year-round temperature for storing vegetables, cured meats, stuff like that. Renni’s all into the whole back-to-nature thing.” She shrugged. “If you read some of his books, you’ll learn a lot.”

“Right now, all I want to learn is how to get out of here. I’m freezing.” Ellie didn’t mention her fear of arachnids.

Angel grinned and led her toward an old wooden door with a huge metal sliding lock. It looked like something that might lead into a dungeon. Angel pulled back the metal bar, then yanked on the door. Light flooded into the room, and Angel held out her hand, indicating Ellie should go toward it first.

Ellie hurried past the thick door and was immediately greeted by warmer, drier air. As her eyes adjusted to the brightness, she blinked, trying to sort out

what she was seeing. Left behind was the century-old farmhouse, and before her was a future like she'd only seen in movies. The floor was patterned with colorful stone tiles, and the walls were a blend of glass and metal and some kind of material that looked like sponge or foam. There were groupings of oddly-shaped furniture like exercise balls and wobbly stools, all with electronic devices attached. But not everything looked like business; the walls were hung with every type of drawing and painting, and sculptures and statues were poised at every turn.

“Hey, slowpoke, let’s go.” Angel was striding ahead and beckoning Ellie to follow, but Ellie was too dumbstruck to move. One of the hallway doors opened up, and a woman stepped out. A rich, operatic voice, accompanied by dramatic piano music, spilled out into the hallway, until the woman pulled the door closed behind her again.

“What is this place, Angel? I mean, where are we? Are we under the house? Or did we pass through a magic time portal or what?” After all that Ellie had seen in the last forty-eight hours, there was nothing she considered beyond reason at this point.

Angel stopped and laughed. “No, no magic time portal, chica. This is just where we do our thing, ya know? Or one of the places, anyway.” She gestured toward doors and windows up and down the hall, “There’s music rooms and science labs and underwater habitats and space travel simulators and...”

Ellie walked slowly toward her, looking from

side-to-side, where glass-walled rooms allowed her to observe the Gifted Ones in action. She stepped up to one wall and pressed her nose against the glass. “What are these guys doing?” In the room, a young man and woman, dressed in Medieval costume, were acting out some sort of sword-fight scene behind a black metal grid, while several onlookers stood by furiously tapping on computer tablets.

“Oh, yeah, that’s pretty cool. The gaming development arena.” Angel joined Ellie at the glass wall and pointed toward the actors. “See, those guys act out the scenes a bunch of different ways, so the other guys can figure out how to do the graphics and programming for maximum realism.” She pointed toward one particular onlooker. “That chick rocks. She wrote this program for me that creates simulations of all different kinds of attack scenarios, so I can really challenge myself and be prepared for anything. I’ve battled Huns, Aztecs, Vikings, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.”

“Impressive.”

“Oh, heck yeah. And it can even do creatures like grizzly bears, snakes, or dinosaurs.”

Ellie turned to face her. “Dinosaurs? Is that really a good use of your time?”

Angel grinned. “Nah, it was just fun.” She lowered her voice, “And to tell you the truth, Tyrannosaurus Rex kicked my ass. Those little bitty arms are so distracting.”

Ellie was going to give that some thought, but

she was startled by the sound of a modest explosion. Both girls turned to look down the hall where a door opened and purple smoke poured out. Angel sagged, “Not again.”

“What? What is it? Is it poisonous? Do we need to get everyone out of here?”

Angel shook her head and started walking that way. “No. It’s perfectly harmless. Just kind of messy. It was the same thing you heard last night in my room.”

By the time they reached the smoking doorway, two adolescent boys had stumbled out into the hallway, choking and waving away the fumes. One of the boys was chubby with a heavy mop of brown, curly hair, while the other was a painfully scrawny Asian boy with some rather unfortunate acne. Both were coated in a bluish-purple powder, and when they pulled off their protective eyewear, they had big owl-white circles around the eyes of their otherwise purple faces.

Angel approached the chubby boy and planted her hands on her hips. “Spencer Christian Landry, how many times I gotta tell you? No more experiments with that salty peanut stuff.”

“Saltpeter, Angel, and it’s not dangerous. They put it in all kinds of foods—”

“Just because they put it in food, doesn’t mean it’s not dangerous. Just ask Chef Ren.”

The Asian boy chimed in, “But he’s the one who suggested it. He’s looking for a new natural preservative. He said if we could perfect this, we could be millionaires like him.”

Angel sighed heavily and looked at Ellie. “This is what I get for sneaking into his kitchen.” Then she grinned and rubbed her hand through the first boy’s curly hair, releasing a cloud of purple dust. “Ellie, this is Spencer. Spence, Ellie.”

The curly-headed boy stuttered out a clumsy greeting, “Uh, oh, um, hi. Miss, uh, I mean, Ellie.”

Meanwhile, the Asian boy had replaced his goggles with a pair of wire-framed glasses that sat a bit lopsided on his face. He blinked a couple times, allowing his eyes to adjust to the thick lenses, then gave Ellie a big grin. “And I’m Feng. Hajimi Feng, boy genius. You can call me Haj. Or Feng. Or whatever you like. Just call me.” He pulled off a latex glove and grabbed her hand, bringing it to his lips.

Fighting the urge to scream and run, Ellie threw Angel a mortified look. Angel was clearly trying not to laugh as she reeled the young Romeo back in. “Ah, ok, boys, now get back in there and get that lab cleaned up. Go!” She shoed the young men back inside and closed the door behind them.

The two women started walking again, with Angel shaking her head. “Sorry about that, Ellie. Ever since that kid Haji got here, those two have been wreaking havoc on this place. I have to admit, they come up with some great stuff together, but they’re still boys.”

“So, they’re Gifted Ones, too?”

“Oh yeah. Haji’s some kind of science whiz kid, and Spence is what we call an Inventor. He’s got this vision—like he can just dream up stuff no one ever

thought of before...and then just figure out how to build it, at least with a little help from some of the other brainiacs around here.”

“That sounds really cool.” Ellie shook her head. “I just can’t imagine what Gift I could possibly have. I guess it’s still a little hard for me to believe I even have one.”

Angel stopped and took her by the shoulders. “You do, Ellie. Trust me, you do. Just give it time. It will find you.”

Before Ellie had a chance to doubt her, a voice called out from the far end of the hall, “Angel, Ellie, where’ve you been? I’ve been looking everywhere.” It was Joe, and he was walking quickly and beckoning. “C’mon, we’ve got a briefing in 180 with Rishi.”

Angel started moving down the hall towards him, but looking back, said impatiently, “Well, let’s go, chica.” Then she grinned. “Now you’ll see how we really roll.”

###

“Hey, Aunt Grace, check this out—we’re in Alaska. Arctic Circle. Look, Polar Bears!”

Angel couldn’t help smiling watching Ellie play with the controls in 180. It hadn’t been that long since Angel herself had first delighted in operating the control panel of everyone’s favorite virtual reality arena. The room was called 180, due to its being a half-circle with projected scenery along the curved wall, and

computerized imagery and props as needed, along with full-scale sounds, smells, and sensations to complete the atmosphere.

Grace pulled the door closed behind her. “Brrr, Ellie, it’s really cold in here. Could we please relocate to Mexico or the Caribbean? I’m not really dressed for snowshoeing.”

Joe spoke up, “Thanks for joining us, Grace. I need both of you here for this.” He stepped up to the control panel and gently shooed Ellie out of the way. “Time to get down to business, El.”

“Can I do more later? I want to go to Europe and maybe Africa. Omigosh—can we travel back in time with this thing? Elizabethan England? That would totally help me with my school work.”

“Yes, yes, honey. You can try it out all you want, as long as someone’s not using it for their research or whatever.” Joe tapped on a small screen and punched a few buttons, and in a moment, the frozen tundra was replaced with a colorfully designed sitting room whose windows overlooked a sparkling city at night. A thick marble slab slid out from the center of the curved wall, extending the table in the virtual sitting room into a real table in 180.

Angel grabbed some office-type chairs from a corner closet and rolled them up to the table. While she and Joe and Grace were seating themselves, Ellie remained standing, inspecting the scene on the wall. “Is this a real place? Where is it?” She rose up on her toes for a better view out the virtual windows. “It looks like

there's an ocean or something. And the buildings look like...Miami?"

Joe smiled. "I see you have an eye for architecture, Ellie. But wrong side of the globe. It's Mumbai, the capital of India. We're overlooking Marine Drive. It runs along an enormous bay, similar to South Beach, and yes, with lots of Art Deco buildings."

Still staring at the images, Ellie spoke wistfully as she dropped herself into one of the chairs, "Man, I'd love to go there someday. I mean, either place—Miami or Mumbai. I've hardly been anywhere."

Angel wrinkled her forehead thoughtfully. Apparently, they weren't kidding when they said Grace had been hiding Ellie from the world since her sister's death. She turned to Joe. "Hey, maybe Ellie could join us ___"

"Joseph, my friend, I am here now. Sorry if I kept you waiting." All eyes turned toward the screen as Rishi Takoor settled himself into a comfortable chair, with the lights of Mumbai as his backdrop. His dark skin, dark eyes, and mop of graying black hair were offset by a white collared shirt adorned with intricate thread patterns in green, blue, and gold. Angel never tired of screen chats with the brainy Indian, who was not only intelligent, but fun-loving and flirtatious, as well. Rishi held up a tablet. "I have the list now."

Joe nodded. "Great. Thanks, Rishi. Just give me a sec." He turned toward Ellie, who was seated next to him. "Ellie, we need your help. Yours and Grace's. What happened the other night with your friend Aiden—"

Ellie held up a hand. “Not my friend. So-o-o not my friend.”

Joe smiled. “Okay, your acquaintance.” Then he was serious again. “Ellie, that was no accident, and those weren’t just some random street thugs that happened along.”

Now Ellie looked serious. “Yeah, I know. You guys said something about that last night, but I don’t get it—what did Aiden have to do with those creepy guys who attacked Aunt Grace?”

“Everything, I’m afraid. The whole thing was a set-up. I mean, from the very beginning. Aiden enrolled in your school and befriended Nathan in order to get to you.”

“But why? Because of this Gifted gene thing? I don’t believe it. I mean, how would he know I had it? I didn’t even know I had it. And I’m certainly not some super-scientist or super-Defender person like Angel. What good would I be to anyone?”

Angel scratched her head, trying to think of a polite way to respond, since neither Joe nor Grace seemed willing to say what they were all thinking. “Uh, Ellie, remember that stuff we were talking about last night? About how if two Gifted people have a baby together, they’re more likely to have a Gifted child, and if there’s a double-gene involved, it’s guaranteed?”

Ellie shrugged. “Yeah, I remember.” For a moment, her face was just blank, but then her eyes widened. “Whoa. Wait a minute. Are you saying somebody wants to use me to mother the Master Race or

something?”

Grace threw an angry look at Angel, then grabbed Ellie’s hand. “No, no, no, honey. Nobody’s saying that at all. The truth is, we don’t know what they wanted. We don’t know *anything* for sure.” She looked at Joe, then toward the screen. “Do we, guys?”

Rishi responded, “I am afraid your aunt is correct, Elodie. I have tried to find out anything I can about this boy Aiden, but he is a ghost.”

Ellie shook her head and waved her hands vehemently. “Okay, now you’re going too far. First this crazy gene thing, and now you want me to believe in ghosts?”

Joe spoke up. His tone was assertive and intended to end the speculation, “Ellie, sweetheart, listen to me. This is not some silly horror movie. This is real life, and we’re dead serious. Rishi only meant that Aiden Orcutt is not his real name, and he wasn’t at St. Augustine’s to earn a high school diploma. We don’t know who he is, where he came from, or how he knew about you, but he did, and we need to find out how, and not just because he tried to hurt you and Grace, but because, apparently, whoever he’s working with or for has some kind of inside track to our Council—what you might call a mole, or a leak. Someone knew that Grace had called us that night, and they also knew about the hotel *and* the plane.”

“Wait, what?” Angel hadn’t heard of this mole business previously, and Joe always told her everything. She was his right-hand as far as security was concerned.

“Why haven’t I heard about this? Joe?” She jumped up from her seat, slamming her hands on the table, feeling a wave of heat rising through her torso. “Did you think it was me?” she demanded.

Rishi cut in, “Mishti, calm down. No one doubts your loyalty. It was my fault. I told him he should speak to no one until I could backtrack on the patterns. We thought there might be a bug in someone’s phone or on the plane or even in a shoe. I had to check before anything else got out.”

Joe turned to Angel. His voice was even and calming, “Angel, please sit back down. You’re not helping.” He inclined his head slightly back in Ellie’s and Grace’s direction.

Oh yeah. Right. Kind of lost it there for a moment. Angel chastised herself for missing her morning meditation due to showing Ellie around. Of all people, no one knew as well as Angel how important it was for a Defender to keep their emotions under control, to stay focused and grounded. She sat back down and lowered her voice, “Sorry, Joe. You caught me off-guard.”

He nodded. “Understood. And just for the record, we swept everything—including yesterday’s outfit.” He waved a hand toward Angel’s black leather combo. “There were no bugs.”

She smoothed the front of her black shirt and said with a pout, “Of course not.”

“Anyway...” Joe redirected everyone’s attention toward the screen. “Rishi has a list of Council members and other closely related parties who’ve traveled to

Atlanta in the last couple years for any reason. I really don't believe any of these people would intentionally betray us, but perhaps they were unwittingly part of something—”

“Wait, Uncle Joe...what's the Council?”

“I'll take this one,” volunteered Grace. “The Council is a group of Gifted Ones from around the world who meet semi-regularly to discuss issues of interest to all the Gifted. They debate the relative importance or danger of various research projects, whether to let an identified Gifted person know they have the gene, and figure out ways to help Gifted Ones, like they did with my family—”

Angel interrupted, “And with mine. After I took down the scary dude in the street that day, the Council sent Joe to find me. They figured I was worth saving.”

“They were right,” Joe said, then he motioned to Rishi to continue.

Rishi tapped on his tablet, then raised a hand in the air. He flicked open his fingers, and a three-dimensional image of a chubby, elderly man appeared, seemingly floating in the air in front of them and spinning slowly, like a model on a pedestal.

Joe narrated, “This is Donat Maisonet, a French physicist. He was one of the people who was in D.C. with Angel and I the other night, when we got the call. He could've theoretically overheard us talking or...” Joe shook his head, indicating his doubt. “I suppose had us followed.” He looked at Grace and Ellie. “Have either of you ever heard of him before today, or seen him

somewhere?”

Grace shook her head, and Ellie shrugged her shoulders. “Can’t say I’d remember if I did.”

“Okay, good. Next.” He nodded toward Rishi to show the next one, and on it went. In each case, neither Grace nor Ellie expressed any knowledge of the person...until the last.

As Rishi flicked open his hand one more time, an image of a large, muscular man flashed before them. His jet-black hair was slightly unkempt, longer than it should have been, and the ends were curling up in the back. He wore black jeans and a black t-shirt that was just snug enough to accentuate every ripple and bulge across his broad shoulders and well-developed torso. At the sight of him, Angel felt herself fighting for self-control again. “Joe! Seriously?” she demanded.

He raised his hand without looking in her direction. “Yes, Angel, seriously. It’s just a question.” He looked at Grace. “Anything?”

Once again, she shook her head. “Nope. Never saw him before.” Then she grinned. “And I’m quite sure I would remember him if I had...mmm, mmm, mmm.”

Joe rolled his eyes and then motioned toward Rishi to close the image.

“Wait!” Ellie grabbed Joe’s arm, apparently transfixed on the handsome physique.

“You recognize him?” Joe asked.

“I...no...maybe. I’m not sure. There’s something familiar...” Ellie tipped her head to the left and then to the right.

“Well, of course there is!” Angel snapped, opening both hands toward the image. “It’s Rique! My brother. You saw his picture in my room last night.”

“Oh, sure, now I see it.” Ellie relaxed her shoulders, then took another long look as the image spun again to the backside. “He definitely grew up...and out. I mean, uh, you know...” She held her hands in a way that was supposed to represent broad shoulders.

Angel started laughing. “Yeah, I know. He’s pretty popular with the ladies up in D.C.”

Ellie propped her elbows on the table and dropped her chin into her hands, still staring at the screen. “I’ll bet.”

Then Angel turned her attention back toward Joe and Rishi. “And he may not be a member of this organization, but he would never do anything to hurt any of us. You know that, Joe. He’s helped us several times, and he would do it again. He’s constantly working to make himself a better Defender and a better person.”

Joe again motioned for Rishi to close the image, then looked directly at Angel. “Angel, he’s a big boy now. He doesn’t need you to protect him. And for the record, I have complete faith in Rique. I wouldn’t have invited him to join us—more than once, I might add—if I didn’t.” Joe consulted his tablet. “But he did drive to Atlanta six months ago and stayed for three days, so he was on the list. That’s all there is to it.”

Joe addressed the group again, “I knew it was unlikely that Ellie and Grace had seen any of these people; we just had to verify it.” He looked at Rishi. “So

you found nothing anywhere to give us a clue about this kid Aiden?”

Rishi was shaking his head. “I tell you, Joe, nothing. Within hours, every trace of him disappeared from cyberspace. Somebody really knew what they were doing. Most impressive. Almost as good as me.”

Joe wrinkled up his forehead and thought for a moment. “Ellie, honey, I know your brain was scrambled, but do you remember anything that Aiden said or did that seemed really strange? Just take a minute, think about it.”

Ellie squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. She looked like she was trying really hard to remember, but then started shaking her head. “No, Joe, it was all just normal teenager chit-chat...” Her voice trailed off.

Grace grasped Ellie’s hands. “What, honey? There was something, wasn’t there? Tell us, even if it seems silly or unimportant.”

Ellie opened her eyes. “Well, there was this one thing. It’s probably nothing, but he said something about my eyes.” She turned to look at Joe. “He said I have my father’s eyes. But I don’t. Why would he say that?”

Chapter Eight: Jump Seat

Her father's eyes. Hmph. Joe was still cogitating on that one three days later. First, the guy drugs Ellie with God knows what, and then he makes a crack like that. As if the little creep knew anything about Ellie's father. Joe was looking forward to the day they tracked down that Aiden kid, so he could kill him with his bare hands.

Oh, okay, he wasn't going to kill the kid. Just make him wish he were dead.

Joe rolled his head around on his neck, attempting to loosen the taut muscles, and kept walking the path toward the main livestock barn. He looked skyward, hoping to clear out those ugly thoughts with some brilliant April sunshine. There was still a chill in the air and enough breeze to keep him moving, but even the fresh smell of a springtime afternoon wasn't going to take it all away. Between learning he had some kind of weak link in his organizational structure, and then, almost losing Ellie and Grace to unknown forces from

the “dark side” of the Gifted gene pool...well, he’d had about all the stress he could handle this week, and now there was just a little more. Nothing quite so dramatic brewing up in D.C. this time, but enough to require a visit in person, and that meant convincing Grace to go along.

Although she’d been at the farm only a few days, Grace had already become a fixture in the barns and fields, plying her veterinary skills with the animals and experiments that Dr. Bianco’s departure had left in the lurch. When Joe couldn’t find her in the farmhouse, he knew just where to look.

Before he even reached the big barn building, he spotted her through one of the windows. Unaware that she was being observed, Grace labored aggressively, brushing down one of the Belties who was feeding from a trough. Joe paused for a moment. Watching her through the fuzzy glass, in her jeans and casual shirt, muddy sneakers, and hair in a pony tail, he could feel the years melting away. He thought of a day, nearly twenty years before, when he’d taken both Lucy and Grace to the State Fair. Lucy, the dainty and delicate intellectual, was awkward and uncomfortable around the big, smelly animals, while her baby sister boldly approached them and marveled at their majesty. Who knew that fascination would become her career?

He turned away from the window and walked the rest of the way to the side door of the barn. He took a few steps inside but stopped when he heard their voices laughing together. Doo was with her now, and they were

sharing a moment over something the cow had done. Joe felt immediately uneasy, superfluous, and oddly intrusive. He shifted his direction, intending to retreat.

“Joe, come here!” Grace called out to him, her voice light and playful. “You have to see this crazy cow eating this seaweed. She actually likes it. Apparently, she’s got a more sophisticated palate than I have.”

Hiding his discomfort, Joe proceeded inside. “One of the research protocols?”

“Yes, sir,” said Doo with a smile. “We’ve been looking for natural tonics that might increase milk output without messing with these poor girls’ hormones.” He stroked the animal’s head. “Gilda here really seems to be taking to the seaweed. Her production is up 27%.”

“That’s great, Doo. I’m glad to hear you’ve been able to keep up the research without Bianco.”

Doo looked over at Grace as he answered, “You should thank Gracie. We couldn’t have done it without her.”

Gracie? Why was he calling her Gracie? That was Joe’s thing. He and Lucy were the only ones who ever called her Gracie. Argh! What was this stupid, protective, selfish thing he kept feeling about Grace? He bit his tongue and framed a response, “Well, you might have to manage without her for a couple days.” He looked at Grace. “Angel and I need to make a quick trip to Washington. Something’s come up that we need to take care of right away. I thought, with things being the way they are right now, that it would be best if you and Ellie came with us.” He paused, then added, “For your

safety, I mean.”

“Washington?” Grace looked up into her head, then slowly answered, “I suppose that would be all right. I don’t think Ellie’s ever been there. We could see the sights, do some shopping...”

Joe gave her a lopsided grin. “I was thinking more along the lines of meeting some of my esteemed colleagues at the Council. Fraser Lincoln will be there to talk about his latest algal pond experiments and a couple of top-notch archeologists from Germany, too, but... whatever you think.” Joe did not want to push her. Grace had always had a stubborn streak, and if he was going to change her thinking about Ellie’s future, he’d have to let her come to it on her own.

Grace laughed. “Uh, I think Ellie will be more interested in the Lincoln Bedroom than Fraser Lincoln, but sure, we can go. When do we leave?”

“First thing in the morning?”

She nodded. “I can do that. Of course, we’ll have to track down Ellie and drag her out of that basement amusement park over there.” Grace motioned back toward the farmhouse. “She’s been hounding those gamers and stalking the Shakespearean actors ever since we got here. But yeah, that’ll give me the rest of the day out here with Doo. We need to finish up our work with the cows and then do a few things with the geese before I could leave. Right, Doo?” She lightly touched Doo’s arm as she said it, and he gave her a nod and a broad smile in return.

And then Joe was really glad he was taking

Grace away with him.

###

Archer Orucov scanned the roomful of well-dressed men and women, who were sipping drinks and snagging caviar and goat cheese hors d'oeuvres from silver trays carried by tuxedoed waiters. He was more than ready to exit this dreadfully dull congregation of congresspeople, but Kumika was nowhere to be found. He took another pull from his drink, then set it down on the nearest table in disgust. He wondered how a budget as bloated as that of the United States Congress couldn't find room for a decent bottle of scotch.

A high-pitched cackle from the other side of the room caught his attention. He lifted his head and spotted her, crushed in a corner with Senator Warren Lathey. With her already long legs perched atop four inch heels, she towered over the man's bushy gray head, positioning her small but firm breasts not far below his chin. The senator's rosy cheeks beamed as he pressed closer to her, and though Archer couldn't see for the crowd, he was guessing Lathey's hand was firmly planted on Kumika's slender behind. Her arm was casually draped over the man's shoulder, and her black eyes sparkled, as she alternately laughed at his jokes and whispered in his ear. Archer had to look away to keep from laughing himself. Did the old codger really think a woman that beautiful and that intelligent was genuinely interested in him?

When Archer looked again, Kumi caught his eye

over the old man's shoulder, and with the subtlest of glances, told him her mission was accomplished. He turned and headed for the door, stopping only to shake a few hands on his way out.

Twenty minutes later, she slid into the limo beside him. He patted her knee. "Excellent work, my dear. For a while there, I didn't think you'd reel him in."

Kumika opened her beaded bag and fished out a lipstick case. She carefully traced the black-red color onto her lips, eyeing herself in the case's tiny mirror, and only when she was satisfied with the job, did she respond. "Please. From the first minute, he was so-o-o in." She dropped the lipstick case back in the bag and withdrew a folded envelope. She flattened it out and handed it to Archer. "Did you really doubt me?"

He grinned and shook his head. "You have never failed me yet. However..." He paused while he carefully tucked the envelope into his inside pocket, then continued, "We still need three more votes to get this project through. You and I have a lot more work to do." She didn't respond. Archer supposed she was looking for a more flowery acknowledgment of her success. He reached over and brushed her lower lip with his thumb. "This lovely mouth can do such amazing things."

She dipped her chin then and looked up at him through her lashes. "Talking is not the only thing it's good for."

He gave her half a smile, but refused to give in to her attempts at distraction. "There'll be plenty of time for that later, Kumi." He rapped once on the wall to the

driver's section, and in a moment, the car began to move.

Kumika glanced out the window. "Where are we going?"

"We have one more stop to make."

"Archer, it's after midnight."

He shrugged. "I got a message from Mondo."

She rolled her eyes. "Seriously? You can't see him tomorrow? I'm tired. My feet are killing me."

"He said it had to be tonight. And Aiden's meeting us there."

She flipped her knees toward the door and folded her arms over her chest. "Oh, for God's sake. Shouldn't he be tucked in his little boy bed by now?"

Archer bit his tongue and didn't answer. Kumika Asano was an alluring woman with a sharp mind, and surely an invaluable asset in his business dealings, but sometimes, her childish needs for attention and adoration were wearying.

They traveled the several blocks to Mondo's divey little ristorante and entered through the back door. A short, but thickly muscled man in a too-tight tee shirt greeted them and ushered them down a hallway to a private room. The space was picture-book Italian restaurant: checkered tablecloths, dim lighting, half-melted candles, and a lot of bad art.

Three men were seated at the only occupied table in the room. The largest and eldest of the three, whose broad back was to them, turned to look when Archer and Kumika walked in. He immediately stood and greeted them. His voice was gruff, but warm,

“Archer, my friend, I’m glad you could join us.” He briefly grasped Archer’s hand in both of his, then turned his attention to Kumika. He gave her a mock bow. “And Kumika, so nice to see you again.” His eyes scanned her body up and down, then he lifted her hand to his lips. “You look absolutely ravishing this evening.”

She reacted to the gesture with a wry smile. “Armondo, you’re so full of shit.”

He laughed out loud and reached for a chair for her, but then noticed the two younger men at the table had not moved. “Hey, whattsa matter, you two? Get up! There’s a lady in the room. Carlo, you got no manners?” He smacked the head of the one nearest him, and the lad quickly stood.

Aiden, who was seated on the other side of the table, also stood, but in a more leisurely manner. He was holding a pepperoncini from the antipasti on the table. He lifted it to his lips and said simply, “Kumi.” Then he bit down hard on the pepper.

Kumika narrowed her eyes, barely nodded, and slipped into the proffered chair. When all the men were seated, she turned to Carlo, who was next to her, and stuck her fingers into his hair. Pulling a tuft straight up on his head, she asked, “Gone blonde, huh?” She looked toward Aiden. “You boys going in for some matchy-matchy look?”

Aiden didn’t answer, but Carlo blurted, “No!” as he attempted to undo the damage she had done to his perfect coiffure.

Suppressing a grin, Archer settled the matter, “I

suggested it, Kumi. I thought the Angel of Darkness might like it. Opposites attract and all that.”

Kumika reached for a tiny plastic sword on the antipasti tray and pierced a cube of aged cheddar. She studied it as she spoke, “Hmm, I guess it worked. Let’s hope the rest of the plan is equally successful, because, from what I hear, it’s on.” She stuck the cheese end of the sword in her mouth and pulled it out clean.

“It will be, and it starts with this.” Archer held his left hand up and pulled and twisted at a ring on his middle finger. He reached across the table and handed the ring to Carlo. “Try it on.”

Carlo tried the ring on his thick middle finger first, then failing that, his ring finger. When it got stuck there as well, he moved it to his pinky, and the ring slid on. “Okay, so what do I do with it? Is it like a radio or somethin’?” He held the ring up to his mouth and seemed about to speak into it when Archer held up a hand.

“No, son, it’s not a radio. It’s a magnet, a fairly powerful magnet. It’s the perfect tool for removing nanophones.”

The boy wrinkled his nose up. “Nanophones? What’s a nanophone?”

Kumika grinned her most devilish grin, saying, “I’ll show you.” She turned to face the boy and slowly extricated a dripping mass of diamonds from her right ear. Then she took Carlo’s hand in hers and laid it along the side of her neck. Keeping her eyes on his face, she gently guided his fingers up toward her ear, pushing

them through her silky locks. Archer couldn't stop himself from grinning as the young man's face turned an ever-deepening shade of red. Finally, Kumi pulled his hand away from her ear and held it out in front of all of them. With a long fingernail, she pointed to a tiny metal button that had affixed itself to the pinky ring. "That, my dear, is a nanophone—a little teeny two-way microphone."

Carlo snatched his hand back and held it two inches from his face, inspecting the tiny device. "No kidding," he said. Then he looked at Kumi. "That was in your ear?"

Archer answered for her, "Yes, and there's likely one in your girlfriend's ear much of the time."

Carlo thought about that for a minute, and his face took on a horrified look. "Wait, like...even when..."

At that, Kumika spiraled into a fit of laughter, and Mondo joined her, his deep bass resonating off the walls. Only Aiden seemed unamused. Archer just shrugged. "Let's hope the monitors are discreet enough to turn the tapes off once in a while."

"Tapes?" Carlo gulped.

The poor guy looked miserable, so Archer moved on. He reached into his inside jacket pocket and brought out two tiny sealed vials. One was about half-full, and the other, all the way to the top. He laid them on a napkin and pushed it across the table to Carlo. He pointed to the one that was half-filled. "This one's for the kid."

Aiden interjected, "She's a lightweight, Carlo."

Don't confuse the vials."

"And make sure they eat first. No empty stomachs, or it might not stay down," added Archer.

"Wait, what exactly's gonna happen here?" Carlo picked up the filled vial and studied it. "What does this stuff do? Drowsiness? Confusion? Blackout?" When he got no immediate response, his tone changed, "I mean, this ain't gonna kill her, right? 'Cause I—"

Armondo laid a hand on his son's arm. "No, no, no. Nobody's gonna get hurt. We don't want no trouble." He looked across the table. "Do we, Arch?"

Archer had just picked up the bottle of wine from the table. "Why, of course not, Mondo." He poured himself a glass and lifted it up. He held the glass at eye level, studying the dark colored liquid inside, then spoke, as if to himself, "The formula is quite precise. I mixed it myself. It's based on some of my groundbreaking research in paralytics...from back in the day." He swirled the wine in the glass, then took a sip. After holding the beverage in his mouth long enough to savor the flavor, he swallowed. He set the glass down, nodding his approval of the vintage, then looked at all of them. "I just want what's mine, and this is the simplest way to get it." He smiled at Armondo. "But I appreciate your concern, my friend; good parents always want what's best for their children."

###

"And while Joe's at his meeting, we can tour the

monuments and see the White House.” Grace was talking to Ellie the next morning, as they approached the barn, en route to the secret entrance to the airstrip.

Angel, who was just behind them, was thinking how that just sounded boring as hell. She had much better ideas for Ellie’s trip to Washington. “No, no, no. You don’t want to go there. Go see the spy museum. It’s my favorite! There’s so much cool stuff in there, and there’s this awesome bistro next door where they bake all their own bread, and then this gelato place right next to that—it’s to die for. And once we’re done with our...uh, stuff we have to do, we’ll come meet you guys for dinner. Oh, but first thing when we get there, you’ve got to try some of Nicky Argulo’s homemade pretzels—”

Joe looked back at her, laughing. “Angel you should write a book: Washington, D.C., the Gastronomic Guide.”

“Hey, I just don’t want them to miss out...” Her voice trailed off as everyone’s attention shifted toward the barn.

“Grace! Grace, I’m so glad I caught you!” Doo was running toward them, Stetson in hand, from the direction of the pasture. He came to a screeching halt in front of Grace, and panted out his words, “It’s Gilda. She’s sick. I never seen her like this, and she can’t tell me what’s wrong.” He rocked his head back on his neck and looked skyward, catching his breath, then went on, “I think she got into the seaweed bin. I found it this morning with the lid off, and the whole thing’s empty.”

Grace’s eyes widened. “*The whole thing?*” She

bit her lower lip and appeared to be thinking hard about something.

Joe looked at Doo. “Well, can’t you just give her something to settle her stomach?”

“No! It’s not that simple,” Grace insisted. “Seaweed has iron and iodine and lots of other powerful constituents.” She shifted her attention to Doo. “If she really ate all that...”

“Is it bad?”

“Yes, really bad. It could kill her. We have to act fast. Do you have any activated charcoal? What about sodium chloride?” She dropped her bag, and started to move toward the pasture.

“Grace...” Joe looked bewildered.

She turned back to look at them, as though she’d completely forgotten about the trip to Washington. “Oh, Joe, I...uh...”

“We can wait for you,” he offered.

She shook her head. “No, you go. I have to stay with her. It might be all day...even all night.” She pointed at Angel. “You’ll stay with Ellie, right? Every minute?”

Angel raised her hands. “That’s my job, Grace. Won’t let her out of my sight.”

“I’ll be fine, Aunt Grace. Go take care of the cow.” Ellie made a shooing motion.

Grace nodded her assent to all of them, and blew a kiss to Ellie. Then she grabbed Doo by the elbow and yanked him back in the direction from which he had come. Joe looked at Angel and Ellie and said half-

heartedly, “Well, I guess it’s just us then. Ready, ladies?”

Angel looked at him quizzically. She’d known Joe Manning a long time, worked side-by-side with him in many stressful situations, and he’d always kept his cool. That was Joe—Mr. Even Keel. It was why he was such a fantastic leader. But yet, these last few days, with Ellie and Grace around...well, he just seemed off his game.

###

Joe was still brooding as the trio boarded the plane. While Angel and Ellie settled themselves in to comfortable seats in the front, he excused himself to the back cabin, taking his computer and phone with him. As soon as he’d pulled closed the cabin door, Ellie wrinkled up her nose. “So what’s up with him?”

“You noticed that, too, huh?” Angel looked in the direction of the back cabin, as if it would somehow yield some insight. “He’s never like this—all moody and broody.”

“It’s certainly not the way I remember him, from when I was little. He was always happy and funny and playful. At least with me. He used to take me to the zoo and the museum and the playground.” She shrugged. “Maybe this is just what happens to people when they get old.”

Angel laughed out loud. “Hey, he’s not *that* old, and he’s probably got more on his mind nowadays than he did back then, but...something does seem to be

bothering him. He'll usually tell me. I can't very well protect him and our other Gifted folks, if I don't know everything that's going on."

"Maybe it's personal."

"Personal..." Angel raised an eyebrow to indicate her confusion.

"You know, like...maybe he had a fight with his girlfriend."

Angel shook her head. "No girlfriend. At least not currently." She looked up in her head a moment, trying to recall. "Hmm, not for a long time, now that I think about it. As long as I've known Joe, he's never really had great luck in that department. He'll go out with somebody a few times, maybe a few weeks or months, but it never lasts." She shrugged. "I don't know why. I guess he's just too wrapped up in his work. His love life is one area we don't discuss."

"But maybe...I mean, I was thinking..." Ellie bit her lip.

"What?"

"Well, he looked kind of red, didn't he? Maybe more violet. You know, hot. Like hot temperature."

"Violet? Hot temperature?" Angel shook her head out. What was the kid talking about? She seemed like a bright girl, but she was making zero sense right now.

"You know what I mean, Angel. Jealous. Angry. Hurt."

"O-o-o-h." Angel's eyes widened. "You think Joe has a thing for your aunt? And he's jealous of Doo?"

Angel thought about it a minute, then laughed. “No. No way. Even if he was totally diggin’ on Grace, Joe would never be jealous of the cowboy.”

Ellie shrugged. “If you say so.”

“I know so. Joe Manning’s a very confident guy. If there’s something he wants, he doesn’t sit around and mope. He goes after it.”

“Is that what happened with you? You said he more or less plucked you off the street, and now you’re the Chief Defender for his whole organization.”

Angel grinned, trying to control her pride. “I don’t think that was necessarily his plan from the beginning. He just wanted to help us—me and Rique, I mean.”

“Oh, your brother. Right.”

“Yeah, one of the Council members had read about what happened, had Rishi do some checking, and they figured out we were probably Gifted and sent Joe to find us. They’re good people, chica, all of them. If it wasn’t for Joe and Granny and the Council, I’d probably be in jail now, and Rique would have ended up dead.”

“But why? I know your mom died, but didn’t you have anyone to take care of you? What about your dad? Or some other relatives?”

Angel gave her a soft smile. Maybe they had both lost their mothers at an early age, but that’s where the similarities stopped. There was no Aunt Grace to pick up the pieces for the Espinoza kids. “Nah, there was no one. Daddy wasn’t exactly up to the task, and none of Mom’s relatives even knew where we were or how to

find us. I took Rique and ran, because I knew if Social Services got a hold of us, we'd end up split up and probably abused and lost in the system somewhere."

Ellie looked dumbfounded. She spoke quietly, "Wow, I never thought about that. How did you live? On the streets?"

"More or less. Sometimes, we'd find a place to crash for a while—a church or a friend of a friend or whatever." She looked down at the floor. "But there was always a price to pay, one way or another."

After a moment, though, she looked back up and grinned. "But sometimes, it wasn't so bad. We'd sneak in places, like hotels or department stores or public buildings, and find a warm place to sleep and a clean toilet. And sometimes there'd be food left out on room service trays or from some big shindig, and we'd stuff our empty bellies 'til we were sick. Rique developed quite the talent for moving around without being seen or heard." She wrinkled up her forehead. "And he's only gotten better at it with time. He used to love to sneak up behind me and scare the crap out of me...until I got to where I could beat the living hell out of him."

"You can do that? Really? I know you're good, but he's a Defender, too, right? And he looked...big. I mean, really big."

Angel leaned back in her seat and stretched her legs out in front of her. "Oh, he is. Six-foot-five, pushing three hundred pounds, and yes, I can still take him down. And more importantly, he knows it." She grinned from ear to ear. "Nothing pisses him off more."

“But how? You’re...”

“Six inches shorter and half his weight? Yeah, well, I’ll tell ya.” She sat back up and leaned forward in the seat, bringing her closer to Ellie. “It’s not his fault. He’s a Two.”

“A Two? You mean—”

“Yep. He’s a double-G.”

“Wait, how? I don’t understand.”

Angel paused a moment. She hadn’t really meant to spill all this, at least not yet. She wasn’t shy or embarrassed about her family’s colorful past. It wasn’t a secret, but it also wasn’t the most fun thing to talk about, especially with a girl who’d grown up entirely on the right side of the tracks with multiple loving caretakers watching out for her every minute.

Angel glanced out the airplane window at the ground peering up through the filmy clouds. Large open fields and thickly wooded forests stretched out below them. Houses dotted the landscape at infrequent intervals, and roads were narrow with only the odd vehicle here or there. That was the kind of life Ellie knew, so far from the dirty city streets that were Angel’s childhood playground.

She focused on Ellie again. “Mami came here from Cuba when she was just a kid. Her parents smuggled her out. Turned out she had an incredible voice, and when she was old enough, she got a job as a jazz singer in the lounge of one of those fancy hotels in downtown D.C. She worked hard and saved her money. She dreamed of going to Juilliard.”

“So she was a Gifted One?”

Angel nodded. “Never knew it, of course, but Granny’s since traced it back.”

“So what happened? Did she make it? Did she go to Juilliard?”

“Nope. Never got the chance. My father came along. They met in the club. Apparently, he’s got a real thing for beautiful women who can sing.” Angel made a wry face. “Or maybe just beautiful women in general.”

“Oh, I see.”

Angel shook her head as she spoke. “Mami was so naive. She really thought he loved her, that he was going to marry her someday. That he didn’t have a different girlfriend in every city he traveled to. It went on for years.”

“So he was like a salesman or something?”

“Worse. A lawyer. Jacques Laplace, attorney to the stars. Look him up sometime.”

Ellie’s eyes were wide. “Jacques Laplace, the Frog Prince? I don’t have to. Everyone’s heard of him. He defended that movie star out in L.A. who beat his wife to death with a golf club.”

“Yep, that would be Daddy. Talented S.O.B., isn’t he? All that evidence against the guy, and Jacques had the jury eating out of the palm of his hand. By the time the trial was over, they were ready to nominate the defendant for sainthood.”

Ellie looked up in her head, as if doing the math, “So...if Rique’s a Two, that means...”

Angel sighed. “Yes, our father is Gifted, too.”

What we call a Communicator. They have the gift of gab. Selling ice to the Eskimos, that sort of thing. And like any Gift, it can be used for good or evil.” Angel shifted in her seat, then went on, “You might meet Shelley Walters while we’re in D.C. She’s a Communicator on the Council. Now there’s a woman who knows how to use a Gift. She’s been the head of five different charities in her life, and made them all very successful. She’s gotten money for schools and hospitals, disaster relief, medical research...you find a cause, she’ll talk somebody into funding it.

“Unfortunately,” Angel continued, “my esteemed papi only uses his talent to get criminals out of jail and women out of their underwear.” When Ellie’s face turned bright red, Angel cringed. “Oh, sorry, chica. What I meant was—”

Ellie shook her head, appearing embarrassed to have been embarrassed. “No, no, it’s okay. I get what you mean. But what I still don’t understand is why all this means your brother isn’t a good Defender.”

“Not a good Defender? Oh no, I didn’t say that. He’s quite good. No one you’d rather have on your side...except me, of course. But here’s the thing. Anyone can build their body up and learn martial arts and other defensive skills, just like anyone can learn to play the piano or do geometry or whatever. What makes Gifted Ones different is not the skill itself. It’s what’s going on up here.” Angel tapped on the side of her head. “I’m in awesome shape, no doubt about it, but that’s not what makes me good. It’s the Gift. The Gift lets me focus and

see things. I zone in. I shut out all distractions—physical, mental, and emotional. I *become* the weapon. I’m not thinking, ‘Holy crap, I’ve got to beat up this three hundred pound Samurai dude before he crushes me like a bug.’ All I’m thinking is: Left elbow to the jaw. Right heel to the rib cage. Spin and kick. Opponent down. Full stop.”

Then she frowned. “Rique can’t do that. I mean, he tries. We work on it all the time, but the double-gene...it gets in the way. He’s overwhelmed by the drive to achieve his goal. He can’t reel it in. When he needs to fight, to defend, to protect someone, he has a hard time stopping. That’s why he can’t beat me—he’s too afraid of losing control. It reduces his effectiveness. Like this one time, up in D.C., he’s in this pub, and he’s friends with the owner. And the owner’s daughter works there, waits tables and stuff. And some drunk starts hitting on her, grabbed her, scared her or something, and Rique starts wailing on the guy. Nearly killed him. It took like five or six guys to pull him off.”

“Wow, he sounds really brave.” Ellie’s eyes were shining.

“Oh yeah, brave. And stupid. All he had to do was talk to the guy. If he’d said one word to him, the guy would have laid off. Rique doesn’t have to use his Gift. The bad guys usually take one look at him and run the other way.”

Ellie grinned devilishly. “And I’ll bet the women take one look and run straight toward him.”

Angel fell backwards into her seat laughing. “So

true. And he kind of lacks self-control in that area, too. He's definitely a bit of a ladies' man, but, unlike Dear Old Dad, Rique understands the concept of birth control. Granny made sure to pound that message into his head."

"Excuse me?" The voice broke into the cabin before either girl realized the door had opened.

Angel sat straight up, red-faced. "Oh, Joe. There you are. Uh, we were just chatting. A little girl talk..."

He narrowed his eyes. "'Little' being the operative word, Angel. She's only sixteen, you know."

Ellie rolled her eyes. "Uncle Joe, I wasn't born yesterday. I know all about the birds and the bees." Joe's face took on a mortified expression, so she clarified, "I *mean* from the classes at school. And Aunt Grace. And the Judy Broom books." She frowned. "No personal experience. What. So. Ever."

Joe and Angel started laughing, and Joe's clear blue eyes were sparkling again. Whatever the events of the morning had done to his mood, it seemed to have passed, and Angel looked forward to the intrigue awaiting them in Washington.

Chapter Nine: What Happens in Washington

“Whoa. You can see for miles from up here.” Ellie’s face was pressed against the glass on a wall of windows overlooking some portion of Arlington, Virginia. The landscape included a mish-mash of tall, shiny buildings and a thick mat of green trees, sprinkled with white and pink blossoms.

She turned back around and looked at Angel, who was unpacking her bag, carefully hanging a spare black leather jacket and two black shirts in the large closet. “Geez, Angel, this place must cost a fortune. Who owns it? Who pays for it?”

“You want the bed by the window? ’Cause I should probably be closer to the door.”

Ellie shrugged. “Huh? Sure, whatever.”

“The Council,” Angel added, answering Ellie’s first question. “Technically, they own all our property. Well, except for the farm. Granny owns that. The whole thing. Even the airstrip. Been in her family for generations.”

Ellie hadn't really given much thought to who owned that massive piece of land with the sprawling Wonderland hidden beneath it, but now that she thought about it, she was curious. "So...maybe it's none of my business, but where does the Council get its money from?"

Angel spoke matter-of-factly, "Oh, donations mostly, sometimes bequests, from Gifted Ones all over the world. Many of them were helped along to get where they are today by Granny and Joe and Willow, and they want to give back. They want to help Gifteds who need it, to make the most of their Gifts. You know, like your mom and her family. And me and Rique. And Poppy and Spencer and Haji. No one wants to see that kind of talent go to waste."

"Wow, that sounds incredibly generous..."

"It's all relative, I guess. Trust me, chica, some of those guys are filthy rich. They can afford it. Football and basketball players, pop stars, famous authors, CEOs of big corporations—some of them never would have had those opportunities if someone from the Council hadn't given them a hand up."

Ellie tilted her head to the side, watching Angel arrange her toiletries neatly along the top of the dresser. "And you give back through service."

"Service. Huh." She turned to look at Ellie. "I never really thought of it that way before, but yeah, I guess that is my way of giving back. It's the only thing I've ever wanted to do, ya know? Protect the people who protected me and my baby brother. I'd do anything for

them.” Then she grinned. “They do pay me pretty well, too.”

The sound of the outer door of the condominium banging closed drew their attention. It was followed by Joe’s voice, “Ellie, Angel, you girls still here?”

“Yeah, Joe, back here.”

Ellie followed Angel back out into the main room of the condo—a combination living, dining, and kitchen area, also with a full wall of windows overlooking Arlington.

Joe stood holding up two outfits, one in each hand, covered in clear plastic bags. “I wasn’t sure which size would fit, so I got two. One small, one extra small.”

“Probably gonna be the extra small,” Angel remarked, as she crossed to the dining table, where he had laid some other packages.

Ellie walked closer to him, inspecting the outfits he held up. They were identical-looking: two navy, green, and gold plaid jumpers paired with short-sleeved white blouses. “Man, those are ugly. Who are they for?”

Joe laughed. “Yeah, I think ugly is exactly the look they go for in a Catholic school uniform.”

“Catholic school?”

Before he could answer, there was a knock on the condo door. Joe tucked both dresses into one hand, checked the peep hole, then opened the door. A very petite young woman stepped inside. Ellie wasn’t tall, but this girl was several inches shorter than her, five feet max, and probably weighed less than a hundred pounds. “Hey Joe, what’s up?” the girl said as she walked in. She

had some kind of European accent that Ellie couldn't place. The tiny lady snatched the dresses from Joe and examined them. "Seriously? You want me to wear this? This is the most hideous dress I've ever seen in my life."

Ellie laughed. "That's what I thought."

The woman looked up from the dress. "And you are...?"

"Nadia, this is Elodie Eggleston," Joe offered. "Ellie, this is Nadia Pavlenco. She's another one of our Defenders."

Ellie didn't want to be rude, but she was sure the confusion showed on her face. How could this little micro-human be a Defender? Ellie had no doubt she could take the girl in a fair fight. As if reading her mind, Angel supplied the answer, "Not every Defender is about raw power, El. Nadia has other skills that come in handy."

Nadia had stepped further into the room, close to the dining table, and was pulling the plastic off one of the plaid uniforms. She spoke to no one in particular as she examined the ugly jumper, "Yep. I crawl, climb, swing, rappel, and squeeze in and out of tiny places like you wouldn't believe." She lowered the jumper and looked at Ellie over the top of it. "What do you do?"

"I, uh, I...I don't know." Ellie suddenly felt about half the size of little Nadia.

Joe moved behind Ellie and laid his hands on her shoulders. "Ellie's just here to learn today, Nadia. She's still discovering her abilities."

"Uh-huh." Nadia shrugged, then took the two

uniforms and a bag from the table, and headed to the bedroom where Angel and Ellie had set their belongings. “I’ll try these on.”

After the door closed behind her, Joe apologized, “Uh, sorry about that, Ellie. Nadia’s from a different culture. She tends to be suspicious of strangers. She has to get to know you. Then she’s really quite pleasant.”

Angel made a face. “No, she’s not.”

Joe laughed. “Yes, she is. And she’s extremely well-read and knowledgeable about European history and politics. She makes a delightful dinner companion.”

“Good. Then you can take her instead of me tomorrow night to meet the Germans, and me and Ellie can do something fun.”

“But Dr. Graber is the preeminent archeologist —” Angel’s facial expression stopped him, and he relented. “I’ll think about it.”

Nadia emerged from the bedroom, sporting the ugly plaid uniform and a pair of flat-soled shoes that made her look even shorter than her own shoes had. Her long blonde hair hung lazily around her shoulders, giving her a sexy, sultry appearance that made for an odd contrast. She tugged at the loose material around her waist. “It’s a little big.”

“Did you try the extra small?” Joe asked.

She frowned. “This *is* the extra small. But it’s okay, adds to the gawky girl effect.”

Joe propped his chin on his fist. “Yeah, but it’s not quite right. You’re supposed to be fourteen. Take off

all your make-up, and let's try two braids.”

“Braids?” Nadia sounded mortified.

“And...” Joe glanced over at Ellie, then back at Nadia. “Add a few freckles.”

Nadia huffed a bit, but returned to the bedroom. As soon as that door closed, the sound of the condo door unlocking turned them all in that direction. The door handle flipped, and the door pushed open. A large, beefy man, thirty-ish, with chubby cheeks and a soft chin stepped inside. He was dressed in a brown workman's jumpsuit and heavy boots. A logo was displayed on his left breast pocket: Mountain View Moving Company.

Angel rushed over and gave him a light hug. “Coop! Long time, no see.”

“Hey, gorgeous, how're you?” He kissed her on the cheek, but then wrinkled his forehead as he spotted Ellie. “And who's this? I thought we were working with Nadia on this one.”

Joe spoke up, “Cooper McCann, this is Elodie Eggleston. Remember I told you about her?”

“Oh, right, right, right. The daughter of your—”

“Yes, that one. And no, she's not on the team.”

Joe motioned toward the bedroom. “Nadia's in there, getting ready.”

Angel grinned. “You're gonna love this outfit, Coop. She's every middle-aged man's fantasy.”

“Catholic school girl is *not* my fantasy,” insisted Joe.

“But you admit you're middle-aged, Uncle Joe?” Ellie teased.

While Joe blustered and blushed, Cooper laughed out loud, then approached Ellie with a high-five. “Nice one, kid.” Then he looked back at Joe. “You can put her on my team any time.”

Ellie wasn’t sure what team they were talking about, but she knew a compliment when she heard one and blushed a little herself.

Nadia once more emerged from the bedroom, this time sans make-up and with two blonde braids and a couple of freckles. Cooper made a low whistling noise, to which she tartly replied, “Can it, McCann.” Then she looked to Joe. “Is this it?”

He nodded his approval. “Oh yeah, nailed it. You guys should have no problem pulling this off.”

“Actually, Joe, there is a problem.” Cooper pulled his phone from a side pocket of the jumpsuit. He tapped on it, and then showed the screen to Joe. “I got some intel on the tour guide. She’s a stickler. Does a body count on every floor. If Nadia leaves the group to enter Stanhope’s office and doesn’t return before the tour gets to the end of the next level, they’ll go on full lock-down.”

Joe frowned. “There’s no way she can do it that quickly. It’ll be tough enough for her to get it all done before he comes back from that meeting.”

Nadia slumped. “Ah, hell. Our plan is screwed.”

###

While Joe, Nadia, and Cooper put their heads

together over the flaw in their plan, Ellie caught Angel's eye. She moved over into the sitting area, and Angel followed. "What's going on, Angel? What are they talking about?"

Angel glanced back toward Joe, as if she wasn't sure how much it was okay to tell Ellie, but then plunged in, "Remember I mentioned earlier how the Council tries to help Gifted people make the best use of their Gifts?" Ellie nodded. "Well, they also try to help Gifted people not *abuse* their Gifts, like using them to cheat or lie or hurt people. If stuff like that started happening, and people started finding out about us and about the gene, it would make people hate us or fear us or just want to study us. None of us would be safe if that happened."

Ellie hadn't thought about that. So far, being Gifted had seemed like a purely positive thing, maybe the best thing that had ever happened to her. Perhaps she could understand better now why Aunt Grace had hid it from her all these years. "So, who is this Stanhope person? Is he a Gifted One who's done something bad? And how's the moving guy gonna help?"

Angel laughed. "Coop's not really a furniture mover. That's just a cover. He's a Builder, one of us. He's a genius with electronics, mechanics, engines. If it's got moving parts, he can make it go."

"Okay, so what are they doing?"

Angel seemed a little impatient with Ellie's pestering, but she gave in and explained the issue. "Senator Stanhope is *not* a Gifted One. He's a slimeball. He's been accepting bribes to permit an algal energy

system to be built in his home state. We suspect some others are, too, but he's the only one we know for sure. See, algae has great potential as a fuel source and could eventually replace petroleum. It's cheaper and better for the environment, but there's a problem with this particular pond design. The designer is a Gifted One, and he knows his design is flawed, and the pond will leech dangerous chemicals into the surrounding environment."

"And he doesn't care?"

"Well, maybe he does, but he won't speak up. He's not telling the truth about it." She shrugged. "Maybe he's being blackmailed or something. Anyway, without him, we've got no proof. Our only hope is to out Senator Slimeball."

Ellie looked back toward Uncle Joe, Cooper, and Nadia. They were all leaning over the dining table looking at some plans and charts and talking heatedly. "Okay, so what's the Catholic school thing got to do with it?"

"And aren't you the curious one? Look, if you have to know, Joe cooked up a plan. Cooper's going to deliver this fancy armchair to the senator's office, and then the senator's staff will tell him they didn't order a new chair. He's going to leave it with them while he investigates the mix-up. Meanwhile, Nadia's going in to the Capitol Building with a bunch of students from St. Piperio's. They've got fifteen minutes scheduled with the senator, during which Nadia's going to slip into his private bathroom and hide until he leaves for a meeting he's got soon after. Then she'll have about thirty minutes

alone in his office to photograph a bunch of incriminating documents that he keeps locked in his desk. When she's done, she tucks herself into a secret compartment in the base of the chair, and when Coop shows back up to reclaim the chair, he wheels her out of there on a handtruck." Angel stopped for a breath.

"Wait, if he can wheel her out, why can't he just wheel her in?"

Angel looked surprised that Ellie had actually followed all that. "Well, because it's a lot easier to smuggle things *out* of the Capitol Building than in. They've got x-ray machines and bomb-sniffing dogs and all kinds of stuff on the front end."

"Oh, sure, didn't think of that. Man, it's such a cool plan. I mean, you guys are like Mission Impossible!"

Angel laughed. "Well, maybe not quite, but it is pretty exciting sometimes. Problem is, it sounds like this one ain't gonna fly, because the tour guide will notice Nadia's missing when she counts at the end of the hall. We'll probably have to abort and try something else."

The wheels started turning in Ellie's head. "Maybe not." She walked back to the dining area and interrupted them, "Uncle Joe, I've got an idea."

He looked up at her, distracted. "You've got a way to help us?"

She grabbed the second uniform from where it was hanging over the back of one of the dining chairs and held it in front of her body. "Yeah, me!"

#

Hissssssss.

“¡Mamacita!”

“Hey, chicky-chicky-chicky!”

Angel narrowed her eyes and blew out a deep, cleansing breath. Sometimes it was hard to stay in character when she was under cover. When sporting her black leather combo and standing well over six feet in her high-heeled boots, she was pretty intimidating to the average man on the street, and if any of them did dare whistle or cat-call, one slitty-eyed glare would shut them down. Dressed as she was this afternoon, however, as somebody’s maybe-legal Hispanic houseworker, walking the kid home from her ritzy private school, it was a different story. Her sympathies went out to the hard-working ladies who had to pass this way every day.

Ellie looked up at her, biting her lip, obviously concerned that her clever plan might not be as foolproof as she’d hoped. Angel gave her head a quick little shake. “Nothing to worry about, chica. We’re doing fine. Just keep walking.”

Despite the fact that Ellie’s part in the plan put her in no real danger, it had still taken some serious lobbying to convince Joe that he should let Ellie help out. When Ellie pointed out a simple solution to their problem, Joe was the only one who wasn’t all for it. Even Nadia, the irksome little acrobat, jumped on board when she saw how easily Ellie could play her double with the Catholic school crowd. For a while, it had

seemed as though Joe wouldn't relent, even with all their assurances that they would fully prep Ellie with everything she needed to know, but when Ellie turned her big gray eyes on Joe and begged pretty please, he folded like a house of cards. The next time she needed to change Joe's mind about something, Angel was going straight to Ellie.

As they neared the visitor's entrance, Angel stopped and gave Ellie a final check. She pulled a few strands out of one of Ellie's braids and let them fall into her face. Then she tugged on the collar of the white blouse to give it a more disheveled appearance. Angel casually raised her hand to her face, pretending to scratch her nose and spoke into her hand, "You got us, Joe? We're goin' in."

A tiny voice responded inside her ear, "I can hear you both, Angel. Loud and clear."

She tapped on her ear and looked at Ellie. "Joe can hear you, and I can, too. We'll hear everything you say and do through that little mic inside your collar. Any sign of trouble, all you gotta do is say the code word. You remember it, right?"

Ellie's face said yes, she'd been drilled on it ten times already, but she was patient with Angel's question. "I got it, Angel—if anything goes wrong, I just have to mention plaid."

"Good girl! Okay, chica, let's do this. And remember, we're supposed to be *late*."

They rushed up to the doorway, trying to appear panicked. Angel laid on her thickest Spanish accent and

best broken English, “Oh, mister, sir, you must please help! My Leenda she is late for tour! Is all my fault. Now she no see wonderful American Capitol building and meet fine senator. My employer, he will be so angry. I lose my job.”

The elderly man behind the desk regarded her with some suspicion, but before he had a chance to say anything, Ellie chimed in, impressing Angel with her improv skills, “She’s right, sir. Daddy will have an absolute fit if he finds out Marissa didn’t get me to the class trip on time. And then he’ll fire her and send her back to Mexico, and she won’t be able to support her sick mother anymore. Please, she’s the nicest nanny I’ve ever had! Oh, please tell me I can still catch up with my class!” She turned those same puppy dog eyes on the old guy, sounding like she was about to cry.

“Now, now, little lady, let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” He looked over her plaid uniform, then checked his computer. “You’re with the group from St. Piperio’s?” Ellie nodded emphatically. “And you have your school ID?”

“Yes, sir, it’s right here.” She pulled the ID card from her shoulder bag and handed it over.

He studied the card a moment, looked at Ellie, and then ran his finger down the length of his computer screen. “Linda Alcott. I see it right there.” He looked at her again, testing her, “And your teacher’s name is?”

“Sister Bertha.”

He smiled, apparently pleased with his own crafty, detective work, and handed back the ID. He

printed out a bar-coded badge showing her name and the tour time, and plastered it on the front of her jumper. “All right, Linda, I’ll have the guard take you up there.” He glanced at the clock. “You might not make it in time to meet the senator, but you’ll get to see everything else.”

“Oh, thank you so much, sir!” As the guard led her down the hall, Ellie threw one last glance back at Angel, who gave her a big thumbs up. As they crested the stairs to the second floor, though, Ellie’s excitement and enthusiasm for this brilliant idea was giving way to insecurity. What if the nuns figured out she didn’t belong in their group? What if the other kids started asking her questions that she didn’t know the answers to? What if Nadia got caught, and they were all hauled off to Guantanamo Bay as suspected terrorists? Uh, okay, maybe that wasn’t gonna happen, but still...

“Young lady! Where have you been?” A heavy-set woman wearing a white blouse, navy sweater, and a skirt in that same awful plaid pattern was striding down the hall toward Ellie and the security guard. Her voice was sharp, “You were supposed to be in Senator Stanhope’s office with the rest of us!”

“I, uh...”

“Which class are you in? Who’s your teacher?”

“Sister B—” Right before she said the woman’s name, Ellie’s eyes fell on the teacher’s bar-coded badge, which read: Sister Bertha Bartholomew. Ellie quickly backpedaled, “Uh, I’m in Sister Mary Elizabeth’s class. I’m new. I’ve only been at St. Piperio’s for two weeks.”

“I see. Well, the first thing you’ll need to learn is

how to follow directions.” The woman grabbed her arm and whisked her away from the security guard, then continued down the hall, berating her for leaving the group and embarrassing the entire school with her irresponsible behavior.

Ellie looked down the hallway. They were approaching the rest of the tour group, and several of the students were looking back at her and Sister Bertha instead of focusing on the tour guide up ahead. One of the other adults in the group, probably Sister Mary Elizabeth herself, turned to look at them, too. She wrinkled her forehead and began checking a clipboard she had in her hands. Ellie’s heart started beating rapidly. Her hands felt clammy. She was supposed to be subtle and not draw attention to herself, so no one would notice her and start asking questions.

Ellie glanced back over her shoulder. They weren’t too far past the ladies room. Maybe she could say she felt sick and dash in there. Maybe she should just make a run for it back the way she had come. Was there any other way out of here? She turned her eyes forward again, and blam! A door opened suddenly out into the hallway, and Ellie walked right into it. “O-o-ow!”

“Oops, sorry!” A tall woman in a severe business suit and high heels, carrying an armload of files, tossed back her apology as she rushed on by and hurried down the hall.

Now everyone was definitely looking at them. The combination of the scrutiny, the fear, and the sting on her forehead brought tears to Ellie’s eyes. Sister

Bertha took Ellie's face by the chin and studied her. Her tone changed from anger to sympathy, "Oh, my dear, are you all right?" Bertha shook her head, looking after the busy woman in high heels. "Hmph. Couldn't even stop to see if you were hurt." Then she glanced up the hallway at the tour group, and gave them an exasperated wave. "Well, go on, stop gawking. Nothin' to see here."

The embarrassed onlookers turned back toward their tour guide, but Ellie was transfixed on Sister Bertha. Through her tears, she was seeing something—an odd glow. The woman's face appeared to be beaming out a bright white light. There were streaks of pale pink and silvery shimmers, too. She looked almost like an angel. Wow, that whack on the head must've been harder than Ellie had thought.

But the whole thing gave her an idea. "Y-yes, Sister. I think I'm okay. But please forgive me. I must be honest with you. The real reason I fell behind...I just got caught up in the Rotunda, looking at that big painting on the ceiling."

The nun brought her voice down to a whisper, "The Apotheosis?"

"Is that what it's called? Isn't it marvelous? All those beautiful images...I couldn't take my eyes off it." Ellie sighed, "It looks just like God in heaven with the angels, doesn't it?"

Sister Bertha smiled like the angel she appeared to be. "Why, yes, child, I believe it does." She laid a hand on Ellie's shoulder then, and together, they slipped quietly back into the tour group.

###

Ellie understood that every day couldn't be as exciting as the day before, when she'd gotten to help out Uncle Joe and Angel and two other Gifted Ones in their plan to expose a dirty politician, but did it have to be this bad? She could barely keep her eyes propped open at the painfully dull meeting Uncle Joe had dragged them to in some big fancy office building in downtown D.C. She shifted her focus from the presentation at the front of the room—some old geezer talking about that algae stuff again—to the world outside. Through the big windows on the side of the room, she could see several of Washington's landmarks, including the glorious Capitol building where they'd carried out their little caper.

She could still hardly believe the whole thing had happened. Here, she'd been excited just to be visiting a new place and meeting new people, and just like that, it had turned into the biggest adventure of her life. Even Uncle Joe, who'd initially resisted the idea of letting Ellie join in, had been thrilled with the outcome. "Ellie," he'd said, "you were so fast on your feet! You handled Sister Bertha like a pro. That bit about the painting was genius!" Ellie had felt so much pride at his reaction, she imagined *she* was beaming white and silver streaks herself. And, thanks to Ellie's improvisational skills and her standing in for Nadia, the plan had come off perfectly. Nadia managed to find and photograph the incriminating papers, and Cooper had smuggled her out

in the base of the armchair. Early this morning, in some newsroom somewhere in the city, some lucky reporter had opened an anonymous package that would make her famous.

It had all been so thrilling, so exciting—the kind of life she would fantasize about when watching those old movies with her dad. She wanted to tell her Aunt Grace all about it, every detail, but she knew she couldn't. Grace would hit the roof if she knew Ellie had done something like that, and she would probably kill Uncle Joe for allowing it. Fortunately, Uncle Joe had used some kind of super healing products he carried in his bag to help the bump on Ellie's head go down, so they wouldn't have to explain it.

“Ow!” A quick, sharp jab in the rib cage brought Ellie back to the world of the living. She hadn't even realized the meeting was breaking up until Angel's elbow brought an abrupt end to her daydream. The speaker switched off his presentation, and folks started getting up and milling about. Angel grabbed Ellie by the elbow and pulled her up from her chair. “Vamos, chica. Let's see if we can't break you outta here.”

They worked their way towards the front of the conference room where Uncle Joe, the algae guy, and a couple of other people were conversing animatedly. Ellie glanced out across the room. It was filled with a hodge-podge of races and nationalities. It could've been the U.N. for all the different clothing styles, hair styles, sizes, shapes, and ages of people that were gathered. Her ears were picking up dozens of different languages and

accents, some speaking earnestly and some angrily, but most were laughing and chattering like friends at a party. Nadia the Gymnast, Cooper the Builder, Angel the Defender, Uncle Joe the Healer, and all these other super-talented people. What could she, Elodie Eggleston, possibly do that could compare to what all these people had to offer?

As the group began migrating back toward their seats for the next presentation, Angel made a move toward Joe. She tapped on his shoulder to get his attention. “Hey, Joe, why don’t I take Ellie out and show her around a bit? You’ve got plenty of Defenders here. The kid’s really...uh, hungry. Aren’t you, El?”

Ellie brightened. “Oh, oh yeah, starving. Absolutely starving. You don’t mind, do you, Uncle Joe?”

He looked gloomy. “But Dr. Graber’s got these great artifacts from her last dig—” He stopped and grinned. “Never mind, you’ve earned it. Go ahead.” He pointed directly at Ellie. “But stay with Angel, got it? I mean, every minute.”

“Yes, Aunt Grace,” Ellie answered with a giggle.

Angel smiled and assured him, “Won’t let her out of my sight.”

Once outside, Ellie tried to sound cheerful, “So, where are we off to? The Washington Monument? The Jefferson Memorial?”

Angel looked at her oddly. “You really want to go to those places?” Ellie laughed and shook her head.

“Good, me either. There’re a couple places I would like to go, though.”

“I’m all yours. Remember, I can’t leave your side for two seconds.”

They started down the busy street. People were rushing past in every direction on the crowded sidewalks. Meanwhile, cars clogged the roadway in between, and buses and bicycles wove in and out. Ellie had to walk double-time to keep up with Angel’s long-legged pace. As they stopped at the crosswalk on their third block, she asked breathlessly, “So, where are we going?”

“A couple more blocks, but first—” Angel came up short as a door swung out toward them from a shiny glass building. She grabbed Ellie’s arm to force her to stop, too, as a group of big, strapping men burst through the doorway almost as a unit. All of the men were dressed in dark suits with dark shades and short or slicked-back haircuts.

Ellie couldn’t help but think *Men in Black*, as the small crowd moved from the building to a long black limousine parked directly in front. The men on the outer rim of the pack were all turned outwards, scanning the surrounding area with grim looks on their faces. The limo door opened, and through the wall of darkness, Ellie caught glimpses of brighter colors and maybe even a flash of jewelry. When the limo door closed, there were fewer big men left standing on the sidewalk, and Angel walked boldly up to one of them, who had his back to them.

Although all the men were big, the one Angel approached was bigger still. He was a couple inches taller than the rest and broader, if that was even possible, across the back and shoulders. His hair was jet black in a layered, wavy cut touching the base of his collar, where it curled up in a disorganized pattern. Ellie grinned, thinking how this guy's neck was probably wider than her waist.

“Rique. Riq.” Angel was attempting to get his attention, but he seemed thoroughly engrossed in his mission of scoping out every single person on the street. Angel tapped on his shoulder, and in a louder, more aggressive tone, repeated the request, “¡Hermanito!”

Hermanito? Oh, sure, Ellie knew what that meant—little brother. The big dude was Angel's brother, Enrique.

The hulking form spun around in response to Angel's call, and the grim look was immediately replaced with a dimpled smile. “Ange, honey, sorry. Didn't know it was you.” He leaned in, slid an arm around her waist and kissed her on the cheek. “I didn't expect to see you today.”

“Sorry, I couldn't tell you. We've been trying to keep the chatter down...”

“Oh, right. You mentioned that.” He looked past her suspiciously, down the street, and then back over his shoulder before leaning in even closer. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine. I just wanted to—”

One of the other MIB crew reached in and

touched Riq on the arm. “Hey, man, gotta go.”

“Right there,” Riq responded. Then he turned back to Angel. “Sorry, Ange, duty calls. Maybe we can have dinner next time?” He touched her cheek affectionately, then stepped away.

“Rique, wait, there’s someone I want you to meet.” He stopped and looked back in their direction, his eyes darting about as if seeking the big, important person he expected to be introduced to. Angel took Ellie’s elbow and gave her a slight shove in his direction. “This is Ellie, my latest charge. Remember? The girl I told you about—Lucy Eggleston’s daughter.”

He looked down, finally focusing on Ellie’s face. “Oh, sure, I remember. Ellen, nice to meet you.” He extended his hand and quickly shook.

“Uh, Ellie, Elodie,” she mumbled in reply. Then she wondered if her cheeks had flushed enough to hide her freckles.

“Riq!” His MIB buddy sounded impatient. Rique gave the girls a quick wave and disappeared back into the building.

Angel shrugged. “Sorry, he’s really busy right now. Whole bunch of royal big shots from...Morocco, or Monaco, or was it Montevideo? Anyway, we caught him off guard. He’s usually a little friendlier than that.”

“Oh, that’s okay.” Ellie wouldn’t have had a clue what to say to him if he hadn’t been called away, so she was just as glad that the encounter had been brief. Besides, she wouldn’t want to be caught openly drooling at the guy. No doubt about it—Enrique Espinoza looked

nothing like the skinny, awkward boys in her classes at school. But it was more than that. There was something, something she could see, feel around him. Kind of a warm glow.

Angel seemed oblivious to Ellie's fugue state as she stepped to the curb to cross the street, and just kept chattering away, "It's his first time working with such high-ranking officials, and he really wants to make a good impression."

"Uh-huh," mumbled Ellie, still lost in her thoughts of the big man. As they waited for a break in the traffic, Ellie felt the warm glow against her back and couldn't help turning to look. Through the glass door of the building, Enrique could be seen standing there. His hand was pressed against his ear, and he appeared to be talking to someone, as though he had one of those spy-type earphones in. His eyes slowly rose to meet hers, and for just a moment, they locked. She had to squint as the bright sunlight around him was hurting her eyes.

"C'mon, chica. Now's our chance." With a sudden yank, Ellie was pulled off the curb and into the street by Angel's firm grip. "Really gotta stay on your toes in D.C., Ellie, or someone will mow you down."

Chapter Ten: Doo Drops

“Okay, it’s just a little further.”

Ellie was grateful to hear that they were finally nearing their destination on Angel’s little walking tour of Washington, D.C. They had already stopped at three different food stands to pick up hot sausages, soft pretzels, and handmade gelato, but eaten it all while moving at a pretty fast clip. Angel wasn’t kidding when she bragged about being in good shape.

As they waited at a stoplight, Angel pointed down the next block, to where a red and white striped awning overhung a few small tables on the sidewalk. Ellie read the sign on the awning, “Mama Luccini’s Ristorante. So we’re going to meet Mama?”

“Well, we might see her, or even Papa Luccini, but it’s actually their handsome son we’re after today.” Angel reached up to her neck and slid her fingers down inside her shirt. She pulled her hand out, letting something glittery fall against her chest. It took a moment before Ellie recognized it as the single, simple

stone that Poppy Prentiss had drawn into her princess picture of Angel. Angel blushed a little at Ellie's reaction. "I know, right? All sparkly and sweet—not really my style."

Ellie motioned in the direction of Mama Luccini's. "So the handsome son gave you that? He's your boyfriend?"

Angel tilted her head just a bit, apparently not fully comfortable with the concept. "I guess you could call him that. Kind of a new thing for me. I never really had a boyfriend before. I mean, not a real one, like the kind who actually cares about you as a person and buys you nice gifts and shit."

Ellie laughed at that. "Well, me either. I wasn't exactly the head cheerleader at my school."

The *Walk* sign came on, and they started across the street. "Hey, give yourself some time, chica. You haven't started to, ya know, blossom yet."

"Now you sound like Aunt Grace."

"Well, your Aunt Grace seems like a smart lady."

They had reached the restaurant. Angel pulled open the door and indicated that Ellie should precede her. It was the middle of the afternoon, and the place was quiet. There were only a handful of patrons inside, seated on stools at high tables or standing at the counter. A wide opening in the stone wall behind the counter revealed a view of the kitchen and a woman in a full-body apron.

Angel led Ellie around a wall to the side of the kitchen and then held up a finger. "Wait here just a

minute. I'll see if I can get him." She pushed through a set of wooden saloon-style swinging doors. Ellie could just see her over the top. A plump Italian-looking woman with dark hair piled on her head stood at the stove. She was stirring a large pot with a long wooden spoon when Angel walked up behind her. "Mama Maria?"

The woman dropped the spoon into the pot and spun around. She grasped Angel's face between her chubby palms. "Angelica! How good to see you, sweetheart." She kissed Angel on both cheeks, then pushed her away. "You look so skinny! You need to eat!" Maria grabbed a plate of pasta off the counter and waved it under Angel's nose. "You try my Fettuccine a la Maria, eh?"

Before the woman could force the plate into her hands, Angel stopped her. "I'd love to try it, Maria, but —"

"I know, I know, you are only here to see my baby boy."

Angel grinned. "Is he here?"

Maria pointed toward the back of the kitchen, out of Ellie's view. "He's in the walk-in, counting sausages. Go on, surprise him. I've got to serve these." She picked up another plate of pasta and came bursting through the saloon doors.

Ellie had preemptively stepped back to avoid being run over by the little powerhouse as she passed by. After Maria disappeared from view, Ellie peered over the doors again but couldn't see Angel. Since she wasn't supposed to be out of Angel's sight, she pushed open one

of the swinging doors and stepped tentatively inside. Angel had her hand on the door to the walk-in freezer, but before she could pull on it, the door opened itself from the inside.

“Angel!” A stocky young man stepped out, holding a clipboard and an armload of packaged meat. He had olive-toned skin as Ellie would expect an Italian to have, but his hair was white blonde, spiked up in one of those modern boy styles. He tossed the meat and the clipboard onto the nearest counter, grabbed Angel by the shoulders, and slammed her up against the nearest wall. In her high-heeled boots, she stood a few inches taller than him. “God, you look good, baby. I *really* missed you.” He slid his hands down her sides and proceeded to kiss her like a man returning from six months on a submarine.

Ellie knew she should look away, but her eyes were glued to the pair. There was something electric about the connection between them, something she’d never felt before. The room was heating up around them, so hot it was creating a haze. At first, it was white hot, then changed to red. Ellie blinked a couple times and pulled on the collar of her shirt. She wondered if a quick hop into the walk-in freezer would be considered rude.

“Stop it, man!” Angel pushed him away, wiping her smeared lipstick with the back of her hand. She waved in Ellie’s direction as she spoke, “We’re not alone, you animal.” Then she grinned and looked at Ellie. “Sorry, chica. He’s not usually like this.”

“Yes, I am!” He grinned, too, and pulled her

back in, but then relented and released her. He walked directly to Ellie, holding out his hand. “Sorry, honey. I hope we didn’t embarrass you. You’re a friend of Angel’s?”

Ellie was too tongue-tied to respond. The hazy heat had dissipated, but she could still feel the beads of sweat it had spawned on the back of her neck.

Angel answered for her, “Uh, yeah. Carlo, this is Ellie. She’s one of my clients’ daughters.”

“Well, nice to meet you, Ellie. I know as long as you’re with Angel, Daddy’s got nothing to worry about.” Ellie wasn’t sure what they were talking about, but she decided to play along.

The towheaded boy turned his attention back to Angel. He wrapped his arm around her waist and sucked her in beside him, then brushed a stray hair from her forehead. His voice was warm and low as he spoke, “So how long you in town for? Can I see you tonight?” A hint of the red haze seemed to surface again. Ellie rubbed her eyes to see if she could clear it up.

“Sorry, no,” Angel told him. She nodded toward Ellie. “We are staying tonight, but I’ve got to keep an eye —”

He shrugged. “So bring her along. Come on over to my place. I’ll make you both the best Veal Piccata you’ve ever tasted.” He touched his fingers to his lips in a kissing motion, indicating the quality of the dish, then added as enticement, “There’s a Dirty Harry marathon on tonight.”

But Ellie finally found her voice, “Oh no, no,

no. Sorry, I don't do third wheel." She looked at Angel. "You go ahead, Angel. I'll hang with Uncle Joe and that anthropologist lady, Dr. Whatsername."

Angel was clearly about to protest that plan when Carlo interrupted, "Absolutely not. I insist you join us. Really." Then he looked at Angel. "Honey, I want you to know that I respect you. I respect your work. If this is something you need to do, then we'll do it together. You're not just eye-candy to me, baby."

The words seemed to be melting Angel like a warm oven, yet Ellie felt oddly chilled. The beads of sweat on the back of her neck felt like tiny ice cubes now. She glanced side-to-side, half-expecting to see the freezer door open again. Then she noticed it—the reddish haze she'd been seeing looked almost black now. She rubbed her eyes again. She totally needed to clean these contacts.

Angel reached out to her as she massaged her eyes. "El, you okay?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine. My contacts are just bothering me a little."

"Maybe it's the heat in here. Or all the oils and spices," Angel offered. "I should get you out of here. We need to get back before somebody starts to worry."

She stepped towards Ellie, but Carlo grabbed her arm, stopping her. "So tonight? The two of you? Eight o'clock, my place, right?"

Angel started to shake her head, so Ellie spoke up, "Sure, Carlo. I'd love to try your Veal Piccata." She hadn't known Angel long, but she could already tell the

Gifted Defender took her responsibilities very seriously. She had told Aunt Grace that she would be with Ellie every minute they were in D.C., so there was no way she would do anything else.

“Chica, you sure?”

“Sure.” Then Ellie wrinkled up her nose. “But maybe no Dirty Harry?”

Carlo and Angel both laughed at that, and he offered, “Hey, your choice, Ellie. I’ve got a huge movie collection. Struggling actor, ya know? I like to study the greats. I’m sure I’ve got something you’ll like.”

“Okay!” Ellie felt better then. The chill seemed to have left the air, the haziness in her vision had cleared, and she was glad to be doing something nice for her new friend Angel.

It wasn’t until they were back out on the street, making their way back to the Council’s building that she remembered to ask, “Oh, hey, Angel, what was that bit about me being your client’s daughter?”

“Oh, that.” Angel made a wry face. “Carlo doesn’t know anything about the Gifted Ones. It’s strictly need-to-know. Plus, I didn’t want to scare him off.”

“So what does he think you do for a living?”

Angel grinned and patted one of her side jacket pockets, where Ellie assumed she carried some sort of weapon. “Private security. Like Rique. He thinks I’m like a bodyguard or whatever for the rich and famous. It was the only way I could explain my difficulty passing through metal detectors without freaking him out.”

“Difficulty...” Ellie thought about it a minute.

“So...just what do you carry underneath all that leather?”

Angel smiled brightly. “Two guns, three knives, a taser, a set of brass knuckles, these cool spikes in my boots, and a couple pairs of handcuffs.” She looked up in her head a moment, then added with a grin, “Of course, Carlo kinda digs the handcuffs.”

Ellie slammed her hands over her ears. “I so-o-o didn’t need to hear that. But I guess it explains the red haze.”

“The what? You mean your eyes? What was that you were saying about your eyes hurting back there?”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s nothing. Just my contacts. And...I’m kind of tired...” As if to prove the point, Ellie yawned broadly and added, “Really tired.”

Angel stopped walking a moment and studied Ellie’s face. “Hmm, maybe. I’ve learned not to ignore anything with Gifted folks. Sometimes, the least little thing can mean a whole lot.”

###

“Wait, so who is this Carlo person?”

“Grace, take it easy. Carlo is Angel’s boyfriend. They’ve been seeing each other for months. They’re just going to his apartment for dinner. Ellie will be fine.”

Grace felt her temperature starting to rise. She closed her eyes a moment, forced herself to be calm, and then opened them again, speaking to the image of Joe’s face on her tablet, “Well, what exactly do you know about him? Have you met him? Has Rishi checked him

out?”

“Yes, yes, yes. I’ve met him. He’s very nice. And Rishi’s run a full check on the guy; he’s nobody special. Just some wanna-be actor who works in a pizzeria. I think his family owns the place. Look, Grace, as long as she’s with Angel, Ellie couldn’t be safer. You know that, right?”

Grace sighed. Yes, she did know that. Much as she’d like to think she herself could protect Ellie better than anyone, the truth was—having Angel around was like having the Secret Service at your beck and call. “All right, Joe. Just bring her back tomorrow, okay? I can’t handle worrying about Ellie *and* Gilda at the same time.”

“So how is the old girl?”

“Still very ill, I’m afraid. She’s lethargic, despondent, won’t eat. We were up all last night with her, and back at it all day today. We’re doing our best—taking turns massaging her, applying chelating agents, keeping her hydrated. Doo is great with her; it’s really amazing to watch.”

“Mm, right.”

The curtness of Joe’s response and the sour look on his face took Grace by surprise. Was it just her imagination, or did Joe dislike the handsome cowboy? Or perhaps, distrust him? She glanced toward Doo, who was working with Gilda only a short distance away. She lowered her voice, “Joe? Is there something wrong? Is there something I should know about Doo?”

“What? No! I mean...no.” He looked flustered, caught off guard.

“Sorry. Never mind. Anyway, just look after Ellie, and get her back here, okay? We’ve only been apart a handful of days since Lucy...I mean, since Ellie came to live with me, and I have trouble relaxing when I can’t keep an eye on her.”

That made Joe laugh. “Well, trust me, my dear, she’s doing fine without you.” He shifted the angle of his device so that Grace could see Ellie in the background, laughing and chatting with Angel and a couple of other young Gifted Ones. “Ellie,” he called out, “say hi to Aunt Grace.”

The entire group of young people all turned toward Joe’s device, smiling, waving, and simultaneously greeting her. Ugh. Grace felt like an overprotective old Grandma. She quickly waved back and was relieved when Joe turned the camera back to himself. “Okay, fine, so Ellie can survive without me for one day,” she said grumpily.

“And that’s only because you’ve done such a fine job raising her.”

She gave him a grateful smile. “Thanks, Joe.” He nodded, said good-bye, and the screen went black.

Grace lowered the tablet onto her lap and shifted her attention back over to Doo and Gilda. The cow was lying down on her side, like a sleeping dog, and Doo was kneeling on the stable floor next to her, almost laying his upper body across hers. He had his head very close to her ear and was whispering to her. He finally got up and walked over to where Grace was sitting on a bench near the stall door.

“Any luck?” she asked.

He shook his head and slumped down onto the bench next to her. “She’s not ready to get up yet. She needs more time.”

“But she’s got to get up and start moving around to get this toxic overload out of her system.”

Doo sat up straighter on the bench, looking at Grace. “She knows, Grace. I explained it to her. And she’s goin’ to...when she’s ready. I mean, she doesn’t understand what’s wrong, but she knows we want her to get up, and she knows you’re trying to help her. She’s grateful.”

Grace wrinkled up her nose. She’d seen some amazing things around this place, met some incredibly talented people, but—a human talking to animals? Really? It was pretty far out there.

He tilted his head to one side. “You think I’m full o’ horse manure, don’t you?”

“No. No, I don’t. It’s just...” She’d never been a good liar.

“Nah, it’s okay. I don’t expect people to believe me. Before I met Granny and Joe and Willow and some of the others, nobody believed me, except Mom and Dad. They seen it with their own eyes.”

Grace looked into Doo’s eyes. They were pretty. Medium brown, with long blonde lashes. There was something endearing about the childlike innocence he exuded. Clearly, *he* believed he could talk to the animals, and that was good enough for him. She smiled and encouraged him. “What was it your parents saw?”

He hesitated a moment before speaking; she supposed he'd been laughed at before. "Well, I don't actually remember this, you understand. It's just what Mom and Dad told me. They said when I was really little, like two or three, our dog got sick. She stopped eating, wouldn't play, seemed depressed, ya know? And nobody could figure out what was wrong with her. They were talking about putting her down. They tell me I just laid down with her on the bed, and after while, I got up and told them that there was something wrong with her hind leg, that it hurt really bad. They took another look, and sure enough, they found a tiny sliver stuck way up behind her dew claw, and it was badly infected."

"But how did you know?"

"I'm not sure I can explain it. It's not like I actually talk to them, or them to me. We just understand each other—kind of like how a mother understands her baby's cries. She knows whether the baby is hungry or tired or sick, just by looking and listening."

Grace considered that a moment, then asked, "And you can do this with any animal?"

"No, not all. Mammals, mostly, especially the smarter ones. And they have to know me, and trust me, or it doesn't work at all." Doo got up then and walked back to Gilda. She looked up at him, and he squatted next to her and rubbed her head as he spoke, "Look, it's not magic or super-powers or anything. Lots of people communicate with animals every day—chimps, dolphins, pigs. Old Gilda here may not be as bright as those guys, but she knows what I'm saying."

“So-o-o she knows there’s too much iron in her blood?”

He laughed. “No! That’s what we needed you for. All I could get out of her was that she ate something wrong and felt really weak and sickly. And then I told her that you were really smart, and you could help her, and she needed to do whatever you said.”

Grace smiled at his compliment, then got up from the bench and walked toward them. “Well, thank you, Doo, but I’m not sure she got that last part.”

Doo set both hands along the side of the cow’s head and made her look directly at him. “Sure she did, didn’t you, Gildy?”

As if to prove his point, the cow pulled away from him and began struggling to get up. Doo jumped up to guide and steady her. “See! I told you. She understands.”

Grace joined him to help steady the shaky Gilda. She still wasn’t convinced that Doo could talk to the animals, but he certainly had a way with this one. Just as Grace reached out to her, the cow pressed her nose up under Grace’s chin and then stuck her long tongue out and lavishly licked the side of Grace’s head. Grace couldn’t stop herself from laughing out loud, despite the slathery wet mess she could now feel running down her neck.

“Oh, geez, sorry about that! I forgot to mention how affectionate Gilda can be.” Doo pulled a red bandana from his back pocket and prepared to wipe the evidence of Gilda’s affection off Grace’s neck.

A wave of self-consciousness washed over Grace as the handsome hombre came closer. He wrapped one big hand around her head, tipping it to the side and holding her hair back, while the other hand gently cleaned. It should have been the simplest of actions, the most innocent touch, but the nearness of his grossly masculine form was sending shock waves through her system. Oh, my. As she'd joked to Joe on the plane, it had been a long time since Grace had had any kind of intimate encounter with a person of the male persuasion.

She felt a few tiny beads of perspiration popping out on her forehead and the back of her neck. She was hoping he wouldn't notice that. She wanted to smack herself for lusting after him; it was totally inappropriate. For one thing, he was much too young for her—at least six or seven years difference, maybe more. And for another, he was entirely too...too...dare she think it? The guy was just pure sex appeal—the kind of man old married women fantasize about. He was not some nice, stable fellow with a good job who'd make a great father, but rather, a flat-out stud muffin offering a strong jaw, a broad chest, and a guaranteed scratch to the itch.

Egads! What the hell was she thinking?

“Uh, thank you, Doo. I'm good now.” She pulled the bandana hand away from her neck, but he caught her fingers and held on. The hand around the back of her head tightened up just a little, and his eyes locked on hers. Deep, rich, sparkly pools, drinking her in. Oh, God, he was thinking it, too. Grace felt her resolve melting like a vanilla cone on a hot summer day.

Ellie—her only real responsibility—was gone until tomorrow. And Joe Manning, the only other person who might notice or care, in a strictly big-brother-little-sister kind of way, was far off, too.

She relaxed her shoulders and allowed herself to be pulled in closer. Instantly, her senses went on overload. The guy smelled like bottled *man*—sultry, sweaty, and muddy, with a touch of sweet hay. The bandana hand was pressing against her back now, crushing her into the fold of his powerful arm. She let her eyes drift closed, and her head fell back.

“Moooooooooooo!”

Grace’s eyes flew back open at the sudden sound of Gilda’s voice. Doo stiffened, and his head jerked up, looking over top of Grace’s head. He immediately released her and took a few steps back. He didn’t say a word, but pointed toward the window behind her.

“What?” Grace turned around to look. Sure enough, there was Granny, in her plain gray dress and sensible shoes, hurriedly tromping down the walkway that led to the barn’s side door. Grace slammed her face into her palm. Cripes, that was close. She would have absolutely died of embarrassment if Elmyra Mertens had caught her in the cowboy’s arms.

She turned back around to face Doo, who had apparently had the same reaction. He was once again snuggled up to his bovine buddy, his head pressed up against hers, and his hands massaging her. “Gilda my girl, you really saved my bacon that time. I owe you one,

darlin’.”

“Wait a minute. You mean...” Grace raised an eyebrow, pointing toward the cow.

Doo straightened up and grinned. “I told you, we understand each other.”

Grace was still contemplating that when Granny burst through the side door calling out to them, “Grace? Doo? Where are you people? There’s something going on up in D.C. I’m concerned about Elodie.”

Chapter Eleven: Help

“*Pat and Mike, Adam’s Rib, Woman of the Year*—geez, Carlo, you’ve got all my favorites. There’s nothing better than Hepburn and Tracy. I don’t know how I’ll decide.” Ellie stared at the wall in Carlo’s apartment that was filled, floor-to-ceiling, with movie DVDs, arranged by genre and year.

Angel shook her head. “I never heard of any of those.”

Carlo grinned. “That’s because there’s no fist-fights, gun play, or karate in any of them.”

“Okay, so I like action flicks, what can I say? But I suppose I can slog through one of those moldy-oldies if I have to.”

“They’re really good, Angel, if you give ’em a chance.” Carlo held up one of the boxes and pointed at the cover. “Tracy was a genius.”

Angel took the cover from him and looked at it a minute. “Really? She doesn’t look too bright to me.”

Carlo and Ellie started laughing at that, so Angel lifted her shoulders. “What?”

Carlo bit back his grin and clarified, “Tracy’s the guy, honey. It’s Spencer Tracy.”

Angel blushed. “Oh. Right. Whatever.” She handed him back the DVD case and picked up her glass off the coffee table. “You two movie-bugs decide. I’ll go finish the salad.” She walked across the room, where a small kitchen lined the far wall. Multiple pots sat steaming on the stove, while various foodstuffs and plates and bowls and pans lined the narrow countertop. The whole tiny apartment reeked of garlic and oregano.

Ellie pulled another title off the shelf, shaking her head. “Man, Carlo, this is the most awesome collection ever. How did you get all these? You must have been collecting for years.”

“Actually, they were left to me.” He paused a moment, then added, “When my mother died.”

Ellie turned. “Wait, I thought your mom—”

“Oh, Maria? Yeah, she’s my mom. I mean...” He looked as though he didn’t want to continue. Ellie wondered what the story was, but was sorry she’d made him uncomfortable. He glanced toward the kitchen, where Angel was pulling some plump red tomatoes from the refrigerator, then looked back at Ellie. He gave a quick shrug. “I was adopted.”

“O-oh, I see.”

“I never even met my real mom. Her name was Sarita Longoria. She was this big-time actress back in Italy. I guess having a kid didn’t fit too well in her plans.

She and my mom were close friends. I think they kept the whole thing under wraps. It says Luccini on my birth certificate.”

“Wow, that’s some story...” Ellie was trying hard to follow, but...uh-oh. That funky eye thing was happening again. She was starting to see the haze, only this time the colors were different—some light pink and dark blue. She was definitely going to get her eyes checked when they got home, but she didn’t want to interrupt Carlo right now.

“Now don’t get me wrong; my folks—the Luccinis—they’re the best. I couldn’t ask for better. I’m not sorry it worked out the way it did. Especially since...” Again, he stopped and looked unsure whether to continue.

Looking at him, Ellie’s heart was beating a little faster, and her breath felt shallow. The desire to hear the rest of the story was strong. She prompted him, “Especially since what?”

He grimaced, then blurted it out, “She committed suicide. I mean Sarita. She kinda went crazy, hearing voices and shit. They tried to help her, but then she killed herself.” The haze around him brightened and intensified.

Ellie’s jaw went slack. She felt lightheaded and lost. She gripped one of the bookshelves for stability and finally found her voice. “Whoa. I-I’m sorry, Carlo.”

Carlo shook his head, as if clearing out cobwebs, then ran his hand through his spiky blonde hair. “No, I’m sorry. I mean...I have no idea why I told

you all that.” He took a step back from her, as though he needed to free himself from a spell she had cast on him. He looked into her eyes intently. “I’ve never told anyone that. Not even Angel.”

He took a couple more steps backwards and seemed to regain his composure. He pointed his thumb over his shoulder toward the kitchen. “I-I need to check on the garlic bread.” But he kept staring at Ellie, and she couldn’t take her eyes off him, either. Finally, he gave her an odd little smile. “I guess you really are special.”

Ellie furrowed her brow at him. “Huh?”

“Hey, you two! You done yet? I could use a little help in here.” Angel’s voice dissolved the glue that seemed to be holding them together. Carlo turned and walked quickly into the kitchen, slipping in behind Angel at the countertop and wrapping his arm around her waist. The vibrant colors evaporated, and Ellie’s head cleared.

She sank down into his couch and looked absently at the DVD case in her hand. There was a couple on the cover, entwined in a passionate embrace, but the title was written in Italian. Ellie was clueless to make sense of it, but then down at the bottom, she saw it: Sarita Longoria. This was one of Carlo’s mother’s films.

Ellie turned her head to the side, peering over her shoulder toward the kitchen. Once again, she knew she should look away, but it was hard not to watch. Angel and Carlo weren’t chopping any vegetables. They were face to face, only inches apart, whispering and giggling together. He had one hand on her waist, and the other, tangled in her hair, playing around her ear. Ellie

noticed a fat, shiny ring on his pinky finger. Odd. Like Angel, Carlo just didn't seem like the jewelry type.

###

The phrase “concerned about Elodie” had apparently been enough to light a fire under Grace Nagle. Whatever she and Doo were up to with that cow had been dropped the minute Granny stepped into the barn. Frankly, she was amazed at the speed of Grace’s reaction. The woman had more or less run back to the house and into Granny’s office after she mentioned the teeny, tiny concerns she had about the activities in Washington. Rishi wasn’t actually worried himself and had only called Granny, because he considered his findings interesting, not terrifying. But it looked like Grace was about to go nuclear over the whole thing. Half an hour later, they were still trying to convince her it was nothing to get upset about.

“Grace, please,” Rishi insisted from the large screen monitor. “You are not listening to me.”

“I *am* listening, Rish. You’re telling me that every single move my Ellie makes is being tracked by someone, and she’s in imminent danger! What part of that am I not getting?”

“No, no, no. That is not at all what I am saying. It is only a possibility, a remote possibility. These are some very sophisticated algorithms, but they are untested. I can offer no guarantees about what we are seeing.” Rishi tapped a few times on his tablet and

waved a hand in the air. Some criss-crossing lines in a variety of colors formed a graphic on the screen in front of him, while his face still showed in the background. He motioned toward a peak in the graph. “See here, there was a minor spike in the linear trajectory of the transmission frequency a few hours ago, but that is statistically insignificant, mishti. It is only because of Visnu’s newest beta coding that we even noticed it.”

Grace waved him off with both hands. “Beta coding? Algorithms? Trajectories? For God’s sake, man, speak English!”

“I am trying to explain. If you would just—”

Granny held up a hand, cutting him off. Grace was taking this tidbit of information from Rishi’s investigations about as well as she had their original findings about Aiden Orcutt. Granny was now regretting the decision to even tell her about it. She looked up at Rishi and reopened the conversation, “In layman’s terms, Rishi, please tell us what a spike in the trajectory would mean.”

“It is indicative of an increase in the encoded chatter, in the precise areas where Angel has indicated she traveled today with Miss Elodie. In other words, it looks like someone is very interested in everything they are doing together.”

Grace’s tone shifted from righteous indignation to outright fear, “And that means someone is after her again. Maybe that Aiden person or someone else. I never should have let her go up there. They’re going to follow her and snatch her when Angel’s not looking, and then

do who-knows-what to her, and I'll never see her again!"

Granny offered a matter-of-fact response, "Now, Grace, you're blowing it all out of proportion. It's not that dire. It only means someone is paying attention to two pretty girls strolling around D.C., one of whom is heavily armed and dressed like the Terminator. If anything, it's Angel that's drawing the attention, not Ellie. But even if Ellie was the object of some interest, Angel would never *not* be looking. Ellie is as safe up there as she would be right in this room."

Grace gestured broadly, endangering the glassware and ongoing experiments. "How can you say that? How can you be so calm? Someone in your organization wants my Ellie! One of these crazy Gifted people is going to come after her and hurt her, just like they did Lucy!"

Wait, what? Granny furrowed her brow. What did any of this have to do with Grace's long-dead sister? Granny wrapped an arm around Grace's shoulders. "Grace, dear, just listen—"

"NO!" Grace threw Granny's arm off of her and dug in, "You listen to me, old woman! You tore my family apart years ago, and one of your beloved Gifted Ones nearly destroyed my sister. I won't let it happen again with my niece!"

Granny's eyes widened, and she stared in bewilderment. Clearly, the wheels were coming off. "Grace, I know you're worried about Ellie, but, honestly, I don't know what you're talking about. This has nothing to do with what happened to Lucy..."

“Oh, yes, it does! You think you know everything, but you don’t! You don’t know the half of it! You think you’re all one big happy family here...well, I’ll tell you what—when my sister was really in trouble, when she really needed help, she came to me. *Me*. Her real, bona fide flesh and blood, non-Gifted family member. Not some people she shares one lousy gene with. And I’ll tell—”

“Gracie?”

The voice was soft, yet commanding. Granny breathed a sigh of relief as Joe Manning joined the conversation, bringing an instant end to Grace’s diatribe. Both women turned towards the screen which was now split into two views—the original, of Rishi in his comfortable chair, and the new one, a head and shoulders image of Joe.

Rishi shrugged sheepishly. “Sorry, ladies, I thought perhaps we needed an intervention.”

Granny gave him a brief wave of thanks, then focused on her esteemed colleague and friend. Joe was dressed nicely, in a dark navy suit and a red patterned tie. She hated that they were interrupting what was probably an important meeting or a fine meal, but if anyone could bring order to this chaos, it was Joe. Still, it was Grace’s reaction to him that surprised her most.

The shrieking hysteria evaporated, and tears welled up in her eyes. As Granny watched, the spunky, take-no-prisoners maiden aunt morphed into a whimpering schoolgirl. She begged him, “Joe, please! Please go and get her. Bring her back to me. Now! I can’t

lose her. I can't!"

His voice was gentle, "Grace, it's all right. She's fine. I talked to Angel twenty minutes ago. They're at her boyfriend's apartment. Safe and sound. He's making them dinner, and they're going to watch a movie. She's having fun."

Grace's nose was bright red now, and tears were openly running down her cheeks. "But did you actually talk to Ellie? Did you see her?"

Joe wrinkled his forehead, allowing some frustration to show. "No, I didn't talk directly to Ellie, honey, but she was there, with Angel. Where else would she be?" He sighed. "You don't trust any of us, do you, Gracie?"

She bit her lip and looked down at the floor.

"Look, how 'bout I call them right now? Or why don't you call her yourself? Will that put your mind at ease?"

There was a moment of silence during which Grace sniffled and appeared to be wiping tears from her face. Finally, she lifted her head and shook it quickly. "No. You're right, Joe. I'm totally overreacting. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, honey. It's my fault. I should've realized you weren't ready—"

Rishi shifted noisily in his chair, as if to remind Joe that he and Grace were not alone. Joe's tone changed to a more businesslike manner, "Um, that is, I should've respected your wishes as her guardian and not pushed you to let me bring her along."

Grace, too, seemed to recover her composure. “It’s all right, Joe. And Rishi...I’m sorry for running all over you like that. I know you’re just doing your job. Please keep us updated if you find out anything new.”

Rishi smiled and nodded, then signed off.

Anxious to relieve Grace’s stress, Granny pointed toward the window. “Look, Grace, Doo’s on his way in. Gilda must be feeling better. You’ve done a marvelous job with her. I think Chef Ren left some plates for you two in the front kitchen. Why don’t you go relax and have a late supper together?”

Grace peered out the window. “Well, now that you mention it, I am pretty hungry. That’s a good idea. I’ll go catch him.”

As Grace started toward the door of the lab, Joe, who was still on the screen, called out to her, “So I’ll have Ellie call you as soon as they get back, okay?”

Granny sagged. No sooner had she gotten Grace’s mind off the girl for a minute, than Joe was reminding her to hurry back for an update. Couldn’t he see that Doo was a perfect distraction for the little worry wart? She glanced back up at the screen as Joe signed off, noting the sour expression on his face. Hmm, maybe he *could* see that, and he wasn’t liking it so much.

###

“So sorry, ladies. Important call. Wha’d I miss?” Joe smiled amiably at his dinner companions as he resumed his seat at the table and laid the white linen

napkin back in his lap. The three, Dr. Hannah Graber from the Max Planck Institute, her assistant, Dr. Eva Ruehlein, and Joe's personal escort for the evening, Nadia Pavlenko, were all bright, charming, and highly accomplished women. And they were all, of course, Gifted Ones. The two Germans were world-renowned archeologists, while Nadia, a former Olympic hopeful from Romania—a gymnast, sidelined by a wrist injury—was now making use of her lithe physique as a Council Defender. And yet, despite what should have been a scintillating engagement, Joe found himself distracted.

It certainly wasn't their fault. The three ladies shared a charming, non-stop banter, and the two younger ones, at least, were very easy on the eyes, but the face that Joe kept seeing was Grace's. Before today, he'd only seen her cry once. That was the day that he'd tried to explain to her why he had to go away, why he was leaving them all, why Grace would never get to wear the beautiful maid-of-honor dress they had picked out together. Until that moment, even he hadn't realized that his engagement to Lucy was about more than just the two of them. He had not understood how tight was the bond that had formed with her family, as well. Especially her little sister.

And although he continued to be a part of both their lives for a long time after, he had never again seen that degree of vulnerability on Grace's face. He had never doubted it was there; he had simply accepted that he would no longer be privy to it. Seeing her like that today, and more so, knowing that she'd allowed it, and

allowed him to help her, had shaken him to his core. Perhaps a bridge he'd thought long since burned could be rebuilt.

“Don't you agree, Dr. Manning?”

Dammit. Caught in the act. Joe lifted his napkin to his lips, buying himself a second to see if he had subconsciously heard *anything* that Dr. Graber had just been saying. He hadn't. “Well, I...” Oh hell, where was the waiter when you needed him?

“You see, I told you he wouldn't want to take sides on this,” Nadia offered with a catty tone. “Joe never wants to offend, and repatriation of religious artifacts is just too controversial a topic for dinner conversation. I mean, who's to say whether the Vatican or the state should take ownership? Right, Joe?” She flashed him a bright smile.

“Exactly what I was thinking, Nadia. Thank you for putting it so succinctly.” Joe gave her a grateful look and took a large swallow of his wine. What Nadia lacked in physical size and strength, she more than made up for with her quick thinking. As he had assured her during the recruitment process, there was more to being a Defender than simple bulk.

And she once again proved herself valuable when, a little while later, she caught him stealing a glance at his phone, as it lay on the table beside his plate. She laid a hand on it, then addressed the other two women, “If you'll all excuse me, I need to run to the powder room.” She picked up Joe's phone as she stood and said quietly, “Angel?”

He nodded briefly and said, “Just a quick check-in.” She smiled and left them. Clearly, Angel’s training of the young Romanian had included a section on “how to anticipate the boss’ needs even before he knows what they are.” He wasn’t the least bit concerned about Angel and Ellie’s visit with the boyfriend, but he knew Grace would appreciate his staying on top of it.

He forced himself to focus on Dr. Ruehle’s description of a new dig site in the southernmost part of Africa where some pre-human remains had recently been uncovered. Her enthusiasm and vivid imagery allowed him to forget momentarily about Grace and her little meltdown. When Nadia returned a few moments later, however, the agitation on her face brought it all back.

Rather than taking her seat, she beckoned to Joe. He once again excused himself, and Nadia led him to an alcove outside the dining room. She pushed his phone back at him. “She’s not answering. Not calls or texts. I tried more than once.”

“Well, she doesn’t always answer right away. Maybe they’re eating or watching the movie. Let’s—”

“Call her on the nano? I tried. Three times.”

Joe’s heart skipped a beat. Angel was imminently capable; he had said many times that he would trust her with his life and anyone else’s, too. But no one is infallible. And Angel *never* failed to respond to the nano. In fact, she’d leave the tiny microphone in her ear at times when the monitors preferred she didn’t. Even undercover, she’d say something to let her monitor know she was okay. Joe kept his voice steady, “How far is it to

Carlo's apartment?"

Nadia tapped on her phone a couple times. "An hour. Fifty minutes, if we break a few laws."

Joe closed his eyes for a minute and pressed his index and middle fingers into his forehead. When he opened them, he was dead calm. He pointed back toward the dining room. "Give the bone sisters our apologies, then meet me out front." He turned toward the door, still talking to her, "I'll drive, you make the calls."

###

"Sorry, gorgeous, gotta run. Can you let yourself out?" Enrique Espinoza tossed his phone across the room, landing it perfectly on top of the pile of his clothes in the corner, then threw back a tangled bedsheet.

"C'est quoi ce bordel?!" The willowy blonde sat straight up as Rique pulled away from her. Her tousled hair fell around her shoulders, and the bedcovers sank to her waist, displaying her perfect white breasts for his viewing pleasure.

He paused briefly, taking it in, and then, shaking his head at the wastefulness of the moment, proceeded to leap out of the bed. As he slid into his black jeans and yanked a dark T-shirt over his head, she assailed him with a litany of French that sounded most unpleasant. He ducked to avoid being hit with a picture frame she had grabbed off the bedside table, and simultaneously snatched his boots off the floor. As he pulled the bedroom door closed behind him, he cringed at the sound

of glass breaking against it. Fortunately for Rique, he didn't speak a word of the lovely lady's primary language.

Damn shame to walk out on that one. He'd have to look her up...if he ever found himself in Monaco. But some things were more important. He pulled his leather jacket on, verified his equipment, and headed out.

Once outside his building, Rique checked the address on his phone. He looked up and down the street; it was dark, save for the illumination of corner lampposts. He assessed the situation, his brain quickly calculating the options, then he began to move. He darted between cars, crossing in the middle of the block, and then slipped down a narrow passage that separated two of the newer buildings on his street. Soon he was moving, almost noiselessly, down alleys, around tool sheds, over fences, and past sleeping dogs. In a motor vehicle, or even on a bicycle, the D.C. area could be a nightmare for navigation, but on foot, and with a modicum of agility, one could move swiftly to his destination, enjoying the cover of so many obstacles. In just under eleven minutes, Rique traveled a distance that would have taken half an hour in a car, and twice that at rush hour.

But this wasn't rush hour. It was close to ten o'clock, and in this neighborhood, things were relatively quiet. If there was someone on the street, they were probably best avoided. Rique peered around the corner of the brick building he had come to, squinting in the darkness. Carlo Lucinni's street was even less well-lit

than Rique's. He scanned slowly, his senses tuned, seeking any interruption to the stillness.

He pulled out his night-vision binoculars and focused on three vehicles parked along the street. One, a large black SUV with tinted windows, was an obvious suspect. He couldn't see the plate from where he stood, but the complete lack of road salt corrosion on the body told him that that car had not spent the prior winter in the Washington metro area. A second, more subtle contender, was parked on the next block. From a distance, it looked like just another overpriced sedan, but Rique recognized the styling as that of a late-model Jag—way too expensive for this neighborhood. The third vehicle—the one with steamed, rather than tinted windows—definitely had people in it and was the least of his concerns. He only hoped the young couple would wrap up their tryst and move on. He had no interest in seeing innocent bystanders get hurt.

The landscape, he was already familiar with. It was an older building, which meant it actually had a few trees growing around it, miraculously enough, in the thirty-foot-wide strip of grass that surrounded it. Beyond that was a short iron fence, bordering the grass, which could potentially be an issue. Of course, Rique could easily jump over it, but others might get tripped up. And if he ended up with the package, things might get really messy.

Finally, he turned his head upward, angling it as much as he could without exposing himself. He tried to suss out what was going on behind the lighted windows

three stories up. From his vantage point, though, he couldn't even tell if the curtains were drawn. He reeled in the tension and stood straight again. He wanted to slip in the side door or shimmy up the fire escape and bust on in there, but that wasn't his job. How was he supposed to just stand there, when *anything* could be happening? Waiting and watching had never been Enrique's strong suit.

He took a deep breath and then blew it out. Even a loner like him needed to play it cool and be part of a team sometimes. Just not too often. Look what it had done for Angel. She was always so high and mighty on her beloved band of Gifted Ones. Sure, the G.O.s had done a lot for both of them, but that didn't mean they owed them their lives. And who said they even needed to be rescued from the streets anyway? They were doing okay on their own. Rique had learned to be a helluva sneak-thief at only seven years old, and as soon as he'd grown just a little bigger, he'd have been watching out for Angel, instead of the other way around. And then neither one of them would be caught up in this mess they were in tonight.

###

“You're not still frettin' about Ellie now, are you? 'Cause I got something that can fix that.” Doo reached across the picnic blanket and picked up the wine bottle. “A little more?”

Grace appreciated that he at least asked. It had

always bothered her when men would refill her wine glass or order her an additional drink without consulting her first. Maybe they were just being polite, but it was a little too fraternity-house pushy for her taste. Doo, for all his marvelous masculinity, appeared to have been raised to treat women with respect. “No, thanks, Doo. I’m fine, really. I’m embarrassed that I got so upset. I’m not even worried anymore.”

He grinned in a way that told her he didn’t believe her, but he set the bottle back down in the ice bucket. “Then how about a little of this?” He uncovered a small plate that had been among the many that Chef Renni had left for them.

Grace’s eyes widened at the sight of several small, perfectly shaped blobs of very dark brown. Doo selected one and held it under her nose. The pungent aroma of bittersweet chocolate assailed her senses. “Omigod! Give me that!” He laughed and obliged her, pushing it between her lips. “Mmmmmm.” She leaned back on her hands, closed her eyes, and rolled the soft mass around on her tongue, savoring the flavor while it melted in her mouth. When it was gone, she opened her eyes again and looked over at him. “Wow, that was heavenly. How do you stand it? I’d weigh five hundred pounds if I lived here.”

Doo had leaned back on his hands, too, and was staring up at the clear, starry sky. “No you wouldn’t. ’Cause you’d spend all your time out here.” He waved one hand across the dark, open stretch in front of them. “You’d be in the barn with the animals, or out in the

pasture, or up there, in the hills. And you wouldn't need any wine, 'cause you'd be drunk on fresh air and sunshine."

"You make it sound so simple."

"Isn't it?"

She wrinkled her forehead suspiciously. "Did Joe put you up to this?"

He sat straight up. "Joe? Manning? Heck no! Why would you say that?" He looked genuinely surprised by her question.

She gave her head a little shake. "Sorry, it's just...Joe has been hounding me. He really, really wants us to stay. He thinks this is the best place for Ellie."

"And what about you? Where's the best place for Grace?"

"Me? What difference does that make? Nobody wants to kidnap me."

"O-o-oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that..." He gave her a devilish grin, then shifted his attention back to the night sky.

Grace found herself blushing and quickly followed his gaze, finding it easier to focus on the constellations than the lanky farmhand.

"Seriously, Gracie, you need to think about yourself, too. Don't you think your happiness matters to Ellie as much as hers matters to you? Do you think she wants to go through life feeling like you gave up *everything* for her? You gave up vet school, you left your beau, and you moved far away to a strange town, because all that was best for Ellie."

She turned sharply toward him, her mouth agape. “Wait a minute! How did you—”

His shoulders drooped, and he pushed his hat back on his head. “Oh, uh, sorry, Grace. It’s just...”

“Wait, I know. Elmyra.”

He looked sheepish. “I didn’t ask, I swear. She volunteered the information. She’s got that whole database of all the Gifted folks and their families...”

Grace sighed and patted his hand. “It’s okay. I understand. That old busybody’s just got way too much information at her disposal.”

He just smiled. “All I’m sayin’, Grace, is...you don’t have to be a martyr. You’ve done a lot for Ellie. And she appreciates it, I’m sure, but maybe it’s time to let somebody else do a little. There are people here who want to be her friends and teachers and mentors. Let them do it. Let them help. Every one of us has something to learn from everyone else.”

Whoa. Surprise, surprise. Apparently, the backwoods country boy had more than sweet hay in his head. And maybe he was even right. She looked at him thoughtfully. “So-o-o-o, if I were to share my responsibility for Ellie with all the eggheads and athletes and who-knows-what-else around here, what would I do with myself all day?”

Doo dropped way back on his elbows so he was almost lying down. His voice was playful, “Gimme a little time. I’ll come up with somethin’.”

She laughed out loud, then plucked his hat off his head and slammed it down over his face, making him

fall flat on the blanket. He knocked the hat away and grabbed her arms, pulling her towards him with a wide grin.

To hell with propriety. To hell with the age difference. Grace felt more silly and happy and carefree than she could remember feeling in a long time. She allowed herself to be drawn into his arms, and even before their lips met, a rush of heat pushed up from her loins. She kissed him hungrily and reveled in the breathlessness of being crushed against him. Damn, that felt good.

And then, just as her body was melting into liquid honey, her phone, sitting near them on the blanket, buzzed and lit up. They both froze and turned their heads in that direction. She lifted her head just enough to see the screen. "It's Joe."

"You could call him back."

She looked at Doo, biting her lip. He gave her a kind smile and pushed them both up to a sitting position. He nodded toward the phone. "Answer it, Gracie."

Chapter Twelve: Choose

“Ellie, how’s it comin’ in there? You made a decision on the movie yet?” Angel called out to Ellie from where she and Carlo were cleaning up the mess in the kitchen after their sumptuous Italian feast. Knowing how much Angel enjoyed good food, Ellie was starting to understand her attraction to the fair-haired boy.

“Oh, yeah, I got one now. I think it’s one we’ll all like.” Ellie answered her without looking over. She wasn’t sure if it was so much their relentless affection or the actual heat level in the kitchen that was doing it, but watching the two of them together really seemed to be bothering her eyes. Every time she even glanced that way, her vision was blurred by a shimmery haze of red smoke. Maybe she just wasn’t cut out for contact lenses.

She turned the film box over in her hands and scanned the back again. Hitchcock’s *Notorious* was her selection for their movie. Carlo would get his fix of iconic actors like Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman, Angel would probably love all the super-spy mumbo-jumbo,

and Ellie could bask in one of the greatest love triangles ever captured on the silver screen. She couldn't help but liken the famous three-minute kiss scene with what she'd been seeing and hearing from the kitchen for the last quarter hour. Devlin and Alicia had nothin' on Carlo and Angel. Ellie wondered if she'd ever feel that way about anyone, or more importantly, if anyone would ever feel that way about her.

But there was yet another reason for her selection of this particular film. To Ellie, Hitchcock and Cary Grant and the others were some of her only remaining connections to her dad, for it was Martin Eggleston who had turned her onto the "moldy-oldies", as Angel called them, at an early age. For a man dedicated to science, Martin had kept a warm and fuzzy place in his heart for classic films, and *Notorious* was one of his favorites. Ellie could still recall the first time they'd watched it together; she was probably only seven or eight years old, a time when most kids were slurping up pirates and wizards and dinosaurs. Of course, he'd had to explain some scenes to her and fill in background about the war, but that was part of the fun. Her mom wasn't a huge movie fan, so watching movies together, with him adding in all kinds of trivia and historical notes, was their special Daddy and Daughter thing. That was a long time ago, though, and nowadays, if Ellie wanted someone to watch an old movie with her, she'd have to drag Aunt Grace kicking and screaming.

Aunt Grace! Oh, crap! Ellie looked up at the wall clock. Geez, it was way past ten, and she hadn't

texted her aunt since they first arrived at Carlo's apartment. On the other hand, Grace, miraculously, hadn't texted her, either. Usually, if Ellie was even a couple minutes late checking in, Grace was all over her. Ellie jumped up from the couch to grab her phone. As she looked for it, she wondered if maybe Uncle Joe was pinch-hitting for her again. He had done all the heavy-lifting with Grace since the idea of traveling to D.C. had first come up. It was kind of nice having someone else do the begging, er, asking, for a change. In fact, Uncle Joe had seemed happy, even anxious, to talk to Grace on Ellie's behalf. And he seemed pretty effective in getting her to loosen the reins a bit.

Hmm, so where was it? Ellie could've sworn that both she and Angel had set their phones on Carlo's desk in the corner, but they weren't there now. And if memory wasn't failing her, Angel had hung her black leather jacket over the back of the desk chair. That was also no longer in place. She'd have to ask Carlo where he had moved the stuff to, but she didn't want to interrupt...

"So what we got?"

Ellie spun around to see that Angel had plunked down on the couch and picked up the DVD case from where Ellie had laid it on the coffee table. Ellie joined her on the couch while Angel scanned through the images and description on the box. "Huh. This actually sounds okay. Might even be good."

Ellie rolled her eyes. "It *is* good. It's Hitchcock. Classic film noir. Spies and wartime secrets and everything." She took the box back from Angel and

opened it, pulling the disc out. “Trust me, Angel, you’re gonna love this.”

“Love what?” Carlo had stepped up behind the couch and was drying his hands on a dish towel. Both women looked up at him, as he read the title over their shoulders. “*Notorious*. Awesome choice, Ellie. Now, you girls get it set up, and I’ll make you both a nice, cold drink.” He looked at Angel. “The usual, baby?” She nodded. “And for you, Ellie? I’ve got a bunch of different sodas, flavored water, tea...”

Ellie looked at both of them. “What’s the usual?”

Angel blushed slightly, then mumbled, “Root beer. It’s my favorite.”

“Root beer? Really?” Ellie grinned, but then shrugged and said, “I’ll try one.”

“Coming right up.” Carlo turned to walk back into the kitchen, but Ellie stopped him, “Oh, Carlo, did you move our phones? I need to text my aunt, or she’ll freak out.”

“O-oh, yeah, I did. They’re...in the kitchen.”

Ellie started to get up. “Okay, I’ll—”

“No, you don’t have to do that. I’ll bring it to you. Help Angel with the DVD. She’s a klutz with machines.”

Angel made a sour face as she headed over to the DVD player, but Ellie was busy watching Carlo walk away. The haze was back, and this time it was black. She wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed her arms.

Angel stood up from inserting the DVD into the

machine and looked at her. “You okay, El?”

“Ah, yeah. Fine. It’s just getting a little chilly in here.” Ellie gave her head a little shake. “I guess I’m a little tired, too.”

“Now, listen, chica, we don’t have to stay if you’re pooped. We can head back right now—”

Ellie dropped her arms and ignored the goosebumps. “No, no, no. I want to stay. Really.” Ugh. She wasn’t about to ruin her friend’s evening, just because her stupid contacts were dirty, and she was a little tired. She got up from the couch, grabbed an afghan off a nearby chair, and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“Okay, ladies, here we are.” Carlo came back in carrying a little tray with three glasses on it, all filled with ice cubes and a fizzy dark brown beverage. He set the tray on the coffee table, and picked up two of the glasses. Each one had one of those cute little umbrellas in it, one pink and one red. He handed the drink with the pink umbrella to Ellie, and the red one to Angel. Then he picked up the third drink and held it up. “Shall we toast?”

Erm, he had forgotten Ellie’s phone, but okay, she supposed she would let him toast before asking about it again. Angel held up her glass, and Ellie followed suit. Wow, that icy glass was cold. It almost hurt her hand to hold it. With her free hand, she pulled the afghan tighter around her shoulders, but still involuntarily shivered.

Carlo started saying something about old friends and new friends and good times and blah, blah, blah... but Ellie was having trouble focusing on his words. The

cold was overwhelming her. And the haze—cripes, she could barely see him now. It was like looking through a thick black fog. She twisted and stretched her neck; it was feeling funny. Prickly. She wrinkled her forehead, trying to shake off the odd sensation. She heard the clinking, and through the fog, saw Carlo's and Angel's glasses touching, and their faces smiling and laughing. Then their glasses bumped against hers, and then they were lifting them to their mouths.

“Ellie? Chica?” Angel stopped the drink just before it touched her lips and pulled it away. “Are you sure you're all right? You look a little pale. In fact, your lips are kinda...blue.”

Carlo cut in. His voice was rougher than it had been, “She's fine, Angel. Drink up.” As if to prove his point, he took a swallow from his glass. Angel still looked concerned, but she once again lifted the glass to her lips.

Ow! The prickles bit into the back of Ellie's neck so hard she saw stars. But the pain snapped her brain into gear. Duh—this wasn't the first time she'd felt this. All of this. The cold, the dark haze, and yes, the “prickles”. Aiden. The night at the river. She didn't know what it all meant, but she knew something was wrong.

Without thinking any more about it, Ellie let go of the blanket and her drink, which fell in a mess on the floor. Her hands shot out, knocking Angel's glass away from her and sending it clear across the room. It shattered against the wall, making a horrible sound and spewing root beer everywhere.

“What the—” Carlo’s face turned bright red—really red, not a filmy, hazy, half-there color—and his whole body tensed up, muscles tightening, blood vessels popping to the surface.

“Chica, what?” Angel demanded, with a flash of anger and confusion. But as Angel stared at Ellie, her eyes widened, and the confusion vanished, and then, almost faster than Ellie could comprehend, Angel spun toward Carlo, and the heel of her hand crashed into his face. While he was still groaning and reeling from the impact, Angel’s booted right foot cut through the space between them, folding him in half. He crumpled to the floor, but not without reaching for something he had tucked in his waistband. When his torso hit the ground, Angel’s boot slammed down onto his forearm, eliciting a howl from his throat, and forcing open his hand. The item he’d had clutched therein went scuttling across the hardwood floor.

Ellie gasped when she saw that it was a gun, and fear took over. What was happening? Why was it happening? What should she do? Pick up the gun? Scream for help? Get the hell out of there?

“You little piece of—” Angel now had her boot placed squarely across Carlo’s neck, pinning him to the floor.

“Angel, baby, you gotta understand—”

She pressed harder, cutting off his vocal chords. He began to choke and wheeze. His thick arms clutched at her leg, trying to move it, but Angel didn’t flinch. She pressed a hand against her ear and spoke into the air,

“Joe? Joe? Nadia? Cooper? Anybody?” After waiting a moment, she shook her head and then looked over her shoulder at Ellie. “A little help here?”

Ellie’s lips still felt frozen, but she forced them to move. “What...how...um...” She was starting to think crises weren’t really her thing.

“Get my jacket!” Angel looked down at Carlo, narrowing her eyes. “I *need* my jacket.” Carlo made a strangled, fearful sound in response.

“Uh, he moved it. I don’t know where it is.” Three guns, two knives...and what else had she said she had in there? To be honest, Ellie was glad they didn’t have it.

“Ah, hell.” Angel looked disappointed, but then shifted her focus back to Carlo. She spoke through clenched teeth, “You move one muscle, and I snap your neck, got it?” He nodded as best he could under the boot pressure. Then, in one motion, she dropped to her knees and wrapped her hands around his neck. Almost instantly, his body went limp, and his head fell to the side.

Ellie’s mouth fell open, “Oh my God! Is he... dead?”

“Sadly, no. Not even close.” Angel got up and dusted off her knees, then she glanced around the room, probably taking one last look for her jacket, and finally, motioned to Ellie, “C’mon, chica, we gotta get outta here. *Now.*”

###

“Stay behind me!”

Angel’s whispered command left no room for argument as the two women hurried down the six sets of stairs in the old stairwell. Ellie’s head was spinning with the events of the last several minutes. The only thing she knew for sure was that whatever she’d been seeing or feeling back there had nothing to do with contact lenses or an overly efficient air conditioning system. And somehow, Angel knew it, too.

When they reached the ground floor, Angel pulled the stairwell door in towards them enough to peer out, first right, then left. She pulled her head back into the room and looked hard at Ellie. “Chiquita, listen, this is really important. We’re on our own here, and I guarantee you, Carlo was not. Whoever he’s working for is out there, waiting—front, side, and back.” She waved her hand in a circle to indicate the building would be surrounded. “You do exactly what I tell you to do, okay?”

Ellie nodded. She felt both terrified and reassured. Whatever was going on was just flat-out crazy, but she had every confidence now that Angel could handle it.

They moved quickly down the hallway toward the front door of the building, seeing no one in the process. But the minute they stepped outside, three large men rushed toward them. Angel grabbed Ellie by the shoulders and literally shoved her to the side, screaming, “Run, Ellie, that way! Go!”

It was hard not to turn and look back, but she did as she was told, high-tailing it in the direction she'd been shoved, toward the side of the building. She could hear grunts and groans and the sounds of flesh colliding behind her. But as she moved further away, she realized some of the sounds were following her. Heavy breathing and heavy footfalls were closing in. She was almost to the end of the building now. The jagged edge of aging brick seemed oddly illuminated from behind. She wondered what lay around that corner.

The question was answered before she turned, as one more large man stepped out to face her. Geez, he looked like a freakin' linebacker, but dressed all in black. His thighs were bigger around than the puny little trees that dotted the front yard of the property. She came to a sudden stop and spun. Yep, behind her was one more just like him. She was trapped!

The guy who'd followed her stopped moving also. He seemed to be looking past Ellie, so she looked past him. The other two monster-dudes were engaged in a vicious battle with Angel, and it looked like a pretty fair fight, but then an arm flew out when Angel was turned, and she went down. "Angel!" Ellie couldn't keep herself from crying out.

When she did, the man in front of Ellie turned to look, and as he did, Ellie noticed it. Even in the poor lighting of a single lamppost, she could see the haze—the same black haze that had shrouded their last moments with Carlo...and her last moments with Aiden. She took advantage of his momentary distraction to shift direction,

thinking she'd head straight out to the street and hope for the best.

“Ellen! Allie! El—c'mon, this way! ¡Vamos!”

Apparently, the side-of-the-building linebacker guy was one step ahead of her, motioning her in his direction. Cripes, there was nowhere left to go!

“It's me, Rique! Remember?” Now he was running toward her.

Rique...Angel's brother. Why was he here? Was this a trick? Was he one of *them*?

A gruff voice called from close behind her, “Go to hell!” The big guy with the black haze. Ellie was caught, helpless. She stood between them as they approached, closing in on her.

“*Come on, kid!*” Rique looked desperate to convince her. Desperate and...bright. Yes, bright. Why hadn't she noticed it before? Rique was the light that had been coming around the corner. There was no lamppost on this side of the street. The only reason she could see him at all was this eerie glow that exuded from all around him. Like Sister Bertha. It was gold and silver and white, but also pink and blue—anything but black.

In a fraction of a second, both men would be upon her. Time to choose. Could she trust her instincts? Could she trust this crazy light and dark haze thing? Her gut had told her something was wrong when Aiden had her by the river, and she'd been right about Carlo, too. With one monumental burst of effort, Ellie took off and basically threw herself at Rique. She felt his massive arm wrap around her waist and hoist her from the ground.

Oof. She was dumped over his shoulder, and madly banged around as he took off running from the scene, leaping over the fence and into the street. Car tires screeched and a rear door opened. Bam. She was dumped again, this time into the back seat, and the door slammed behind her. Oh dear God, what had she done?

The engine roared, and the vehicle jerked forward, tossing Ellie onto the floor as it took off. She crawled back up into the seat, on her knees, and looked out the rear window. As the car peeled around a corner, she got one last look at Carlo Luccini's apartment building. There was noise, confusion, and distress out front, people moving every which way, but she could identify no one in particular. There was too much darkness and not a shred of light.

###

“Hey girly, you need to turn around in the seat and buckle up!”

“Ellie. Her name is Ellie.”

“Right. Ellie, you need to—”

“Wh—who are you?” Ellie's voice was shaky.

Oh, geez. She still didn't know she was safe. Now that they were a few miles from the scene, and, he was quite sure, not being followed, Joe Manning dared to take his eyes off the road for a minute to look in the rear view mirror at her. “Ellie, honey, it's me, Uncle Joe. And Nadia—you remember her.” He reached toward the console and turned the interior light on for a second,

meeting her eyes in the mirror.

Ellie blew out a big sigh of relief, but just as quickly, shifted back into a panic. “Uncle Joe, we have to go back! It’s Angel. She’s hurt. They hit her, and she was on the ground.”

“No, no, honey, she’s fine. She was just—”

Ellie sat forward, waving her arms around in the front seat. “But I saw her, Uncle Joe. She got distracted, and this big scary guy—”

Nadia chuckled. “Classic Angel. Trust me, Ellie, if she went down, it was only to *create* a distraction to give you a chance to get away. Now buckle up.”

“But I...” Ellie slowly sat back in the seat, apparently pondering Nadia’s words. Then she pulled the seat belt across her chest and locked it in place.

Joe glanced into the mirror and spoke into the air, “So...are you okay, Ellie? Did he hurt you?”

“You mean Rique?”

Joe laughed. “Well, him, too, the big galoot, but no, I meant Carlo.”

Ellie’s voice sounded weak and tired. “Um, Carlo? No, no, he didn’t do anything. I mean, he did. I mean, he would have, if...” She interrupted herself with an enormous yawn. “Wow, Uncle Joe, I’m so-o-o tired.” She laid her head back against the rear seat headrest. Her next sentence was garbled, as though she was drunk, “Carlo was gonna...he had these drinks...with umbrellas...and then the haze...” Ellie’s voice trailed off.

“Uh, never mind, El. You can tell us later. The

important thing is you're okay."

"Uh-huh."

Joe shook his head. He supposed it was the trauma, or she was just overwhelmed or disoriented. For all his medical training, it appeared he didn't know too much about the functioning of the teenage brain.

Nadia looked up from her phone. "Coop says they're on the way now, Joe. We won't beat them by much." Then she pointed toward a sign along the side of the road. "That's it right there. The turn's just past, and the rendezvous spot is about a mile down."

"Rendezvous?" asked a bleary-sounding Ellie. "Who are we...rende-rendevouze...meeting up with?"

Joe maneuvered the car onto the dirt road. "Angel and Cooper and Enrique, honey. We're taking you back to the farm."

Ellie sounded confused, "Tonight? I thought—"

"Mouse, your aunt knows what happened, or at least, what might have happened. If I don't get you back to her before sunrise, she's going to turn into a vampire, fly up here, and suck out all my blood." Ellie giggled at his analogy, then babbled something about him calling her Mouse.

Joe glanced into the mirror again. She was falling asleep. Maybe she was sixteen, but in her drowsy, vulnerable state, she might as well have been six again, the same little girl he used to push on the swings at the park and build sandcastles with on the beach. His shoulders sagged. He had missed a lot, and it had all been unnecessary. Regrets weren't something he needed

any more of in his life; he wasn't going to let it happen again.

Nadia reached over, tapping his hand on the wheel. "You okay?"

He snapped back into the moment. "Yeah, yeah. I'm okay." Damn. This one had definitely been absorbing her training. She was doing everything he wanted his Defenders to do—tuning into her environment, picking up on human emotions and frailties, sensing needs and desires, and anticipating what *might* happen, rather than just reacting to what had. He gave her a sidelong glance. Maybe he didn't like being the object of her investigation, but he was proud and pleased that she was getting so good at it.

After another moment, they pulled into a clearing and parked. The jet was waiting for them, but not the other car. Nadia reached for the door handle. "I'll do a quick sweep of the perimeter—"

"In those?" Joe motioned toward her strappy sandals with the three-inch heels.

Nadia made a face. "Oh yeah, forgot." She wrinkled her forehead, then brightened. "I could do a thermal scan."

Joe laughed; Nadia's eagerness to please was downright charming. "I think we're okay. They'll be here any minute. Rique drives like a madman."

She nodded. "Right." Then, perhaps reminded that she was dressed semi-formally, she suddenly yanked down the lighted visor mirror and immediately set about repairing her hair and make-up with items from her

beaded handbag.

For a moment, Joe was perplexed. Then he mentally rolled his eyes. Besides having the physique of the Incredible Hulk (in a more palatable shade), what was this magical effect Enrique Espinoza seemed to have on every female in the free world? Well, Nadia could primp all she wanted to. Even if Joe didn't have a strict policy about his Defenders fraternizing, Rique did. He had told Joe, being a double-gene boy himself, he absolutely, positively wouldn't chance bringing any more Two's into this world. It was too hard, and too dangerous, to live like a ticking time bomb, never a hundred percent sure you could control your Gift and not have it control you.

The crunching of the car tires against the stones alerted them to the vehicle's arrival. Joe and Nadia exited their car, preparing to greet the other three. It was a dark and still night, but a three-quarter moon had risen, throwing an eerie gray light around the area. As soon as the car stopped, Rique hopped out of the driver's side and opened the rear door for Angel. He tried to help her out, but she shooed him away. "Riq, I'm fine!" She climbed out, a bit gingerly, holding a lumpy white package against her face.

"No, you're not." He looked at Joe. "She took one for the team, Dr. Joe. Will you make sure she's all right?"

Joe nodded and smiled. "Yeah, I've got everything I need on the plane."

Cooper, who had joined them, was looking

around. “So where’s the kid? She okay?”

Nadia grinned and stepped away from the side of the car, where her body had been blocking the view of Ellie, crashed out against the car window. “Yeah, she seems fine. Just worn out.”

“She was really beat,” added Joe. “Couldn’t even tell us what happened before she passed out.”

Angel pulled the white package away from her face, revealing a red, swollen area around her left eye. Joe winced just looking at it, but Angel was smiling. “Yeah, well, she should be. Ellie’s suffering from post-hypermetabolic backlash.”

Joe’s eyes widened. “Wait, you mean—”

“Yup. The kid’s found her Gift. And she’s beat to hell from using it.”

“Well, what is it, Angel? What can she do? Tell us!” Joe demanded, his heart swelling.

Angel inclined her head toward the plane. “I’ll tell you all about it inside, Joe. We really need to get going. I feel awful about getting Ellie into this mess and scaring Grace half to death.”

“Hey, don’t blame yourself, Angel. We all missed it. I still don’t know how Carlo got involved in all this. From all our research, he has zero connection to anyone who might know who Ellie is.”

She gave them all a devilish grin, and said in a sing-songy tone, “Not *everyone* missed it.” She pointed toward the car window with Ellie’s sleeping face smashed against it.

Joe’s mouth fell open, “Ellie...knew? But—”

Angel stopped him, motioning toward the plane. “Vamos, amigo.”

Rique stepped over to her and kissed her non-swollen cheek. “Take care, Sis. Te amo.”

“Tu, también.”

She returned the kiss, but as she did, something seemed to catch Riq’s eye. He reached toward her throat and lifted a single stone pendant off her shirt. He wrinkled up his nose. “You never wear jewelry. Where’d you get this?”

Angel’s face flushed. She grabbed the stone from around her neck and tore it off. Through gritted teeth, she answered his question, “Carlo.” With a wry smile, she explained, “He said it was a real diamond. Probably lied about that, too.” She took Riq’s hand and dropped the chain and stone into it. Then she closed his fist over it. “Get rid of it. I don’t care what you do with it. Crush it, hock it, give it to one of your lady friends. I don’t care. Just make sure I never see it again.”

“Ange, are you sure?”

“Sure.” Her expression was darker than anything Joe could remember seeing on her before. She turned quickly and walked away, mumbling, “I’m gonna go check with the pilots.” Despite some obvious physical pain, her steps were swift, carrying her up the stairs and into the plane.

Rique’s face began turning rather red. His jaw was clenched as he spoke, “If I *ever* get my hands on that slimy little—” His eyes darted over toward Nadia, and he seemed to think better of finishing his sentence.

Joe laid a hand on his shoulder. “Take it easy, Riq. She’ll be fine. Your sister’s as tough as they come.”

“Well, she shouldn’t have to be. Someday, somebody’s gonna come along and see her for the princess she really is...and treat her like it, too.”

Cooper looked longingly up toward the plane. “I’d be willing to give it a shot.” His dreamy-eyed expression broke the tension, and the other three laughed out loud.

Rique gave him a lopsided grin. “We’ll discuss that on the ride back, Coop.”

“So you won’t come with us, Riq?” Joe knew the answer, but it was always worth a try.

“Sorry, Joe. No go. You know me—glad to help out in a pinch, but otherwise, strictly a solo act. Give Gran a kiss for me, though, will ya?”

Joe nodded, then said, “But hey, can you do me one more favor tonight? Will you drive one of the cars back for us?”

Riq pointed at Nadia. “Can’t she—”

“Nope,” Nadia chimed in cheerfully. “Can’t drive. No license. Joe says it’s in everyone’s best interest.” Cooper snickered behind his hand, and after giving him a dirty look, Nadia went on, “Maybe you could give me a ride home, Riq?” She straightened up, planting a hand on her hip, and looked up at the large man, who was well over a foot taller than her, then batted her eyelashes profusely. Riq looked borderline terrified.

Joe worked to keep a straight face. “Yeah, actually, that would be great, Riq. You know Coop lives

in the other direction...”

“Uh, sure. Glad to,” Riq said, though his face disagreed. “Here, let me get the kid for ya—” Riq moved toward the door where Ellie’s head was propped.

“Nah, thanks, Riq. I got this.” Joe walked around Riq, opened the door carefully, and caught Ellie’s limp body as it tumbled over. Her eyes fluttered open for one second, settling on his face, then dropped closed again. He slid his arms under her and pulled her out of the car, lifting her up and cradling her like a baby. Her head fell against his chest. She certainly wasn’t a baby anymore, in fact, a pretty good weight for a forty-something man to be lifting, but he didn’t care. Ellie’s whole life was about to change, even more dramatically than it already had, and Joe wanted to be the one helping her through it.

Chapter Thirteen: Insomnia

“Doo, you don’t have to stay. It’s almost two in the morning. You must be tired. Go on to bed.”

“Oh, no you don’t, Gracie. You stuck with me and Gilda when we needed you; I’m just returning the favor.” Doo wrapped his arm more tightly around Grace’s shoulder, settling back into one of the leather couches in the farmhouse library.

Granny peered over the top of her glasses from her seat in an old wing-back chair on the other side of the room. She was pretending to study something on her tablet, but was, in actuality, hanging on every word the two of them exchanged. Doo and Grace, who’d a thunk it? Granny smiled to herself, only sorry she hadn’t come up with the idea sooner. What better way to change Grace’s mind about letting Elodie stay at the farm than to give her a reason to stay herself.

Through assiduous but selective spying, and with Rishi’s help, of course, Granny had kept abreast of Grace’s romantic entanglements, or more accurately, lack

thereof, over the many years that Grace had been Ellie's guardian. While she admired Grace's devotion to the child, no one should choose a life without love, as Grace seemed to have done. And, clearly, that choice had caught up to her. The minute she had just a few days free of the constant worry for Ellie's safety, her heart had found another home. Or at least, some other parts of her anatomy had. Granny might be a hopeless romantic, but she wasn't a fool. She'd been a randy young thing herself some decades ago, and she wasn't a completely dried up old prune even now.

All three of them jumped and turned toward the door, as it burst open. Seeing the expectation, and then the disappointment, on their faces, Willow Begonia apologized, "Oh, sorry, folks, it's just me. No sign of our weary travelers yet, but I got a call from Joe asking me to come down and be here when they arrived."

"Why? Did he say? Is there something wrong with Ellie?" Grace swung her head around from questioning Willow to look at Granny. "Elmyra, is there something you're not telling us?"

Granny got up from her chair and walked closer to the couch. "No, dear, there's not. I'm afraid they're keeping me in the dark, too. All I know for sure is that Ellie is just fine. She's sound asleep. Look." Granny turned her tablet to show Doo, Grace, and Willow an image of Ellie, crashed out and covered with a blanket on one of the jet's couches. Grace sat forward, inspecting the image, as though she needed more than Granny's word to believe it. After a moment, she sighed and sank

back against Doo.

Granny hid a grin, then beckoned to Willow to follow her to the other side of the room. They put their heads together over top of a chess and checkers table. “So he really didn’t tell you anything?” she asked Willow.

“No, just that he thought I might be able to help everyone over the hump. Those were his exact words.” Willow shrugged.

“Hmm, all he told me is that he knows what Ellie’s Gift is now, but the little turd wouldn’t tell me.” Willow laughed at Granny’s characterization of her long-time friend, then listened patiently as she went on, “Well, who does he think he is, keeping it a secret? Sheesh, what’s the big deal? We figure out people’s Gifts here every day. I mean, after all, I was the one who first broke the news to him that he was God’s gift to the healing arts.”

Willow gave her that condescending now-now-there-there look, and said, “Gran, I’m sure he has a good reason. Or maybe he wanted to be the one to tell Grace, and he knew if you knew, you couldn’t keep your mouth shut.”

Granny sat up straight, folded her arms across her chest, and glared at the woman. “I hate it when you’re right.”

With that, the library door opened again, and this time, the anticipated faces did appear—Joe, Angel, and Ellie. Grace leaped off the couch and clenched Ellie in a death-grip that could have suffocated the child.

When she finally let go, Ellie looked dizzy from the loss of blood to her brain, so Grace quickly led her to the couch, which Doo had been kind enough and wise enough to vacate. Grace sat them both down together and then turned to Ellie, holding her face in her hands. “Are you all right, honey? I mean, really all right?”

Ellie sounded dazed and still sleepy, but she grinned. “Just peachy, Aunt Grace. Really.” Grace sighed and smushed the girl’s face into her neck, squeezing the life out of her again.

By that time, Granny and Willow had made it to the cozy couch area, as well. “Angel, you look a little worse for the wear,” Granny observed, noting a little swelling around Angel’s eye and tape wrapping her wrist. “Everything okay?”

This remark drew Grace’s attention away from Ellie. “Oh, Angel, thank you. Whatever happened, I know we have you to thank for Ellie’s safety.”

“Wish I could take the credit, but...” Angel was grinning from ear to ear. Clearly, harboring the secret was about to burst her skull.

“For God’s sake, child, spill! Tell us!” Granny blurted her impatience.

Angel and Joe exchanged glances, then he looked right at Granny. “Gran, maybe you should sit down.”

“Whatever for?”

Willow took her by the elbow and gently pointed her toward one of the chairs. “Why don’t we just do as he asks?”

“Fine.” Granny plunked down in the room’s antique rocking chair. “Okay, the old bird’s in the rocker. Now, will you tell me?”

Angel looked at her and then over at Grace and Ellie. “Well, when Grace said I saved Ellie, she was wrong. Ellie saved me. I mean, with her Gift.”

Ellie finally showed some sign of life. She pulled away from Grace and stared at Angel. “Wait, what? I didn’t do anything. All I did was...”

“You knocked the drink out of my hand, Ellie. Why? Do you remember why you did that?”

Ellie spoke slowly, as if it was all coming together in her mind like a jigsaw puzzle. “Because... there was something wrong with it. It was drugged or poisoned or something. I knew it. I just...knew it.”

Joe urged her on, “How did you know, Ellie? What was the clue?”

“Carlo. I could see it. I mean, feel it. I mean, it was like he was telling me. He may as well have been screaming it.” She shook her head in confusion, then looked at all of them. “How did I know? How did I do that?”

“Good heavens!” Everyone’s eyes shifted over to Granny as she let out a little cry. Her hand flew to her mouth, and she jumped up from the rocking chair. She ran over to the couch and plopped down on the other side of Ellie. She bit her lip, swallowed the lump in her throat, and battled back the tears. She lifted her bony hand to Ellie’s face and caressed her cheek.

Ellie gave her an uncomfortable smile, then shot

a sidelong glance back toward her Uncle Joe. She dared to look at Granny again and said, “What?”

Granny gripped Ellie’s chin and looked intently into her eyes. “You’re a Reader, my dear. A Reader.”

“A Reader?”

Granny wanted to explain, but she was losing the fight against her emotions. After she choked out a couple of unintelligible syllables, Angel picked up the slack. She walked over and set her butt down on the coffee table, facing Grace, Ellie, and Granny. She patted Granny’s knee and said quietly, “Granny’s first husband was a Reader. He’s the only one she’s ever found. Ever. Among all the thousands of Gifted people she’s traced and tracked and met.” Granny nodded her assent to Angel’s explanation while continuing to stare at Ellie. She had always known this one would be special.

Angel continued her commentary, “Granny’s told me dozens, hundreds of stories over the years. Stories about different Gifteds and all the things they could do. She told me about Oren, her husband, and how he could see and feel what others were feeling. He saw colors, chica, just like you. Like you told me you were seeing, and I just didn’t get it. And the temperature—” Angel looked at Granny a moment, then back at Ellie. “Oren could sense changes in mood through his body temperature.”

Ellie’s mouth fell open, “Whoa, that’s just what happened to me.” She was starting to look a little wary of the whole thing. Granny nodded at Willow, hoping the wise woman would have something to offer.

“Now, Elodie,” Willow started. “We’re not talking crystal balls or ESP or channeling the other side here...not that there’s anything wrong with those things, but...reading people, or seeing auras, is a bona fide scientific phenomenon. It’s called synesthesia. It’s an unusual collaboration of the synapses in the brain. There are pathways overlapping sight and smell and touch and emotion that occur in most humans, but for you, because you’re Gifted, there are just more of them, or they’re more focused, or more intertwined, or *something*, enabling you to comprehend those connections and actually make use of them.”

Joe finally joined them, settling himself on the couch that sat opposite Ellie and Grace and Granny—and as far from Doo, who was seated on the other end of that couch, as possible. “Has it ever happened before, Ellie? Do you remember knowing what someone was feeling any other times?”

“Oh, yeah. The exact same thing—that black haze and the chilly sensation—with that creepy Aiden kid. That’s how I figured out what was going on at Carlo’s. It was déjà vu all over again.”

Grace butted in, “But that’s not the only time. She’s always done it.” She looked at Ellie. “Honey, you were always telling me you knew what your teachers were going to ask on a test, and you knew who was about to leave their table, and-and...remember that guy?” Grace started to laugh, “The guy in the coffee shop? You knew he was going to come over and flirt with me, and he did.”

Doo chuckled at that, but Ellie said, “Oh, Aunt Grace, that’s totally different.”

“Maybe not,” Willow interjected. “Ellie, you may have been reading people for years without realizing it. But until you started seeing and feeling things that you knew weren’t there, it just seemed normal. You probably thought everybody could do it, right?”

Ellie nodded, and Angel spoke up, “But Willow, how come Ellie only has the auras and the chills and whatever with the bad guys? Why can’t she read anyone else like that?”

Willow shrugged. “Hard to say at this point. Could’ve been fear, heightened emotions, the danger, the necessity...or something she ate that day. Her Gift is still so new. It’s just developing. We don’t know how it will evolve. Like all Gifts, she’ll have to work at it, and learn to manage and control it.”

Granny turned Ellie toward her. “But listen, Ellie. Trust me, it won’t always be scary. Sometimes...it will be rather wonderful. You’ll be able to connect with people in ways others can only dream of.” She closed her eyes, seeing and feeling the connection she once shared with Oren.

“Wait, I-I think I know what you mean.”

“You do?” Granny opened her eyes, surprised.

Ellie nodded and looked over at Angel. “It happens with the good guys, too. I saw that aura thing... around Enrique.”

Simultaneously, Angel and Joe said, “Rique?”

“Yes. That’s how I knew he was okay. When I

saw him in the courtyard, he looked like just another big scary dude. But the light around him—it was beautiful. Bright. Shiny. With lots of colors, like sunlight through a prism. It was magnificent. It made me feel safe. That’s how I knew I could trust him and go with him.”

“Yes, my dear. That’s it exactly.” Granny took Ellie’s hand again and held it tight. She felt closer to Oren at that moment than she had since the day he died so long ago.

###

“You’re a Reader, my dear. A Reader.” Granny’s words kept running through Ellie’s head. How was she supposed to get to sleep, knowing she had this Gift? Aunt Grace had, as usual, broken up the party earlier than anyone wanted to leave, insisting it was too late, and they all needed to get to bed. It was something like three in the morning by then, so maybe she had a point, but Ellie felt wide awake now. She wanted to know everything there was to know about being a Reader. She wanted to hear every story Granny had to tell about her husband Oren. And she couldn’t wait to try out her newfound skill on more people. She would be able to tell what they were feeling, for God’s sake. How freakin’ cool was that? For the first time in her life, Ellie knew she was someone special, and that wasn’t exactly a thought that made her drowsy.

She was laying on her back, surveying her surroundings in the little light afforded by the moon

outside her window. She was in her pretty room on the second floor of the farmhouse, and Aunt Grace was down the hall a ways, with a nice corner room overlooking the pasture. On their second day at the farm, a couple of guys had shown up with boxes containing, as Angel had promised, everything that meant anything to them. Her clothes, her books, her computer, pictures of her parents, even her stuffed animals, including Josephina, a beloved stuffed pig she'd had as long as she could remember. With all of that around her, budding friendships in the works, and Uncle Joe back in her life, this place already felt like home. Now, the only question was—would Aunt Grace let her stay?

Oooh. Ellie's tummy made an uncomfortable growling noise. Angel had told her something about how using a Gift would make people really hungry and really tired, especially in the beginning, when they were first learning. Something about hypermetabolism. She wondered what the consequences might be if she snuck down into Chef Ren's kitchen for a snack.

Since sleep was elusive anyway, Ellie decided to give it a shot. She got up and headed to the bathroom for her robe. As she pulled open the bathroom door, though, she saw a sliver of light across the floor, and noticed that the door to Angel's room was slightly ajar. Angel was still up? Yes, she was; Ellie could hear her talking or listening to music or, no, that wasn't it. That was the sound of...crying. Ellie paused. She wasn't sure what to do. This wasn't something she had a lot of experience with. Back in their house in Atlanta, Ellie was the only

one who ever cried, and Aunt Grace did all the comforting and bucking up. Should she ignore it and pretend she never heard it? Should she go in? Should she knock? Or would Angel be mortified? Still undecided, she went ahead and grabbed her robe and pulled it on. In the process, she managed to knock her hairbrush on the floor, making a nice loud rattle and bang sound.

A little gasp came from the other side of Angel's door, and then a throat-clearing sound. "Ellie? Chica, is that you?"

Okay, no choice now. Ellie stepped to the door and pushed it open. "Uh, yeah, Angel, it's me."

Angel was sitting on her bed in black sweat pants and a loose black tee shirt, with a bunch of papers spread out in front of her. She quickly turned her head away and brought both hands to her face, trying to hide the fact that she was wiping away tears. She looked back at Ellie and pasted on a smile. "Hey, what's got you up so late?"

Ellie walked over to the bed uninvited and sat down on it. She looked at Angel's face. There was mascara streaked down one cheek and black smudges under both eyes. Her nose and cheeks were red and blotchy. That she thought Ellie would *not* know she'd been crying was almost comical. Ellie reached out and laid her hand on top of Angel's. "Why so sad?"

Angel sniffled, lowering her head to avoid eye contact, and mumbled, "I'm not sad. I'm really pissed. I hate him!" She smashed her hand through the pile of papers and finally looked up. "That stupid jerk actually

made me believe he loved me. I wasn't even sure how I felt about him, but I was sure how he felt about me. He fooled me, El. He fooled me good. I thought I was so smart. I always thought *I* could read people, ya know? Because, in a fight, I can. I always know what they're thinking. I know where the next punch is going, when they're gonna kick, when they're gonna duck. That's why I can beat them, beat them all. But not Carlo."

She grabbed a handful of the papers and held them up. "You know what these are? Love letters. Yeah, seriously. Love letters. Who the hell writes love letters nowadays? He wrote me all the time, every day, even when I couldn't be in contact because we were on some kind of a mission. He sucked me in." She looked up in her head. "I'm such a sap."

Ellie picked up one of the letters. Indeed, it was sweet and syrupy and dripping with declarations of love and devotion...and horrendous spelling. She picked up more of them and held them in her hands, remembering all that she'd seen and felt when she was in Carlo's presence. She looked at Angel's war-torn face and slowly shook her head. "No, Angel, you're not a sap. Whatever Carlo did and whyever he did it, I'm not sure, but I do know this—he loved you. That part was real."

Angel gave her an exasperated look. "Chica, what part of the last twenty-four hours did you not get? Carlo lied to me, about everything, from the moment we met. He's a way better actor than anyone's given him credit for being. I was totally deluded. Me!" Her tone became sarcastic, "Angel Espinoza, The World's Greatest

Defender. Ha! What a joke.”

“It’s not a joke, Angel. I’m telling you—he only fooled you, because he wasn’t fooling. He was sincere... at least about that.” Angel was quiet, but her expression demanded elaboration. “I saw it. I felt it. In the restaurant. In his apartment.” Ellie raised her eyebrows. “Especially in the kitchen. Hoo boy, did I feel it. You guys were about to burn the place down.”

Angel shook her head. “I don’t understand...”

“I didn’t just know that he was lying or that the drinks were bad. I felt *everything* he was feeling, Angel. His feelings for you—maybe love is the wrong word. It was more like...passion. Whenever he got close to you, it was like burning, sizzling, fiery desire.”

Angel sat back a little, appearing surprised and perhaps a bit embarrassed. “Wow. I mean that’s kinda how it felt to me, too, being around him. He’s definitely a very...passionate person.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, that part was real, and you *are* the most awesome Defender ever, so please don’t be so sad.”

“I told you, I’m not sad!”

Ellie widened her eyes and felt her jaw go slack. There was a shimmer around Angel now. It was bright, sparkly, like Rique’s, but shrouded in blue. “Yes, you are sad,” she said. “I can see it, and, oh man, I can feel it, too.” Ellie’s throat tightened up. Tears were welling in her eyes. “This is awful. What a horrible feeling.” She stared at Angel, feeling overwhelmed with sadness.

“Oh God, El, I’m sorry. I don’t want you to feel

this. C'mon!" Angel leaped off the bed, grabbing Ellie's arm.

Ellie stumbled after her. "Where we goin'?"

"Kitchen."

"And that's gonna help?"

"Oh yeah." Angel stopped and looked back at her. "I know where Chef Ren keeps the chocolate."

###

"Ellie? What are you doing?"

What was that?! Joe sat straight up in bed. He was dead tired and really confused, but he'd heard something. Something about Ellie. And alarm bells had gone off. He shook his head out and looked around. Okay, yeah, he was in his bedroom at home, on the farm. The bedside clock said it was half-past four in the morning, and it was perfectly dark and quiet. Must've been a dream. He dropped back down on his pillows. Was this what it was like to be a parent? To be constantly worrying about your child, even when there was nothing to worry about? He sighed and rolled onto his side, facing the door of the room, and let his eyes close again.

"Joe?"

The voice was soft, gentle, and timid. Definitely a woman. He was hoping it was the start of a nice dream.

"Joe, are you awake?"

That didn't sound very dreamy. The door creaked as it was pushed open. Joe opened one eye. Through the grayness, he could see a head peering

around the door. “Grace, is that you?” He sat up again. “I’m awake. What is it? Is everything okay? Is it Ellie?”

She stepped inside, and pushed the door closed behind her. She was wrapped in a thin, faded, flowery bath robe, and her hair was hanging free, wavy and disheveled. Fuzzy slippers completed the ensemble. “Yeah, it’s me, Joe. Nothing’s wrong. Ellie’s fine. I just saw her and Angel going down to raid the kitchen.”

Joe laughed, then yawned loudly and ran a hand through his hair. “So...four-thirty’s a bit early, Grace, even for you...”

“Uh, yeah, sorry about that. I know how tired you must be, but I couldn’t sleep.”

She sounded stressed. He reached over and turned on the small bedside lamp, then tossed back the covers and swung his legs over the side. The hardwood floor felt cool to his bare feet. “Don’t worry about it, honey. What’s wrong?” Instead of answering, she turned abruptly to the side, averting her eyes. Oh, geez. He stood up, grabbed a wrinkled tee shirt off the chair near his bed and pulled it over his head. Good thing he slept in pajama pants, or she’d really be embarrassed.

He stepped closer to her, put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. “Tell me, Gracie. What’s on your mind?”

She took a deep breath and looked directly at him. Her brown eyes looked almost black in the low light. “I had some time to think while you were all in Washington. Joe, you were right. You’ve been right about everything, all along. I mean, even back in the day

—when Lucy sent you away. She shouldn't have done that.”

Hmm. Not that he disagreed, but what brought this subject up after so many years? “She had her reasons, Grace. I understood. Two father figures...it was confusing for Ellie.” He shrugged.

Grace raised an eyebrow. “It was confusing for Lucy.”

Joe raised both eyebrows. “Oh?”

She pushed his hands off her shoulders and turned away, pretending to study the handmade doily on his bedside table. “Never mind. Forget I said that. The point is...” She turned back around. “Ellie needs you now. She needs you and Granny and Willow and Angel. Especially Angel. You guys can do things for her that I never could, not the least of which is keeping her safe.” Grace sighed deeply and sunk down on the side of his bed. “I guess down deep somewhere I thought, I hoped, that her Gift would never manifest. That we two would just go on living our lives together, like normal people. Ellie would go to college and get a job and get married and none of this...” She waved her hand in the air, apparently indicating the whole Gifted world, “...would ever be a part of her existence.” She looked up at him again. “I just wanted her to be happy.”

Joe gave her a wry smile and sat down next to her. “You think a Gifted person can't be happy?”

“No, I don't think that. It's just...the track record of the ones I've known has been, well, rather tragic.”

“Gracie—”

“C’mon, Joe, be honest. Are you really happy?”

He bristled. “That’s not fair. I’ve made mistakes. Bad choices. And I’ve had to live with that. If I’m not as happy as I could be, it’s my fault, not the fault of my genes.”

She took his hand. “A lot of people made a lot of mistakes. You don’t know...” He wrinkled his brow, wanting to ask what she meant, but she didn’t allow it. She shook her head and went on, “I want to fix one of them right now.” His heart surged, praying he’d hear what he wanted to hear. “If it’s all right with you, I’d like to stay. Me and Ellie. At least for a while.”

“If it’s all right?” He turned toward her and grabbed her by the shoulders, letting a broad smile cross his face. “You *know* it’s all right! You know how much I want you to stay. Both of you.” Did she have any idea how happy she’d made him?

She grinned then, too, showing him that yeah, maybe she did know. His exuberance snuck up on him, and, without really thinking about it, he pulled her close and kissed her, just like a friend-kiss or a brother-kiss. Except not. Because those kinds of kisses don’t make you feel woozy and dizzy and send little shock waves shooting through your belly like that one had. Grace gasped in response, and he pulled back as quickly as he’d gone in. Oh crap. What had he done? He jumped up from the bed like it was on fire. “Er, um, sorry about that, Gracie. Just got a little excited. I mean, uh...” He grimaced.

She gave him a look that rolled shock, horror, and bewilderment all into one. Then she pushed herself up from the bed. “Um, that’s okay, Joe. No...big deal...” She stepped carefully around him and made her way back toward the door of his bedroom. “You should probably get back to sleep now. You’re obviously over-tired.”

“Yeah, good idea.”

She gave him a little wave as she pulled the door closed, looking a bit concerned about his mental state. He gave her a wave back, then collapsed onto his bed. Nice work, Joe. What the heck was *that* all about?

###

Enrique Espinoza could have waited until morning to clean up the mess that his lovely guest from Monaco had left behind, but after living a good bit of his childhood on filthy city streets, he had found, as an adult, that he had limited tolerance for dishes in the sink, laundry on the floor, overfull trash cans, or bathtub rings, so he certainly wasn’t going to sleep well with shards of broken ceramics on his bedroom floor. By the time he’d driven Nadia home, barely escaping with his virtue intact, returned here to sweep up the smashed curios and dispatch the half-empty wine bottle and glasses, and then taken a long, hot shower, he was able to see the first trickle of pink creeping around the edges of the window shade. The alarm was set for seven-thirty, and he really wasn’t sure it would be worth the trouble to lie down.

As he stood next to the bed, contemplating the value of two hours of sleep, a sparkle caught his eye. The trickle of sunlight was dancing crazily along the baseboard near his closet, tossing a spray of colors onto the hardwood. He walked back over there and bent down. Oh yeah, the necklace. It must've fallen out of his pocket when he was undressing. He picked it up and held it so that a narrow stream of light passed directly through the stone. Immediately, his bedroom wall was covered with a million miniature rainbows. Huh. Maybe the thing was a real diamond. He decided not to "get rid of it", as Angel had insisted, but instead, to hang on to it, if for no other reason than he would love to shove it down Carlo's throat should he ever have the misfortune of seeing the little punk again.

Enrique closed his fist over the stone and then closed his eyes. He breathed deeply, in and out, per Angel's careful instruction. Her voice played in his head, "Staying in control of those raging emotions is the key to being an effective Defender," or so she never stopped reminding him. When he had successfully quashed the animalistic urge, he carried the necklace over to his dresser and dropped it into a pretty blown-glass keepsake dish that one of the kids at the farm had made for him. Then he stumbled back to the bed and flopped onto it, staring at the ceiling.

###

In a different part of town, another man was

staring at his ceiling.

Lightly sweating and with his heart still racing, Archer Orucov threw back the covers and sat up on the side of his bed. He'd tried everything, from sleeping pills to acupuncture to herbal teas, but the one thing he could never shake were his nightmares. They'd be gone for months at a time, and then, bam, out of the blue, they'd return to torture him yet again. Although this time, he suspected it was hardly out of the blue. Obviously, coming so close to having Elodie had stirred the pot. Those haunting images of her mother's face, terror and tears, shock and horror, would come rushing into his dreams and rattle him to his core. He just wanted to remember her as she once was—sensual and playful and so, so keen of mind.

He slid his hand across his balding crown, and then, not wanting to wake Kumika, he picked up his silken robe and slipped out into the sitting room. He fastened the sash around his waist as he walked over to the first set of French doors. Drawing back the curtains, he stepped out onto the narrow balcony. The sun was just coming up over the Tidal Basin, and the cherry blossoms, in full bloom, were spectacular against the pink and purple sky. Whatever else one might say about Washington, D.C., it was a well-planned city, and from the right places, there were breathtaking views. The Tai Pan Suite on the twelfth floor of the Mandarin Hotel was one of those places.

Archer sucked the chilly morning air into his lungs. It was powerful, powerful enough to clear out

those cobwebs and allow him to focus on the future. A younger man might have been distressed by how things had turned out, but not Archer. With maturity had come the gifts of wisdom and patience. These were not genetic Gifts, like his scientific genius, but rather, gifts that came only through life experience—the good and the bad. He had made mistakes in his youth, the kind of rash decisions that one can only regret and hope to learn from, and never expect to be forgiven. But those mistakes had been invaluable; from them, he had learned that everything happens for a reason. Every misstep is a chance for improvement. Every failure is an opportunity. And so it would be this time.

Elodie was no one's plaything. She was not an oaf to be outwitted, nor a possession to be taken by brute force. He should have seen that. His experiences with her mother should have taught him that. He felt foolish for not applying those early lessons with the child. No, if he wanted Elodie in his life, if he wanted to make her part of his world, or—dare he think it?—an heir to his throne, then he needed an altogether different approach. Elodie would have to want it for herself. She would have to be made to understand how powerful she was, and all that she could do with that power. This was Archer's task, this was what he needed to be planning: to bring the gift of desire to his little freckle-faced prodigy.

“Archer? Where are you?”

Kumika's voice drifted out through the open balcony doors, bringing him back to reality. He stepped back inside and closed the doors. “Here I am, my dear. I

was just getting a little fresh air. I hope I didn't wake you." He walked back into the bedroom and stood next to the bed.

She slid herself toward the middle of the bed, inviting him in. "You had the doors open? No wonder it's so cold in here." She propped herself up on one elbow and reached for him with the other arm. "Come back to bed and warm me up."

He took her hand, but resisted her pull. "Kumi, I have so much to do today, so much to plan. And we're supposed to pick up Aiden—"

She looked up at him with her signature black-eyed stare and pouted, "But, Archer, you've been a madman all week. You need to relax and have some fun. Even Genghis Khan took a day off now and then."

The backhanded compliment was enough to pull an uncharacteristic belly laugh out of Archer. "You flatter me, Kumika. But perhaps you're right." He dropped his robe to the floor and climbed in beside her. He ran his hand down the length of her angular frame, appreciating every inch of her taut flesh. "Perhaps today, we should stay inside and recharge our batteries." He rolled onto his back and reached for the bedside phone. "I'll call room service."

"Not yet." She crawled up on top of him, pulling his hand away from the phone. She pushed herself up so she was straddling him, then yanked the silky nightgown up over her head, tossing it back behind her somewhere.

Yes, Archer had learned many lessons in his life, and he knew the importance of heeding them. Not the

least of these was that a strong leader surrounds himself with wise counsel. And another was that all work and no play made Archer Orucov a very dull man.

The End, Book One

Author/Publisher

Message from the Author

Thank you for reading *The Gifted Ones: A Reader*. If you had fun getting to know this unusual group of people, you'll enjoy their next adventure where a Gifted Native American man uncovers a mysterious artifact on tribal property. Pick up the second volume in the series, [*The Gifted Ones: A Learner*](#) from your favorite bookseller.

If you would like to be notified of new releases, please sign up [here](#), and you will be the first to know when new episodes are available.

Also, if you enjoyed the book, please [leave a review](#) or tell your friends, or Facebook or Tweet about it. Reviews don't have to be long, complex, or eloquent. Just give your honest, spur-of-the-moment reaction. Your review helps other readers find books they will enjoy.

If you'd like to learn more about me and my work, please visit my website, MariaRomana.com. You can also contact me directly through the contact page on the site.

Current Titles:

The Gifted Ones Series

[The Gifted Ones](#) is an episodic series, with each book running 60,000 to 90,000 words in length (250 to 350 paperback pages). Each episode is a complete story in itself, but leaves “dangling threads” to be resolved in later episodes. The stories are chronological and connected with recurring characters, so you will want to read them in order, similar to many action/adventure/mystery series on television.

[The Gifted Ones: A Reader](#) is the first book in the series and follows Elodie Eggleston's introduction to the Gifted Ones. Elodie is nerdy, awkward, and shy—just like a lot of other teenage girls. Or so her overprotective Aunt Grace would have her believe. But a frightening encounter with the handsome new boy in town starts Ellie on a path to uncovering her true identity and a certain genetic gift she never knew she had. In less than twenty-four hours, Ellie and her aunt are whisked away from their staid city life to a mysterious mountain retreat...where nothing and no one is quite what they seem. At first, Ellie embraces this enchanting new world and her new, Gifted friends and can't understand why Aunt Grace is so anxious to leave, but soon, Ellie learns

that “special” isn’t always better, and sometimes, it means running for your life.

In Book 2, [The Gifted Ones: A Learner](#), Daniel Holybear, a Native American Gifted One, finds himself at odds with a development company that is threatening the peaceful seaside town he grew up in. When the company’s construction project unearths a mysterious stone tablet, Daniel calls on his Gifted friends to help secure the stone and uncover its secrets. Their efforts to assist him, however, are complicated by a peculiar kinship Ellie senses between Daniel and the project’s lovely manager. As the relationship deepens, Ellie finds her Gift bringing more pain than pleasure to those around her, and ultimately leading one of them to the brink of tragedy.

The Unbreakable Series

If you’re a fan of medical mysteries or romantic suspense novels, you will enjoy Maria Elizabeth Romana’s *Unbreakable* series, a 2010 Readers Favorite Gold Medal Award Winner, consisting of [Little Miss Straight Lace](#), [Little Girl Lost](#), and [Daddy’s Little Girls](#).

Synopsis: When a dedicated researcher learns a bit too much about her client’s new drug, the horrors from her past seem destined to return. As her life begins to spin out of control, a dashing computer security expert arrives from South America and seems the perfect antidote. But is his sudden appearance just the happy coincidence it

seems? Find out in this series of novels which combine romance, mystery, and suspense to take the reader on a roller coaster ride of murder, mayhem, sex, and drugs—of the pharmaceutical variety, of course—until the very last page.

“Romana’s characters are portrayed with skill, each is a credible person filled with foibles, warts and gaffes...the various twists and turns are handled with skill, are easily followed, and add depth and dimension often lacking in works provided by newer writers...Maria Romana’s Little Miss Straight Lace is a fast paced, keep ’em guessing and turning the page type read sure to intrigue readers who enjoy good writing, a bit of romance, a lot of action, and a downright good read.”

—Molly Martin, [Midwest Book Review](#)

Book Sample:

Josie pulled her laptop toward her, but peered out the corner of her eye. Damn it! They were sitting right up at the bar. Probably waiting for a table for dinner. Six o’clock, too. Why didn’t they make reservations? Losers. She watched Gary shift in his seat, opening his view to the room. Then, as he glanced around, acting casual, he caught her eye and grinned ever so slightly. A twinge poked in her belly. She quickly shifted her focus back to her laptop. *Ignore him, Josie. Your club, your friends, not his.*

“Jos!”

She looked up. It was Shawn, grinning from ear to ear. She grinned back. “So...did you work it out?”

“Better.” He plunked down in his seat and picked up his wine. “Guy was kissing my ass.” He tossed back the last of his glass. Josie leaned in to hear the scoop, but before Shawn could say any more, they were interrupted.

“Shawn, Josie, how are you two?”

Shawn answered for both of them, “Gary. Is there something we can do for you? Josie and I are in the middle of a very important meeting.”

Gary brushed the top of their empty wine bottle with his thumb. “Looks like it.” He turned to Josie. “Shawn tells me you’re just back from a little vacation with your boyfriend. I was kind of hoping I might get to meet him. Oscar says he’s a real swell guy. Nic, right? Not gone to South America again, is he?”

Pins and needles started pricking the back of her neck. Why was Gary asking about Nic? How was it he cared enough to remember Nic’s name and where he was from? An image flashed in her mind of the day at the airport, of Gary watching Nic load his bags in the trunk of the car. Was he going to do something to Nic? Try to get back at her by hurting him? Not while she was alive! Josie looked up and faced Goldman as she hadn’t before. Stupid sardonic grin. Ice cold green eyes—

nothing like Daddy's. She looked Gary in the eye and answered him, "None of your damn business."

Both Shawn's and Gary's eyebrows shot up. After a second, Gary recovered and reached out toward her, running his finger along the top edge of her computer. "Well now, that wasn't very friendly."

Not very friendly, is she? Three guys standing around her and one behind—surrounded!

Huh? What was that? What was she thinking of? Josie felt the color draining from her face.

Before anyone could say anything else, Gina reappeared at the table. "Josie, hun, sorry to interrupt, but would you taste test these for me? New recipe I'm trying. It's called chocolate covered golden hearts. See, it's these little flaky pastries with a layer of..."

But Josie wasn't listening. Chocolate covered golden hearts. Chocolate covered. Chocolate covers. Gold hearts. Josie could see it—a bed with a chocolate brown coverlet. Windows with chocolate brown drapes. A bathroom with chocolate brown towels. All with gold accents. Where? When? And Gary Goldman. Huh? Why was all this crap floating around in her head today?

"Josie? Will you, hun? Will you try them for me?"

She tried to focus on Gina's face and her pretty red hair, but Gina was standing right next to

Gary, who was still grinning his stupid grin and no doubt seeing the confusion on Josie's face. The voices in the room were pulling away, sounding distant. Someone had lowered the lights. And turned up the thermostat.

“Jos, you okay?” Shawn's voice.

“What is your name? Where do you live? Do you know who I am?” Gary's voice. But the words didn't match his lips. How was he asking that? *Why* was he asking that?

“Doctor, should I increase the dose now?” Gina's voice. But her lips weren't moving at all. And why would she call him doctor? Well, he was a doctor—of finance, right? But Gina didn't know that.

The room was getting darker still, and the voices in it further and further away. Crap—she was losing it. No, no, no. Not now. Not right in front of world's biggest jackass. Not right after she'd finally stood up to him. Josie pushed herself up from the table. *Just need to get out of here, get some fresh air.* She backed away from the table, knocking her chair down as she went, and ran toward the veranda door.

The Birds Christmas Carol

This illustrated edition of [*The Birds Christmas Carol*](#) is a remastering of the 1912 version of the timeless

Christmas classic, originally written by Kate Douglas Wiggin in 1886. It tells the story of Carol Bird, a wealthy but sickly young girl, who decides to bring the joy of Christmas to a neighboring family with nine children who have very little but each other. Despite its serious undercurrents, the story is lively and even comedic at times, as Carol endeavors to pull the holiday celebration together from her sickbed, while the Ruggles children struggle to learn how to behave in “fine society”.

The ebook version of *Birds* contains more than 30 original illustrations by accomplished artist Katharine R. Wireman. The book’s text has also been modestly rewritten to eliminate antiquated terms and writing conventions, making it more accessible to young readers, while preserving the charm and flavor of Ms. Wiggin’s original tale. Children and adults alike will fall in love with this story and want to read it year after year.

Food, Glorious Food: The eBook Carb & Calorie Counter

[*Food, Glorious Food*](#) is a comprehensive guide to nutrient values for more than 12,000 natural, packaged, and restaurant foods. Unlike other food count books, however, the information has been specifically formatted for ebook readers. Rather than squeezing numbers into narrow rows and columns, each entry is presented in the familiar nutrition label format, with resizable font and reflowable text. The book is easily searchable with with

active links and multi-layered indexes.

Features:

- Nutrition label format
- All the nutrient counts you need: calories, fats, protein, and carbohydrates, including fiber, sugar, and “net carbs”, cholesterol, and sodium
- Active (clickable) Table of Contents, Main Index, and Chapter Indexes
- Multiple serving sizes for most foods
- Weights and measures in both US and metric formats (ounces/grams and fluid ounces/millilitres)
- Fully searchable with you ereader’s search function

About the Contributors

Story Author: Maria Elizabeth Romana has a background in research statistics, with experience in psycho-social, pharmaceutical, and marketing research. She also spent six years as a volunteer and board member at the Women’s Center in Durham, NC. She has published articles on several websites and has two book series out. Her educational background includes degrees in mathematics and business. Maria lives in the Research Triangle region of North Carolina with her husband and

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Publisher: Research Triangle Publications is a small, independent press, specializing in works by authors local to the Research Triangle region of North Carolina. RT Pubs was formed in early 2010 as a wholly owned subsidiary of At Your Command Computing, Inc., a data analysis and software services company, established in 1995. The company currently has nine titles available, focusing on both fiction and non-fiction that reflects the scientific and analytic backdrop of this unique part of North Carolina. You can reach us through the [Research Triangle Publications](#) website.

The End