

MIDNIGHT FIRE BOOK ONE



# IGNITE

KAITLYN DAVIS

**Ignite**  
**Midnight Fire Book One**



**By**  
**Kaitlyn Davis**

eBook Edition

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The Shadow Soul  
The Spirit Heir  
The Phoenix Born  
Leena's Story – The Novellas

To my family for their unconditional love,  
my friends for their overwhelming support,  
and my fans for their incredible enthusiasm.  
Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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## Prologue



Kira watched as he languidly stood, flexing his muscles as though he had just awakened from a long dream. He stretched his arms over his head and cracked the bones in his neck before finally settling his gaze on her. She hardly recognized him, the boy she had fallen in love with. Where minutes before there had been light and emotion in his eyes, now there was only a black hole, a seemingly endless abyss. Kira had never seen him look at her that way, like less than food, like vermin, even since the first time they met.

"Aren't you going to run?" he asked with sinister humor coloring his words. The smirk on his face may as well have been a knife cutting through her heart. The darkness had always called him, but Kira thought that being with her would be enough to keep him from crossing over. She saw now that he had surrendered to his nature, and for the first time, she felt real fear when he looked at her.

Kira stepped backward on shaky feet, trying to digest the question. She didn't have an answer. How could she turn her back on him and run away? The man she loved was trying to kill her. There were no options. Could she forget it all—all the nights they had shared kissing and swapping secrets—and fight to kill? Or would she run and admit that there was no hope he would return to her?

Kira said his name and reached out her hand, searching one last time for the man she had lost.

"Yes, honey?" The words hit her like a slap in the face as they rolled off his tongue, drenched in sarcasm.

Kira looked up at the sun, still hidden behind the shadow of the moon, and sprinted into the tree line behind her. She couldn't give up on him now. But when the eclipse was over, maybe she would finally find the strength to fight.





## Chapter One



As Kira waited in line for a parking spot, she studied the sprawling two-story building that took up her entire line of vision. A stone engraving read "Charleston County High School" and Kira sighed at the daunting brick walls before her. Already she could tell it had a layout much different from the private school she had attended in New York, with numerous buildings sandwiched between corporate skyscrapers and spread out over a few city blocks. The students wandered here at a pace much different from the bustle she had grown used to during the past five years spent at the boarding school that she had begged her parents to attend. But last year her father had been laid off, and Kira knew she would be back home for her senior year.

Her family had lived in Charleston for about four years, but Kira had never met anyone during her summers home. This would be new for her—a huge school that she would definitely get lost in and tons of people who had probably never even heard of The Met.

A car honked behind her, and Kira continued moving at a slow pace down the parking lot as students took turns swinging trucks into super-sized, yellow-lined spaces. As she took her turn pulling the eco-friendly car her parents loved into a spot, she knew she wouldn't quite fit in here. Kira looked to her left at the person sitting in the passenger seat of a pickup truck, a full two feet above her, and felt as tiny and invisible as she probably seemed to him.

*But enough*, she thought, straightening her shoulders.

Kira hated self-pity more than anything, so she grabbed her shoulder bag and made for the front door with the rest of the crowd. She did give Charleston one thing, the smell of marsh and pine was a heck of a lot better than that of car exhaust and garbage.

"Name?" the secretary asked as Kira entered the main office for her

schedule.

"Kira Dawson."

"Year?"

"Senior." Kira ran her hands down the sides of her royal blue sundress, smoothing out the wrinkles to make a good impression on her new classmates.

"Here you go, honey."

She took the folder and pulled out a schedule. Advanced Calculus, room 253C. Kira walked out to the hallway and looked around for a sign, anything to point her in the right direction, but saw only bare brick walls. After a few minutes, someone finally took pity on her.

"Are you new?" A handsome blond guy with a lanky build stood behind her looking over her shoulder at the paper. "Oh, 253C, not an easy walk from here. Come on, I'm next door to you." She followed, having no real other choice. "So you are new, right, or have my great looks made you speechless?"

*Damn*, Kira thought, hating to be called out. Time to prove she wasn't a wallflower. "Yeah I'm new, and what good looks? You're so tall I can't even see your face."

"Touché." He studied her for a moment, and Kira finally got a good look at his face, which she had to admit wasn't too shabby. He had wispy hair the color of summer corn, a slightly crooked nose spotted with light-brown freckles, and a wide, friendly smile full of perfectly white teeth. There was something about his eyes, green with flecks of yellow, which she found familiar and almost comforting.

"I'm Luke Bowrey." He extended his hand, naturally tanned from a summer in the South, and she shook it.

"Kira Dawson. Nice to meet you, and thanks for the help."

"Not a problem. When I see a damsel in distress I just can't help but act the knight in shining armor."

She laughed despite herself. Kira knew he was cocky, but she also instantly knew they could be friends.

"Here's your stop. Hope to see you later," he said and rushed into the classroom next door right as the bell rang.

She hurried to do the same and quickly sat in the first seat she could find. The math was easier than she was used to, as were chemistry, biology, and Spanish. Her morning passed smoothly as she followed people from classroom to classroom and eventually into the cafeteria big enough to hold all fifteen hundred students at the school.

Kira had packed her lunch, so she made her way down the rows of tables, searching for an open seat in a friendly crowd, almost giving up until a huge hand landed on her shoulder.

"Need saving again?"

She smiled to herself—it was Luke coming to the rescue once more. "I wouldn't mind it."

He nodded to the left and she followed him to one of the smaller tables where two boys and another girl sat. "Everyone, this is Kira. Kira, this is everyone."

The girl rolled her eyes, pointing an exasperated look at Luke.

"Luke, truly amazing introduction," the slightly goofy looking boy with shaggy brown hair and black-rimmed glasses said, and extended his hand. "Hey Kira, I'm Miles, this is Emma and that's Dave." He pointed to the girl—who had dyed blonde hair, more makeup on than Kira was capable of applying, and was wearing Lily Pulitzer—and the boy—who had one tanned arm around her chair back and was sporting a baseball cap for the Dallas Cowboys. "We all moved here last winter, but thanks to you we're no longer the new kids. Not much change happens here. I think five students in one year must be a school record."

"Wow, so everyone is pretty set in their ways then?" Kira adjusted the curly red ringlet falling over her eyes, slightly nervous in front of this new crowd. "Good thing I found you guys, or good thing I looked lost enough that Luke felt some pity for me."

"We would have found you eventually," Emma added. "We're some of the

only kids not here since birth and probably the only ones not here since middle school, so it was almost inevitable that we'd adopt the new kid and not upset the balance."

"The balance?" Kira asked, a little confused. Her school in New York had been a constantly changing atmosphere with girls dressed in anything from Gucci to Forever 21 to leggings with holes in them from a flea market.

"It's like this..." Luke put an arm around Kira's shoulder and steered her gaze to the left side of the large, open room. "First, the cafeteria is divided into four with freshman in the front near the grotesque processed food smell, and older kids filling in the back until you get to the seniors around us who have the best window view of the lake and the biggest tables. Then, each year is divided into your standard groups. The jocks have a table." He pointed to the corner that was a sea of blue jerseys full of boys and girls in uniforms. "Next are the football players and the cheerleaders who fawn on them, the next table over is the just plain popular because of good looks and in rare cases a stellar attitude. In the middle are the average uncategorized and the most down to earth people you'll meet. And finally, rounding out the senior class, we have the drama nerds mixed with the emos, because who really can tell the difference there."

She stared at the groups, sort of seeing the distinction in clothes and stature, black leotard looking garments versus regular jeans and a T-shirt or pompoms, but not totally understanding it. She wasn't used to groups, except for rich and scholarship, which had been the only divide at her private school. But even then, it was sometimes hard to tell just from looks, because the wealthiest students would come to school wearing oversized sweaters with moth holes, and the poorest students might spend a month's income on one dress.

"Luke, you forgot the misfits," Miles added and turned his head out the window.

"Meaning us?" Kira asked, certainly feeling like this motley little group didn't fit into any of the categories Luke had mentioned.

"Nah, we're still the newbies, those are the misfits. Don't know how I

forgot." Luke turned Kira toward the tables outside where three boys and a girl were lounging—all pale despite their position in the sun. "They sort of keep to themselves."

"Why?"

"Don't know. I don't really know anything about them actually."

Luke sounded as though he was holding something back, but Kira had only known him for three hours and didn't want to accuse him of lying, especially after all he had done. She looked outside for a moment longer, and even through the glass, she could tell there was something different about them. It was more than the distinction between a jock and a drama nerd—it was something almost tangible. But whatever it was, she wasn't going to harp on it now. She had friends to make.

"So, where are you guys all from?" Kira asked while sliding into one of the open chairs circling the table.

Dave just pointed to his hat. Kira guessed he was the silent type.

"He means Dallas," Emma supplied. "I am too. We never knew each other before moving here, isn't that funny. I mean, he went to my rival school, so not that surprising, but still, it's pretty crazy."

"Fate?" Kira said, knowing it was the confirmation Emma searched for and guessing Dave would keep silent.

"Yup, that's what I like to believe." They smiled at each other.

The silence from Dave was something she would get used to, Kira decided, hoping she would eventually become friends with both of them. Especially Emma. She liked her perfectly styled hair, manicured nails, and carefully applied makeup. That sort of knowledge would definitely come in handy in the future, maybe before her next date.

"Well, I'm a northerner all the way," Miles interjected. "Or I was until my parents moved down here. I lived in Boston and will hopefully be back in Cambridge in no time."

Kira smiled because Miles definitely looked like the Harvard type, with

the pile of books next to his lunch. But she felt a little edge to him too.

"And now, my turn." Luke adopted his theatrical voice again. "I, dear lady, am from the far reaches of, drum roll please..." He supplied his own when the only response was rolled eyes. "Florida, the sunshine state with glorious beaches, Walt Disney World, and a small town in the middle of nowhere called Sonnyville where I was born and raised."

"Wait, you're from a small town?" Kira sputtered, almost spitting out her drink.

"I get that a lot, but why, I don't understand."

"I don't mean any offense, it's just that your personality is so..." Kira moved her hands in a wide circle searching for the appropriate word.

"Charming?" Luke supplied.

"I think she means big," Miles chipped in, and Luke sat down with a nod of defeat. But Kira just assumed it was more playing around, so she quickly agreed with Miles and smiled.

"You know, I just love your hair." Emma grabbed at Kira's curly mess. "Do you dye it?"

"Nope, unfortunately it's just what I was born with." Kira self-consciously put a hand to her head. She had always felt weird about her hair. It was a curly mess of bright red and almost white blonde strands that mixed to create a sort of strawberry blonde with a punch.

"Well, I'm jealous. I wish I had such natural volume, and guys go crazy for a red head."

"Enough guys already go crazy for you," Dave finally spoke up, pulling Emma tighter into the crook of his arm.

*Ah, the jealous type,* Kira thought.

Luke took a strand of her hair and wrapped the natural curl around his pointer finger. He stared at it intently, almost as if he were in a trance, and Kira stared at him, stuck.

"Luke, creepy much?" Emma chimed in. Luke dropped the curl

immediately, and he and Kira both turned toward Emma. "Whoa, Luke, Kira has your psycho eyes."

"Really? Look at me," Miles asked with a curious expression. "Whoa," was all he said when they looked over.

"Let me see." Luke gently held Kira's chin so she looked into his eyes.

The moment their gazes touched, she realized why his eyes were so comforting before—she had never seen anyone with irises quite like hers. They were barely green on the outer rim, but that hue was quickly overtaken by a yellow tint with red and orange specks that almost looked like fire. Most people were weirded out by it, but she liked that she wouldn't be alone in that, at least for the next year.

"I didn't think they'd look the same," Luke murmured softly. Kira paused at the words Luke clearly had not meant to say out loud.

"Well, obviously you wouldn't think a complete stranger has the same eyes as you," Emma said, and Kira silently thanked her for commenting. She was still trying to figure out what he was talking about. "What's up with you today, Luke? You're acting all mysterious."

There was a momentary pause. Luke opened his mouth, seemingly unsure of how to answer, but then the lunch bell rang. They all stood up, conversation forgotten. Kira had English with Luke, so he grabbed her arm and started pulling her through the all too confusing hallways she feared she would never figure out. After a few minutes, they arrived at the far side of the building and slid into their seats. More students began trickling in as the bell rang again, but no teacher showed up.

"Mr. Bell is notorious for being late to class," Luke leaned over and whispered to Kira.

"Oh, really? How is he still—"

"Lukey," the girl that Luke had labeled as a misfit plopped down on top of his desk. She had waist-length, stick-straight black hair, and her eyes were impossibly blue, almost like ice. "Hitting on the new girl already? Tsk tsk, you

should let her get to know everyone before she's forced to settle on you."

"Diana," Luke said tersely. "I thought you graduated."

She laughed, and her eyes flashed almost white as she stared at Luke. "No, no. I'm quite content to stay in high school forever. And I had to wait for my boys."

At their mention, the three boys who had been with Diana outside now walked into the classroom. Instantly Kira felt on edge, as though there was something else going on here that she was not privy to but was somehow part of. The look on Luke's face was strained. Something was happening between him and the others that no one else in the classroom but Kira could feel. She heard laughter and saw students hugging friends they hadn't seen in a while, but in the back of the classroom, there remained only the tension of a rubber band about to snap.

"Jerome, Tristan, John," Luke said each name with a stiff nod. They circled around him.

Kira lost interest in the strained conversation and instead studied the newcomers. Jerome had black skin that miraculously seemed pale and the same steel blue eyes. He was built like a football player, like a running back who was speedy yet surprisingly strong. John had sandy blond hair, shaved close to his head, with a thin and streamlined build.

Finally, she looked at the guy Luke had called Tristan. He seemed different to her somehow, with jet-black hair that hung over his eyes a little and barely visible dimples that played on his cheeks. His eyes were also an icy blue, but they seemed deeper to her, like steep ravines she could fall into. He stayed out of the conversation, she noticed, as if lost in his own thoughts—ones that seemed more troublesome than the cutting remarks being doled out by his friends. He had a rebel without a cause look that made him perilous for a girl's heart.

Suddenly, he turned to Kira. His eyes brightened a shade when they landed on hers, staring. And Kira, who was never one to back down, returned his look with interest.



"Who are you?" he asked in a barely audible voice filled with surprise, one just loud enough to attract the attention of his friends and Luke. Kira melted at the sound. He was dangerous she knew, but something about him made her feel safe and afraid at the same time.

"Kira," was all she could respond with. They both looked at each other, trying to unlock the other's secrets.

His friends came to circle her now, and she instantly felt cornered. Fear sparked in her heart, a quick flash of lightning. She didn't quite understand the nerves, but she also couldn't shake them.

"Well, what have we here?" Diana leaned in to really look at her, and Kira thought she read shock on the girl's face despite the confidence in her voice. Tristan laid a hand on Diana's arm, almost like a warning.

"Diana, back off," Luke said and tried to come to Kira's rescue, but it was Mr. Bell who saved her by running into the classroom very late and very out of breath.

"All right, simmer down people, I just lost track of time in the teacher's lounge. Welcome to Advanced English, I expect everyone's full attention for the entire first half of the year, and then after winter break, those of you who are college bound can do some slacking."

A general cheer went up around the room. Even Kira, who didn't really know how to slack off, let out a smile. She had already decided to take a gap year to work and hopefully travel, but a little slacking wouldn't be too awful.

"We're starting the year off with Shakespeare," Mr. Bell continued and the cheer changed to a groan. "Come on now, I'll show you that Shakespeare can be cool, starting with acting lessons. For the next few weeks, we are going to perform scenes from the plays we read, starting with the age-old classic *Romeo and Juliet*. Next week we're going to practice acting out emotions, so everyone please put those game faces on."

The rest of class passed rather quickly as Kira decided she liked Mr. Bell more and more. He was a young teacher who treated them like friends rather

than students. Unlike her teachers in New York, she could tell Mr. Bell truly loved teaching, and it wasn't just a job.

"Hey Luke," she asked when class ended and the students all dispersed. "What was that at the beginning of class? I thought you said you barely knew anything about those guys."

"I don't, Kira. I don't know anything but a mutual disgust. Can we just leave it at that?"

She nodded okay but it wasn't sincere. Something had to have caused that much hatred. At first, Kira thought maybe Diana and Luke used to date, but it seemed less like jealousy and more like something else, something intense that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, and Kira didn't see Luke again. After finishing her last class, she retreated to her car, totally spent.

On her way home, Kira stopped at the supermarket to pick up ingredients for her latest recipe, the one she had thought up during calculus instead of going over differential equations. All she had ever wanted to do was be a chef. And while other students her age were applying to college, she was practicing her knife and cooking skills whenever she got the opportunity, resulting in lots of good food for her family and lots of experience for future entrance examinations to culinary schools. During her gap year, Kira would hopefully be perfecting her skills in a real restaurant kitchen, but for now, she just practiced on her own. Tonight Kira was feeling homey, so she bought fresh tomatoes, spices, and flour to make some good old-fashioned spaghetti.

When she arrived home, the house was empty. Her father, she remembered, had job interviews all day with banks in Charleston's city center. She assumed her mother was with her baby sister at the pool, since she was still too young for kindergarten.

As Kira dug her fingers into the tomatoes she had just sliced, she thought about her family. When Kira was born, her parents had been twenty-three, which seemed just old enough to have a child. And when her sister was born, they had

been thirty-six, which seemed just young enough. Even now, Kira never really grasped who the mistake was—her or her sister. She remembered about five years ago when she got the news. She had just begun boarding school and was thirteen, a rather inopportune age to realize your parents were still sexually active enough to have a child. Those scars were erased as soon as Kira held her little sister in her arms and looked into her bright green eyes, ones that lacked the yellow center but were filled with warmth. Even now, she couldn't wait for her mother to come home so she could play with Chloe, who always liked helping her in the kitchen (as much as a four-year-old could).

With the sauce finished, Kira turned to the pasta, stirring the batter while she relived her first day. One of the amazing things about cooking was the therapy it provided. She could think about Luke, who at first glance she had figured to be the overly cocky yet oddly lovable boy. But there was something else there too. When he looked at her, it was almost like he saw something she didn't understand and maybe didn't want to know. In a way, she was reminded of Cy, her ex-boyfriend in New York. They had only dated for a few months—it wasn't love or anything, just fun for both of them. He had the same look as Luke, with bright blond hair that looked resolutely sun bleached. He had been overprotective of her, something that got old quickly. When she turned sixteen, he appeared out of nowhere and took over her life. While the constant calling to check in was cute at first, Kira had grown more and more frustrated. Moving home was the perfect excuse to dump him. Luke seemed more laid back, but there were traces of protection in his wannabe-knight manner. Could she see herself dating him?

Kira considered it, pondered the idea of a crush, but her mind slowly wandered from his familiar eyes to the icy blue ones belonging to Tristan.

Her hands stopped mixing at the thought of him. He was too much of a distraction, even for cooking. His brooding eyes held pain and love, his dimples added a cute boyish factor, and his hair hung just low enough to make her want to run a hand through it. She could tell just by looking at him that he had put up

barriers and was full of secrets—ones that Kira would love to unmask. He was the kind of boy you wanted to comfort and to kiss, the kind you knew would break your heart yet hoped against all odds wouldn't. The bad boy with a soft heart, the sort of trap a girl knowingly jumped into.

*Stop it*, Kira told herself and began kneading the dough to get out her frustration. They had barely said two words to each other, not nearly enough to begin crushing; especially when all she knew about him was that the one person she hoped to call a friend hated him.

"Kira, Kira!"

She was shocked out of her thoughts by the four-year-old now attached to her leg. Kira looked at the dough. She had kneaded it far more than necessary and more than enough to let her sister play with the now soft putty.

"Want to help me make dinner?" She asked, lifting Chloe onto the marble countertop next to the sink.

Her mother came in seconds later and kissed her on the cheek. "How was your first day?"

"Oh, fine."

Her mother sank a little—clearly, she wanted more details. "Any friends yet? Any guys? Now that you're home I'd hope to get some more information out of you."

"Well, there was this one guy," Kira began telling her mom about Luke and how he had saved her. She could tell her mother was enjoying the teenage gossip she had missed out on while Kira had been up north, but she couldn't bring herself to speak about Tristan. For now, he would be her secret.

*Damn you*, she thought. *If you're causing me this much trouble now I can only imagine what will happen if we ever have an entire conversation.*

## Chapter Two



When Kira arrived at school the next day, Luke was waiting for her outside the entrance. She was happy for the escort but wanted to try walking herself to class to test her memory of the layout. Luke let her lead, which resulted in two missteps and a five-minute tardy to class, but she had still gotten them there on her own, which was something.

In no time, Kira's morning classes whizzed by, and she was sitting with her newfound friends in the cafeteria, feeling like she had an actual place in the school.

"Dude, Wonder Woman is definitely hotter than Catwoman," Luke said to Miles. The two had been in a heated debate since their teacher had mentioned comic books in chemistry class.

"No way man, Catwoman is totally badass and she wears a leather costume. Leather!"

"Okay, Wonder Woman wears a bathing suit, has super human stamina, and can fly," Luke argued, mouth hanging open in disbelief that they were even still talking about the subject.

"Catwoman has a whip."

"Wonder Woman has an invisible flying plane."

"Dude, leather plus whip plus hint of evil wins every time."

Dave decided to chime in with, "Luke, I think Miles has you there."

"Ladies? Come on, help me out." Luke peered over with puppy-dog eyes. A slight pout graced his lower lip.

"Speaking as a completely heterosexual female, I have to say that Catwoman is definitely hotter," Kira spoke up, hoping to end the completely absurd debate. "Now, here's a real question—Batman or Superman? I have to go with Superman every time."

At that, Miles spit out his drink. "You have got to be kidding me."

Kira laughed and let the new debate continue now with male subjects who were of much more interest to her. But when Miles and Luke began spitting words at each other, most likely forgetting to breathe, she tuned them out.

Letting her gaze wander over all of the different groups around the cafeteria, Kira eventually allowed her eyes to slip out the window to the one person she was secretly searching for. But when her view landed on the misfits' table in search of Tristan, all four of them were looking at her. Jerome, John, and Diana held their gazes for a moment before looking away, but Tristan continued staring.

Kira's breath caught. She didn't understand or want their interest. Well, she secretly wanted Tristan's but not the others. She smiled at him, trying to change his sort of gloomy stare for a flirtier one. But he just looked away, confusing her more.

Luke nudged her, pulling her gaze from the window. "Come on, it's time to go to class."

They walked together, winding through the sunlit hallways, and sat down quietly until Mr. Bell walked in, flustered. Hastily, he started to lecture.

During class, Kira looked over her shoulder to catch all of the misfits staring at her once more. She held Tristan's eyes again, only breaking contact when Luke tapped her shoulder to pass her a note. He sufficiently distracted her with funny notes for the rest of class, but the hairs on the back of her neck remained standing for the entire period.

"Luke, why do they keep staring?" Kira asked as they followed everyone out of the room.

"Don't worry about it. It's just because you're new. I'm sure it will wear off soon."

But despite his reassurance, it didn't.

Every day for the rest of the week, Kira was under scrutiny. The misfits would only look away when she finally turned to meet their gazes. Kira was

confused, but more than anything, annoyed.

"I'm going to confront them," she told Luke after school let out on Friday afternoon. Her first week was complete, but she felt like things were only just beginning.

"Kira, leave it alone." He shook his head, exasperated with the conversation they had had every day this week. "The more it bothers you, the more they do it. They're jerks. If you ignore them, I'm sure they'll stop."

"I can tell from your voice that you don't believe what you just said. Do you know what's going on?" Kira made Luke stop walking before they reached her car, which was only a few steps away. She wanted to delve deeper into what Luke was obviously hiding from her.

"Nothing, it's just who they are." He turned away, unable to meet her eyes, and continued his stroll.

"Well, we'll see next Monday. If I catch them staring again, I'm going to talk to them. I'm not really one to stand idle when I'm annoyed."

"I'm starting to realize that," Luke said in a resigned voice and leaned against the trunk of her small car. "Do what you want to. I doubt I could stop you anyway."

Kira laughed. "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship, Luke. We are definitely starting to understand each other."

He put an arm around her shoulders, pulling her against the car, and smiled. The playful mood finally returned to their conversation, the way it always did. "Hey," he said, as though suddenly remembering something he forgot to tell her. "You have to come to the beach with us tomorrow. Apparently, it's a school tradition. The entire senior class goes to Folly Beach and has a sort of picnic-type event."

"Sounds great."

Kira jumped from his grasp and dug through her purse for her car keys. When she found them, they said their goodbyes, and Kira stepped into her car, more than ready for a mellow Friday night with the family.

The next morning, Kira was jarred awake by a booming alarm, dragging her out of that perfect place between being asleep and being awake, when everything seemed so serene. She flopped her hand on the clock to shut it off, stretched her muscles, and then rolled over to see sunbeams filtering through the yellow sheers on her window.

*Beautiful*, she thought, still trying to hold on to that limbo.

After a few minutes, she was finally awake enough to stand and start preparing for the beach. Flinging the curtains aside, Kira let the sun warm through her before heading toward the closet to find the perfect bikini and cover-up combo. The white bedazzled two-piece might be too flashy, and her new brown one didn't really go with her hair, so Kira decided on her new kelly green bikini that would definitely flatter her hair and maybe even her eyes. She threw on her favorite beach cover-up, a pink and green polka-dotted strapless dress she picked up last summer, and flip-flops to prevent from seeming too fancy. After a look in the mirror, Kira decided it was New York chic meets low-key beachy.

She had told Luke she would bring a picnic basket, eager to let some new people taste her food. After making a killer pasta salad and cold cut sandwiches with her special sauce—a hint of mayo, a hint of mustard, and a little something secret—she was ready to go. Kira walked outside, waiting for Luke to pick her up, and was shocked to see a huge pickup careen around the corner with Dave and Miles lounging next to surfboards in the bed of the truck. Kira opened the paint-flaked passenger side door to a giggle-fest between Luke and Emma, and hopped in beside them.

"What is going on in here?" she asked. "Something I should be telling Dave about?"

"Nothing, nothing." Emma finally calmed down enough to breathe, but her face was red from laughing so hard. "One of those things that's only funny if you saw it."

"What? Come on, I have to know."

"For a minute, in the rearview mirror..." Luke coughed to keep a new



round of laughter at bay. "It looked like Miles and Dave were making out." He and Emma broke down again.

"Do I need to drive?" Kira said in a jokingly condescending voice.

"No, no, I got this." Luke composed himself and revved the engine.

The drive to Folly Beach didn't take long, especially with Kira, Luke, and Emma singing country at the top of their lungs while Miles and Dave stuck their heads through the back window to occasionally join in as back-up singers.

When they arrived, Kira was amazed at the quintessential surf town she had never known existed just a short drive outside of Charleston. Beach shacks and inexpensive hotels lined the shore, while surf shops and local restaurants called in most of the crowd.

They parked and practically ran down the rickety wooden boardwalk that led them through the dunes and onto the sand. The long flat beach was already lined with students from their high school. Some held not so discreet brown paper bags with bottle rims poking out, while others had coolers masking mixed drinks.

Dave, Miles, and Luke dragged their surfboards along the beach behind Emma who was scouting a location. Kira followed, soaking in the view. Fluffed clouds softened the bright blue sky, which faded into the deeper blue waters of the ocean before her. She let the sun warm her skin, itching to lie down on a towel and not move for hours. A little in the distance, jetting past breaking waves into the deep ocean, she saw the famous Folly Beach Pier.

"Kira, come on." Emma waved her over to the small square of sand the group had claimed. She quickly moved through the maze of towels to meet her friends.

"Sorry," Kira said while sitting down on the towel they had laid out for her. "Who wants food?"

"Me!" Her friends chorused in unison.

Kira opened up the picnic basket she had packed and handed out the sandwiches. After leaning her elbows back on the squishy sand to look at the

view, she sighed. "Man, this is the life."

"I'll second that. This sandwich is incredible. What did you put in this? Drugs? I can't stop eating," Luke marveled and Miles seconded with a grunt, since his mouth was completely full.

"I was talking about the view and the weather, not the food, stupid. The sun feels so great, especially after the first week of school. The tension is literally melting from my body." Kira dropped back down to her towel to soak it all in. The sun had always been her favorite thing. Feeling the heat and warmth it radiated always gave her a sense of inner-peace. She had spent many afternoons in Central Park while living up north, but nothing could compare to the feel of the sand scratching your toes, the sun prickling your skin, and the surf rolling in your ears.

And then Kira felt it, that tingle at the base of her neck that told her something was wrong. She opened her eyes to look around and saw that Tristan, Jerome, John and Diana were walking onto the beach. They looked away when she caught them staring, and Kira finally broke. In school, it was one thing, but ruining her perfect moment of relaxation went way too far.

She watched while they walked along the shore and took careful glances in her direction. When they sat down, yards to her left, Kira turned away. Experimenting, she looked back and met each of their eyes, catching them in the staring act yet again.

"This is ridiculous." Kira stood, dusting the sand off of her legs, and marched over toward the misfits before her friends even had time to realize she'd left. Four eyes watched her carefully as she swiftly dodged people and came to a stop at the edge of the bright blue towel Tristan lounged on.

"Okay, what is your problem with me?" She flung her arms wide, searching for some answer that made sense.

"You exist," Diana spoke coldly.

Kira was shocked and she flinched. It wasn't the response she had expected. "And what about my existence is so terrible that I can't turn around

without you guys all staring at me?"

"Not terrible, intriguing," Tristan spoke up before Diana could, tilting his head as he pondered her.

Kira couldn't imagine what about her had caught their interest so much, and she was beginning to not even like Tristan's watchful eye. But then again, she couldn't help noticing the outline of a six-pack etched in his pale skin and how the sun made his eyes look even bluer. It wasn't so bad...

"You're completely ignorant of everything," Jerome said in a deep, rumbling voice. "It's...alluring."

Kira didn't like the way he looked at her—with a glimmer of malice in his eye. And even staring at Tristan shirtless wasn't enough to keep her there much longer. "Look, I lived in Manhattan for five years. I'm hardly ignorant compared to almost everyone else who goes to our school, and I'm tired of this. Get over whatever it is you think you know about me, and leave me alone."

Kira walked away, hoping she had gained an upper hand and that they would stop. When she turned her head back around, they were gazing at the ocean, hoisting up surfboards, and ignoring her. She smiled, glad she had faced them, but also confused. What had Jerome been talking about? Why would he think she was ignorant when he had never even spoken to her before?

"Kira!" She stopped her unhappy thoughts and turned to Luke, who looked concerned. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'd just had enough, like I told you before."

He nodded. "Come on, I'm making you surf with me and Dave. Go grab Miles's board and meet us out there."

She quickly took off her cover-up and lifted the heavy board from the sand. "Thanks, Miles," she yelled after she turned and started walking toward the water. When she stepped into the waves, she instantly knew this would be a much more enjoyable swim than those she went on in the Hamptons. Instead of walking into freezing cold and almost paralyzing waters, this ocean was bathwater warm. Kira smiled at the change, already starting to appreciate the

permanent move down south, and headed out toward her new friends, who she felt like she had known for a lifetime.

After jumping on the board and awkwardly paddling past the waves, Kira made it to Dave and Luke, who sat like pros with their feet dangling in the water and the nose of their short boards angled up into the air. Kira noted her own very long board, which hadn't left the surface of the undulating water even though she sat on its back tip.

"Why is my surfboard so huge? I could barely lift the thing."

"It's a beginner board," Dave spoke up now that the conversation was of real interest to him. "We only started teaching Miles about a month ago, and he's taking a little while to get the hang of it."

"Don't worry. I can tell you're a natural," Luke chimed in and playfully nudged the edge of her board with his foot, almost sending Kira into the ocean. "Well, maybe not a natural, but it's really not that difficult."

Kira nodded and listened to their detailed instructions carefully. She had never heard Dave speak so much. That alone was exciting as he told her exactly what she had to do. When the wave was approaching, paddle as quickly as she could, then make one last push right when it felt like the wave had complete control. Quickly put her palms on opposite sides of the board and push her chest up. Then, she had to move her right foot perpendicular to her left knee while still keeping most of her leg on the board for balance. Finally, the hardest part, she had to jump up by swinging her left leg through her arms in front of her other leg and then lift her upper body up while keeping her legs bent.

*Easy, right?* Kira tried to assure herself, but as she waited for a wave, she couldn't stop the anxiety from building in her chest. How fast did these boards really go? Kira was no adrenaline junkie by any means, so to calm herself she tried to envision a *Blue Crush* scenario, in which she becomes a super hot surfer chick who woos a professional quarterback.

She was jolted from the daydream when Luke and Dave shouted at her. "Here comes a wave. Start paddling, Kira!"

With as much power as she could muster, Kira pushed her arms through the water, digging under the surface. One of the boys gave her a push, and then the wave was in control. She pressed up on her palms, moved her leg forward as quickly as she could, and promptly lost her balance. The board flipped, sending Kira crashing into the ocean.

She rolled around underwater, riding the wave in like the boys told her, and felt the strong tug of her ankle strap as her board and she went in opposite directions. Finally, the speed slowed and she was able to break through to the surface of the water to swim over to her board. Kira flopped her arms over the board, rested her head for a few moments, and then looked up to search for Dave and Luke. She waved to them, gave a thumbs up, and then jumped back on her board to paddle back out.

"I'm going to do this," she told them resolutely as she spun her board around, back toward the shore. Turning for a second, she watched Tristan who had just stood up on a wave. He looked like such a natural, taking steps along his board to control speed and doing a few tricks despite the smaller nature of the waves. She was totally captivated by it.

"Kira, here comes a set." Dave brought her back around and she started paddling again.

This time, Kira did it by herself without a push from Luke, and got caught in the movement of the wave. After a few seconds, she toppled over, but this time it was when she tried to fling her foot to the front to stand. She paddled out after escaping the churning waters, already feeling the exhaustion in her arms, but not ready to give up yet.

After about ten more tries ending in belly flops, Kira had about reached that point where she was ready to give in.

"I cannot do this," she told the boys after lying back on the board and resting her body. "It is physically impossible for me to stand up on this board." She crossed her arms, trying to maintain her balance while also looking stubborn. It was a difficult task.

"Come on." Luke prodded her with his finger. "Wakey wakey."

"No," she put on a five-year-old voice.

"One more try, I have a really good feeling about this one."

"Oh, fine." She sat up and let him spin her board around.

Kira looked back at Tristan, hoping to spot him in action, and instead met his eyes, which had turned to match the color of the sky. He lifted the corner of his mouth in a half-smile, which she first thought was meant for her, until he turned to watch Jerome who had stood up on his board to do a pretty good impression of her last fall, which was a total body flip off her board as soon as she had attempted to lift her hands and stand. Spurned into anger, Kira decided to act. She had always thought that nothing was as good a motivator as furiously wanting to shove someone's joke back in his face.

"Luke, I am so ready for this. Don't push me into the wave. I just got that feeling where I know I am going to kick some ass." He took his hand off her board to let her try by herself.

Kira saw the set approaching and, like Luke had said, let the first and usually smallest wave go by. She started paddling for the second one and felt the acceleration when the wave latched onto her. Quickly, Kira lifted her upper body, smoothed her foot along the board until it came perpendicular to her knee, flung her left leg to the front of the board and stood as quickly as she could. She waited to lose her footing, to slip off of the edge, but that moment never came. She paid close attention, never letting the board wobble too much and trying to hold her own against the water rushing her toward the shore.

*This is exhilarating*, Kira thought. The excitement mounted with every moment that she didn't fall and with every increase in her speed. When she finally felt herself slow down and saw the sandy beach through the water, Kira threw her hands up in the air, leaped off her board, and jumped up and down, splashing water everywhere.

Luke and Dave rolled in on the third wave, only seconds behind her. Luke picked her up and spun her around while Dave slammed her hand in a high five.

She looked over at Tristan again and caught the grin curving his lips. Maybe he had been rooting for her all along, she mused.

"That was awesome," Kira said with a beaming smile.

"It really was, now let's grab some food." Luke turned toward the towels with a hopeful look that silently prayed Emma and Miles hadn't emptied out the cooler.

"What? Food? I just got the hang of this." The boys looked at her with sad baby faces. "Okay, you guys go eat, I'm going to try for a few more waves."

"You sure?" Dave asked, and Kira could tell he had finally warmed up to her. A day in the water could do wonders.

"Go, go. I'll be in soon." She shooed them along and then threw herself back on her board to paddle out past the breaking waves. As she caught the next wave, Kira knew she had the technique down. She rode in perfectly and paddled out for more. After a few turns on the small waves, she decided to try for something bigger.

Tristan sat alone in the water, closer to the pier where the waves had been breaking earlier and getting larger. Some part of Kira wanted to prove to him that he was wrong, wrong in judging her based on stolen glances and wrong in making fun of her. Kira could feel his eyes on her as she paddled closer. And maybe she was being too self-assured or was too fueled by the anger he had sparked in her, but Kira knew she had to try to show him something about her that he hadn't already assumed.

Kira never met his stare. She didn't want him to know how much his presence affected her, so instead she looked out at the horizon for the next set.

Kira saw the curl, saw it break early against the pier, and paddled with all the strength she had left. When the wave got closer, she knew it was too big for her to handle and almost wanted to back out, but Tristan was still watching her. The wave picked her up and pushed her faster than she had ever gone before. When she tried to stand, her board nosedived with the speed and Kira fell headfirst over her board and into the water. She flipped underwater a few times,

the strain of her board pulling her forward until she finally broke the surface for air.

After a gulp, the next wave crashed and she was thrown under again. She caught her breath for a moment of relief before the third wave in the set smacked her, and she had nothing left to fight. The wave pushed her under, and her board smacked her forehead.

Pain flashed. And then nothing.

She was sinking. Her board tugged, pulling her underwater.

And then Kira fell into darkness.

"Kira, come on." She heard the command in his deep voice, but couldn't respond. "Kira, wake up."

A hand slapped her in the face, once, twice, a third time and then her eyes shot open and she tried to breathe, but her throat was stuck. Someone flipped her to her side as she began coughing, and finally she spit up what seemed like a gallon of water. Kira lay down again and closed her eyes, wanting to sleep.

"Kira!" One more smack landed on her face. "You have to stay awake."

She opened her eyes and saw the blurry outline of a boy with dark hair and pale skin. "Tristan?"

"Hello."

She saw the corner of his mouth curve upward despite her uneasy vision. "What happened?"

"You were being stupid," he drawled. Kira started to remember the wave and wipeout, and then her anger brimmed back to the surface.

"Only because you were being an ass," she grumbled. He just laughed.

"Come on, try to sit up." Tristan curved an arm around her back to help lift her up.

She noticed, at that moment, that they both wore only bathing suits and she was basically sitting on his lap. Kira tried to discreetly look at his chest, which was quite chiseled, and then she noticed the nice bulge of a bicep in his arm. Kira let her eyes wander a few moments longer until Tristan picked her up far



enough for the pain in her head to finally hit. She groaned, put a hand to her brow, and curled into his body a little more.

"Ow."

"Yeah, your board got you pretty bad."

"I know." Kira was starting to get annoyed by his habit of stating the obvious. She pulled her hand back for a moment. "Crap! I'm bleeding."

He stared at her hand, which was covered in running red liquid, until she put it back to her head. Kira noticed he was staring again, but this time at her wound. He leaned in closer, inspecting it she hoped.

After a minute, she couldn't take it. "Tristan, tell it to me straight. How bad is it?"

He jerked as if she had interrupted him mid-thought. "Oh. It's nothing. You'll be fine. Might need a few stitches."

He sat her up on her own and moved back a foot.

"Thanks...for helping me, I mean," she said, not sure where to look, eyes landing on his face and then staying there. A few different emotions pass over his features until he finally settled on the half-smile she had started to like.

Tristan grabbed a shirt from the unguarded towel next to him, looked at it, looked at Kira, and shrugged. He put it to her head, told her to hold it there, and helped her stand up.

"Get away from her." Luke's voice boomed from behind. He barged in, pushing Tristan to the side.

"Chill out, Luke. I didn't do anything."

"I don't care. Leave," he commanded, voice angrier than Kira ever remembered hearing.

"And if I don't want to?" Tristan asked. Kira knew he was saying it more to test Luke and less because he really needed to stay.

"Then..." Luke paused, clenching his fists and looking around. Then he promptly punched Tristan in the face. For a moment, Kira thought she saw a flashing light, but she quickly realized it must have been the sun, which had

previously been silhouetted behind the two boys. Tristan fell over and rolled once on the ground.

"Luke! Stop it. He just saved my life."

"Come on, Kira." Luke tugged her hand. She glanced back at Tristan, who just nodded to her, and followed Luke. "We have to take you to the hospital."

She didn't mention the punch, wanting to wait for a good time. Instead, she went with her friends back to the car, listened to them talk about trivial things to distract her, allowed Luke to carry her into the hospital, and tried to process the heavy thoughts churning in her head.

## Chapter Three



During the car ride home from the hospital, Kira tried to drone out the lecture her parents were offering from the front seat. Surfing is dangerous, blah blah blah. She put her hand to her scalp and felt the five stitches that had been sewn there to hold her skin together. Truthfully, she was just relieved it had been the back of her head—losing a little hair was nothing compared to having a scar on her face.

Beside her, Kira's little sister was starting to nod off. She pulled Chloe's head over so it rested on her lap and ran her hand through her sister's silky brown hair, looking outside at the moss-covered trees passing by.

Mildly distracted, she did her best to respond to her mother at the necessary moments, so she would think Kira was listening. But as the lecture droned on, Kira reached her hand up to the back of her head a second time and finally realized how close she had come to drowning—a fact she would never tell her parents. She didn't even remember getting out from under the water. All she could remember were the waves pounding her every time she tried to surface and the searing pain of her board hitting her on the head. Kira couldn't blame surfing. She could only blame her own stupidity. She'd known the waves were too big, but she was too stubborn to stop when she had a point to prove. Hopefully Tristan had been trying to prove a point too—maybe he didn't hate her like she knew his friends did.

When she got home, Kira ran to her room and called Emma. She needed to discuss things with a girl. For most of her life, Kira had been one of those girls that was one of the guys. Now, she needed a girl who was her opposite to help her dissect the situation. After half an hour, headlights pierced through the window and Kira went downstairs to get the door.

"Oh my god," was the first thing Emma said. "We have so much to

discuss. Let's grab some comfort food. Do you have potato chips? I can't resist."

Kira grabbed some cookies and chips from the kitchen, and led Emma outside to the back porch. She sat on the hammock while Emma curled up on the wicker chair.

"You know, Kira, it's a little spooky out here. You live kind of far into the woods." Emma hugged her legs a little tighter and searched the surrounding woods for anything terrifying.

"Trust me, I know, but you get used to it." Kira let Emma get the search out of her system, and lay down, peering past the edge of the porch roof to search for stars.

"So who first? Luke or Tristan? Don't tell me you called me over here just to gaze mysteriously at the sky."

Kira sighed. "I know." She chewed her lip for a moment, thinking. "You choose. I'm just as confused by both of them."

"Well then, I've been dying to tell you what a freaking god Tristan looked like when he carried you out of the water. You, of course, were dangling there like a dead fish, but let me tell you." Emma shook her head as if there were no words and fanned herself.

"Wait, he carried me out?" Kira grabbed a chocolate chip cookie. Reliving a near death experience required chocolate, especially when someone just said you looked like a dead fish in the arms of a god. Great description.

"Yes, dummy, how else do you think you ended up on the sand?"

"I don't know..."

"Well, anyway, let me paint you the picture, because it was like a scene from a movie, or more likely from Baywatch, but still unreal. The guys and I are sitting on the towels, chatting and eating, when suddenly Luke looks up and is like 'Where's Kira' and the guys start to freak out because they don't see you anywhere. Then, I look out all the way down toward the pier and tell them you moved over there to surf. Dave and Luke just shake their heads at each other, like they know you can't handle it, and the four of us watch you try to catch that

wave. For a second Dave is like ‘she’s gonna do it’ in that awed voice that is so cute. Anyway, instead, we see you wipe out huge, and we all start laughing cause you just looked ridiculous, but then you don’t surface. We are all staring, and after two minutes, we don’t see you, and Luke goes running down the beach.

"Then, out of nowhere, Tristan emerges from a wave holding you in his arms. His body is dripping with water, making the sun bounce off of him, and his arm muscles are bulging. I mean, I practically heard every girl on the beach sigh with jealousy and have a momentary heart attack because of how hot he is. Anyway, he runs from the water, sets you down really gently, and then starts slapping you in the face. I didn’t get it, but we all saw you wake up while we were running over and were so happy, until we saw Luke punch Tristan in the face."

At the mention, Kira groaned.

"Why did he do that?" she asked while grabbing another cookie. A near-death experience followed by your guy friend punching your savior and potential crush in the face seriously required chocolate.

"Because you, my friend, have been dropped right in the middle of a love triangle."

"No!" Kira put her head in her hands. Screw chocolate. She needed vodka. "Luke doesn’t like me like that, we’re friends, okay? Right? And Tristan, well, I don’t even know him."

"Listen to me," Emma said and put her hand on Kira’s shoulder. Kira sat up, looking her friend in the face. "No guy punches another guy over nothing and no guy is as attentive as Tristan is to you over nothing. Something is going on."

*Something is definitely going on*, Kira thought. But it wasn't so simple as a love triangle—something else was at play. That much she knew.

Emma continued, unaware of the thoughts churning in Kira's mind. "I know you don’t want to hear it, but I’ve never seen Luke watch someone like he watches you, like he’s always looking to protect you. Maybe you should talk to

him?"

"Yeah, you're right," Kira replied, wanting to leave it at that and not let Emma know she thought something else was going on. Luke wouldn't tell her anything, which was why Kira had invited Emma over—to dig up dirt that Luke would never tell her. And she couldn't resist asking Emma, the boy genius, about Tristan too. "So, do you think he actually likes me?"

"I knew it, I knew it. You are definitely crushing on Tristan, and, well, who can blame you." Her eyes started to glaze over.

"Um, Emma?"

"Right right, sorry. I love Dave, but a bad boy is always dreamy."

Kira sighed. Just what she didn't want to hear. "And you think Tristan is a bad boy?"

"Kira, please, let's not state the obvious. The real question is, would he change for you?"

Kira paused. "No?" She tried to convince herself and Emma that she wouldn't be the one to try to change him. It never worked out she knew, but in the back of her mind Kira could hear a small part of her say yes.

"I don't know, not yet. But I will, I promise, even if it takes all the knowledge of boys I possess and a little more snooping."

Kira laughed, happy she and Emma had started this new stage of their friendship. It would be great to have a girlfriend who she could gossip with, and who could help her figure out her disheveled love life, something she had never been able to master.

"Have Tristan and Luke always hated each other?" Kira asked. Emma nodded while munching on a chip. "Do you know why?"

Emma shrugged. "I'd say it was an instantaneous thing. Miles was the first one of us to arrive, then I showed up a day after him, and the next week Dave showed up with Luke right behind him. None of us really knew each other at that point, but I still remember when Luke walked into the lunchroom. We figured we would round him up, but when he walked down the cafeteria aisle, I

remember he paused and looked right out the window toward the misfits. They all stood outside and stared back at him with seriously evil smiles. It was like a challenge or something. None of us knew what caused it, but that first day we met Luke he was nothing like he is now. He was angry the whole day and barely spoke to any of us. In fact, the next day we were all questioning if we wanted to let him in the group, but he came back on his second day as the charming person we know and love. Still though, he changes around them. Oh, and there was Bethany."

Emma paused to grab another chip. She chewed on it slowly, eyes losing focus on the forest around them, and Kira wanted to wring her friend's neck in anticipation. This was it—this could be the explanation she had been looking for.

"Bethany?" Kira prompted.

"I'm trying to remember all the details. Bethany was the first girl Luke dated, here at least. They met his second week of school, and he was head over heels for her. After a month, we all knew he was in love, but none of us was as sure about her feelings. She was the kind of girl who tricks a guy into falling for her, but keeps a wandering eye." Emma sneered to show her disgust. "The boys all loved her, but I had a feeling something was off. Anyway, there was this party, and Bethany told Luke she was doing homework and couldn't come out. So, we all went without her, but it was totally lame and we heard people were partying at the beach. We drove the extra fifteen minutes, and when we walked onto the beach the first thing we saw were Tristan and Bethany making out in the dunes. Luke ran over and punched Tristan in the face. By the time we got there, blood was all over Tristan's face and Luke's hand, and we had to pull him away. It was messy."

Emma shook her head, and Kira flashed back to Luke's punch on the beach, somewhat surprised Tristan hadn't started gushing blood then too.

"Yeah, wow, I didn't expect that." Kira chewed on her lip. "So I'll be the worst person ever if I try to date Tristan knowing Luke hates him and maybe likes me."

"Eh, fifty-fifty on that, but you have to do what you want." Emma looked at Kira with wide eyes, showing her that she meant those words.

Kira curled back up in the hammock and listened to the breeze ruffle through the trees. That was the clue she had been waiting for, but she wasn't so happy now that she had it. Even if Luke and Tristan had hated each other from the start, Bethany had been the catalyst, and maybe Kira's presence had dredged up old wounds. She needed to talk to Luke about this.

"Thanks for coming over, Emma," Kira told her friend at the door an hour later. Their conversation had moved past Tristan and Luke and into school gossip. But it became so late that Kira's pain meds had worn off, and she knew she needed to sleep on everything.

Emma smiled. "You know I'm here when you need me."

They hugged and Kira watched her friend leave before shutting the door and heading upstairs. Instead of lying awake for hours, as she had expected, sleep came almost instantly—and thankfully dreamlessly, considering her tumultuous thoughts.

The first thing Kira did the next morning was Google search for a Starbucks, and then call Luke to meet her there. In New York, coffee shops had been her favorite place to meet with friends, and she needed a comfortable spot to have this conversation with Luke. She loved the smell of coffee brewing and the artsy laid back feel that most coffee shops had. Everyone was in his or her own world, typing away at a computer or talking about the previous days' events, but it was like a secret community.

Kira's drive over was solemn, but when she arrived at Starbucks and sat down with a latte, she already felt more relaxed. The indie music of an up-and-coming artist was playing in the background, and she sank into her big leather seat to wait.

Luke walked in about ten minutes later, and she waved him over. When he sat down, Kira didn't really know where to start, so she waited for him to say something.



"So, how's my hospital patient?"

She smiled. Luke always did make her laugh. "Fine, thanks. And, even though my mom thinks I'm crazy, I can't wait to try surfing again."

"Such a bad ass." He grinned.

She relaxed finally and tried to face what she had come to say. "Luke, believe it or not, I didn't just ask you for coffee to swap jokes, I actually need to talk to you about something." He nodded, prodding her on. Kira wasn't sure how to tell him gently, so she figured the best approach was quick and to the point—like ripping off a Band-Aid. "Luke...I know about Bethany."

"Dramatic much, Kira? It's not like she died."

She knew him well enough to know he was trying to brush it off, but couldn't quite. "Emma came over last night and told me the whole story, and I know that's why you hate Tristan."

"Kira, that's not even half of why I hate Tristan. Can't we just drop it?"

"Why won't you talk to me? I feel like I just got plopped down into the middle of a television show. I know all the characters, but none of the plot." Kira set her coffee cup down. Whenever she was angry, her hands had this bad habit of moving on their own accord, usually in wide sweeping circles that would definitely spill her warm, sugary latte everywhere.

"I can't tell you. Trust me, I would because I know it would keep you away from Tristan, but I can't." Luke leaned closer to her—his eyes crinkled at the edges as he pleaded with her to understand him and stop the argument.

"Why not?" She questioned, anger mounting. She had known he was keeping things from her the moment they had met, but she couldn't guess what it was or could even be.

"I just can't, okay? Drop it, seriously."

There was an awkward pause. Kira wouldn't speak until he gave something up, and he wouldn't give any information away. Luke fell back against his chair.

"So, surfing..."

"Oh, don't change the topic," Kira snapped to shut him up. "There's something else I want to talk about too, as long as we're at a stalemate with the other topic...?"

"We are." He nodded to enforce the finality.

"Fine, then I need to ask you something." Kira picked her mug back up to ponder. On her ride over to the coffee shop, she debated talking to him about this in case it hurt his ego. But, now that she was angry with him for holding so much back and keeping so many secrets from her, Kira had no such reservations. "Luke, do you like me?"

"Sure, what's not to like?"

Kira stared at him, waiting. *Typical of a man to totally misread the question entirely*, she thought.

"Oh..." Luke twitched, finally understanding. "I mean, you're great and all, but I really thought we'd just be friends, you know?"

Kira smiled, totally relieved. "Thank god. Me too. So, why did you punch Tristan yesterday if not jealousy?"

"Plead the fifth?" He grinned like a little boy trying way too hard to appear innocent.

"Luke, this is ridiculous. He saved my life. I would have died if not for him, and you punched him in the face! Seriously, you have got to get over whatever it is that's between you guys, because I won't let you punch him in the face the next time he does something nice for me." Not like she knew he ever would. It could have been a one time, "I was the closest person to you", sort of thing. But Kira hoped not.

"I know you don't understand but eventually you will. And I hope I'm there to help you when that happens." Luke stood up and left, letting the door slam behind him.

Kira remained sitting and sipped the rest of her coffee slowly. Now she was really confused. Who wasn't letting Luke talk, or was he just using that as an excuse? Kira had thought he would be a best friend to her, but how could

someone who wouldn't even explain himself be her best friend? Luke was clearly emotionally hurt about Bethany but wouldn't talk, hated Tristan for something that happened a year ago, and hated him more for something he wouldn't discuss. Maybe she would have to go to the source of the trouble. And what of him? All she knew about Tristan was that he had been a jerk to her, but then he saved her life. Was that enough to redeem someone whom everyone she knew disliked?

And what of love? Thank goodness Luke had no feelings for her, but Kira needed to decide for herself what she wanted from Tristan. He was gorgeous of course, but she barely knew him. She shouldn't be catching her breath every time she saw him and getting little chills up her spine at the thought of him. And yet there she was, looking out the window of the local Starbucks, holding her breath and feeling a tingle when he unexpectedly stepped out of a car with Jerome, John, and Diana in tow.

Tristan's face didn't have a single scratch from yesterday, and his pale skin wasn't marred with a purple bruise. Kira was surprised—on the beach it had seemed like Luke really hit him. But his cheek was pristine as it rose in a smile, a reaction to whatever funny words Jerome had just voiced. Kira watched, heart pounding, as a dimple curved into his cheek and his hair fell over his eyes. Tristan shook with laughter, but he stopped before the others. A dark look slowly gathered back to his face as his mouth curved down, and his eyes became full of his own troubled thoughts again. Kira could read him just as easily as she read other people—she just couldn't read how he felt about her.

Unaware of her presence, the four of them walked toward a sporting goods shop next door. Quickly, Kira drank the rest of her latte, waiting until they went inside before sneaking over and carefully opening the shop door without making a sound. Kira wanted to snoop now that she finally had the chance to get some real unguarded information.

She slowly walked down the aisles, checking each one with a quick peek before entering. She eventually spotted them in the surfing goods section at the

back of the store and walked down the parallel aisle, trying to hear tidbits of their conversation. Through a small hole in the shelf, she could just barely see them, but it was enough for prime eavesdropping. They were talking about surfing wax because John needed some.

*Great*, Kira thought. She was really going to learn a lot on this covert mission.

After a few minutes, staring at what looked like soap to Kira, they moved down toward the boards themselves. Tristan needed a new surfboard—he had abandoned his in the water when he dove in to save her. They started to talk about his rescue.

This was exactly what she needed.

"Why'd you do it?" Kira heard John ask.

Tristan carefully examined the fins of a new board and smoothed his hand along the bottom, testing the curve of the wood. "I knew it would annoy Luke, and besides, we might be able to use her later. Letting her die would have been a waste."

Kira stopped breathing so she could listen closer. This wasn't about her at all. Maybe he would have even let her drown.

"Good thinking," Jerome praised him.

What was she to them? She would never let herself be used by anybody, ever. The fact that they thought she would was more proof that they were the ignorant ones—not her.

"I don't think it's as simple as you make it sound, Tristan." Diana spit out the words, and then put her hand on Tristan's, making him meet her gaze. "I see the way you've looked at her. The way you held her when she woke."

"Don't be absurd." Tristan looked back down, brows knotting, unable to hold Diana's gaze for too long. She threw his hand away from hers and off the board, so he couldn't hide behind it.

"Jealously doesn't become you," Jerome said to Diana.

"We'll see," was all she replied.

Kira didn't want to trust her ears. Tristan's concern had seemed so real on the beach. But, maybe Diana was right. Maybe he was helping just because he wanted to protect her. Maybe there were things he didn't want his friends to know. Maybe—Kira started but then her tippy-toe balance failed her and she knocked the shelf, letting a few soccer balls fly off and bounce down the aisle.

*Crap*, she thought and ran to another aisle to escape before they caught her. Kira heard one of them say to separate and check on who was listening, so she dove into the best hiding spot she could find—a tent that had been set up in the camping section. She zipped it halfway, to prevent from being too obvious, and hid behind the closed part of the flap.

Kira barely breathed for ten minutes until she saw the misfits walk past her tent with a surfboard and head for the cash register. After they left, she slowly emerged from the tent and calmly walked out the door.

"Miss, miss!" She turned to see an employee from the sporting store running after her. "I'm supposed to give you this." He handed her a small piece of paper and turned back toward his store. Kira stared at the folded note, unsure of whether to open it or let it fly away in the wind.

"Hi, Kira. Nice hiding spot. Tristan."

A shiver ran down her spine, of fear or of excitement, she didn't know. But she did know one thing—he didn't rat her out to his friends or they would've confronted her, which meant Tristan was keeping secrets.

The question was really how many and from whom?

## Chapter Four



For the next three weeks, Kira ignored Tristan. At school, she built her friendships with Luke, Miles, Dave, and Emma. At home, she played with her sister and practiced for culinary school. She was determined not to think of him and the drama he would bring into her life. Instead, Kira focused on all of the people and things she did have and let that little part in the back of her head that longed for him get quieter and quieter. But she couldn't completely erase the nagging wish that he would be the one to break the silence and approach her.

On the first Saturday of October, Kira decided it was finally time to start working on her term paper about Charleston's role in the War of Northern Aggression, more commonly referred to by the rest of the world as the American Civil War. Her history teacher had assigned the entire class a research paper due before Christmas about Charleston's local history and involvement in the war. The open-ended question was to be interpreted in any form she wanted, and Kira thought it was more than annoying that most of the students had a lifetime of knowledge about the city compared to her meager month and summers spent mostly at the beach. Today would be her day to wander around and explore until something interesting caught her eye.

Battery Park was the first stop. Kira figured she would start from the southernmost tip of Charleston and move north. As she walked along the wharf that ran parallel to the park, Kira noticed that the Civil War monuments still stood but their meaning had been left behind. Statues had been erected to honor past heroes of the South and cannons were placed facing the open water as if still waiting for an attack to defend against. However, the mounds of cannon balls were now a play place for children pretending to be soldiers, and the statues were a challenge to little adventurers hoping to climb something more than a tree. The North had long since moved past the Civil War, but even in Charleston,

a city engrossed in its own history, the past was beginning to be left behind.

Kira leaned against the metal fence, facing the sea. In the distance, almost like a mirage, stood Fort Sumter, the ultimate spot of Charleston's Civil War history. It seemed hard to believe that such a small island fortress had been such a huge stronghold and spot of aggression. But she knew it was too easy of a pick for her paper and figured almost everyone in her class would be writing about it.

Kira turned back toward Battery Park just as a modern day horse and carriage rode past her. She tried to picture two women with hoop skirts and floppy hats riding around, probably pulled by a slave, and envisioned men wandering around in uniforms with muskets to patrol the streets against a potential Northern invasion. She imagined a way of life come crumbling down, imagined the mansions in front of her exploding with cannon fire, and all the beautiful trees around her lighting up in flames.

For a moment, she saw all of that, until someone's breath tickled her neck and a whisper made its way to her ear.

"Lost in thought?" Tristan's deep voice sent a shiver down her spine, and a secret smile played upon her lips—he was officially the one who broke the silence. Since she had tested her own willpower and won, Kira decided it was perfectly fine to talk to him now.

"I was until you so rudely interrupted," she said playfully while turning her body to face his. Kira took note of his dark-washed jeans and how they completely opposed her own white tank top and flower-covered skirt.

Tristan shrugged and said, "Since I've already annoyed you, I guess there's no real reason to stop." She couldn't help but laugh, and he smiled in return. "What were you thinking about?" He leaned back against the rail, so his arm lightly brushed against hers.

"Hoop skirts and muskets," she blurted out.

"What?" He lifted one corner of his mouth and furrowed his eyebrows in a half-question, half-laugh.

"Oh, sorry, my Civil War paper." Kira frowned and looked beyond Tristan

at Battery Park. "I see all of the history here, but I can't seem to find a topic that really stands out to me."

"Come on." He put an arm around her shoulders and guided her toward a cannon across the street. "Who better to show you around than a Charleston native?"

After not speaking for three weeks, Kira had never expected to have Tristan as her own personal tour guide, but it was perfect. He seemed to know everything about the city, and spending the afternoon with him was exactly what she needed to get the paper done. It also happened to be exactly what she wanted in her heart.

Tristan led her around Battery Park first, pointing out a huge mansion that was a wedding gift from a father to a daughter after the war, and another beautiful town home that still had a piece of shrapnel lodged in the roof from a Northern attack. He explained that Battery Park had been Charleston's first line of defense against any ships that made it past Fort Sumter and had not always been so picturesque. They kept walking as Tristan pointed out famous cemeteries where Confederate soldiers were buried and tons of buildings that had been preserved during the war that were truly from historic Charleston. They walked to the old slave market, which was now a flea market where local artisans could sell their goods. He showed her where the slaves had been kept, how they were sold, and where they were eventually set free. He painted the picture of a graceful city with an ugly undercurrent of racism that still needed to be weeded out.

"How do you know all of this?" She questioned him after two hours.

"You pick up a lot when you live here." He shrugged. "Charlestonians are very proud of their history."

"I guess, but you describe it like you lived there."

He breathed out a laugh, one that almost sounded like a sigh. "Do you actually believe that's possible?" His squinted eyes caught hers at that moment and she knew there was more to this question, some deeper meaning. Her heart



skipped a beat. Was it possible?

"Of course not," Kira looked away, flustered, and focused on the old woman sitting on a blanket on the sidewalk weaving a straw basket. She could have been from a different era and almost seemed out of place near the busy intersection where cars zoomed by behind her.

Kira looked back at Tristan. Did he fit into the scene? His constant brood made it seem like he was years older than he looked. She knew he had more on his mind than the average seventeen-year-old, but was that enough to start believing impossible things?

"Come on." He nodded to the side making his hair slip to shield his eyes. When the piercing blue was hidden in shadow, Kira finally felt she could breathe and stopped her mind before it dreamed up even crazier theories. "I want to take you to my favorite place in the city."

They walked for a while, lightly chatting to avoid any serious topics, before Tristan stopped in front of a huge building. Four round columns shot upward into a huge triangular frieze that reminded Kira of a Roman temple, until she looked further up and saw the top of a steeple. The building was huge but rather plain with large wooden doors and sweeping windows, but no ornate decorations marred the beauty of the architecture. The yellow-tinted stone created a beautiful contrast against the blue sky, and Kira tried to take it all in before she looked to her left to read the sign that stated Saint Philips Episcopal Church. Kira was a little shocked. She had never figured Tristan as the religious type.

"I know what you're thinking, but it's because of the view." He started to enter and she had no real choice but to follow. When she walked inside, the sanctuary took her breath away. Huge white columns rose toward an arched ceiling that was also a polished white. The marble floor led her eye past the ivory pews toward a huge stained glass window behind the altar. With the sunlight beaming through, the window acted almost like a kaleidoscope, casting colors around the otherwise bare room. Kira looked up at the balconies that ran

parallel down the sides of the church and were composed of carved mahogany, creating a striking contrast. And when she turned, an organ took up the majority of the back wall, and she could almost feel the music coming from the great instrument.

"Kira, come on." Tristan stood beneath the organ and waved her over. "This is nothing."

He walked over to the wall at the left corner of the church, and Kira watched him dubiously. Suddenly, what had seemed like solid plaster creaked open as Tristan found the secret latch he had been searching for. He pulled the thick door and moved his arm toward the opening as if to say, "After you, miss."

"Is this allowed?" Kira asked while she peered into the darkness.

"Rules are made to be broken," Tristan said with a wry smile. She knew it was a challenge—could she drop her usually straight-laced mentality?

Kira smiled back and started walking. As she passed through the hidden entry, she found a wooden staircase that creaked when she put her weight on the first step. She saw the light disappear and heard the door shut as she continued to climb with Tristan following behind her.

When she reached the top, she could see the structure of the arched ceiling and knew they were above one of the balconies. Kira tried not to touch any of the dirt and dust, which she was sure held tons of nasty insects she would rather keep away from, and followed Tristan's exact movements as he confidently strode toward a second door. Cobwebs draped from the handle, and Tristan swiped them away. They were definitely not supposed to be up here, but she was too intrigued to see what waited at the end of the climb and too scared to turn around and face the darkness alone.

Kira's breath became labored as they walked farther and farther up the never-ending staircase that she could only assume belonged to the steeple. Finally, she saw light and as she turned around the circular steps, a window appeared. She peeked through the grimy glass to see that they were well above the city skyline.

"We're almost at the top," Tristan looked back to tell her as if he had heard her stop.

Kira started climbing again, energized by the fact they had almost reached their destination. At last, the steps gave way to a wooden platform, and Kira was greeted by church bells and a long rope that hung through a hole in the floor. She followed Tristan through the maze of bells, until he finally sat down on a cushioned bench right next to a huge window. Using his sleeve, he cleaned the dust away. When Kira looked outside, she could see for miles.

"Wow," was all she could say.

Kira glanced toward the harbor and saw Fort Sumter and Battery Park for the second time that day, but now it was from above. The mansions seemed small, and even the trees looked like toys from so high up. She swore she could see all the way to the ocean, and she counted the sailboats in the harbor. From this vantage point, they looked more like white speckles than large ships.

"I know, it's pretty amazing right? Best view in the city." Tristan motioned to the other side of the bench. She sat down while still soaking in the scene.

"How'd you find out about this place?" Kira looked at him and noticed he was just as caught up by the sight as she was.

"My mother showed me." He paused, and Kira saw his eyes lose focus as he jumped back into his own memory. "It was a long time ago," he said after a few moments of silence.

"Do you miss her?" she asked, guessing she must have died when he was young. Tristan nodded and she saw him retreat again.

"You can talk to me." She reached out to grab his hand. He met her gaze when their fingers touched. Sadness laced his melancholic blue eyes, but Kira didn't know what to do about it.

"I believe you," he said, grasping her hand tighter, and they remained quiet for a moment, just feeling comforted by one another's presence. Kira looked at her palm resting on Tristan's lap and wondered if she could have ever guessed that the day would lead her here.

In the corner of her eye, she noticed something peeking out of Tristan's pocket—something she hadn't seen when he had been standing.

"What's that?" she asked, and he followed her gaze to see what she meant.

A second later, he pulled a small moleskin notebook from his pocket and handed it to her. "It's just sketches, you can take a look if you want."

"You draw?" She opened the book.

"Just as a hobby."

Kira imagined more than saw his shrug because she quickly became engrossed by his small pencil drawings. There were pages of hands that were perfectly shaded and seemed to leap from the paper. There were outlined sketches of people playing in parks, dogs running, and children hanging on swings. She came upon a series of pages dedicated to different people sitting on benches—one an old woman whose laugh lines told the story of a beautiful life, another a homeless man who was draped in newspapers for warmth, a third a couple holding hands and staring out toward their future.

"Tristan, these are amazing," Kira told him without pausing to look up. She continued to flip through the small notebook, slowly taking in his work. "Seriously, this isn't just a hobby."

"Thanks," he told her when she gave it back.

"Have you ever thought about art school?"

"Not for me." He shook his head while stuffing the notebook into his pocket.

"Why not? You should let people teach you. Those drawings have a real personality to them. I can tell exactly who the people you are picturing are just by the expressions you give them." Tristan shrugged in response, which just made Kira push the point even more. "I get the whole bad boy thing you do, but I know it's just a front. You really care about people. I can tell from the drawings that you choose people you feel for in some way."

He sighed when she finished talking, as if he had known she would notice that but had hoped she wouldn't. Then his expression changed so his lip curved

up and his eyes gleamed in a mischievous way. "A front, huh? I just broke you into a church."

"You broke me into a church to show me a beautiful view and a place that is sacred to you. Not exactly the same as breaking and entering," she challenged back.

"Ah, but we used the trap door, which most people don't know about. I could have just taken you up the janitor's steps."

"Would those have been cobweb free?" He nodded and Kira slapped his arm. "Jerk."

"Come on, it was much more adventurous my way. Admit it, you were scared but secretly excited."

Kira smiled, whispering, "That's generally how you make me feel."

The words popped out of her mouth before she had time to think. She cringed and silently cursed herself for basically admitting she liked him.

"Me too," he whispered, more to himself than to her.

She looked up, but Tristan gazed out the window. She knew his thoughts were churning, and she wished she could peek inside of his head for just a minute.

"Tristan?" she asked to see if he was listening.

"Yeah," he said distantly.

"Why did you save my life? You know I heard what you said to your friends, but for some reason I can't believe it."

He turned to look at her now, and Kira was certain he could read the confusion on her face. His chest expanded slowly in a prolonged breath and his eyes remained closed for an instant too long. He was thinking about how to tell her something. Kira could almost see the secrets floating in his head and could feel him struggle with how much to say. "I saved you because I wanted to protect you, and I still do. Some small part of me won't stop believing you are precious to me, even if I'm not supposed to feel that way."

She inched closer, trying to read his mind with her proximity. "Who says

you can't? Your friends?"

He laughed bitterly. "No, my so-called friends are the only ones making sense. We just can't ever be, Kira."

"Why?"

"Someday, you'll understand." He leaned back against the wall, away from her presence.

"God, I am so sick of everyone telling me I'll eventually understand all of this stuff. Luke keeps telling me that, like some patronizing father who knows everything about my life, but won't give me any insight. And now you! I never expected this from you. What happened to 'Mr. Breaking the Rules'?"

Kira started pacing around their little corner, trying to make sense of everything. She was sure Luke and Tristan and his crowd all knew something she didn't. They were all keeping the same secret from her. When would she realize it? When would she finally connect the dots and stop feeling like the baby that everyone had to coddle?

"I just can't be the one to tell you, to see you look at me with hatred, because you will hate me." Pain passed over Tristan's face and he winced.

"Look, Tristan, I get the whole self-loathing thing you have going on. I can see that you're troubled somehow by the way you retreat into your thoughts and lose track of the world. But don't presume to know my mind. You have no idea how I will react to anything. Everyone has some sort of past to hide. The fact that yours may be darker than most doesn't scare me. It makes me want to help you, not hate you." She practically spat those last few words, frustration at an all time high.

He stood, and she knew his anger had mounted with her little speech. "Kira, you just don't know what you're talking about. It's not my past that you will hate me for, but today. Today, I let myself believe we lived in a different time, and when I saw you standing at the park, I couldn't help but be glad we could finally be alone together. But today, I let you feel for me and let my walls come down for an instant, and that is what you will hate me for, for the moments

of intimacy that I will cherish but you will look back on and loathe."

Kira hadn't realized the fight had brought them face to face and mere inches apart. Like people say, anger is just one small step from passion, so when she spoke, she hardly realized what she would say until she said it. "Well, if it's intimacy with you that I'll come to hate, I might as well enjoy it while it lasts."

Kira took one small step forward and their bodies melted into one another's. Quickly, his hands cupped her cheeks and his lips were on hers. She reached her hands around Tristan's back to pull him closer. Heat rushed through her body and she moved with Tristan as he pushed her back against the wall, encasing her body within his, pulling his arms around her waist. Her hands found their way to his head and she grasped his thick black hair, running her fingers through it. His lips moved from her lips, down past her ear to the base of her neck.

"Kira," Tristan sighed. But then his body stiffened and he pulled away. "I have to go," he said with a firmer voice.

Tristan turned away from her and left, disappearing before Kira even had time to react to what had just happened. Instead, she sank down the wall she had just been pressed against, gazed at the empty spot Tristan had filled moments ago, and began to cry.

Kira needed to understand whatever was going on. The frustration of not knowing was driving her crazy. Luke didn't want her spending time with Tristan, and even Tristan didn't want her spending time with Tristan, so she decided there was only one thing to do—spend more time around Tristan. He was the key to finding out her role in everything, and she knew he wanted to be close to her even if another part of him fought that feeling. Watching him run away had just made Kira even more determined to solve this mystery revolving around her, even if she would come to regret losing this ignorance.

Kira stood up and wiped her face free of tears. She looked out at the sun setting over Charleston and knew it was time to leave the church and what had happened there behind for a little while.

She grabbed her bag, which she had set down on the bench, and noticed that Tristan had dropped his notebook on the way out. She leaned down under the bench and slid the notebook from its hiding place in the dark. In place of a novel, she knew what she would be looking at before bed tonight.

After finding her way through the bells and back down the steps, Kira searched for that janitor's staircase Tristan had mentioned. She walked in the dark around the circular steps three times before finally finding a small knob beautifully free of cobwebs and dirt, and slowly opened the door. This path led right down to the front lobby of the church, and Kira silently cursed Tristan as she placed her foot on each superbly polished step. She quickly walked through the lobby and out the door, thankful no one was there to see her sneaking out. After a bit more walking, Kira finally managed to find her car. When she got home, her parents were not pleased.

"Where have you been all day? I was worried sick." Her mother barraged her as soon as she opened the front door. Her father stood in the background nodding his head and giving her a stern look. "I expected you to come home hours ago. Isn't this why we bought you a phone, so you could call us if you were running late? You don't understand what can happen to a young girl out alone at night."

Kira rolled her eyes and appeased her mother by listening to the lecture that began. She'd lived in New York, Kira thought, she understood the dangers of being alone in an unfamiliar place. She didn't bother to mention she had been abandoned by her tour guide after he ditched her in the church steeple they had broken into, which was why she had trouble finding her car.

Eventually, her mother cooled down and started breathing again. After which, Kira quickly said goodnight, made her exit, and snuck into her sister's room to kiss her sleeping forehead. When she made it to her own room, Kira breathed a sigh of relief that her father had remained silent because he usually asked all the questions she didn't want to give answers to. He was very good at reading people and almost always knew when she was hiding something.



After a shower and some chocolates from her secret candy stash, Kira settled into bed and turned on her reading lamp. She gently eased Tristan's notebook open, and looked over the drawings she had gazed at earlier that day.

Again, Kira noticed the expressions he was able to convey, and she tried to think on why he chose those people on the benches in those three drawings that truly caught her eye. A homeless man? Had Tristan been homeless, or did he just sympathize with a man who had lost everything? An older woman? He could have a grandmother he missed, or old women could remind him of the age his mother should be. Kira thought back to his question. Did she believe he could have been alive during the war? Could he sympathize with the old because he would never be there? And what of the young couple in love? Was that why he pulled away? He was jealous of those in love because he believed he was not deserving of it?

Kira sighed. All she had were questions. Ever since she moved back to Charleston, everything about her life had become questions with no answers. She flipped past the bench drawings, past some blank pages, and tried to see if he drew anything else in that book she hadn't seen.

After skipping through fifty blank pages, Kira was about ready to give up and go to bed when she turned one more page, and her own face was staring back at her. Her hair took up most of the small piece of paper, and within the mass of curls was the most perfect drawing of herself she had ever seen. The fire in her eyes sparkled. She was smiling in a laugh, and even her freckles were in the right location. Kira looked alive in the picture—and happy. Beyond all the minute details he drew to perfection, her emotion ran off the page. She looked like the sun radiating warmth to the viewer. Was this a drawing of how he pictured her? Kira never thought she had looked so happy or pretty in her life, but maybe Tristan had thought so.

Kira turned to the next page and saw a close-up of her eyes, turned again and it was her lips. One more turn and she saw herself standing by the wharf staring out at Fort Sumter with a breeze in her hair and her skirt flowing in the

wind. Kira realized that he must have been observing her for a little while today before he finally snuck up on her to say hello. Why was he so afraid to talk to her? Everyone in school was intimidated by his good looks and standoffish attitude, by his dark slacks and typical black T-shirt, and by his friends. He was a bonafide bad boy. Every girl secretly loved it and every boy was secretly jealous of it, but Kira was starting to realize that it wasn't who he was at all. What bad boy secretly draws pictures of old ladies and young couples? Tristan was more of a tortured artist than anything else.

She sighed and turned the page again, but the blank paper returned. There were only four secret pages devoted to her, and Kira tore each one out before dropping the small notebook back into her bag to give to Tristan at school. She wanted him to know she had discovered his secret and that she wasn't going down without a fight.

## Chapter Five



"Hello, gorgeous." Luke sat down next to Kira in the cafeteria with his typical greeting. "Where were you this weekend? I didn't get a single phone call. Don't tell me you have a new best friend that you're sneaking around with." He looked at her with pouted puppy eyes.

"You know, now that I think of it, I do have a new best friend. It's called my Civil War term paper." She rolled her eyes and shoved her notebook full of ideas at him.

"Kira, Kira, Kira. When will you learn? Term papers are to be completed during the last week of the term, not two months before it's over." He opened her notebook and skimmed some of her notes. "But let me know when you decide what to do cause I will definitely steal one of these discarded theses."

Kira grabbed her research back from him quickly. "We'll see," she said slyly, making a joke but knowing full well she would help him out if he actually needed it.

"Hi y'all." Emma waved while Dave carried both of their lunch trays over. Kira assumed the fuchsia dress Emma wore was new, and that Dave had been forced to play the chivalrous boyfriend. From the back of the cafeteria, Kira could barely see Miles walking over behind the mound of books he held in his arms. In fact, all that she saw were the black rims of his glasses pressed against his forehead.

"How are you guys just sitting and laughing?" he said when he dropped what looked like twenty pounds worth of library books on the table. "Are you not at all worried about college?" Kira had noticed the fear of not getting into Harvard or another Ivy League school had made Miles go a tad insane.

"Relax, man," Dave chimed in before slapping Miles on the back.

"Yeah, seriously. Go buy some lunch and take a minute to chill out. The

books will be here when you get back." Luke pushed Miles toward the lunch line. As soon as he was out of hearing distance, Luke turned to everyone else and said, "We should totally hide these."

"Oh lord, leave him alone." Kira put her arms around the books and protectively pulled them over toward her, Emma, and Dave. Basically, as far from Luke as they could go. When Miles returned, he seemed calmer but still turned the conversation to college applications. Kira knew all of that was irrelevant for her and couldn't help but let her eyes shift to gaze out the window. For the first time in a while, not a single one of the misfits was looking at her. In fact, Kira studied them for a few minutes and they seemed completely disinterested in everything going on inside of the school. She needed to grab Tristan when he was alone to confront him about what had happened and give him back his drawings, but how to get him away from his friends?

"Earth to Kira. Come in, Kira." Luke waved his hand in front of her face. She snapped out of her thoughts and rejoined the conversation.

"What? Sorry, I've had a lot going on."

"Just asked what you would be up to next year."

"Oh, a gap year to work in a restaurant hopefully, then I'll be applying to culinary school, and I'll be just as crazy as Miles is now." Miles finally cracked a smile at her statement and they continued lunch with ease.

As she walked to English with Luke, Kira knew this would be her only chance to catch Tristan alone. But at the same time Mr. Bell walked through the door, Tristan came rushing in and sat down on the opposite side of the room. And when the class was over, Tristan ran out before Kira could even begin to stand and walk over to him.

For the next two days, the same thing happened. Kira was always one step behind and couldn't trap Tristan alone for the two minutes she needed to get her point across.

On Wednesday, after her third try at chasing him down, Kira pulled Emma aside at the end of the day and sat down with her on one of the benches outside

of the school.

"So, I need to get some advice. Can I give you the short version of my weekend?" Kira asked once they'd settled.

"Ooh, this sounds juicy," Emma said, and Kira noticed that she seemed very excited for some gossip to live vicariously through.

"Okay, well, on Saturday I went to Charleston to start working on my history paper, just like I told you all in the cafeteria. What I didn't mention was that I ran into Tristan. We snuck into a church steeple and ended up making out for a while." Kira finished quickly and let out the breath she had been holding. She peered at Emma carefully, hoping to see no judgment coming from her friend's eyes.

"Whoa, I was not expecting that. Way to go, Kira." Emma put her hand out for a discreet low-five, and Kira happily slapped her hand down. "Now back up, give me a little more detail, and tell me what the heck the problem is."

"I basically ran into him early in the day, and then he said he would be my tour guide and show me all the Charleston hot spots. We ended up having a great time, and Tristan told me he wanted to show me his favorite place in the city, which happened to be the top of a church steeple, so we snuck up. We ended up talking, which turned into fighting, and fighting turned into kissing, and kissing turned into Tristan freaking out, running away and abandoning me in the church."

Kira sighed and thought about how much to reveal about why Tristan ran away. She could tell Emma was trying to wait patiently, but her foot tapped against the sidewalk with enthusiasm at the new turn of events.

"I'm not completely sure why he left," Kira continued, "but I think it has something to do with his friends. And now at school he's avoiding me. I know I need to catch him alone, which is where you come in." She looked at Emma hopefully, needing a plan—and fast.

"And the only class you have together is English, right?" Emma asked.

Kira nodded.

"With Luke?"

Kira nodded again.

Emma chewed her lip. "I'm going to need to do some thinking for a minute, a little scheming time."

Now it was Kira's turn to try to wait patiently while Emma sat with a furrowed brow and her chin resting on her hand. Kira looked out at the school parking lot, which had completely emptied during their conversation, and she was grateful to not have to worry about eavesdroppers. The last thing she needed was to be the talk of the school and to let her secret afternoon become public knowledge. Kira ran her sweaty palms down the length of her pants, trying to calm herself.

"I have it." Emma's entire face brightened as she turned to Kira with a gleam in her eye. Kira was instantly overjoyed to have Emma on her side, especially when she looked so mischievous. "Today, in my English class, we got into groups of two to read lines from *Romeo and Juliet*, something about how hearing it gives it more meaning or whatever. Anyway, you'll only have about five or so minutes, but if you can trap Tristan and force him to be your partner it might give you the time you need."

"Emma, you're a genius!" Kira grabbed the girl's shoulders, shaking them with glee. "I totally forgot when Mr. Bell made that announcement at the end of class."

"Too distracted by your lover?" Emma asked with a teasing grin. Kira tried to laugh it off, but the caught-in-the-act look was all over her face. "Seriously though, I need some details. Was he a good kisser?"

Kira had a quick flashback to being backed up against the wall in his arms. "Yes," she said while biting her lip to keep from smiling too widely.

"Can I get some more details on that please? A little play-by-play maybe? I can promise you, every girl in the school wishes she was in my shoes right now, well more likely yours, but still."

Kira laughed and started giving up some of the more intimate details about

the romance of the location and how they were yelling one moment then caught up in it the next. Emma hung on her every word and sighed romantically at the appropriate moments. It was the perfect ten minutes to Kira, who had been thinking too many deep thoughts recently. She just wished she had thought to supply some chocolate or peanut butter. One thing was certain though, next time she needed to watch romantic movies like *The Notebook*, Emma would definitely be the one to call. She needed another person besides her mother who could appreciate the “I want to cry because this is so heartbreakingly romantic” sort of movie.

Eventually, Kira drove away from the school and found her way back home, just in time to make dinner. She sat her little sister on the counter as she prepared the chicken picatta and heard all about Chloe’s day with her imaginary friend Beth. Sometimes Kira wished she was still in those days of make-believe, but despite how nerve-racking the past few weeks had been, she knew she was on the verge of figuring it all out. She just needed a bit more patience.

The next day, all Kira could think about was how to put her plan into action. She barely spoke to her friends at lunch and was silent during her walk to English with Luke. Just as they were about to turn into the classroom, she stopped moving.

"Hey, Luke?" He turned when he heard her speak. "I forgot something in my locker. I'll meet you inside."

He nodded and continued into the classroom.

She tried to walk at a normal pace, but quickly sped to her hiding spot and peered around the corner of a locker to keep a lookout on the classroom door. For a moment she was worried that Tristan would be the one to sneak up on her, but Kira soon saw Mr. Bell enter the classroom, and Tristan was close behind.

After he disappeared inside, Kira made her way to the door, hoping that an open seat was left next to Tristan and that all of this planning wasn't for nothing. Luke sat at the front of the classroom with an open seat next to him, and Tristan was two feet from her next to the other open seat. She flashed an apologetic look

at Luke and sat down, trying to look guilty at being late instead of smug at having everything go smoothly.

Tristan didn't glance at her, but she thought she saw his arm muscles tighten in anger when she sat down a few inches from him. Kira tried to act innocent and pulled out some paper to jot down notes during the first half of class. Really, she was losing all of her patience waiting for Mr. Bell to end the lecture and start with the acting lessons. If he didn't do it soon, she knew her chance to trap Tristan for a few minutes would be lost. She couldn't really pull the "I left something in my locker" act again. Kira knew Luke would be suspicious.

Finally, Mr. Bell walked down the aisles assigning pairs, and Kira let out a silent breath of relief when she and Tristan were paired together.

"Okay, everyone, now that we've finished reading the play, I want you all to practice reading Shakespeare out loud. He was a playwright after all, his words were meant to be spoken. I think the balcony scene will do since I paired you all in coed groups. You are all hormonal teenagers, right?"

The class responded with a laugh, and everyone opened their books to act 2, scene 2. Tristan turned to Kira with what she could only call a pained expression and tried his best to read some of the most romantic lines ever written in a completely melancholic voice.

"But soft what light through yonder window breaks. It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon, who is already sick and pale with grief that thou her maid art far more fair than she."

Kira couldn't help but laugh at him as he speedily grumbled out the lines without even an ounce of passion. "You know this is supposed to be a love scene, right?"

He looked up at her with contempt while she tried to swallow her smile. "Oh, really? I hadn't noticed."

He looked back down at the page and continued to read aloud in his monotone voice, totally ignoring her, which just prompted her to continue.



"Look, Tristan, there's no point hiding the fact that you like me, from me I mean. I flipped through your notebook again after I saw that you'd left it behind. I saw the drawings you made of me." He looked up at her then, and Kira handed his small moleskin back to him, happy to at least have that out of the way. For some reason, she thought he was looking at her like she was an unruly child who wouldn't follow instructions. Where he got that from, she had no idea, but he continued with his speech so she continued talking over him.

"They were really great, actually—pretty flattering." She smiled, hoping he would look at her again, but he didn't. "Anyway, I think we should talk about what happened, not here obviously, but somewhere where we can meet in private." They both chose that moment to look around, and Kira saw they had the attention of both Luke and Tristan's friends. Yeah, the classroom was definitely not the right place to have this conversation, and she kind of hoped talking would lead to other things like it had last time...

He finished reading his lines. "Hey, Juliet, it's your turn." He smirked.

"Oh, right." She looked down at her book. "'O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo.'" She tried to copy his apathetic style of reading and was secretly overjoyed when he laughed at her.

"I get it, I sounded like an idiot." She just continued giving him the same silent treatment he had given her. "Okay, here's the truth, Kira. We can't talk here, and we shouldn't even be talking now, or maybe ever."

"You told me that already." She stopped reading.

"Yet, you seem to have trouble understanding it. English is your first language, right?" She rolled her eyes at the joke. "Like I said before, we just can't ever be."

"I understand what you're saying, but I also know you don't mean it." She leaned closer to him to prevent from being overheard.

"I do," he said, forcing the point.

"Oh really?" she tried to push him now. "It didn't seem that way when you kissed me."

"Kira, forget that ever happened, okay?"

"Or what? You don't scare me."

"I should," he said and shot Kira a lethal look.

His eyes changed color to the lightest blue she could imagine, and they held her captive. Not in the romantic way, but as though she were a prisoner held paralyzed. His eyes were ice cold, making her shiver as though she had been dropped in an arctic pool, and slowly his pupils began to expand, overtaking his irises.

Kira was scared, but more than that, she felt like he knew it and didn't care. Try as she might, she couldn't look away—completely stuck. Slowly, a feeling of warmth spread to her hands, burning hot, a sense of power that fought the fear tightening her stomach in knots.

Whipping her gaze to the floor, Kira breathed heavy as she finally broke his stare. Her fingertips still tingled with the heat that had coursed through her, allowing her to break his gaze. Kira leaned back against her chair, away from him, and touched her fingers to her cheek.

They burned into her skin.

"What the hell was that?" she asked unsteadily, still not looking up. The heat emanating from her hand absorbed all of Kira's thoughts.

"Me," he said with the venom gone from his voice. She looked at him again and caught the unbearably sad expression in his eyes before he looked away.

*Or me?* she thought, feeling the warmth finally ebb.

"Rewriting Shakespeare, are we?" Mr. Bell walked between them, and Kira couldn't help but let a guilty look cross her face. They most certainly had not been following the assignment, but she wanted to hug Mr. Bell for breaking the silence and pausing her thoughts. "Tristan, you seem to have a hard time following the classroom rules." Tristan looked at Mr. Bell defiantly, and Kira felt a little sorry that she had caused the whole thing. "What were you and Miss Dawson talking about so passionately? It definitely was not Romeo and Juliet."

"Screw you," Tristan replied. Every student in the classroom inhaled in shock. She couldn't tell if he said it just to be defiant or to hide their conversation from his friends.

"Well, Mr. Kent." Tristan looked up at the use of his last name. "Perhaps you and Miss Dawson would like to show everyone how it's done. Tomb scene. Front of the class. Now."

Kira stood and practically pulled Tristan from his seat to stop him from getting both of them punished with extra homework.

As they walked to the front of the class, he whispered to her, "Think you can be quiet and play dead for a few minutes?"

When they reached the front, she turned to face him and, with his body hiding her face from the rest of the class, said defiantly, "Think you can pretend to not enjoy kissing me for your friends?"

"Think you can for Luke?" He smirked and moved aside.

*Damn him, she thought, he always has to have the last word.*

"You can start with Romeo's monologue," Mr. Bell prodded, and Tristan began to read.

Kira listened intently for the cue that meant he would lean down to give her a quick kiss in front of the classroom. As she listened, she realized he was much better at reading than he let on. His voice was full of passion as he paused at the appropriate moments and rushed through some lines as though the words were his own. Kira lay still on the front table with closed eyes, but was sure he had captivated the entire classroom as he read Romeo's lines. And she felt herself fall for him a little bit more the longer he spoke.

"Eyes, look your last."

Even through closed lids, his gaze sent a thrill down her spine.

"Arms, take your last embrace."

His body gently settled on top of her own. He seemed to speak only to her ear.

"And lips," he whispered, running his thumb along the edge of her lower

lip, something the script definitely didn't call for. "Oh you the doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss, a dateless bargain to engrossing death."

He lifted himself off of her to continue reading. Kira heard him utter the last few lines and recognized the swish of his clothes as he lifted his arm to swallow invisible poison.

"Oh true apothecary, thy drugs are quick," he spoke with a stalled voice. His hands fell on either side of her face and the desk creaked as he leaned slowly down. From the brush of warm air, she knew that his lips were only an inch away.

"Thus with a kiss I die."

For what seemed like a millennium, Kira lay still, waiting, until finally, in the softest kiss she could ever imagine, his lips landed on hers and remained there for a few seconds longer than they should have. Her lips curved into a smile and his did the same. Unfortunately, he then pretended to fall off the desk and die.

*Shoot*, Kira thought, listening to the engrossed silence of the class, *how the heck am I supposed to follow that?*

Mr. Bell spoke for the other characters, until she knew it was her time to wake. Kira opened her eyes slowly and sat up to speak her lines to the friar. She tried to look appropriately shocked when she was told of Romeo's death but heard some people snicker at her failed attempt. And just when Kira was supposed to have her own monologue, the bell thankfully rang and saved her from the embarrassing experience.

Kira looked down at Tristan and almost believed him dead, until he jumped up, winked at her, and fled from the classroom. Kira sat for a moment longer, trying to guess who had come out of that exchange with the upper hand, wondering if Tristan would agree to talk things over in private.

More importantly, she felt her own cheek, trying to recall the overwhelming warmth that spread from her hand to that very spot. Kira had no idea what had happened, and she didn't know who to ask for answers.

With a heavy sigh, Kira lifted herself from her seated position on the makeshift tomb and walked over to gather her things. When she left the classroom, Luke was waiting for her by the door.

"So...that was interesting," he said with shrugged shoulders and hands buried in his jeans pockets. Kira remained silent as they walked step for step down the hall. "I personally thought you were captivating as Juliet. Great idea to put a hand to your chest then forehead and pretend to faint when you saw Romeo had died. Classic move."

Kira smiled and shoved him away from her for making fun. "I'm not an actress, and I never said I was," she said in her defense.

"Trust me, I know." Luke jumped away from the shove he had already anticipated. "Want to talk about it?"

"What?" She tried to hide the frown on her face, and pulled her purple sweater tighter around her torso.

"Whatever it was you and Tristan got in trouble for fighting about," he prodded. Kira knew it hurt Luke that she was starting to keep secrets from him—that there might be something she would rather talk to Tristan about.

"I was just thanking him for saving me in that surfboard accident. I never really got the chance before." Kira wanted to let Luke know the truth but knew she couldn't, no matter how much she hated to shut him out. He had been there as her friend since she walked through the doors of this school a month ago, and she really didn't want to hurt him. For a moment, Kira had thought she would tell him about Tristan, but she remembered Bethany and knew Luke would never understand. He was too emotionally involved to put himself in her shoes.

"I bet he didn't want to hear any of it."

Kira shrugged. "Something like that."

"Cheer up." Luke put an arm around her. "Want to skip class and buy some ice cream? I wouldn't mind playing hooky for the rest of the day." She smiled at the mischievous look in his eye.

"And how are we supposed to do that?" she asked, knowing the campus

security would definitely report two students ditching class.

"Follow me you must, young padawan," Luke said, quoting Star Wars and attempting to use a Yoda voice. He started running down the hallway, and she ran after him, knowing they were already late to class and had nothing left to lose. He stopped at the hallway intersection in front of the main exit and peered around the corner.

Out of nowhere, Luke produced a straw and a small rolled up piece of paper, sending the most perfect spitball she had ever seen—well, the only spitball she had ever seen—into the head of a security guard down the hall. She covered her mouth to stop from laughing as Luke sailed another one into his head. The security guard spun around angrily, and Kira and Luke snuck into an open janitors closet. They heard the guard's heavy steps as he ran down one hall, paused and made a wrong turn down the hallway leading away from them.

"Go, go, go." Luke pushed her out of the closet and they ran for the door. Once they made it through the exit, Kira forced Luke to keep running, and she bit back her own laughter until they made it to the parking lot.

"Ice cream, my lady?" Luke pretended to bow and offered his arm. Kira accepted.

They marched over to his car and sat down safely inside before erupting into a fit of laughter that only stopped when they both had tears streaming down their cheeks. Luke revved the engine and pulled out of the parking lot. They left the school completely behind them.

Kira couldn't think of a more perfect ending to the day, or of a more perfect friend for that matter. She smiled to herself, glanced at Luke when she caught him looking at her, and turned up the music to take on lead vocals.

## Chapter Six



A week later, Kira opened her locker to see a portrait of herself leaning against her textbooks. She grabbed the small paper that held a close-up of her face, with a dusting of light curls around the edges, and knew it was a message from Tristan. She turned the paper over to read the note scribbled in cursive on the back.

"Meet me in the auditorium at lunchtime."

She noticed he didn't even sign his name, like he knew she had been waiting for a sign from him. She, of course, had been waiting. But still, the arrogance of assuming he was the only guy who would leave her a note! Kira didn't care though, because just like in Charleston, Tristan had been the one to break the silence, which meant he really couldn't resist her either.

"What's that?" Emma had snuck behind Kira without her noticing.

Kira turned, clutching at her chest. "Good lord, you just gave me a heart attack."

"Sorry," Emma said without really meaning it as she tried to peer closer at the paper Kira had quickly stuffed inside her binder. She didn't want to share Tristan's drawing, but she would definitely tell Emma what it said.

"Let's just say our little scheme worked, and I won't be at lunch today." Kira tried to play it cool and not give away how excited she was.

"Ooh, scandalous. Was that a love note?" Emma looked dreamy eyed.

"I don't know, but I'm willing to try to find out," Kira said before slamming her locker closed and following Emma to class where the gossip was quickly overtaken by the need to pay attention to their teacher's lecture on differential equations.

When lunch rolled around, Kira dodged the crowd and went in the opposite direction toward the auditorium on the complete other side of the

school. She arrived before Tristan and walked past the rows of chairs up toward the stage where the set for the December musical *White Christmas* was being prepared. Her school in New York only allowed secular performances, and she did kind of like that people got into the Christmas spirit here. Of course, it was the middle of October, so really only the drama crew had reached the point of singing Christmas carols, but she could anticipate how crazy school would be right after Thanksgiving.

In the middle of the stage, a half-painted Christmas tree stood surrounded by boxes cutout like presents, but not decorated. There was a piano in the corner and a costume rack held forties style dresses and suits for the actors. Kira scrambled on stage and walked around the yards of fake pine and tinsel that already covered it.

"Mistletoe?" Tristan called from behind. She turned in time to see him jump deftly onto the stage.

"I hadn't noticed." Kira tried to play it cool. Tristan pulled a strand of green plastic leaves from his pocket with a smirk. "I knew there had to be a reason you wanted to meet here. But you'll have to catch me first." Kira teased and started backing away.

His smirk turned into the half-smile she loved and a little dimple sprouted on his cheek. Tristan strode confidently forward, and when he got a little closer, Kira jumped behind the fake tree to use it as a defensive wall, moving left when he did and right when he did. She laughed when his frustration grew and jumped out from behind the tree to try to leap off the stage, moving the chase into different territory. But strong arms gripped around her waist, lifted her off the ground, and swung her around in circles.

"You're mine now," he whispered into her ear, and Kira couldn't decide if the shiver that raced down her back was full of excitement or fear. He let her feet drop to the ground, and she turned in the circle of his arms.

"Changed your mind about that we-can-never-be nonsense?" She smiled in victory.



"Not completely, but you are doing a great job convincing me." Tristan lifted the corner of his mouth again and she laid her hand on his cheek, capturing the dimple in her palm, before sliding it up into his hair, pushing his ebony bangs back so she could see his eyes better.

"You have to tell me something first," Kira said, pausing. Tristan nodded, looking at her with concern and she almost thought a hint of dread. Kira bit her lip, thinking about how to phrase her question. "What happened when you looked at me before, in class I mean? I swear I couldn't move and then something happened to me that I didn't understand. And I know you know." She held his face still, making sure he didn't look away to hide his secrets again.

Tristan hesitated for a moment. His face was frozen in a grimace—the expression of someone with nowhere left to run.

"I do know." He sighed, and Kira thought it sounded as though a weight that had been holding him in place had suddenly been lifted free. "There's something about me... about who, no what, I am that you need to know, and Luke will have to fill you in on the rest. I'm so tired of hiding, Kira." Anguish was written all over his face, and she let her hand fall to his chest, to his heart, trying to give him some comfort in what he was going to admit. "I'm—"

A clapping sound interrupted Tristan, causing both of them to spin, searching for the source. It came from the back row of the auditorium where Diana, John, and Jerome sat with grins on their faces. When Kira and Tristan finally noticed them, the three intruders stood and strode down the aisle slowly, with complete confidence, clapping at a leisurely pace and staring only at Tristan.

Fear trickled down Kira's spine. She didn't understand what was going on or the more than venomous looks on his friends' faces.

"Well done, Tristan. You had even me believing that performance." Diana gracefully jumped on stage in one smooth motion that shocked Kira. Jerome and John stopped clapping and followed suit.

"Don't listen to a word they say, and please stay behind me," Tristan

whispered to Kira as he turned around to face his friends. "This isn't what it seems," he told his friends in a confident voice Kira hoped he wasn't faking.

"And what is it?" Jerome's deep voice seemed to reverberate off the walls.

"I brought her here to talk and that's it." Tristan angled himself in front of Kira, as his friends closed in on them.

"To talk? And what, if I may ask, do you possibly have to talk about?" Diana sneered and walked closer to Tristan, stopping barely a foot away from him. John and Jerome came up beside her, and Kira hoped she was forgotten as they continued to stare at Tristan.

"You may not ask," Tristan replied coldly.

"Then I demand," Diana hissed.

Tristan tensed in front of her. A few seconds of strained silence passed before he suddenly started laughing very obviously in Diana's face. Kira thought he had gone mad. Surely there was nothing funny about this situation, and she watched as his friends' faces darkened with anger.

"Demand? Diana, you get ahead of yourself. You know you can't threaten me." Tristan used his height to look down at her, proving his dominance.

"Maybe I can't alone, but even you can't take on three-to-one odds." Diana angled herself back, so she, Jerome, and John looked like one solid, impenetrable wall.

John and Jerome shuffled their feet, getting ready to move at a second's notice. Kira hoped it wouldn't become a fight. She had no idea Tristan's friends would react so harshly to seeing them together. For a moment, she wondered if she had done the right thing in trying to pursue him. Maybe it would have been better for him to draw her in secret and for her to move on, never knowing what could have been. But Kira knew it was too late for those thoughts.

The fight she expected didn't start. Instead, John placed his hand on Diana's shoulder. "Perhaps we should let him explain," he questioned, relieving some tension.

Diana nodded, not breaking her gaze. "Can you explain, Tristan? Why are

you here with this girl when we said we would kill her together or not at all? When we said we would wait and watch to see how much she knew?"

*Kill?* Kira sucked in her breath. They thought he meant to kill her? They had all planned to kill her?

"I was greedy, I admit," Tristan began.

Kira could hardly believe her ears. He couldn't have meant to kill her. They had met here because he wanted to be with her, or that's what she'd thought at least. Kira backed up a few feet, away from him. After all, how much did she really know about Tristan? What if he had been fooling her all along, fooling her into falling for him so she would be easier to catch? But why did he even want to catch her or to maybe kill her? None of it made any sense.

Tristan started speaking again, and Kira tried to shut her questioning mind down to listen. "I wanted the power for myself, and for that I apologize. Let's go and forget this happened. Let's go to a different town, one not swarming with conduits to confuse us and place us against each other."

Conduits? What were conduits and why would they try to split Tristan from his friends? And what power?

Kira looked at Diana and saw one very prominently raised eyebrow, displaying her doubt. The black-haired beauty didn't believe Tristan's story. But, Kira noticed, it wasn't the killing or the conduits she questioned, but Tristan's belief in his own words.

For the first time since moving to Charleston, Kira wasn't sure if she wanted all of the answers, especially to the question of Tristan's real intent. She couldn't believe the kiss had been a lie, but what if he was just a very good actor? She had heard it in his voice during class. He could play the part of Romeo extremely well so why not that of seducer?

"Tristan?" Kira couldn't help herself, she had to ask, to know what was happening. She was scared of his friends and maybe of him too. She needed reassurance that she would be safe with him.

Tristan looked back at her, silently begging her to be quiet, and Kira

instantly knew she had made a mistake. All eyes turned in her direction, hunger clearly written on their faces. She watched the transformation as all of their eyes, even Tristan's, turned to a crystal blue. Their pupils expanded and their top lips began to puff. It was the same look Tristan had had back in the classroom—but now Kira understood that his look was meant to keep her away, and this look was meant to kill. Fear raced through her veins. She had never felt so much like prey.

Time stopped as Diana took another step closer to Tristan without taking her eyes from Kira. She leaned over and whispered in Tristan's ear while running her hand down his arm, "If you came here to kill, by all means, take the first bite."

Tristan closed his eyes slowly, and Kira read pain there. Despite his best effort, she also saw a trace of hunger in his expression, leading her to wonder just how much control Tristan had lost, not only over his friends but also over himself.

Diana, John, and Jerome all stared at Tristan, waiting for him to move toward her. They hunched over on their toes, ready to pounce, and she saw the desire for the fight in their eyes. It was a challenge, that much was obvious. It was also obvious that Tristan was losing.

Kira couldn't process anything fast enough—killing and biting and conduits. She felt as though she was on stage in a play but had forgotten all of her lines. She backed away because her gut told her to go, but she couldn't go far because her heart told her not to leave him. Tristan mouthed to her, and at first she didn't see what he said, but after a second time Kira made out one word.

Run.

The next instant, Tristan turned and used both of his hands to shove all of his weight and strength into Diana's stomach. Kira gasped as the other girl flew through the air, landed in the seats below the stage, and stood after a second without a scratch. Diana jumped impossibly far and, in one leap, was back on the stage to face Tristan.

Tristan wasn't waiting for her though. Kira tried to follow his movements but could only see Jerome fly into the stage curtain and John slam into the wall, causing the brick to crack apart. By the time Diana had returned from her initial punch, only seconds had passed, but Tristan was ready and punched her again, sending Diana toward the back of the room once more.

To Kira's right, Jerome tore through the curtain and reemerged with death in his icy blue eyes. He charged Tristan, only to be picked up and shoved head first through the stage floor, creating a hole in the wood. Jerome reached his hands beside the hole and pushed his head from the floor. Instead of a bloodied mess, he emerged untouched by the landing.

Kira was frozen.

Unable to move.

Unable to look away.

She had known that Tristan had secrets, but watching him now made her realize she never should have tried to uncover them. He wasn't human, none of them could be. Vibrations rumbled through her as their bodies slammed into the walls and the ground, causing the entire auditorium to shake from its very foundations. Not wanting to attract attention, she continued to watch as Tristan stood like a titan, throwing his friends around as though they were dolls. The building started to fissure with the force. Kira saw dents where their bodies smacked, and she slowly backed away while their attentions were on each other rather than her.

When she reached the backstage door, Kira turned her body to face away from the battle and groped for the handle. It was her only chance to get away and find Luke. Somehow, she was sure that he would understand what was happening—that this was the gruesome revelation he had been warning her about. If she didn't leave now, Kira wasn't certain she would be able to escape with her life.

But just as she slipped her hand around the door handle, a loose brick hit her in the leg, slamming her into the wall and almost knocking her unconscious.

Kira fell to the ground and suddenly there was silence.

All four of the misfits stared at her. She touched her thigh, felt the warm liquid seeping from a newly formed cut in her leg, and met Tristan's eye. Now his hunger was obvious, and the sliver of his iris that was still visible began to glow blue. Kira shook her head, unable to comprehend the horror story she had just become a part of.

With Tristan still under the spell of his own wants, his friends jumped him. Jerome and John grabbed his arms, twisting them and breaking each one before pulling them securely behind his back. Kira tried to stand and run away now that she couldn't hide, but Diana got to her impossibly fast and pulled Kira's hair to stop her. Kira screamed at the pain and Tristan jolted awake, struggling to escape his friends and ignoring the pain from his crooked arms.

"Not so fast," Diana said into Kira's ear as she dragged her around to face the boys. Jerome and John pulled Tristan back to the stage and Diana forced Kira to face him, but Kira wouldn't meet his gaze. Diana let her go, but she knew there would be no point to even try to run.

"She's pathetic, Tristan," Diana spat. "She couldn't fight. She doesn't know what she is. She couldn't even run away properly. And this is what you fancy yourself in love with?" Diana circled around to face Kira, and Kira met her cold, almost crystal, eyes with the little courage she had left.

"Diana," Tristan growled.

"Shut him up," Diana yelled back, revealing the depth of her anger, and Kira watched as Jerome held Tristan while John ripped his shirt to gag him.

"Your faux confidence is amusing," Diana said and grabbed hold of Kira's chin. "I'd rather see you beg though."

Kira remained silent.

Diana slapped her across the face, and she fell to the ground holding her cheek, knowing it would bruise but trying to ignore the pain. "Have you figured it out yet, little Kira? What we are? How you'll die?"

Kira looked at Tristan. Her leg had almost stopped bleeding. She wondered

if it would clear his head. Was it her or her blood that called to him? Kira looked at Diana and saw her smile. She finally noticed the two pointed teeth sticking slightly over her lip, and Kira couldn't help but wonder when monsters had become a reality.

Kira was amazed at her own eerie calm and acceptance of the situation. *Vampires?* she thought, silently answering Diana. And as the word circled in her head, she knew it was true—the blood, the teeth, and the strength. But she thought of them on the beach, basking in the sunlight, thought of the humanity in Tristan's eyes when he had looked at her in the steeple, and wondered what from the stories was really true.

Kira looked at Diana, at the smug look on her face that already spoke of victory. If she was going to die anyway, she might as well go out with a bang, Kira decided and thought of a retort. "You, Diana? I think you're a jealous bitch who can't take the fact that Tristan cares about a mere human more than he's ever cared about you. You're the pathetic one," she said calmly.

Pain flashed across Diana's face, but it quickly turned to anger. Kira was confident that her words had hit home, but maintained a neutral expression so she didn't give away how much the little victory meant and how scared she truly was.

Diana grabbed Kira by the neck and picked her up off the floor, so her feet rested an inch in the air. Kira started choking from the lack of oxygen. "You are nothing," Diana spat in Kira's face, and then set her back down on her toes.

But before Kira had settled on her feet, Diana's hand whipped forward and her fingernail sliced a long line across Kira's cheek. Diana slowly ran her finger along the cut and pulled it back so Kira could see the blood on her finger. And then she brought the blood close to her mouth, sniffing it, and a flash of longing passed over her eyes.

Repulsed, Kira looked away—a mistake that gave Diana an advantage to use.

"Do you think he's different, Kira?" Diana glanced at the blood on her

finger. "Do you think he doesn't thirst for you like I do? That he's kind and gentle? Well, he's not."

Diana moved to the trapped Tristan, who had a look of dread on his face. She walked closer, and Tristan couldn't tear his gaze away from Kira's blood on her finger. He struggled, trying to, eventually managing to look instead at the floor.

But Diana grabbed his face with one hand to hold it steady, removed his gag, and let her finger wander up to rest on his lips. Tristan tried not to move his mouth, tried not to taste her blood. Diana rubbed her finger clean on his closed lips and waited, like she knew he wouldn't be able to resist.

Tristan shook from the exertion of trying not to open his mouth, of trying to resist the innate urge to lick the blood clean from his lips. Kira wanted to look away, but she needed to see this, she needed to knock her feelings for Tristan right out of her head.

Before long, Tristan eyes met Kira's with a look full of pain and guilt and self-loathing. Then he slowly opened his mouth to stick out his tongue and swallow. Kira saw pleasure flash across his features, saw the slight glow in his eyes, and knew the image would stay with her for a long time.

Meanwhile, Diana clapped at her own ingenuity, like a five-year-old playing with Barbie dolls, and walked back to Kira. She slid her finger along Kira's cheek and took her own taste. Kira saw nothing but pleasure in her eyes, and that was how she still knew Tristan was different. Not guilt free or perfect or even good, but certainly not the same level of evil as Diana's cold blue eyes that showed no ounce of remorse.

Kira watched, helpless as Diana moved close again, and couldn't look away as Diana held her gaze like Tristan had in class. A shiver of fear pierced her heart at the thought of the family she would miss, but she knew there was no way out. Soulless glowing blue eyes looked into hers with excitement, and Kira was paralyzed and helpless to stop it. Diana didn't move closer for the kill, but instead remained still to enjoy watching Kira so powerless. A smile spread



across her features, like she knew Kira didn't know enough to escape.

But then, in an almost comforting way, a surge of warmth filled her palms, just like before in the classroom. Instead of being scared at this unfamiliar feeling, Kira welcomed it. Welcomed her own power coming through, the heat funneling to her hands, and she knew she would be able to escape.

Kira tried to move free of the hold but still couldn't. The heat from her hands soon became too much. In Diana's unfaltering stare, Kira knew she was still in danger. For a second she wondered if maybe Tristan had let her escape in the classroom, if he had known what was happening inside of her and knew how to stop it.

Diana had no such concern.

Kira started to feel as though she were burning from the inside out, as though her blood had turned to lava and was coursing through her body, destroying everything in its path. She started shaking. Diana mistook it for fear and laughed, but Kira barely heard the sound. She couldn't stop the vibrations racking her body. The heat was excruciating. She began to scream.

Tristan cried out, struggling against John and Jerome to try to save her. Kira didn't register him. The pressure in her body grew. She was a bomb, ticking, ticking, ticking. And as Diana sank down to take her deadly bite, Kira finally exploded.

All she felt was the release of the heat going away, seeping out of her. When the pain was almost gone, Kira opened her eyes to see fire streaming from her hands. Diana, John, Jerome, and Tristan were pressed against the back wall of the theater, held there by the light coming from her palms, unable to escape. Kira didn't know how to turn it off. She didn't know what was happening. Tristan's eyes filled with pain and fear, and Kira realized she was hurting him—destroying all of them. They were afraid of her. Powerless against her.

Kira couldn't move, could barely breathe. She just stared at her hands, unable to control anything. Different hands landed on her shoulders, shaking her, and she distantly heard someone screaming her name. But she was outside of

herself, watching this scene as if it were a movie. She almost wanted Diana to feel pain and to die—she almost wanted to kill her.

That thought snapped Kira back to reality.

Blinking, she realized it was Luke who was standing before her. He shook her and called her name. Somehow she knew he understood what was happening. That he was like her. Part of her was mad he had never told her, but a much more prominent part of her knew she needed his help and was overjoyed to see him.

"Kira, listen to me, you have to stop. You have to release them." He spoke calmly, with a commanding voice.

"How?" she cried, not knowing how to turn it off, scaring herself.

"Just close your fists and let go of the anger." He tried to soothe her and ran his hands up and down her arms.

Kira listened to his words and attempted to let go of the fear of knowing how close she had come to death. She tried to let go of the anger at Diana for wanting to kill her, for torturing her and Tristan to do so. She tried to let go of the resentment at Tristan for giving in, for showing her that her trust in him might not have been worth it.

But most of all, Kira tried to let go of the fury with herself, for not knowing who she was, for not being more demanding, for not being able to stop, for hurting Tristan, for feeling the urge to kill. And the fear, the fear was the worst. How could she let go of the self-fear—the fear of what she was and what she might be capable of?

When Kira admitted all of this to herself, she felt a slight release, and though it took all of her strength, she slowly brought her fingers down to curl into her palm. Kira brought her thumb around to hold the light and trap it within her hands. Tendrils of fire tried to seep through the cracks between her fingers, but Kira held steady until finally the heat died and she was able to just let it go.

She looked at the back wall where Diana, John, and Jerome jumped from the crevices they had been pressed into and ran from the room. Tristan dropped

slowly down and gave her one more glance. In that instant, she realized he was right—they could never be. He looked at her one last time, with sadness and with fear, and followed his friends out the door.

Kira knew he was different—she could see the humanity in his eyes where it was absent from his friends—but that wasn't enough to make her chase after him.

Instead, she looked at Luke—at his familiar eyes, friendly demeanor, and look of concern—and collapsed into his open arms as tears began to fall from her eyes.

## Chapter Seven



Kira stared out at the churning waves, barely registering the body heat coming from Luke's arm around her shoulder. He had held her while she cried and after a long time of sobbing, he had brought her to the Folly Beach Pier to let the rhythm of the water calm her.

They hadn't spoken more than five words to each other since he carried her from the auditorium, because Kira simply didn't know what to say. How could she ask if vampires were real and if what seemed like live fire just shot from her hands? How could she admit that she clearly wasn't human let alone ask someone else to believe it? Most of all, how could she confess that she had started falling for the one guy her best friend told her not to and that everything he feared had come true?

It wasn't easy to admit how naïve she had been and to admit she was wrong about everything. It wasn't easy for her to think of Tristan, his eyes in pleasure at the taste of her blood or his eyes in pain as her power slowly started killing him. It was worse still to think of herself and what she was. Kira couldn't ignore it, but how in the world could she face it?

*How do you face it?* she thought, and then answered herself. *You just do.*

"Luke?" She turned to him. Luke didn't move. He just watched and waited to see what she would say. It was like he knew her perfectly, knew what was coming but also knew that Kira needed to hear herself say it before it could be true. "Luke...what am I?"

"A girl," he replied, half-jokingly and half-reassuringly. She nudged him with her shoulder.

"Seriously, no jokes," she said.

He lifted his eyebrows in response as if to say "who, me?" but then realized even his jokes wouldn't adjust Kira's frown. Kira could tell the instant

his mood changed from protector to informer. She knew from the furrow of his brows that the jokes meant to cheer her would be exchanged for serious talk that she wasn't used to from him. Kira's mood dropped further when he lifted his arm from around her back and turned toward her on the bench to see her face. He knew everything, and it was his duty to tell her.

"First, do you know what Tristan and the others are?" She nodded yes. "Tell me, Kira."

She breathed deeply, knowing the minute she said it out loud the scene haunting her thoughts would come true. The supernatural strength and speed. The blood and the teeth. It would all be real.

"Vampires," she whispered, words almost stolen by the wind, but Luke heard her.

"Good. Can you guess what we are?"

Kira looked at him, thankful he had told her what she had already guessed—that they were the same, that she wasn't alone. But still, she had no idea what that was and looked at him with blank eyes.

"Kira, we're something called conduits, protectors if you will. We're the only living things that can hunt vampires, and I say living because we mostly believe that vampires are dead, but they frequently kill each other." She thought back to when Tristan had mentioned conduits—maybe he had been sending her a message, trying to help her.

The entire thing sounded crazy. She was some sort of vampire slayer? But it was the only explanation she had for what had just happened.

"So, we're...conduits." Kira forced the words through her lips. Luke smiled, as though happy she had accepted the name without a fight. "To be a conduit of something, you have to like channel something, right? That was the light I'm guessing, but I just don't understand."

He took her hands and flipped her palms up, so she could see the pale red burn marks they now held. "We channel the sun, and I know it sounds crazy, but that was the light you sent through your arms. It hurts at first, but it'll get better."

"The sun? That's not possible," Kira said, shaking her head. She thought back to the feeling of lava running in her veins and the light that looked almost like fire shooting from her hands. Could she even say anything was impossible anymore? "But how? Why?" she asked.

"I'll get to that later, first—"

"No, tell me now. It's been long enough," she yelled at him. "Why didn't you tell me before? Why didn't you warn me? A little 'stay away from Tristan or you'll turn into a human light bulb', if I even am human. I thought you were my best friend. I was so scared. I could have died not even knowing that I could save myself. Damn it, Luke. Why didn't you say anything?" She started crying again, now out of frustration.

"You wouldn't have died. Even though you didn't know in your head how to save yourself, your body knew danger and reacted. Besides, I wasn't allowed to, and before you open your mouth again, listen to me for ten minutes." He reached out to cover her open mouth with his finger. "You know how I said I was from a small town in Florida, called Sonnyville?" Kira nodded. "Well, it's not just a small town. It's a haven for conduits, so we can grow up together and practice without normal people around and without vampires to snatch us when we're little."

"Why wasn't I there?" Kira asked. Why hadn't she grown up knowing who she was?

"Because you're different, and I was sent here to watch and protect you."

"Sent here? Like forced to be my friend. Is anything in my life real?" She ended quietly, asking more for herself than for Luke.

"Yes, our friendship is real. I was supposed to watch from afar. But I'm getting ahead of the story. To explain what we are, I have to go back to the beginning, to the stories you were supposed to learn when you were just a kid." Kira nodded, signaling she would keep quiet until he finished.

"Ever since humans have been around, vampires have been too. Do you remember on the beach, how they were in the sun?" Kira nodded. "The stories

were wrong, just being in the sun doesn't really kill a vampire. They are stronger than anything else in the world, and faster too. Their skin won't break open unless at the hands of another vampire, which is why there are so few ways to kill them. They do live off of blood and only human blood will do. But other than that, we don't know very much because they are incredibly hard to trap and study. All we really do know is that the sunlight is lethal, just not from the distance with which it shines."

"But I thought—"

He interrupted. "I know, I just said the sun won't kill them, not like how it is in the movies with spontaneous combustion and dust and Hollywood effects. The sun slowly kills a vampire every time one is exposed, but the length of a year is like the length of a second to a vampire. So, it would take thousands and thousands of years for the sun's toll to have any effect. That's where we come along. When we channel the sunlight, it shortens the distance and makes the aging happen faster, so within minutes we can kill or harm a vamp. Are you understanding this at all?"

"I think so." Kira shrugged. She was a superhuman conduit of sunlight—a protector against vampires that would otherwise be unstoppable. In a weird way, she thought it almost made sense. The sunlight had always warmed her, not only physically, but also mentally, like she had a special tie to it. And there was no other explanation she could imagine to describe what had happened before. It was comforting to know she wasn't a monster but a savior. "But Luke, I don't understand how I'm different. Why I wasn't raised with you."

"Just have a little more patience, I promise I'm almost there."

Kira swallowed her next words to let him continue and looked back out toward the ocean. The constant churn of the waves, the monotonous pushing and receding of the water, helped her maintain a sense of calm, something she figured she would need as he went on.

"Amongst ourselves, there is debate about how vampires, and therefore ourselves in response to vampires, evolved. Many believe vampires were sent by

Satan after his fall from heaven to take over God's creations on earth. They think that we were God's response—that we are heavenly avengers meant to kill the evil and rid the earth of them. They call themselves Punishers. Many others think vampires evolved like parasites, a virus that needs a host and changes the human body for its own survival. They think there is something human, something redeemable within the creature, and therefore swear not to kill, but only to harm a vampire if it attacks a human. These conduits believe they naturally evolved as nature's response to the parasite and call themselves the Protectors.

"This debate, this question of purpose, has been around as long as history can remember. It caused a huge split in the conduits, and separate species, if you will, formed because of it. Punishers practiced only killing and sprouted red hair that myth says is a sign of their inner anger. Eventually, they lost the ability to use the light only in defense and became killing machines. Protectors practiced only defensive tactics and developed almost white hair, as a reflection of the purity they see deep within a vampire's soul. They lost the ability to kill."

"And you're a Protector?" Kira asked, trying to follow along and knowing that Luke's blonde hair marked him as such. He nodded. "But I'm...neither?" She still didn't understand, thinking of her own strawberry blonde tresses. She didn't fit either category.

"Never in the history of both our people have the Punishers and Protectors been able to have children. It's been forbidden, because there is something else I haven't mentioned yet. Vampires can become immune to us."

"I don't understand. I thought we were some super race created to stop them." Kira gripped the pier's wooden railing as dread formed in the back of her mind. She was different somehow, and it couldn't be good.

"In a way, but then we would be all powerful over them. There's always a catch, and it's another reason the two races split. If a vampire drinks the blood of a conduit, he or she becomes immune until the blood leaves their system, which varies depending on the amount taken. If a vampire drinks a Punisher, he



becomes immune to their killing light and could theoretically move from Punisher to Punisher, killing each and becoming stronger with each kill. It's too dangerous to even imagine. So, when the debate began, the sides decided to split—not only to harvest different powers, but to make sure no vampire could become immune to both powers at the same time, which would mean he or she could wipe out both races. If a Protector gets caught, Punishers must be able to kill the vampire responsible. And if a Punisher gets caught, Protectors need to trap the vampire until the blood leaves his system. Otherwise, vampires could become unstoppable. It would be chaos—"

"Which is where I come in?" She interrupted. Luke's look told her she had guessed right, and Kira tried to figure out what she was. "I'm a child of both races? I can aim to kill or to harm?"

Luke nodded.

"And I'm forbidden to exist?"

Luke nodded again.

"I could mean the end of the world?"

Luke looked away from her this time, and tears formed in her eyes again.

"Am I evil...like them?"

"No, god no, Kira." Luke pulled her in to his arms, so she was smushed against his chest, and they sat for a while as she tried to absorb all of this new information. She was a thing of good but could also mean the end of the world. So why had they even let her live? Why hadn't they forced her mom to have an abortion as soon as they found out? Kira thought of her mother and father—they didn't seem like rule breakers. Her mother's sweet red hair, her father's rather dull brown—

*Brown?* She thought. Had he dyed it? But her sister's hair was brown too. Was he not really her father?

"Luke? Do you know about my parents?" She looked up from the spot on his chest she had been crying into.

"Are you sure you want to hear everything right now?" He looked down at

her with concern, and Kira tried to swallow the choke in her throat. The fact that he hadn't said no meant she had been on the right track. Her whole life was changing in one afternoon—was she ready for more?

"Yes, I have to." Kira nodded into his wet T-shirt.

"I'm so sorry I have to be the one, but, Kira, well, the person you think is your mother is really your aunt by blood, and the man you think is your father is really your uncle."

She looked at him with blank eyes, empty inside. Her entire life had been a lie. She felt as though reality were sand slipping through her hands, like someone had played an evil trick and was suddenly showing all of his cards before the game was over. Kira moved away from Luke, to the other side of the bench and hugged her knees to her chest. She tried to let her tears fall as silently as possible, knowing she couldn't tune Luke out even if she wanted to.

Kira looked over at him before he continued, saw the hurt in his eyes for her—his eyes that were so like her own, a hint of green engulfed by yellow and orange swirls flecked with red. He was good, unquestionably. Though, she had always known that. The twinkle in his eye when he made someone laugh was enough to show that he only cared about spreading joy, and he had only ever been a best friend to her. Even if everything was changing, she knew she would have him to rely on. She nodded to him to keep talking.

"Your real mom was one of my people, a Protector, and your father was a Punisher. They secretly fell in love and ran away together when they were found out. Your mother had you in secret and when you were discovered, your father's people wanted to kill you for being an abomination, but mine took pity because you were innocent, and we promised to watch over you. Your aunt, as your only blood relative, watched over you when you were young, but when you moved to New York, we set up parameters and guardians. When you were fifteen, you started sneaking out with friends and becoming reckless, so we had to send someone in..."

"Cy? My first boyfriend?" She guessed, remembering how she had thought

Luke looked like him the first day of school. She thought of how Cy had been overprotective and always called her. It hadn't been for love at all. For all she knew he never even liked her. Her first kiss was a complete sham. It stung more than Kira realized it would. "And then I moved here, somewhere where vampires went to my school and my mother, sorry, my aunt couldn't watch me all the time, and you..."

Luke nodded.

She couldn't talk about her family anymore, not with Luke, not as though her life were some textbook story he had had to study and memorize. "I need a break, I can't do this anymore right now. I'll talk to my...aunt later. It's just too much."

Kira looked at Luke, really looked at his features, and wondered if her mother would have looked like him. Did her real mother have the same sun-bleached hair and fiery eyes? The same warm compassion? Was she alive or dead? Mostly, what Kira wanted to know was why neither of her parents had ever come looking for her. If her father was a Punisher, was he only full of anger or did he love too? Did either of them love Kira, or was she just a mistake that never should have been allowed to survive?

Kira stood and walked to the pier's railing. Her mind was more tumultuous than the waters below her. She almost felt that if she jumped in right now, it would calm her to be pushed around a bit, that it would show her that the world continued on despite the madness in her brain. But those thoughts just made her think of Tristan, who wouldn't be there to save her if she got overpowered by the ocean again. Kira couldn't think of him yet. It was too much to think that the boy you had maybe started to love was really evil. Not just a bad boy, but actually a monster.

"I wanted to tell you," Luke said from behind her, and she was happy to have him interrupt her thoughts. "A thousand times I wanted to tell you, but I took an oath. You had to discover your powers on your own. I wasn't allowed to tell you about anything in case the mix of Punisher and Protector canceled each

other out and left you just a normal human girl. When I saw your eyes, I knew it couldn't be true. I knew you weren't a dud, and that you were incredibly strong. But still, I had to be idle. I know I may joke a lot and break some of the school rules, but there are some rules I know I can't test."

"I wish you had," she said, speaking to the ocean because she couldn't turn and look him in the face.

"I know."

"But I understand why you didn't." Kira still spoke to the wind. Knowing his intentions helped, but she still couldn't get rid of the small sting of betrayal.

"Really?"

She heard the creak of wooden planks as Luke stood up from the bench and moved right behind her, like he needed to be closer to Kira to believe she really meant her words.

"I know you and I know you're good. You hoped there was a chance I wasn't supposed to be in this world where vampires and conduits exist, and that there was a chance you wouldn't have to be the one to turn my reality upside down."

"Can you forgive me?" Luke reached to put his hand over the one she had rested on the rail. Kira tried to smile, but couldn't. Instead, she squeezed his hand in her own, trusting he would understand what it meant, and finally met his sad, puppy-dog eyes. Luke pulled her into his chest for another hug. "I'm still your best friend even if everything else has changed. I promise, that was never contrived."

She nodded against his body, not wanting to move from his comforting embrace. He was telling her the truth, and Kira knew she needed him. She needed someone she could trust completely and someone who could help her survive whatever journey her life had just turned into.

"Can we leave the Tristan talk for another time? I know you're curious, but I just can't."

"Of course."

"Luke, I can't go home yet. I can't face it. When I see my parents, it'll all become real. When I look at their faces for the first time and don't see a family resemblance..." Kira cut off, trying to choke back the sob that had risen in her throat.

"Come on." He tugged on her hand, pulling her from the rail back toward the beach. "Let's grab some ice cream. You can stay on my couch for the night."

"Your parents won't mind?"

"Kira...I'm your guardian. I'm twenty, and I live alone. I'm only pretending to be in high school."

"Oh." She shut up. One more surprise might send her over the edge. There was only so much a girl could endure before the fake calmness wore off and all the feelings she had pushed down bubbled back up to the surface.

They walked down the boardwalk holding hands, and Kira relished the contact. She thought it darkly humorous that passersby might think they were sweethearts. How many people had she walked past who were secretly watching her and guarding her? She bet she had passed vampires before and had never looked twice, never even dreamed something like this could be true.

Luke bought them two ice cream cones, and Kira listened as he spoke of trivial things like Miles' school craze and class assignments. She knew he was just providing background noise, that he knew she was lost in her own thoughts. He didn't try to intrude. He just tried to give her some semblance of normal, to maybe make her laugh. Kira wondered when she would laugh again as she remained stone faced at Luke's attempts.

When they finished, Luke steered Kira around to his car and drove her to his house. It was small, and he explained that it had been given to him when he moved here to start watching over her. She wondered if he was getting paid and how much of a job this was for him. Was it a normal thing for a conduit to have to do? To act like a babysitter? Or did they all stay in their safe havens, not even trying to go out and search for people to help?

She knew nothing about her culture or her own people. It was an odd

feeling to have barely any idea where she came from. Her mother had always told her she had an Irish heritage, and when she was little, Kira used to spend hours reading about the druids and old Irish folklore. She liked having a sense of history, and it was important to her to be able to connect to the past. But now, she was part of this ancient secret society she knew almost nothing about.

Most of all, Kira wondered about her parents, her real parents. She wondered who they were and why her aunt had to raise her. The mystery of her sister was easy to explain now. Kira almost laughed to herself. Ever since her sister had been born, she had asked whom the mistake had been. Clearly, Kira was the misfit. It was almost comforting to have one question answered, but the answer left her feeling empty. A mistake? The word rolled around in her head, knocking everything out of place. Not only her parents' mistake, her life itself was also a mistake, one that could end the world as she knew it if more vampires found out.

Luke left her in the living room to go find some blankets for the pull-out she would be sleeping on. When he came back, he unfolded the couch and made it into a bed for her. He fluffed the pillow and pretended to be a bellhop showing her around a hotel suite, but went to get her water when she never cracked a smile.

Kira's cell phone rang while Luke was in the kitchen. The caller ID said it was home, her mother she assumed, but she let it go to voicemail. When she closed her phone, she saw the edge of the burn mark on her hand. She let her cell fall onto the couch so she could peer at the spot more closely. Her hands looked like they had little starbursts on them, like she had put a red paintball between her palms and pressed together to make it explode. She ran her finger along the edge and felt the raised line of the burn. It didn't sting at all. She hadn't even noticed her hands until Luke had mentioned the marks to her on the pier.

"It'll go away," Luke said when he walked back inside and saw her staring. He gave Kira the glass of water. "The burns I mean. After a while they'll go away and each time you use your power, they'll show up less and less."

Kira clenched her fists and looked away. She didn't want to think about using her power again.

"Kira, we're not evil. It's a gift not a curse." She rolled her eyes and grabbed for the water, taking it from Luke's hand. "I'm going to show you something, something I used to do as a kid when I couldn't fall asleep." He left the room and returned after a few minutes with a six-inch disco ball in his hand.

Kira finally laughed. "You danced disco when you couldn't sleep?"

"Hey, I'll have you know I do a mean rendition of the *Saturday Night Fever* dance, thank you very much." He laughed with her and she felt almost happy again. But the moment passed.

"Okay, Kira, I know you. I know you're afraid of yourself right now, of what I've told you, but it can be a beautiful thing. When I was little, my mom always told me how I would grow up to help save people's lives. And I'd sit in my bed at night, so angry that I was just a kid and couldn't go out on adventures yet. So when I couldn't sleep, I would practice my skills, just hoping and waiting for the day when I would be good enough to leave Sonnyville for the real world. But right before I went to bed, I would take out my disco ball—stop laughing—I would take out this totally awesome and not at all embarrassing or funny disco ball I stole from my older sister and do this."

Kira smothered her giggle as Luke lifted the string attached to the disco ball and held it in front of them. With his other hand he spun the ball then shot a small, completely controlled sliver of light from his hand. As soon as the beam struck the disco ball, circles like moving diamonds twinkled and spun around the dark room. She looked around, feeling more like she was in a planetarium than a living room, and was awed by the scene. He let the light die out and gave her the disco ball.

"When you're ready, we'll start practicing your gift. And when you feel comfortable, pull this from your drawer and give it a try." He stood from the couch and looked back at her before he walked to his room. "Goodnight, Kira."

"Night, Luke," she said as he disappeared around the corner. She let the

silver globe fall into her lap and kept an eye on the spot Luke had just vacated. Why, she asked herself, couldn't she have fallen for him instead? Luke was perfect. He was funny and charming, and someone she could tell everything to, but still she thought of him as a brother. He could spill light from his own hand but still couldn't spark anything within her.

Something was wrong with her, Kira decided, since she was some sort of mixed breed freak. Her heart just didn't work the right way. Maybe she was only attracted to other misfits, which was exactly what Tristan was after all. He was a vampire who seemed to want to be human. *You can't get more out of place than that*, she thought.

Kira sighed and lay down on the sofa, curling under the blankets Luke had set out for her. As she rolled up into a fetal position, Kira wished that when she woke up tomorrow it would all be a dream.

But maybe that, she realized, was just too impossible to ask for.



## Chapter Eight



The next morning when Kira woke up on Luke's couch, drool dribbled down her cheek and her head pounded from a headache.

*Yeah, she thought, yesterday really happened.*

The scent of coffee drifted in from the kitchen and she dragged herself from the warmth of the covers to face her new life. Today, she had to talk to her mother. Kira had to learn about her real parents and about her history. There was no turning back and there never would be. All she could do was rise to the challenge.

"I guess we can add skipping school to the list of badass things you've done," Luke said, as he entered the living room. "It's right up there with taking on four vamps all by yourself." She tried to smile and took the cup he handed to her.

"Advil?" she asked. He nodded and returned a few minutes later with two maroon pills in his hand.

"Headache?" She nodded. "How are you feeling otherwise?"

"A little shocked and awed, a little scared out of my mind, and just a little like myself." Kira took another sip and felt a rush of warmth spread through her body in a completely natural sort of way. It was refreshing. "So what happens now, Luke?"

"I take you home and you talk with your mom."

"You mean my aunt."

"No, I mean your mom. Whether she gave birth to you or not is irrelevant. She still raised you, and she's still your mom." Kira nodded slightly at his words, hoping she would eventually feel the same way and not just betrayed.

"I meant more along the lines of, I've accepted this whole supernatural world business and I've accepted whatever birthright I have, so what happens

now?"

"I'm supposed to train you and teach you, but we can worry about that later. Now, let's watch the new episode of *Top Chef* I have saved on my DVR. You observe the food, and I'll observe Padma Lakshmi."

"Sometimes I worry about you," Kira said as she rolled over to lean her head on his shoulder. It was her favorite show and she relished in the normalness of it.

For the next hour, Luke made inappropriate comments about the host and Kira unsuccessfully tried to turn his attention to the food and the art of being a chef. They sipped coffee and attempted to enjoy the peace. But Kira heart constricted when Padma resolutely said, "Please pack your knives and go." The words sounded more like a death sentence to Kira, who knew she needed to pack up and go as well. Her parents would be furious with her and had probably been calling her nonstop. *Thank god for the ability to turn a cell on silent*, Kira thought.

She helped Luke put the pull-out couch away and folded the sheets she had used. Then Kira helped drop the dusty brown cushions back in their place, carried the dirty dishes into his tiny old-fashioned kitchen with hideous blue cabinetry, and finally grabbed her handbag to follow him out the door.

"Luke?" she asked after a while of driving in silence. He looked over in her direction to show she had gained his attention. "Thanks for everything. For letting me spend the night, for coming to stop me when I couldn't stop myself, and for doing the hard thing by telling me the truth." He reached over and squeezed her hand. "Do you think we could do something fun and normal tomorrow? It will be Saturday," she asked when they pulled up in front of her house.

"I'll rally the troops and surprise you. Now, good luck. Call me if you need me later."

"Thanks," she said as she pushed the car door open and slid out.

Luke drove away, leaving her alone in front of her home. It had never

seemed as daunting as it did then. The car was in the driveway, meaning her mother had skipped out on work. The real question in Kira's mind was, *is she angry or worried? Will I open the door to screaming and yelling, or hugs and kisses?* If Kira knew her mother, the wrath of God was about to fall upon her.

Hesitantly, Kira lifted her foot, let it hover above the ground for a moment, and then placed it in front of her to begin the long walk to her front door. She had decided this morning to rise to the occasion, and Kira had a feeling this conversation would be the toughest part.

The front door opened before she even had time to take her key out of her handbag.

"Where have you been?" her mother shouted and pulled her inside by the arm. "Your father and I have been worried sick. We were up all night. I must have called you a hundred times, but did you call us back? No! Of course not. Why bother to calm the woman who has raised you since birth and thought you dead in a ditch by the side of the road?"

Kira fought the urge to scream back and allowed her mother to vent her frustration. It almost felt normal, and in some weird way, the fight comforted rather than hurt Kira. But all she kept thinking was, *how dare you yell at me—you lied to me, for my whole life you lied to me. Who are you? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you protect me?*

Kira let out a slow breath and tried to rein in her anger. She needed answers, and she had a feeling that she would need family. Eventually, they could be her true family again.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" Her mother panted when she had finished ranting.

"I almost died," Kira said softly. She wasn't sure how to talk to her mother about this without sounding accusatory, and she figured remaining calm would be the best decision. "Vampires almost killed me." The words came out with a trace of bitterness that Kira couldn't fight, but she couldn't hide all her feelings.

She almost wanted to cry and fall into her mother's arms, but she held

back and watched as her mother's hand rose to catch the gasp leaving her mouth. Kira observed as her mom backed up into the couch and, like an afterthought, fell into a seated position.

"Oh god, oh god," her mother repeated until Kira came to sit down next to her. "Where was Luke? I never imagined you'd been in real danger." Kira grabbed her mother's shaking hand.

"It's okay, I saved myself..." Kira let her words linger. Her mother stiffened and looked at Kira with eyes full of horror.

"How much do you know?"

"Not everything, but enough. I stayed with Luke overnight because I needed some time to adjust before I came home. I wasn't sure how it would feel to look at you knowing I was just a mistake, that I'm your charge and not your daughter. Oddly enough, it feels half-normal and only half-painful." Kira let her fingers slip from her mother's and moved to the other end of the couch, rolling her knees into her chest.

Her mother sat very still, looking straight ahead with wide eyes. "Will you ever forgive me?" she whispered while bowing her head into her hands.

"I hope so," Kira answered truthfully. She didn't know if she could ever let the pain of not knowing who she was fall away. She loved her mother, but right now, she felt as though she didn't know who her mother really was. "Were you ever going to tell me I was adopted? That my whole life has been a lie?"

"Oh, Kira." Her mother reached for her hand, but Kira moved it away, not ready to forgive her yet. "It hasn't all been a lie. I am your mother, in every way but genetically. Your father and I love you. Your sister loves you. We've always been a family." A tear escaped Kira's eye then. "If you won't forgive me right now, will you at least let me explain?"

"Yes." Kira let the word slip from her mouth before she could stop it. This was the point of no return. Once the story was told, everything about her heritage would be true, but in some ways she thirsted for it. She needed a history—a past to hold on to. "You need to start with my real parents."

"Can we talk outside?" her mother asked while rising from the couch. "These are stories even your father cannot hear."

Kira nodded.

She and her mother always had important conversations outdoors. When she had wanted to go to boarding school, they had walked in a park for an hour. When she got her ears pierced, they had gone to the swing set in her old backyard. Something about the wind and the trees seemed calming—they made even the biggest arguments seem small. For the first time, Kira wondered if it was a conduit trait, that maybe something about being in the sun calmed her people. But she pushed the thought aside, not wanting to linger on any musings that made her feel at all subhuman.

Kira grabbed a blanket to wrap around her shoulders and quickly made instant hot chocolate to bring outside while her mother ran up the steps. She set her mother's cup on the table and nestled into the chair to wait. The air was cool on her cheek—a typical Carolina fall. The leaves of the dense forest behind her house rustled with each churning breeze, almost like waves with their cyclical splash. But here, only the scent of salt in the air reminded her that she lived on the coast.

Kira's mother walked outside in a sweatshirt with a box of tissues in hand. "Kira, I don't even know where to begin. I haven't spoken of the conduits in years. Your father doesn't even know about my past. I never wanted any of us to be a part of that world."

"Start with my father, your brother. What was he like? You are Punishers, right?" Kira tried to keep the crack from her voice. She thought it the logical place to start, the beginning of her father's tale before he even met her real mother. She wished she had a picture, some sort of token to remember them both by.

"Your father was amazing. He was the protective older brother, the ideal fighter, the perfect son, the dream boy, but most of all he was someone you knew without a doubt you could count on for anything in your life. He wanted to

protect the entire world, to fight epic battles, and he started by helping me." Kira noticed that her mother's gaze had glazed over. She was staring somewhere beyond their backyard, back into her memories. "When we were younger, he made sure none of the kids bullied me for being small and weak with my power. You see, Kira, I ran away from that world because I had no place in it. As a child, I could never truly channel the sun properly, and when my power matured at the age of sixteen, I still couldn't hurt a fly. To a Punisher that is the ultimate insult, and many of our people turned against me, but never your father. I lived at home, just waiting until I could leave and go to college and be normal. And, he accepted me."

Kira grabbed a tissue then. It seemed her mother and she had both been misfits in unfamiliar worlds, and she painted the most beautiful picture of her true father as someone fearless. Something Kira wished she had inherited some of.

"When he was eighteen, he went on his first hunt and made his first kill. He returned, boasting of how much fun he'd had and how exhilarating the fight was. He said he was the only newbie who hadn't needed help from the elders to stop his vampire. I could tell, just by looking at him, that he had found his place and that he would grow to be one of our best fighters. Conduit societies are stuck in the past in many ways. The men went out to hunt for vampires to help protect humanity, and the women remained at home protecting the children in case our location was ever found out. And the entire town knew your father would be the best of us. Every time he came back from a trip, he shined with pride, and others told the tales of his heroics. Because for us, the stronger the fighter, the more divine, and your father was seen as a heavenly angel to many of our people."

"But that all changed?" Kira guessed, knowing this story had everything but a happy ending.

"Yes, that all changed. Most youths mature at sixteen and start going on guided missions, but at age twenty we are allowed to hunt alone. At first, your father acted much the same and came back with joy in his eyes. However, one

day, a few weeks before he turned twenty-one, he returned solemnly. Everyone thought he had failed to catch his target for the first time. Nothing unusual for a young hunter. They all let him be. But I knew your father, and I knew something else was wrong."

"Did you talk to him about it?" Kira asked. Their society was so different from everything she had grown up with. She couldn't imagine the pressure of feeling like a warrior and never being able to make mistakes. Kira looked at her mother's red curls as they blew in the breeze and wondered if she viewed them as a curse.

"I tried. I'll never forget what he told me. I had been in the kitchen washing the dinner plates when I noticed him sitting outside on the back steps, so I paused and went out to comfort him. I told him that everyone makes mistakes and everyone misses every so often, but I could tell they were just empty words. He was looking up at the stars with the deepest confusion in his eyes, and then he turned to me and asked, 'Ellie? Have you ever wondered if we were wrong?' and for a moment I didn't understand. But when he turned to look back at the night sky, I realized he meant us, the Punishers. Were we wrong in killing? Did vampires really have souls? 'Of course not,' I told him full of confidence. We were never even allowed to question those beliefs, rooted in our ancestral history for thousands of years. I saw him shut himself away when I answered. He stood up and went inside to finish the dishes, and I was the one left to ponder why he would ever ask me that."

"What would you reply now?" Kira asked her mother, realizing they almost mirrored the scene from her memories, sitting on the porch, but staring at the sun rather than the stars.

"I've never seen a vampire who didn't appear evil to the core, but I suppose there are always exceptions to the rules." Her mother paused, and Kira thought that maybe she was wishing she had used that response with her brother, to provide some sort of solace.

For a moment, Kira allowed herself to think of Tristan. Could he be that

exception? But she shook her head and tried to focus on her real father and his story. "It was my birth mother, wasn't it? A Protector changing his mind?"

Her mother nodded. "I didn't realize it for a long time, but in the year that followed, he went on more solo missions and came back with rebellious ideas of capturing vampires and running tests on them rather than killing them. He wanted to research the old texts to see if anyone had ever found a vampire with his soul intact. He never found anything, but the elders were still so angry with him. He was their golden boy and within a year he became dirt. I noticed he received secret letters and made whispered phone calls when he thought our family was asleep. I confronted him, but he never answered straightly. I never dreamed he was secretly dating a Protector. Of all the rules in our society, that is the most unbreakable and the most forbidden. For two years this continued, but soon after his twenty-third birthday, he received news that scared him enough to finally come clean to me. I was twenty-one at the time and had been living away from home for a while. I had already met your adoptive father and we were so in love. Of course, I traveled home to visit, but the conduit life already seemed so far off to me.

"But one day, I opened the door of my apartment to your father's very conflicted face. I read joy, but also the deepest sorrow, and I knew something was incredibly wrong. 'Ellie,' I remember him choking out to me before breaking down into sobs. I brought him inside, and there he confessed to me that he had fallen in love with the most beautiful woman in the world, one who had the purest blonde hair imaginable. At first, I was horrified. I wasn't sure whether to comfort or to scold him, but I knew I was all he had. He told me how they first met while she had been living in New York trying to protect its citizens from the ever-increasing local vampire population. That had been the site of his first solo mission, and they had been tracking the same clan when they ran into each other. At first, they hated each other but then they realized they needed to help each other in order to hunt down and weaken the clan. They started debating philosophies until each was unsure of the lessons they'd been taught



since birth. And when they hunted down the clan, your father killed and your mother weakened, but neither felt the same joy as before. He said from that first meeting, they never stopped talking. At first, it had been secret run-ins in New York, then letters, then phone calls, until finally they had stopped taking on real missions and just escaped to meet each other in private. He said they had secretly gotten married a month ago, and he pulled a ring from a chain around his neck. And finally, he showed me a letter your mother had just written, confessing she was pregnant with a child."

"And it was the worst news imaginable?" Kira guessed and sipped on her hot cocoa for solace. She sank further into her seat and grabbed a preemptive tissue to wipe at the tears that would soon be falling.

"No, your father was the happiest I had ever seen him, but it was difficult. They knew there would be no turning back. A child meant a life on the run, because you had to be kept secret. He confessed to me that they had made a plan to meet up where they had first met and then run away, and keep running if that was what would be needed to keep you safe. He was going to completely turn his back on his people, all for you, the unborn child he already cherished above everything else."

"But the plan backfired?" Kira asked and her mother nodded. "This seems to be a story where everything that could have gone wrong, did go wrong."

"In many ways, it was. Your father and mother did run away together, and you were born eight months after your father had come to see me. I was the only one he told, and I begged him to come see me, to let me see you. He told me they had found a safe place and he couldn't give it away, but that they would chance it and come to me. I was overjoyed. For one secret weekend, your father came to visit me, and I met your mother and you. You were the cutest baby ever, only two months old and already with a full set of curly blonde and red hair. You always had a smile on your face, and to the outside viewer all three of you would have looked like the perfect family. In the short hours I spent with your mother, I learned she was caring and gentle. She was an amazing woman, and I easily

understood how the two of them had come to love each other. When they left, I assumed it would be years before I could meet you again, but in reality it was only a few short days."

"What happened?" Kira asked, knowing the heartbreaking story of her true parents was about to come to an end. Her mom was just about twenty-three in the story, and Kira knew that was the age she had always been told she was born.

"On their way back home, they were discovered by Punishers from a different state. They were captured and questioned, and you were almost put to death until your mother's people came to argue for your life. In the middle of the night, your father tried to escape. He found your mother and you, but while running away, you three were jumped by vampires. Your father was killed, as was your mother, but the vampires had all shared a little of the blood so none was completely immune to our powers. We got there just in time to save you and hold them at bay by mere feet. We rescued you and saved your father's body, but your mother's was still on the other side of the barrier that our powers had created. When we went back the next day, it was gone."

"And I was given to you, my closest relative, so I could live outside of that world and maybe have a chance at a normal life. The Protectors agreed to guard me, and you and Father adopted me to save me."

"And also to love you, as I always have. I used to pray at night that you hadn't been gifted with any powers, but as you grew, I knew that wasn't true. You had eyes of fire and hair to match and my prayers turned to hoping you would never find out what you were."

"But, I did."

"You did," her mother agreed sadly. She had barely looked at Kira while they spoke, too afraid to see judgment from her daughter's eyes. The change saddened Kira, as the slight awkwardness in the air spoke of their forever altered relationship.

"What were their names?" Kira asked, wanting a small thing to remember her parents by. Names were simple, but held so much meaning.

"Andrew and Lana."

Kira took another tissue to wipe at her face. The story of her parents was sadder than she ever imagined. She had hoped they weren't dead, maybe just locked away somewhere. In a way, it seemed like they had only just died because she had only just found them. Kira watched the fading sun sink beneath the tree line and watched the ruby wisps of cloud start to fade. Her mother and she had been outside for a long time. Kira appreciated the stories. She had needed the stories. But it wasn't enough to make her forget everything else.

"I have to ask why you never told me? Even knowing I was adopted without knowing all the details? I could have handled this new world of the conduits so much easier if every other facet of my life wasn't shattering along with it."

Kira's mother eased from her seated position and walked the three short steps required to stand before her daughter. She knelt, cupping Kira's hands in her own, trying to close the distance that had sprouted between them.

"I just didn't know how. I wanted to. Your father and I discussed it every year. First we excused it because you were too young, then because you were going through puberty and we knew that was a fragile time for building an identity. Then your sister came around, and we didn't want you to resent her, and then you were in New York and so far away."

"And then I came home as an adult." Kira pulled her hands away and returned them to the empty mug on the side table.

Her mother let her hands drop to the floor, as a tear slid from her cheek. "You're still my baby. I didn't know how to tell you without breaking the family apart."

"I understand, in a lot of ways I really do, but I'm just not ready to let it go. I need some time to adjust, so can we put the pause button on this conversation? I need a break and time to think." Kira resituated herself in the chair so that her body leaned away from her mother's. She needed to be alone, needed to ruminate in peace.

Her mother understood and stepped backward, giving Kira space. "Of course, I just want to give you one thing." She drew a small envelope from her pocket and put it onto the table next to the now empty mugs of hot chocolate. "It's a token I've had locked away for a while. Remember I told you that my brother came to visit with you? Well, we took a single photograph, and I put it in a locket that I always meant to give to you when I told you the truth. Let me know if you need me, but I'll leave you alone for a while."

When her mother had disappeared inside the house, Kira lifted the packet and heard the jingle of a chain scratching against paper. She tipped the envelope and let the necklace slide out. The locket was a silver oval, completely plain with no engravings, and next to it on the chain was a gold ring the size of a man's finger. She looked at the inside arch of the band and read the cursive words etched there. "Love will prevail, your Lana". His wedding ring, she realized. *No, not his*, Kira thought. Her dad Andrew's wedding ring—the one that tied him to his true love, her mother, Lana. Kira clutched the ring to her chest, letting tears fall freely, and used her other hand to open the locket, which had fallen to the other end of the chain.

Her father and mother held her between them. Three smiles and three pairs of green speckled eyes looked out from the photograph. Kira couldn't believe she had no memories left from those few months she had had alone with her parents. Her father's hair was a mop of red curls, and freckles spanned his cheeks. His smile was wide and open, just like hers in that it was hard to tell if she was laughing or just smiling. Her mother's hair looked like the sun. It was so perfectly blonde and straight like Luke's. Her smile was more reserved, but her eyes were the same large shape as Kira's, just slightly too big for her face. Kira wondered if her own had ever looked so full of joy and secrets. And there Kira was, a tiny little baby sandwiched between them, laughing and looking up at her mother.

Kira stared at the photo. It was minute in size but more important to her than anything else she had ever owned. She moved over to the hammock and lay

down, staring at the open-faced locket while time passed by unnoticed. This was the only connection she would ever have to them, and she wanted to memorize every detail she could. Kira wished she could recover just one memory, but her mind from those early weeks of life was too far gone.

A car rolling on gravel distracted Kira, and she heard Chloe giggle and her father's deep laugh. They were home. Both were removed from the conduit world, and for a moment, Kira wondered what he thought the story was. How did he imagine her parents had died? A car crash? A murderer? No one but her mother had the real truth, the full story, except maybe her grandparents. Strangers to her, who she now knew must exist somewhere in the world, but had never wanted anything to do with her.

The screen door opened.

"Honey?" the baritone voice of her father asked. "I spoke with your mother. I just wanted to see how you were. If there was anything I could do?" Kira shook her head. "I love you, and I always have."

"I know," Kira replied, still turned away. She heard him sigh as he went back inside. Kira was sure her mother had told him not to push her and to let her be.

She curled further up like a baby, closing the locket and gripping it to her chest, as close to her heart as possible. The stars were starting to appear in the ever-darkening sky, and Kira let her tears pool. Kira cried for the life she was robbed of as a child, the one she had just been robbed of again. She cried for her dead parents and for her living substitutes now guilt-ridden over their lie. Mostly she thought about what could have been and what would be. About training with Luke and what training with her parents might have been like. She wondered if her parents would have told her the histories of the conduits like bedtime stories to gradually fall asleep to.

Somewhere in all the sorrow, Kira fell asleep and let her dreams do the imagining for her. She hardly noticed when her real life father picked her up from outside and carried her inside to bed.



## Chapter Nine



A ringing phone woke Kira the next morning. Her eyes were swollen, and she was dehydrated and dizzy from the days before. When she turned over in bed, a cool chain rolled across her skin. She pulled the locket back over her heart, cupping it in her hand. *At least it's something*, Kira mused. She had photographs and stories, some little tokens to remember them by. *Love will prevail*, she thought. It was comforting to know her parents had loved each other enough to risk it all to be together. She hoped she could do the same if the time ever came.

The incessant ringing sounded in her ear again, and Kira reached under her pillow to grab her cell phone. She looked at the caller ID—Luke. Was she ready to get out of bed and face the world? No. But, Kira realized, she would probably never feel ready to start moving on to her new life in a new world she had yet to figure out. She flipped open her cell.

"Hello?" Kira's voice came out scratchy and hardly loud enough for her own ears to hear.

"You sound like crap."

"Thanks." She rolled her eyes at Luke, wishing he could see her reaction, some sign she was at least alive enough to make fun of him again.

"Get out of bed, get dressed, and be downstairs in ten minutes. The gang and I are on the way."

"Good lord. Couldn't you have given me some warning?" Kira asked, jumping out of bed and running to her closet. Ten minutes was not nearly enough time for her to start looking like a human being again. She needed to shower, and she needed some caffeine.

"Ah, sorry. I totally forgot you're a girl. Emma said I should have called you earlier."

"Tell her I said thanks. See you soon."

Kira hung up and used both hands to search her closet for jeans and a super comfortable, oversized sweater to wear. She might be venturing outdoors, but she still wanted to feel as though she was lounging in her pjs.

Five minutes later, Kira heard a beep outside and cursed Luke for of course being early. She peered out of her window while quickly buttoning her jeans and saw Emma kick Dave out of the front seat of her small convertible. He sheepishly jumped into the back with the boys, and Kira decided to hurry up before he tried to steal shotgun again.

"Hey!" Emma waved from the driver's seat as Kira walked outside. Kira smiled back.

"So, what's the mystery event today? Luke didn't give me any information over the phone."

"Well, it was my idea," Emma began while fiddling with the radio and shushing the boys' complaints when Taylor Swift came on.

"Shopping?" Kira guessed from the glimmer in the other girl's eyes.

"Costume shopping!" Emma seemed positively giddy as she pulled away from the curb and eased onto the empty street. She stepped on the gas, and the car sped down the road. Kira liked feeling the wind in her hair and the roar of the other cars when they turned onto a busier street. It drowned out her thoughts, and part of her felt like a normal girl about to spend a crazy afternoon with her friends.

"Halloween is in two weeks, and we have nothing to wear! It's a travesty!" Emma infused feigned sadness into her voice—well, at least Kira thought it was feigned. "We need to get costumes now before all of the good ones are taken. And I figured we could all plan some sort of theme together."

"Not this again." In the back seat, Miles scrunched up his face, making his glasses slant sideways.

"Oh please, it'll be fun!" Excited, Emma released both hands from the wheel to make her point. Kira jumped forward and grabbed it before the car could swerve out of control. Emma flashed her a sheepish smile.



"I'm with Miles. I refuse to dress up as a Ken doll," Dave added, almost under his breath, but loud enough for Emma to notice.

"It was only an idea..." Emma let her sentence trail off. Kira laughed picturing the boys as Disco Ken with sequined blazers on.

"I've got it!" Luke chimed in from the back seat. Everyone but Emma, now making the effort to concentrate on driving, turned to look at him. "Power Rangers."

Kira groaned. "I refuse to wear a yellow jumpsuit. Never happening. No way."

"You could wear the pink one..." Luke trailed off, anticipating a slap. Instead, Kira turned around in her seat and simply rolled her eyes at him. He laughed it off but held her eyes for an extra second. She nodded subtly, trying to let him know this was exactly what she had needed and that she was finally feeling a little better. The bickering that constantly seemed to befall their little gang was making her forget all about the other thoughts churning in her head.

"I'm with Kira. No way. Even I can't look sexy as a Power Ranger."

"I beg to differ," Dave chimed in from the back. Kira saw Emma flash him a smile through the rearview mirror.

"What about the Scooby gang?" Kira tried to contribute to the debate.

"There are only four of them," Miles said from the back.

"I know. Luke can be Scooby-doo!"

Everyone laughed, except for Luke who just claimed he was too tall to pretend to be a dog.

They pulled up in front of the mall, and Emma slid her car into a parking spot. As they jumped from their seats and headed toward the front doors, a peace treaty was figured out. Everyone would come up with a theme later, and after fifteen minutes of walking around, they would choose the best one—the end.

The mall was crowded, and Kira immediately tensed up. She couldn't help but imagine how many of those people held deathly secrets or how many might try to kill her.

Children laughed as they played on the jungle gym set up where Santa's workshop would be constructed in two short months. Their parents gazed on from the sideline. A group of preteen girls gossiped in the corner, and opposite them were a group of Goths Kira recognized from school. Everyone was harmless, she reassured herself. She had to believe it.

The sun seeped through the skylight and for once, Kira was truly grateful for the lack of artificial lights at this mall. She instantly felt warm all over and calmer.

Luke came up to put an arm around her shoulder. She realized the rest of the group had left them behind to walk toward the costume shop at the other end of the mall.

"Are you okay?" Luke asked, pushing her down the walk a little. Her feet fell in step with his, and she started to break from the trance.

"Yeah." She nodded. "What'd you tell them? No one commented on my slight mood."

"Nothing really, just that you were going through some family stuff right now. Emma really wanted to call you yesterday to check in, but I told her to leave it alone and that you didn't want to talk about it."

"Thanks." Kira nestled into his arm a little further. "I still just don't know what to do. I spoke with my mom and she told me the whole story, all about my parents. And she gave me this." Kira pulled the locket and ring out from underneath her sweater. She opened it and showed Luke the picture. He squeezed her shoulder, comforting her before she even realized she was holding her breath to keep the pain from seeping out.

"Come on," he said, picking up the pace. "No more sad thoughts. It's time to let Emma dress you up like her very own life-sized Barbie doll." He smiled cheerfully as Kira whimpered and involuntarily walked into the Halloween shop.

The first things she noticed were the life-sized animated skeletons and ghouls that were speaking and had electric light-up eyes. Spider webs were knotted all over the ceiling and gruesome bloodied hands and heads lined the

floor. A mechanical spider dropped from the ceiling, landing on top of her head, and Kira let out a loud yelp before realizing it was fake. A five-year-old little boy laughed at her from the other side of the store. *Annoying little kid*, she thought while looking for her friends who all seemed to have disappeared.

"Kira!" Emma waved her over to the back wall, which was lined with costumes and thankfully lacked the gore of the entrance. On the way to the female costumes, Kira spotted the boys huddled in a corner all holding different swords and speaking in hushed tones. She didn't like the look of it.

"Which one?" Emma asked holding up a pirate costume and a princess costume. Each one was short with barely any fabric, and Kira knew it would leave little to the imagination.

"Um..." Kira said, not knowing how to answer. She wouldn't be caught dead wearing either one out in public.

"Okay, Okay." Luke came up behind them. "The boys have come to a decision—superheroes, super villains, or pirates. Girls, take your pick." Kira noticed he still had a saber looped through his belt hole, making him look more like a little boy than ever.

"Ooh!" Emma ran off without answering. She looked like she was in the middle of a eureka moment. Luke just glanced at Kira with a raised eyebrow and she shrugged. Dave and Miles sauntered over, looking out of breath.

"Swordfight," Dave exhaled.

"It was awesome! We need to be pirates," Miles added and Luke looked crushed that they dared do something so amazing without him. But Emma came rushing back at that exact moment and thrust something that looked vaguely like black pleather into Kira's hand.

"Put it on!" she squealed and ran into the dressing room behind her. Kira rolled her eyes, afraid that she had already guessed what it was, and followed suit.

When she closed the curtain behind her, Kira unfolded the costume, looked in the mirror and sighed. A Catwoman outfit. Of course.

Kira didn't want to be caught dead in the thing but knew she had to appease her friend. With a loud exhale, she stripped off her clothes and tried to squeeze into the skintight suit.

When she was ready, Kira took a quick peek into the mirror, and she had to admit, she looked good. She had never worn skintight leather before, but it definitely looked hot. Kira held the whip in her hand, put the mask on over her eyes, and smiled. She looked nothing like herself, but she kind of liked it. The faux cat scratches up the side of her leg definitely looked really sexy, and she tried to push aside the part of her head that started to wonder what Tristan would think. She couldn't let herself go there.

"Kira, come out! I bet you look awesome," Emma called from the other side.

Kira peeked around the curtain and saw that a few feet to the side Emma was dressed in a Poison Ivy costume. The boys looked appreciative and were at the moment fighting over who got to be Batman if the theme stuck. Kira slid open the curtain, and the boys dropped their jaws, halting the fight mid-argument.

Kira smiled. It felt good.

"Wow," was all Miles said, scrambling to right his glasses, which had tilted during the argument. The other two boys remained silent, still slack jawed.

"Perfect!" Emma walked in front of her and beamed with joy. "These are the perfect costumes. We are going to look amazing at the party."

"Party?" Kira's heart immediately sank. It was one thing to dress like this in front of her friends but another thing entirely to dress like this in front of the whole school.

"Yes, the party. The Halloween party? I thought you knew about the school dance. I've only mentioned it a hundred times."

*Oh, that party,* Kira thought, but tried to recover by murmuring, "Right, right." She could never let Emma know she didn't pay attention to half the things she said during lunch. The girl spoke at a rate of about one hundred miles per

hour.

"You do like the costume, right?" Kira saw the hopeful look in Emma's eyes, saw how excited the boys were, and sighed.

"Yeah, I love it."

"Excellent!" Emma practically skipped back into her dressing room.

Kira pushed the curtain aside, stepped back into her room, and would have screamed, except a hand closed over her mouth, and Tristan pushed her up against the mirror, holding her so tightly she couldn't move. He closed the curtain with his other hand.

Kira's body began to heat immediately. She wasn't sure if it was his proximity or her powers, but she couldn't stop the flush that rose to her cheeks or the slight fear that crept into her eyes.

"Please, please calm down. I'm not here to hurt you. Please, don't be afraid." She saw the pleading glint to his eyes and knew he would have already hurt her if he wanted to. She tried to swallow her fear and felt her body relax into his. Tristan freed her mouth and dropped his arms down to his sides.

"Hey," he said, smiling so that slight dimples formed on his cheeks. He shrugged. Kira started to smile in return, but stopped it, mentally shaking herself. She couldn't just forgive him. She forced herself to walk around Tristan's body and slide down the wall to sit on the floor. The image of him licking his lips clean of her blood rose to the forefront of her thoughts, and Kira remembered the desire and repulsion that ran across his features. She looked away from him, unsure of how to act, what to say, and mostly what to feel. There was anger of course, but there was also sadness. She had missed him. She had tried not to, but Kira couldn't hide the bit of joy she felt at seeing him again.

"Please, say something." Tristan knelt down to sit next to her, keeping his voice barely above a whisper.

She looked at him, at his pale skin, shaggy black hair and somehow warm blue eyes. He was evil beneath it all. She had to remember that or else she would keep falling deeper under his spell. She didn't understand, looking at him now,

why she couldn't have fallen for Luke instead. It would have been so much easier. But here she was, wishing he would sit a little closer and explain to her that none of it was true. "Why you?"

The two words escaped her lips before she even realized she had spoken. Hurt filled his eyes. And like a receding tide, the morning's joy quickly seeped from her.

"I'm sorry," Tristan murmured and started stand, shaking his head more at himself than anything else.

"Wait." She lightly touched his arm, but it was enough to make him sit back down again. "I didn't mean it. It's just...it would have been so much easier to hate you." She let her eyes fall to the ground, counting the feathers and sequins that had fallen off the many costumes that had been tried on in the small room.

"I know."

They passed the next few moments in silence.

"What do you want?" she asked, daring to speak first and glance at him.

"I saw you and Luke walking over, and I just had to talk to you. I need to explain what happened. You know I would have never hurt you, right?" She nodded, hoping it was true.

"I was going to tell you. I swear. But then Diana interrupted and we started fighting and before I knew it, things were spiraling out of control. And then there was the whole part where you almost killed me..." He laughed a little, stealing a peek at her through his lashes.

"Sorry about that." She smirked at him in return.

"We'll call it even." A little shred of hope lit his features.

"Why, were you almost going to kill me?" The hope vanished, but Kira had to ask the question. He ran a hand through his hair, frustrated.

"That was their plan."

Kira sucked in her breath.

"But even before I met you, I never would have let them go through with

it," he hastily spoke. "I'm not like that, I swear. I don't kill people. I know you might not believe me, but it's the truth."

Kira knew she shouldn't, but somehow she did believe him. She started to say so but heard Emma from the other side of the curtain.

"Are you okay, Kira?"

*Crap*, she thought. The dressing room really wasn't the ideal place for serious conversations.

"Yeah..." She fumbled for an excuse. "Just having a little trouble with the zipper. No big deal."

"The boys are all in their costumes. Poke your head out."

Kira glanced at Tristan and stood up. She stepped over his outstretched legs, suddenly remembering she was in a leather pantsuit. She could feel his eyes taking in her outfit and immediately felt embarrassed. She tried to quell the blush threatening her cheeks as she slid her head around the curtain.

Kira barked out a laugh at the sight of Dave as Batman, Miles as Robin, and Luke, of course, as the Joker.

"Perfect," she said, meeting Luke's eyes and ignoring the questioning concern they held.

"I know. We're going to make quite an entrance next week," Emma said. Kira noticed she was already dressed in her normal clothes and held a shopping bag in her hand. How long had Kira been in the dressing room?

"Okay, I'll be out in a moment." She ducked her head back behind the curtain and glanced at Tristan as he jerked his head back from a position that seemed precariously close to one someone would use to check out her behind.

"I have to go," she stated into the awkward silence, not sure how to get changed with him in the room.

"Can we talk later? Will you meet me somewhere? There are so many things I still want to say." Kira wanted to say yes. She wanted to let him explain everything, wanted the fake mistletoe and stolen kisses one more time. But, she couldn't.

"I'm not ready," she said, even as her heart screamed at her. "I don't know if I ever will be. I know you didn't mean to ever hurt me, but that doesn't change anything. What you are, what I am..." She let that last thought linger. There was still so much keeping them apart, so much she didn't know about him and wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

Kira turned away from him and looked out past the curtain. All the boys were still comparing costumes.

"Close your eyes." She needed to get changed, and he still couldn't leave. He put his hands over his eyes, but Kira noticed the slight opening between his pointer and middle finger. "Come on, close them," she said, making him stand up and forcing him to face the curtain while she changed behind his back.

After a few excruciatingly quiet moments, she was back in her comfy jeans; happy she was free of the skintight cat suit.

"Hide, okay?" Kira whispered. He nodded, and she started to pull the curtain aside, but he quickly grabbed her hand, making her turn around.

"You looked really hot, by the way." She smiled shyly. "See you at the dance." He winked and Kira quickly bolted out of the dressing room, trying to keep her heart from beating right out of her chest.

Kira practically ran to the cash register and bought her costume, telling everyone she would wait for them outside. She found a bench, curled her knees into her chest, and let her thoughts wander. What was she going to do?

He drank blood for crying out loud. How was she still attracted to him? Kira could never tell Luke and maybe couldn't even tell Emma. Would she risk it to see if she could love Tristan?

Kira fingered the gold ring that now hung around her neck. Did she have the courage?

"Penny for your thoughts?" Luke sat down beside her, and she quickly let go of her necklace. Kira had realized one thing—she needed to learn control. When Tristan had grabbed her, she could feel herself start to explode. If it had been Diana or Jerome or John, she might have accidentally killed one of them in



the costume store. Or, they could have killed her. She needed to learn more about herself and her abilities.

"I need to start training with you, don't I?"

Luke stared at her thoughtfully, probably wondering what brought this about. "Yeah, at some point you need to start learning who you are and how to use your abilities to protect yourself."

"Can at some point be like at some point next week?" She lifted her lashes to view him better.

"Whenever you want."

She nodded. "Let's do it."

"There's one more thing I need to tell you..." Luke paused. Kira waited, hesitant. "I need to start sending reports back home. I haven't told them anything important about you, not yet. But if we start training, I need to let them, the council, know you have abilities. I don't think anything will change, at least for a few months. But I thought I should tell you."

"Thanks," Kira replied and thought about it. Once he sent that report, there would be no turning back. The Protectors would know the threat she represented. The whole conduit community would probably learn about her, her powers, and the danger she represented. All the more reason to train and to show them she had control. She had to prove to them that they hadn't made a mistake by protecting her all those years ago.

Kira nodded in understanding, silently letting Luke know it was okay, as their friends finally approached.

"Sorry, I got distracted." Miles looked sheepish as he apologized.

Emma rolled her eyes. "He challenged a ten-year-old to a lightsaber duel. I swear Miles, I hope you get into Harvard, because aside from us, those nerds will be the only ones who accept you."

"Hey," he started, but then paused as if realizing the truth in the statement. "I sent in my early decision application finally. Did I tell any of you?"

They all congratulated him, and Kira prayed he would get in. They all

loved him, it was true, but unlike Luke who pretended to be really childish, Miles really seemed to be a little boy sometimes.

A few hours later, Kira finally pulled open the front door of her home and climbed the stairs to her bedroom. Shopping had utterly drained her, and she was happy to finally soak in the steaming hot water of her shower and let the stress of the past few days melt away.

Wrapped in a soft, fresh towel, she slipped into her room and practically passed out on her bed.

"What's this?" Chloe appeared from under her bed, scaring Kira half to death.

"What's what?" Kira asked, pulling her little sister on to her lap, loving the fact that nothing had changed in that relationship. She still loved Chloe with all of her heart, and they would always be sisters.

Chloe shoved a piece of paper at Kira. "It's pretty." Chloe smiled, and Kira took the paper, sucking in her breath when she saw a drawing of her as Catwoman and a note that read, "Can't wait."

"Where'd you find this?" Kira asked, finally finding words.

"On the bed, silly." Her sister tried to take the paper back, but Kira pulled it out of her little arm's reach. Tristan had been here, in her room?

Chloe slid off her lap and tugged on Kira's arm.

"Make me hot cocoa," Chloe ordered. Kira laughed and tried to get out of Chloe's grip while still holding onto her towel.

"Let me get dressed first."

Chloe pouted, but let go of her arm and rushed downstairs to wait in the kitchen. Kira stared at the drawing for another moment before walking over to her bookshelf and slipping it in with Tristan's other drawings that she had hidden in her jewelry box.

She tried in vain to ignore all the questions creeping into her mind and quickly got dressed to appease the four-year-old terror downstairs.



## Chapter Ten



"I can't do this!" Kira shouted at Luke in frustration.

"Just relax. Think about lighting the rock on fire. You can do this, I know you can." Kira looked at Luke, wanting to strangle him. *Real easy to feel so calm when you've been practicing since birth*, she thought as she wiped the sweat from her brow. All the mental exertion was draining her.

She and Luke had been practicing for almost an hour and nothing was happening. Kira was almost beginning to think everything had been a dream. Clearly, she had no special powers.

Kira stopped for a moment to look around Luke's backyard. They stood in a small patch of grass surrounded by dense forest. Kira couldn't make out his neighbor's home through the bushes. Even in the sunlight the trees were dark, and Kira knew that if she walked ten feet into the bushes it would be pitch black. A perfect place to practice, Luke had told her when he picked her up from her house and brought her over to his place. No one would see anything, and they would be completely safe.

An entire week had passed before Kira had brought practicing up with Luke again, and since her parents had left for church without her this morning, she had called Luke right away. Things were still awkward at home when her parents were around, but when she was alone, left with nothing but her thoughts, home was excruciating. Now, Kira wondered which was the lesser of two evils.

"Come on, try one more time, and then we can take a break."

Kira sighed and refocused her energy on the boulder Luke stood next to. He told her it wouldn't actually burn, that vampires were the only things affected by the light, but she was a little afraid of hurting him if she couldn't rein it in once started.

"Kira." He brought her back to attention.

Just focus, he had said, it'll come to you naturally. Well, Kira stared at the rock thinking, *light on fire, light on fire, please God give me a little flame*—but nothing. Her palms didn't even feel warm. She threw them up in the air.

"This is just never happening! I can't keep staring at a rock and pointing my hands in front of me, I might as well say abracadabra and try to make your house float away. This is ridiculous!"

Luke shook his head. "Let's take a break. I need to think of something. I don't know why this is so hard for you. When we were all young, using the power felt like using another limb, it was always easier than this. And I know you're strong. I've seen it."

"Well, good for you." Kira huffed and collapsed on the grass where she was standing. He walked inside his house, clutching his forehead with one hand; clearly trying to make a better lesson plan than the one they were currently following.

*He's as new at this as I am*, Kira thought. She let her back fall flat against the grass so she could stare up at the blue, cloudless sky. *Come on.*

"Dear sun, please give me the power to channel your rays through my body, thereby allowing me to inherit my apparent birthright and kill some vampires...love, Kira."

*I've officially gone insane*, she reflected while rolling over onto her side to stare at the few brown leaves dusting the ground. Autumn was a lot different in the South, a little too green for her liking. Kira wondered what it would be like to have a Christmas without snow. She would miss the New York blizzards, the slushy streets, and the cursing pedestrians slipping down the subway steps or marching Prada boots through inches of snow. Rockefeller lit up at Christmas. The city came alive when the lights on the gigantic tree were switched on, and the ice skating rink was crowded at every hour of the day. She had always come home for a week during Christmas break to visit with her family, but hanging ornaments on a plastic tree never felt right. Kira used to love coming home to her dorm where her roommate Sarah and she would decorate a blue spruce pine

tree.

But, Kira sighed as she sat up, she had more pressing concerns.

Luke said it would be easy, like breathing, eventually. She wondered if maybe it was just too late. She took psychology back at boarding school, and she remembered learning about human development. The first few stages of life are the most important. If you don't learn to speak by the time you're four, you probably never will. Babies are born curious and learn far more than adults do. Maybe she had just missed out on her chance.

*Enough ruminating*, Kira mentally shook herself. She needed to learn this.

Luke finally reemerged from his home and carried over two lemonades. Kira gladly accepted. The mix of cold and sweet instantly refreshed her, and she turned to Luke, waiting to hear his thoughts.

"So...basically, you're a freak."

"Hey!"

He threw his hands up in defense.

"Kidding! I just don't think the way I was taught as a boy is going to do anything for you. Your body doesn't react, doesn't know its own potential. We need to like, awaken you first."

"Okay, creepy much?"

"I just mean, we need to find some sort of trigger so you can start to remind your body how it's supposed to work."

"Well, how did you learn? Maybe if you tell me a little bit about the procedure, I'll understand."

Luke sat down next to her on the grass, sipping his lemonade and staring deep into the ebony woods.

"It's hard to explain I guess."

"Try," she said, not letting him off the hook at all. This was all his idea anyway. Well, not technically, but still.

"When you're little, the teaching is less about learning how to bring the fire out and more about learning how to stop it and control it. Ever since I can

remember, I would think of the fire, and it would come. Easy as pie. The hard part was controlling it."

"So, it'll be doubly difficult for me." She ran a hand through her hair, exasperated. "Fantastic."

"One of the main reasons conduit communities live in such seclusion is to protect the children who have no control. The fire doesn't hurt humans or even inanimate objects, only vampires. So, theoretically, it would be safe to live anywhere. But babies just release energy all the time without any warning and suddenly there's a streak of fire soaring through the air like a cannonball until an adult catches it and sucks it back into themselves. Obviously, if we lived in human communities, people would start to catch on to the strangeness."

"Will I ever be allowed to see that?" Kira asked, vulnerable. She wished she could have grown up in such a place, totally accepted by everyone.

"I hope so. Sonnyville was like nothing you've ever seen. I miss it sometimes."

"Why'd you come here, Luke? Why'd you take on this mission?" Kira had wondered it for a while. Who would willingly enroll in high school to basically babysit the one person who could potentially destroy the world? Nobody wanted that kind of pressure.

"Because it was my duty."

"That can't be the only reason. You're not one to blindly follow orders. Remember, I dated a Protector in New York, and he was nothing like you. Had he said duty, I would have believed him, but you don't like to always follow the rules."

"You mean Cy?" She nodded. "I spoke with him before coming here. He told me how little you knew, how he suspected you would need someone to look out for you. He did care about you, in his own extremely stuffy way."

"And you pitied me?"

"A little." Luke shrugged. He was trying to be completely honest with her. "A lot of it was the fact that this was such an important duty, and important

missions are hardly ever granted to someone as young as me. Part of it was my competition. One other boy in my town, Nick, fit the bill. But he was a hard ass and no fun. I knew he'd never befriend you unless necessary. I knew he wouldn't provide the support a girl in your situation would need. And you know me." He broke his far-off stare to smile at her. "I can't resist a damsel in distress." He lowered his voice to a spooky imitation of Dracula. "Now, try to light me on fire if you dare...mwahahaha."

Kira stood, ignoring Luke's impression of an evil mastermind, and got right back down to business.

"So, I need a trigger."

"Yup."

"Any idea what kind?" Luke shook his head with a sly smile. He waved her closer and she hesitantly walked over while he turned around. She moved closer to his back, wondering what the heck was going on, when he turned around and lunged at her.

Luke grabbed her by the throat, knocking her to the ground, and she saw teeth protruding past his lips. He sunk his head closer, so the teeth started to poke her neck, and Kira felt trapped. She couldn't move under the weight of his body and had no weapon to fight him off with. Desperation heated her veins, and a flood of warmth surged through her body. She started shivering from the temperature difference between her molten core and the cool breeze brushing her skin. Kira willed the fire to seep out, anything to stop the unbearable scorching of her heart.

Suddenly, she burst, the same way she had in the auditorium. Her hands burned and Kira opened her eyes despite the pain. Luke smiled, and the waves of sun rolled past him, leaving him unharmed. Kira felt like a river that had just been set free from a dam. There was no way to stop the waves of power bursting forth.

"Control it!" Luke yelled over the crackling fire.

Kira told it to stop. The flood started slowly calming, and she curved her



fingers toward her palm, trapping the light in a viselike grip. Finally, the last bit of light burned out, and Kira almost expected smoke to seep from her palms.

Instead, Luke trapped her in a hug and swung her around. "That was incredible! I was even pushed back a little from your power, which is really hard to do, trust me. You're really strong. You don't even know how strong. It's like there's no limit to how much light you can channel. I never felt it waver until you wanted it to. People usually only last for five or ten minutes, maybe less at full force."

Kira swiveled. "How long was I going for?"

"Like half an hour. It was incredible."

"Oh my god." Kira sat down. "That felt like thirty seconds to me."

"It's okay, the timing will come with the control. But for now at least, we know your trigger." She looked up at him expectantly. "Well, duh. No offense, but clearly, being scared is the only thing that brings the power out in you. We'll fix it. Don't worry."

"How?" She looked up at him, noticing how the sun silhouetted his features, it almost looked like he wore a golden crown.

"I mean, I can't always run around jumping on you with fake fangs. That was just a one-time deal. You're okay, right? I got a little into the moment." His eyes peered toward her throat.

Kira reached her hand to her neck. She felt completely fine. There was no bruise even though it felt like he had choked her pretty badly. "Is it possible that channeling also acts as a cure?"

"Not that I've ever heard of." He was intrigued, she could tell.

"I never mentioned this before, but in the auditorium, I was hit with a brick, and my leg was bleeding really badly, and Diana cut my face. But afterward, when I came back to your place, all the cuts had closed. They seemed to have disappeared. I just assumed it was another side effect, like the burns."

Luke grabbed her shoulders, staring her down. "Are you certain?" She nodded. "Don't tell anyone. I don't know what it means, but it is most definitely

not normal."

"I promise, I won't tell. I don't even have anyone to tell." She shook free of his hold and tried to laugh it off. Just another way she was different, dangerous. Kira sighed.

"So what now? How do we keep practicing?"

"Try to think of things that scare you, and see if anything happens."

"Like what? Spiders?"

"Maybe? I don't know. This is new to me too. Just try to make yourself scared to death." Kira rolled her eyes. She just had to scare the life out of herself. How simple.

Kira tried thinking of spiders, but nothing happened. She thought of their hairy legs, the clicking of sharp mucous covered fangs and sticky webs trapping her alive. Nothing.

Next she thought of flying, picturing turbulence so rough her butt picked up off the seat, and the overhead compartments fell open. She pictured oxygen masks falling from the ceiling, the plane spinning circles in the air to eventually crash in the Pacific Ocean where she would drown in the cockpit or escape to be eaten alive by great white sharks.

Not even a flush developed on her skin.

Finally Kira thought of the worst thing possible, a scene out of *Scream* where a knife waving psycho chased her through her house killing off her friends and popping out of closets.

Nada. All Kira had managed to do was give herself the heebie-jeebies since she and Luke were totally alone in the middle of nowhere, a place no one could hear her scream. Kira shivered.

"This isn't working. I'm just freaking myself out."

"Keep trying. This has to work. It's the only way you'll learn any control and be able to do anything aside from fending off a vamp right when it's about to bite you. That method is way too risky."

Suddenly, Kira had an idea.

She looked back at the rock, focusing on the lines of color formed by sunlight and shadow. Toward the bottom, the hard surface turned black and she stared into the abyss, letting her eyes lose focus and start to blur, until an image from her subconscious took over—Diana.

Kira imagined the moment when Diana leaned in to sink her teeth into Kira's flesh, the uncontrollable fear she had felt as death crept closer. How she looked at Tristan and in that moment realized he could do nothing to save her, that each of them was helpless. Kira waited for the pinprick of teeth on her neck, felt the tiniest pinch before...and then Kira felt it—her strength was gathering.

Heat flowed to her palm, and, for the first time, it felt as though she called it. She pulled at the tendrils of fire with her mind, willing them to surge through her veins, accepting the pain and focusing on the darkness she was trying to dissipate. Her palms burned as the flares broke through her skin and flooded Luke's backyard.

She lost whatever hold she had had for those few seconds and started sweating under the relentless surge. Distantly, she heard a man's voice calling at her, telling her to stop, telling her to rein it in, but some sort of monster had awoken inside of Kira. Like an out of body experience, she felt her legs give out, felt the grass crunch against her cheek, but all the while her hands aimed out toward the rock. New hands lifted her, surrounded her. Her palms pressed against something hard, and the light drained away, seeping into a different source.

Slowly, Kira's vision began to return. She focused on her slightly glowing fingernails where they pressed up against soft cotton. Strings of light danced between her knuckles, trying to escape the suction cup hold of her hands against Luke's chest. Kira noticed for the first time that the light was sinking into him, weaving into his chest, and leaving her body.

"Kira, you have to stop. It's too much."

She looked at him, at the strain on his face and the rough lines of his taut lips. Not her smiling Luke—this Luke was in pain. He squinted his eyes to

squelch the feeling, trying to act like a man, but Kira could hear his raspy breath.

She stepped back and folded her fingers into her palm, willing the torment to stop, and her light obeyed. It winked out almost immediately.

Luke turned away and with a loud grunt, released the sunlight he had absorbed from Kira out toward the forest. For the first time, Kira understood how beautiful it was. The flames illuminated even the darkest corners of the forest, like a firework exploding at eye level. Red, yellow, orange, and blue swirls circled Luke and the yard around, leaving everything unharmed. Flowers turned almost immediately to catch the new rays and blooms opened as if commanded.

But then, Luke crashed to the ground and crumpled against the grass, letting his light wink out and leaving the yard shrouded in darkness once more.

"Luke!" Kira screamed and ran over to him. She landed on her knees beside his immobile body and turned him over so his back touched the grass. She cupped his face in her hands.

"Luke, please, I didn't mean whatever happened."

His eyes peaked out from nearly closed lids. His fingers moved against grass, inching closer to hers. Kira grabbed his hand and moved to rest his head upon her lap, brushing damp hair from his forehead.

"Luke?"

His eyes fluttered, and Kira heard his breathing lengthen.

"Hi," he said quietly, squirming in his drowsiness. "Give me a second," he asked and tried to sit up.

Kira let him gather his thoughts and regain his composure, but she needed to know what had just happened. Did she almost kill him? Kira thought he had said it wasn't possible.

"I'm sorry," Kira said. He looked over at her and shook his head.

"What are you sorry for, Kira? It was my own fault."

"What happened, Luke? I thought I couldn't hurt you."

"You didn't." He sighed and tried to stand. Luke wobbled on his feet but

took a few hesitant steps, as though he were trying to remind his legs how to work. Kira followed him back to his porch and sat beside him on the stoop.

"I overexerted myself," Luke said finally. Kira looked at him, completely blank in the face. "I tried to take your power into my body. You looked completely lost, like you were drowning, and then you fainted, and I had no idea what to do. So, I let your light flood into me to calm the storm and wake you up, but I guess it sort of backfired." Luke looked sheepish. Some teacher he was.

"But, why did it hurt you?"

"It was just too much power. You have no idea how strong you are. Once your body realized what I was doing, you kept pushing more and more light into me, and I just got full I guess. Like a water balloon that gets filled too much, I just needed to release it."

Kira nodded, finally understanding. She felt horrible.

"At least it worked." Kira tried to be optimistic while she mindlessly pulled little grass strands from the ground.

"What did you think of? To trigger your power?"

"I pictured Diana and the scene in the auditorium." Kira shuddered, not wanting to start up again. Luke just nodded.

"So, we're probably done training for the day. You fainted...then I fainted. I'd call it a successful session," Luke said, making light of the situation like always. Kira nudged him with her shoulder.

"What are you going to tell the council? I assume you have to send some sort of report this week."

Luke shrugged. "Not much. I'll let them know you inherited the power, that you have finally started learning to channel at will and that I'm training you. Nothing about the extent of your abilities." Luke looked away from her as he finished talking, trailing his words off into silence.

"What are you hiding? What would happen if they found out?"

"I honestly don't know."

"But, it wouldn't be good."

"No, probably not," he agreed almost silently, reminding Kira that this wasn't all fun and games. It was serious.

Luke grabbed her hand, pulled her from the stoop, and led her inside to his kitchen. Kira grabbed her backpack and noticed a small bookshelf in the corner of the room. She couldn't remember ever seeing it before.

Kira walked over, scanning the titles. Some were classic fiction novels. She spotted a copy of *Dracula* with a worn cover and binds that had started to disintegrate. Vampire novels, even current girly romances, were all stacked in perfect alphabetical order. And then, on the lower shelf, Kira saw a book on conduits—on their history and culture. The binding was old, filmed with a perpetual dust, and gold script displayed the title but no author. She heard Luke in the kitchen. It sounded as though the refrigerator had just closed and, before she realized what she was doing, Kira grabbed the book and stuffed it in her bag.

"Ready?" Luke said as he rounded the corner with a water bottle, which he threw in her direction. Kira caught it and followed him out to the car.

When she got home, Kira ran up to her room, ignoring the family dinner set up in the dining room. She dropped her book bag, locked the door to her bedroom, and pulled out the text she had stolen from Luke. Kira turned off her lights, leaving only the reading lamp by her bed on, and situated herself in her comforter.

She looked at the index: *Chapter One – A Brief History, Chapter Two – Vampires With Souls?, Chapter Three – Protectors vs. Punishers, Chapter Four – A Mixed Breed, Chapter Five – The Prophecies.*

Kira ran her hand down the thick paper, fighting the urge to jump right to the fourth chapter. She let her head fall back onto her pillow.

Kira never thought she would be the type of girl that needed an entire chapter of an ancient text devoted to how dangerous she could be. The book had no copyright or publication information. The pages were bumpy from the thick ink that rose off the page, and a thin string was all that held the binding together. Kira almost feared she would wreck it. Had Luke meant for her to find this? She

was positive there had been no shelf when she had stayed the night, positive there were no books visible in his home.

Training had drained her. So Kira stuffed the book under her mattress, where even her sister couldn't reach it, and vowed to start reading it later that week. But before she could even finish the thought, sleep embraced her.

## Chapter Eleven



Everyone's eyes were on Kira as she and her friends walked into the barely recognizable gymnasium. A blush crept up her cheeks, and she thanked god for the oversized cat mask—complete with ears—that accompanied her costume. Emma and Dave were holding hands and giggling, completely unaware of the crowd, while Luke and Miles had already headed for the snack table, leaving Kira alone and uncomfortable by the entrance. She was used to the stares she got because of her voluminous strawberry blonde hair, but she had never felt so exposed.

Kira wanted to curse Emma for convincing her to wear the skintight getup and for cutting extra cat scratches up the sides of her legs. Flashes of her skin were exposed all the way up her thighs, and one scratch cut across her entire back. Kira avoided making eye contact with the senior boys who had all but started drooling when she walked in.

Twenty minutes before, when Luke's trusty pickup had stopped outside her house, Kira had sprinted from her room, down the stairs, and out the door to keep her mother from commenting on her outfit. When she sat safely in the car, Emma kept talking about how she loved the extra black glittery eye shadow and mascara Kira had put on, but the boys had been mysteriously silent. Kira was starting to understand why, and she didn't like it. It was one thing to feel sexy but another to actually have guys openly staring at you.

Kira took one more look around the room, and all the way in the back of the gym, she spotted him. Tristan sat with Jerome, John, and Diana at a table nestled in the corner of the party, away from the crowd and completely separated from the fun. All three of the boys wore suits, and Diana was dressed in a floor-length black ball gown. They looked like they had missed the memo on the costume party and had instead dressed up for a black-tie affair. But even though



Diana was sitting down and in the wrong theme, Kira begrudgingly thought she looked amazing.

*Of course, Kira mused, the one guy who I actually want staring at me is completely absorbed in his own world.* And Kira left that thought at that, leaving Tristan behind to go find her friends.

Emma had snatched a table right next to the dance floor, so Kira sat with her to wait for the guys who were gorging on hors d'œuvres.

"Aren't the decorations just amazing?" Emma gushed, while gazing around the room. Kira had to admit that the party committee had done an awesome job. Cobwebs hung all over the ceiling and walls, filled with plastic spiders and white Christmas lights. Carved pumpkins lined the floors and acted as centerpieces. They had even found black lights to make the room and cobwebs glow a creepy purplish color.

"Very mysterious looking," Kira agreed. She looked over at Emma, who was shifting her weight on the seat while going back and forth between speaking and keeping quiet. "Spit it out," she told her friend, more curious than anything.

"I just have to ask about Tristan. What is going on there? I've been keeping my distance and waiting for you to talk, but I just can't wait anymore. And the way he stared at you when we came in. I mean, even I flushed."

Kira snapped her head around to Tristan's table. "He was looking?"

"Looking like he wanted to devour you! So, spill."

"It's complicated..."

"Because of Luke?"

Kira silently thanked Emma for the way out. "Yeah totally, because Luke would hate it." Not exactly a lie, but definitely not the real reason for her hesitation.

"You have to let that go. Luke can handle it. And I know you really like Tristan. Your eyes just lit up like stars when I said his name." Kira blushed, hating her obviousness. The boys came back, saving her from the rest of the conversation.

"We are definitely the best dressed here," Luke said as he sat down and Kira couldn't help but agree. Dave made a great Batman, and Emma looked like the perfect Poison Ivy evil girlfriend. Miles was, well, Miles in his Robin costume, the forever geek, and even Luke had the maniacal charm of the Joker when he wanted to. He had even let the girls cover his face with costume makeup.

As Kira watched Luke, he met her eyes, and for the first time she thought his gaze held more than just friendship. She quickly denied it, blaming her ridiculous costume, and looked away.

"Hey." He grabbed her hand. "Let's go be evil and mischievous together."

Kira leaned in while they discussed what villainous act to attempt, and in the end, Luke went the easy route and pulled Dave's mask off his head and ran away with it. Kira followed with Miles and Dave hot on their tails. The chase only lasted a few minutes until Dave tackled Luke behind the bleachers. So, Luke tossed the mask to Kira who quickly found herself cornered by Miles. She threw the mask as far away as she could before Miles jumped on her, hoping the recovery at least would be difficult. Then, out of nowhere, Emma appeared, snatched up the mask, and teased Dave until he caught her up in his arms and stole it back.

"No one can beat Batman and Robin, fools," Dave and Miles yelled triumphantly while the whole group walked back over to their table.

"Hey, Kira."

She jumped at the unfamiliar male voice saying her name and turned around. Carter Evans, the school quarterback, was talking to her. *Typical*, Kira thought, *put on some leather and the guy commonly referred to as the most gorgeous person to ever attend this school suddenly wants to get to know you.*

"Want to dance?" he asked.

Kira honestly wasn't sure what to do. He was definitely nice to look at, and he was a completely normal all-American sort of guy. Maybe he would be good for her track record. And with Emma's eyes practically bulging from her

head, Kira knew she needed to say yes. So she took his open hand and let him lead her to the dance floor, which resembled more of a mosh pit than anything else.

"You look amazing," he whispered in her ear as he put his hands on her back and pressed her body against his.

The base rumbled through her. She found the rhythm of the music and decided she just needed to enjoy herself. To forget about Luke and Tristan, to forget conduits and vampires, and just be a normal hormonal teenage girl dancing with one of the most attractive guys at the school.

Carter wasn't one for words, she quickly realized, as they continued to dance in silence. The music blared, the crowd of dancing students moved as one, and soon Kira began to get really overheated in her leather jumpsuit. Even the skin-showing cutouts weren't enough to keep the sweat from gathering, so after a few more songs with her body pressed firmly against his rather tall and broad chest, she and Carter went to get some punch.

Kira looked around while he waited in line, noticing the jealous stares of her fellow classmates and pointedly avoiding the table all the way in the back. She was ignoring him tonight and not thinking about how his black suit set off the stark blue of his eyes so nicely.

Shifting her focus, Kira quickly drank the few glasses of punch Carter retrieved and then headed straight to the dance floor again. Carter managed the crowd easily, pushing them closer to the center and away from the tables, so other dancing couples surrounded them.

After a while, Kira started to feel dizzy. Looking up, the white lights and glowing cobwebs above her seemed to move, spinning. Carter's actions were in slow motion, and she giggled without any reason. When he started kissing her neck, Kira wanted to pull away, but her muscles wouldn't cooperate, and she had to lean on him just to keep from falling over. He looked down at her, smiling, and she laughed loudly, as though his kiss were the funniest thing in the world. Spinning her around, he held her waist when she wobbled and pressed her back

against his stomach.

Kira leaned her head against his chest, closing her eyes to block out the twirling lights around the room. Carter stepped back suddenly, and she almost fell, but his arm came around her again, lightning fast. She was pressed against his chest once more, but this time he wasn't moving. The music still played, but their dance was abruptly over. Opening her eyes to ask what was wrong, Kira found herself gazing into Tristan's sapphire eyes instead of Carter's honey irises. She giggled at the unexpected, but welcome, turn of events.

"Hello," she said and leaned her head back against his chest, this time spotting Carter on the floor, doubled over and clutching his stomach. "Did you hit him? That wasn't very nice." She tried to scold him, but Tristan just rolled his eyes.

"C'mon. You need some fresh air."

"No, I'm fine. Let's just stay like this." Kira leaned her head against his chest again, stopping her spins and balancing issues in one deft move. Tristan wrapped his arm around her waist and slowly led her through the mass of people, gripping tighter when he felt her balance wane.

After a few minutes, they had slipped free of the crowd and were exiting the humid gym. The blast of cold breeze felt fantastic, and Kira let Tristan lead her away from the school and past the football field to the big tree overhanging the school's manmade lake. He sat down and leaned against the tree, motioning for her to sit with him, but Kira ignored it and started dancing to the quiet strains of music they could hear coming from the gym.

"Kira, sit down." He sounded frustrated.

"No! I want to dance." She started jumping up and down to the beat of the music and almost lost her balance, but Tristan stood up and caught her before she crashed. He slipped off his jacket, and Kira pushed her arms through the oversized sleeves. Finally, she calmed down and swayed with him to the music.

Kira sighed, resigned to the fact that the moment felt completely right.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm supposed to be ignoring you, but it's not working."

He laughed quietly. "No, that doesn't seem to be working for either of us."

"Is that why you punched Carter?"

"I just couldn't stand the way he was touching you."

Kira smiled. "Jelly belly," she said, wishing she could get her mouth to stop word vomiting. She could feel his chin on the top of her head as he pulled her in closer.

"Maybe," he said, but it sounded more like a begrudging yes.

Kira yawned.

"Time to sit down," he told her while helping her down to the spot next to him on the ground and leaning her back against the tree. Kira watched the moon reflect off the water. She looked at the sky and saw it still swerving there, and finally had the realization Tristan must have had in the gym.

"I think my punch was not just punch," she concluded as the world continued to spin.

"I think you're right." He put his arm around her, letting her head fall to his shoulder. They sat silently in the moonlight, just enjoying one another's company.

"Are you like one hundred years old?" Kira spat out the first question that came to her mind. She had never even thought of it before, too consumed by his eating habits instead.

Tristan shrugged. "A little older."

Kira sat up, fascinated, and turned to look him in the eyes. "How old?" she asked, feeling like a little girl.

"About one hundred and fifty, give or take a year."

Kira's jaw dropped and her eyelids widened in complete shock. "Gross!"

She clamped her hands over her mouth before she could say anything else. He just laughed it off.

"I look pretty good for someone who's more than a century old, right?" He grinned. She blushed, thinking of their kiss, and silently agreed.

"So, what do we do now? I'm seventeen and growing, you're seventeen and stagnant." Kira finally felt herself coming down from the alcohol Carter had slipped her. The lake still seemed to glow, and the stars still danced in the sky, but she was regaining her mental control.

"I don't know," he whispered and reached for her hand. Kira intertwined their fingers, amazed at his cool touch against her boiling skin.

*Fire and ice*, she thought. That really was what they were, complete opposites. Fire could melt ice and ice could douse a fire, but was there any way for the two to meet in the middle? But, she thought, Tristan wasn't just icy, he was passionate and alive too—more like a flame trapped in the arctic, struggling for the chance to be set free.

Kira snuggled in closer as his arm tightened around her shoulders, and she let her breath slow, enjoying the comfort of these moments where nothing but her feelings mattered, when her mind had shut off for a moment.

A scream sounded, waking Kira from her reverie.

She bolted upright, out of Tristan's arms, and he stirred beside her, jolted from his quiet slumber. They both heard the second scream loud and clear.

Kira looked to the right toward the woods by the school. She swore it came from that direction.

"Come on, we have to help," Kira said and took off at a run toward the noise. Tristan swore and ran past her, using his supernatural speed to shoot ahead. Kira made it to the tree line, where the moonlight lost its power, and everything was pitch black. She heard whimpering ahead of her, sure that whatever girl had screamed was now in real danger. She crept forward, trying not to trip on the roots and twigs all over the ground.

The blue glow of a cell phone filtered through the trees and Kira hid behind a bush to evaluate the situation. She had to help. What if that girl had been her? But she wasn't sure what she would face on the other side. She started to stand.

"Stop." Tristan breathed into her ear. She nearly screamed from fear. "It's

Jerome and John. Let me." And without another word, Tristan disappeared around the tree bend toward the noise.

"Jerome. John. Control yourselves." She heard the commanding tone in Tristan's voice. But there was no reply.

Kira couldn't help it. She was too curious and too worried that Tristan wouldn't save the girl. She crept on her hands and knees around the tree and peered toward the light from the cell phone. The LCD cast an eerie blue glow around the forest, illuminating Tristan. She followed his gaze further and could barely make out the shadow he stared at.

Kira inched closer. Then she understood.

A girl in a Cinderella costume lay sprawled on the ground, perpendicular to Kira. Her hair was filled with leaves and dirt, proving a struggle had occurred, and now she wasn't moving. Jerome leaned over her neck, and John, with his back to Kira, held her wrist to his mouth.

Kira was paralyzed. They were killing her. But instead of feeling powerful and angry, Kira felt afraid. The scene dredged up a memory she had buried long ago, but now it all came rushing back...

*Baby Kira looked up into the pale freckled face of a woman with straight pearly blonde hair—her mother. She tugged on the loose tendrils, thinking it a game, and laughed when she caught stray strands flying in the breeze.*

*"We have to hurry," her father said, and Kira was scared by his tone. She looked over at the tall man with curly red hair, and he strained a smile for her benefit. "Don't you worry, baby girl," he said and tapped her nose.*

*She tried to reach his, but her arms were too short. Instead, she used her fire and shot a bolt at his face, laughing as the pretty colors danced across the sky. He looked shocked as the flame landed on his cheek, but it sunk deep into his skin with no harm done.*

*"I'm going to get you," he said, sweeping her from her mother's arms and swinging her over his shoulder to pat her bum. Kira laughed and shot a bolt at her mother for another reaction. Her mother caught it in her hand and shot it*

back. Kira clapped her pudgy baby hands and tried to squish the light, but she missed. She tried again and shot a long stream at her mother, who now caught it in two hands. She was about to send it back when seven men burst out of the trees to their left.

"Lana!" her father shouted as the strangers grabbed her mother, who shot the light at them. They fell backward, but kept coming. Her father ran to the side with Kira and lifted her off of his shoulders, hiding her in the twigs and leaves of a bush.

"Kira, baby. Listen to Daddy," he whispered urgently, "be quiet and don't shine your light. Whatever happens, this is very important. Do not let anyone see your power."

Even as a baby, Kira knew to listen. He kissed his fingers and touched the kiss to her forehead. Then he turned and shot bolts of light from his hands like bullets, slamming them into the vampires nipping at the woman lying on the ground. The vampires stumbled backward, but more came from behind her father and jumped him, biting into his flesh. He screamed and let the light come out in a long wave. Some vampires were thrown away, other's who were feeding were immune to the effects. Eventually, her father fell to his knees, then his stomach, until he too lay still on the ground.

Vampires circled both bodies, lying over them, not letting a single drop of blood escape their lips.

Kira sat in the bush, still not able to crawl. She didn't release her fire. She wanted to make her father proud. Kira cried silently, until a minute later another crash came, this time from behind her. Arcs of light soared over her head toward the vampires. At first nothing happened, but slowly the vampires moved back against the onslaught of light, not totally immune. Someone grabbed Kira and lifted her from the bush, but she listened to her father and didn't show anyone that she could make flames as well.

The vampires moved from her father, but they could not be pushed from her mother. The woman was still surrounded and dying.



*"Let's go. We must hurry," Kira heard.*

*In an instant, she had been turned from the scene and a new woman was holding her and telling her everything would be all right...*

"No!" Kira shot up from the ground, propelled from the memory into the present day.

Jerome looked up. His pupils had expanded, making his eyes ivory with bloodlust. Fury scorched Kira's veins, growing hotter the longer she met his cold stare. Quick as it had ever come, as though the memory had fully awakened her powers, Kira shot fire at John's back and right into Jerome's face. Both were instantly sent flying through the air, slamming into and breaking tree branches with the force of Kira's power.

Somehow, she kept the light from Tristan and it curved around him. He was safe. He was not evil and not the force of her rage.

When Jerome and John had been flung completely from her sight, Kira winked out the fire, fast and easy, as though turning off a light bulb.

"Well, well. Someone has certainly learned a thing or two in the past few weeks," Diana spoke, emerging from the trees behind Tristan. "Can't hit me without getting lover boy too. Such a shame."

Diana pouted, glaring at Kira. Though her tone was light, her eyes sparkled with rage—Diana must have known where Tristan had gone when he disappeared from the school dance. Kira thought about trying to shoot her powers around Tristan again, but her initial anger was waning, and she wasn't sure if she could control it.

"Get out of here, Diana." Tristan said, trying to move out of the way, but Diana just followed, protected as long as she remained two feet behind him.

"Oh, Tristan." She placed an arm over his shoulder. "I've been letting this go on for far too long, letting you suck on your plastic bags, letting you get more human with each passing day. But, it ends here." He made a move to escape her but she held steady. "Oh, not right now. I'll let you live in this dream world, where you and our mortal enemy live happily ever after. But I'll be back, and

you'll be my Tristan again. And when you are," Diana let him go and forced him to look Kira in the eyes, "she'll be the first one you kill." Diana pushed Tristan from behind, and he stumbled into Kira with a look of horror marring his features.

Kira caught him, distracted enough to miss her chance to weaken Diana. Instead, Diana disappeared into the woods, following John and Jerome—probably more than ready to concoct a plan for revenge.

"This is all my fault," Tristan swore.

Kira hugged him, closing her eyes and comforting him for the moment he needed, before standing up and walking to the girl lying on the ground. She looked so small in her torn and now bloodied Cinderella costume. Kira figured she must be a freshman who was excited by Jerome or John's interest, never once suspecting anything bad would happen.

Kneeling down, she lifted the girl's head onto her lap. She had healed herself before, now it was time to try the skill out on someone else.

Kira placed her palms over the girl's ears, holding onto her head, and let her power melt into the girl's skin. Her fire traveled through the girl's veins, sealing wounds and healing bruises. After a moment, she stirred and moaned in pain, and Kira stopped. She would be safe. The girl would live.

Kira kept looking down, imagining the girl as the woman she had seen in the dream, with pale blonde hair and a dazzling smile. She saw her mother, alone, abandoned by her people, left to die while her husband's body was recovered and her baby taken away.

"Is it painful?" she asked Tristan.

He understood. "No. Most times, the victim is in a dream state, not aware of their surroundings or of what's happening. There are sometimes exceptions though, if no care is taken." Kira nodded. "Let me have her. I'll bring her body closer to the school where someone will take notice and call an ambulance."

Kira felt more than saw the girl be lifted from her arms. Exhausted, she let her body fall back on the dirt, curling into a fetal position to cry. Had her mother

been in pain the whole time? Had she felt the life drain from her body? Her father had been killed quickly, perhaps because he was a man and they feared the Punishers more. Kira prayed her mother had been sucked into a dream and that she never knew what happened. That in her mind, Kira and she played with fire all the way back to a safe house where the three of them could have grown up as a family. She prayed her mother died to dreams of kissing her child goodnight, growing old with her husband and escaping the confines of conduit society. The truth would have been too hard to bear.

Tristan returned for Kira. She barely noticed him pick her up and hold her close to his chest, letting her tears soak his fresh white button-down. She pulled his jacket tighter around her, relishing the smell of him—the smell of musk, generic soap, and burnt embers that might have come from her.

Eventually, Tristan stopped walking and opened his car door. They slid into the backseat with Tristan still cradling her in his arms. Kira fell asleep while he hummed a jazz tune quietly in her ear and placed a loving kiss on her forehead.

That night, she dreamed of the first year of her life—of her parents, of her powers, of how happy she had seemed in that memory. She remembered the games they had played to teach her how to control her flames and how to hide when she needed to. They had loved her, and she had loved them with all her heart, and when they were taken away, Kira had shut down. She had promised her father to never show anyone her powers, so she never used them again—not in front of her adoptive mother and never even alone. Eventually, Kira realized, she had just completely forgotten about her powers.

But clearly, now all of that had changed.

## Chapter Twelve



When Kira woke up, her back ached and she was freezing. She pulled Tristan's blazer tighter around herself, fending off the cool November morning air, before realizing it was probably Tristan himself that was chilling her.

She sat up and maneuvered out of his arms, trying not to wake him. Oddly, Kira didn't feel embarrassed at all about spending the night with him in his car. She loved having him hold her and comfort her. Sure, her parents would flip when she got home, and she would have to figure out what to say to Luke. But for once, Kira wasn't going to worry about that.

She looked out the car window at the grounds brushed with dew. The sun had just started peeking through the sky. Soft tendrils warmed her skin, and Kira realized that the events of the previous night had awakened something inside of her. She felt different. More in control, as though her memories had allowed her to acknowledge her birthright—to understand that it wasn't horrible but beautiful. She could save people. Perhaps, she had been born not for chaos but for life.

Kira opened her palm and let a little flame rise to rest on her hand like a small campfire. Her fingers warmed instantly, as did her body. Feeling the sun gather on her skin left her complete, content. The swelling under her eyes receded, her scratches from the forest mended themselves, and finally Kira found something better to wake up too than coffee.

"You're beautiful. You know that?"

Kira turned to Tristan, happy to wake up to his barely opened eyes and lazy smile. Distracted, she let her light grow, until she saw Tristan wince.

"Sorry," she said and winked it out of existence.

"I don't mind." He sat up.

"So what now?" Kira asked, letting her head fall back on his shoulder.

"Do you need to go home?"

Kira shook her head. There were too many things they needed to talk about. She wanted Tristan to open up to her and tell her about his past. Kira knew that if she went home, he would close himself off again to protect her.

"Good, then just trust me," he said, hopping into the driver's seat while Kira moved to the passenger side. Tristan started the engine and slid his hand into hers as he sped out of the school parking lot.

Kira couldn't help but wonder if anyone had seen them sleeping in Tristan's car last night. Someone must have. They were in the middle of the parking lot and not everyone had left the school dance before they got there. Luke might have walked by and glanced in, but Kira didn't even want to think about that. He would be so angry and hurt. Luke would never understand why she wanted Tristan, but she and Tristan were the same in many ways—both outcasts who didn't really belong anywhere.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Tristan asked.

Kira relaxed and placed her feet on the dashboard, letting her eyes meet his, knowing they sparkled like Emma had said earlier.

"I'm thinking I'm happy just sitting here with you like it's completely normal." She smiled, and he grinned back, clutching her fingers a little tighter. "I'm also thinking, damn I wish I'd brought a change of clothes." Tristan snickered, and Kira glanced at her leather-covered legs, happy she at least had his coat.

"Don't worry. We're not going anywhere public."

"And where are we going? You don't have to be so mysterious all the time."

"Maybe I just like keeping you on your toes."

Kira rolled her eyes and settled in to her seat some more, listening to the music and letting Tristan concentrate on the driving.

Eventually they pulled up next to a riverbank. Tristan led Kira along the shore, pulling her until they reached a giant oak tree with branches that reached

out over the water. Tristan slid on the branch in front of her and then helped Kira up. Kira let her back rest against the tree trunk, watching Tristan as he inched further out past the few feet of marsh, until his feet dangled over flowing water. Kira listened to the birds chirp, the water swoosh, and the trees rustle, and felt at peace.

"It's beautiful. What river are we on? How'd you find it?"

"The Ashley River. I've come here ever since I was a boy."

"One hundred and fifty years ago?" Kira asked.

This was what they had come here for—to talk and to tell their stories. Kira looked at Tristan, watched him peel bark off the branch with his fingers, and struggle with what to say.

"It's okay," she murmured, wishing he would move closer so she could hold his hands and provide some comfort.

Tristan took a deep breath, let the air ease out, and began to tell his story. "I was born in 1847, right here in Charleston, to two wealthy plantation owners." He glanced up at her, trying to gauge Kira's reaction, but she just nodded encouragingly. "My house wasn't far from this spot, and I used to play on this tree as a little boy. I was often by myself, left alone to explore and play. You see, my mother was the only one who ever understood me. We'd go into Charleston and she'd buy me expensive paints. The first time she bought me a canvas, she took me up to the steeple I showed you and told me to draw the city. It was life changing."

He paused, and Kira tried to picture him as a little boy, hiding away with paints and drawing pads, exploring the forests alone. It was a sad image of a lonely childhood, and Kira was suddenly more grateful than ever for Chloe and the parents she did have.

"You have to understand that I never liked slavery," he continued, "never wanted the family business, and never wanted any part of cotton. That was for my brother. I needed beauty and not savagery. But when the war came, I did my duty. We both went off fighting, my brother fighting for power and I fighting to

protect the city I loved, but not the lifestyle. One night in 1864, the Northern army surprised my regiment and I got shot twice—once in the thigh, once in the shoulder. I fell instantly and watched as my fellow soldiers retreated to leave me stranded. Other dying men lay moaning all around me, and I slowly bled out, awake for what seemed like hours, hearing others fall silent beside me, until a man came. I saw him kneel with the dying, leaning in close. At first, I thought he was a priest saying prayers for the dead, but then he came closer, and I saw the blood all over his face and started screaming. For some reason he took pity on me and saved my life by turning me. When I woke up, feeling the hunger, I knew hate for the first time. I wished I'd died."

Tristan eased his eyes shut, lost in his own thoughts for a moment. Kira knew he was struggling with the memories of the life he had lost. He opened his lids and stared out into the distance, at the trees on the far side of the riverbank, swaying in the wind. Kira had a feeling he was staring through them to a scene she would never herself be able to see.

"Aldrich, my maker, was not a good man. He kept dungeons filled with human prisoners, enjoyed torture and murder. For thirty years, I stayed with him. He forced me to kill, to feed off terrified and crying women, and I thought it was the only way to live. That I was damned to that hell forever."

Tristan let out a sad smile and ran his hand through his hair. His shoulders were hunched, but he turned his head to look at Kira. "One night, a band of Punishers raided his home. We all fled, but I purposely let the conduits separate us. I knew it was my only chance to escape, so I let him think I'd died. I've never seen him since. I don't know whether he lived or died, and I never want to."

Kira wanted to cry for him, for the horrible things he had lived through. He moved closer to her, back toward the shore, and Kira grabbed his hand when he was within reach. She pulled him to her, until he had shifted so that his back rested against her stomach.

Hugging her arms around him, she whispered, "It's all right, now."

"I may be a vampire, but I'm not a bad man. I swear it." He sounded as though he was about to cry. Kira realized his memories still haunted him.

"I know," she said and nodded, hoping he felt the movement against his head, understanding she was sincere.

"After I escaped, I kept to myself for a long time. I fed off people because I had to, but never enjoyed it and never killed again. I traveled, jumping from one city to the next, trying to see the wonders of the world and meeting different sorts of vampires along the way. Some were just as bad as Aldrich, and some were just like me. During the first World War, I scavenged on soldiers dying in Europe, but a few years later a discovery changed my life. I stumbled upon a Russian blood bank, found bags full of blood, and realized my days of feeding on humans were over."

"When did you meet the others?" Kira asked, thinking of Diana, Jerome, and John.

"I knew Diana from the start." Tristan angled his head to look at Kira. She hoped she covered her shock well enough. Diana and Tristan had known each other for more than a century?

"She was with Aldrich for years before he turned me. She took to his teachings far more than I ever did, but she always believed we were meant to be together. She was the one who helped me escape, and I never heard from her again, until I returned to Charleston fifteen years ago, finally ready to come back home. I was tired of drifting, of being alone, and I missed Charleston. It hadn't changed all that much in one hundred years, and I was walking through the old town one night when I saw her with Jerome and John. She welcomed me back with open arms, and even though I disapprove of their lifestyles, it felt so nice to have a family again. But all that changed when I met you."

"Why?" Kira couldn't understand how two months of barely knowing her had changed Tristan so deeply that he would betray the one person he had known for one hundred years. Because surely that's what Diana saw it as—betrayal. The past two months had flipped Kira's life upside down, but she never



imagined they had done the same to Tristan.

"When I first saw you, in the classroom, I had no idea what you were. I never dreamed conduits could form mixed breeds, but Diana knew right away, and she wanted to capture you and kill you. As soon as she said it, I don't know why, but all I could think about was protecting you. Well, some protector I turned out to be." He shook his head and sat up, jumping from the tree to stand on the shore. He knelt down to gather some flat stones to skip along the water's glassy surface.

Kira watched as he beat himself up over the events of the past few weeks. No wonder he always seemed sad, Kira thought. He blamed himself for everything, even things completely outside his control. "I'm alive, aren't I?"

"Because you discovered your power. Diana almost killed you."

"But Tristan..." She sat up and grabbed his shoulder, forcing him to face her. "I might have never discovered anything if you hadn't helped me, in the classroom, when you scared me. It awakened my power, made me know I could somehow help myself. And let's not forget that you saved me from almost drowning."

His features softened and he leaned back against the tree branch, covering her hand with his own, keeping it securely on his shoulder. "You must have questions. Fire away."

Kira chewed her lip, thinking of what to ask first. Her mind was practically bursting, but she didn't know where to start. What do you ask someone who is old enough to be your grandfather but looks young enough to date? Normally, Kira thought, a guy his age would be married...married? How many girls had he been with? Kira had only been dating for a handful of years, and she had already had at least one boyfriend. Tristan had been doing it for one hundred and fifty years. He must have had tons of lovers.

Kira pulled her hand from his, suddenly very conscious of their age difference. She'd never done more than kiss a boy, and she could only imagine what sort of creepy, vampire things Tristan had done.

"Kira? What are you thinking?" He turned around, resting his elbows on the tree branch and looking up at her.

"Um..." Kira twiddled her thumbs, fighting the urge to blush. "So, how many girls have you, you know...dated?" *God*, she thought, *why am I acting like a thirteen-year-old?*

Tristan burst out laughing. "Of all the things, that's what you want to know?"

"Well, it's a start. Why? Something to hide?" she asked, lifting her eyebrows. Kira was becoming defensive, and it brought her out of her dazed schoolgirl mood.

"No. I don't even know. No one serious, if that's what you're asking. But I've been around for a while, so I've met some women along the way and, well..." He trailed off.

Kira hid her face in her hands, suddenly not wanting to know. No one serious—that was good enough for her.

"New topic please," she spoke, still not meeting his eyes. "Can I see your fangs?" She dropped her hands, feeling like a little kid with a new toy.

Tristan rolled his eyes at her but closed his mouth and opened it a second later after a strained expression crossed his features. They were smaller than Kira had remembered with Diana, not nearly as frightening as she had imagined. Pearly white and seemingly delicate, but Kira knew they were lethal, literally. They looked sharp, she thought and reached her finger out to touch one, but Tristan moved away.

"Don't. I don't want to hurt you," he said, letting his teeth recede back into his gums. Kira wasn't sure if he meant hurting her finger, or doing something a little worse, so she left it at that.

"So, what did Diana mean about getting 'her Tristan' back? Can she do that? Can she actually change you?" Kira leaned back against the tree again. Diana's threat had seemed real and much more a promise than empty words.

"No. I should probably explain more about Diana though." He sighed,

resigned. "When Aldrich brought me back, during the change, Diana was the one who cared for me. Afterward, she taught me how to eat and survive and control the urges. She always believed I loved life with Aldrich and that I would someday love her. But years passed, and she could see my discontent. When she helped me escape by leading Aldrich the other direction, away from the Punishers and from me, I think she always expected for me to find her and return to her. When I finally did, I was a different man. She was disgusted that I ate from bags and refused live humans. She still is. I think she believes that if I fall off the bandwagon and drink from a human one time, I won't be able to stop. That I'll become the monster Aldrich made me into again." He looked up at Kira, his expression hard and full of conviction. "I never will, Kira. That was never who I am, and I won't go back, no matter what Diana tries to do."

"I'm confused though." Kira thought back to the auditorium, when she discovered what Tristan and the others were. He was stronger than all of them. If she had never gotten hit by the brick—never started bleeding and distracted him—Tristan would have beaten them all. He had thrown them around like rag dolls and not a single punch had touched him. "In the gym, you laughed when they threatened you. They were all afraid to challenge you. Why? Diana's older, shouldn't she be more powerful?"

He shook his head. "The age thing is just a myth. Your human blood determines power and strength. If you were strong as a human, your strength will be amplified, same with speed. Even abilities, like being able to read people's facial expressions can turn into actual mind reading when you're changed into a vampire. I think that's why Aldrich turned me. He must have known I'd be as strong as I am. But age doesn't affect it at all. I could be stronger than a thousand-year-old vampire, but he's had more time to make friends and garner power, so he's more untouchable."

"What do you mean?"

"Vampires have their own set of rules. Almost every country has some sort of governing council with heads, sort of like senators, in each of the major cities.

If I wanted to travel to, I don't know, Boston, I would need to ask permission first. There are a lot more rules than you would think."

"But all the rules I can think of seem to be wrong," Kira said, remembering Tristan in the church and lying in the sun.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we're outside during the daylight, and you don't seem to be bursting into flame. How did all those rumors get started?"

"It was..." He thought of the right word. "Beneficial for vampires to start those rumors. That way, anytime I wore a silver cross or went surfing, no one would even consider the possibility of the supernatural. Just a precaution."

"So, I'm the only way you can die?"

Tristan shrugged, and Kira looked down at the dim burn marks on her hands from the night before. It hadn't even hurt that time. The fire had come completely naturally. "Can I ever become a vampire?"

"No," Tristan said quietly. "A conduit can only be killed by a vampire. Their blood rejects the turning."

Kira assumed as much even though Luke had never bothered to tell her that. She was relieved in a way, knowing that she could never become a vampire. She would have never wanted that, a life of drinking blood, even if it meant a life with Tristan.

"Can you ever skip out on the whole immortality thing?" she asked.

Tristan shook his head silently.

They really were doomed. She would grow old and die, probably killing vampires along the way. He would be young and strong forever, and there was no way around that.

"Is all of this even worth it?" Kira murmured, staring out at the water. The tide had risen, and the waves were chopier now, breaking into white heads along the surface and swallowing the marshes at the riverbank. "I mean, I wouldn't mind the whole cougar aspect, having a boyfriend who looks seventeen when I'm at the ripe old age of sixty, but who are we kidding?"

"We have to try," Tristan urged. "Maybe you can live with never knowing, but I can't spend eternity wondering what could have been. And if we end up falling in love, truly and deeply, we can deal with it when the time comes. I wouldn't mind having a sugar-momma." He winked at her, and Kira's mood lightened a little bit.

"I'll marry a rich man, and you can be the hot pool boy I have a scandalous affair with."

"Or, I can make a ton of money and pay for all the plastic surgery to keep you looking young. Pumped up lips and a little Botox for the wrinkles—I don't like it when faces actually move you know."

"Can't wait," Kira said and pretended to growl like a cougar. He grabbed her around the waist, pulling her from the tree branch and into his arms. They slipped from the shade of the overhanging tree into the heat of the sun, and it refreshed Kira, giving her energy.

"What does the sun feel like to you?" Kira asked, loving the serenity she always felt when outdoors.

"Sort of like an electric current prickling my skin. It stings, but I don't mind."

"And what does my sunlight feel like to you?"

"I imagine it's comparable to being burned at the stake. Every part of my body boils under the heat."

"I'm sorry," Kira said, and Tristan brushed the lock of hair that had fallen over her face back behind her ear.

"I don't blame you. You were only protecting yourself. Besides, as soon as you stop, the pain does too, in an instant."

"Still..."

"Nope. No feeling sorry for the vampire. Besides, it's my turn to ask you a question." She looked up at him, waiting. "Are you really a mix between Protector and Punisher? I thought so, but without tasting more of you, I can't be sure."

Gross, Kira thought, *tasting me?* "There will be no blood exchanges today, so I'll just tell you that I am and you'll have to trust me."

He smiled, showing her that he had popped his teeth out again, jokingly.

But then he frowned, saying, "You should dye your hair. It's too obvious. If word gets out that you exist, every vampire around the world will be coming after you."

"And then all hell breaks loose, right?" Kira ran a hand through her curls. She had never even thought about her hair as dangerous, as giving her away. Her eyes maybe, but how deadly could a strawberry blonde mess really be?

"Let's hope we never have to figure that out," he said.

Kira silently agreed. All she needed was to let go for a second, lower her guard and then *bam!* She remembered her parents, how vampires had jumped them, coming out of the bushes with no warning sign. If a single vampire ever caught her, he could keep her around, drinking her almost dead for immunity, then letting her blood replenish for more supplies. Kira saw Tristan fight Diana, John, and Jerome. Without their light, conduits were no match for vampires. *Our fire is our only weapon*, Kira thought. Conduits needed to exist, but she could mean their end.

"You know, you seem different to me," Kira said, shaking her head and changing the subject. No more dark thoughts, not while relishing the cool embrace of his arms around her, comforting despite the cold. "Happier, somehow. Like the brooding, sad Tristan has been mostly replaced by the mischievous one."

"I am." He smiled against her forehead. "You don't even know what a relief it is to talk to someone about all of this. I've been holding it in for one hundred years, and finally, I can openly and honestly talk about how I feel. I can be myself."

"I understand," Kira said, as she rested her head on his chest, noticing the steady beat of his heart. "I can't talk to Luke about how I feel about all of this. He would never understand why I'm even talking to you. He doesn't know what

it feels like to be trapped. I never asked for these powers. I never asked to be a conduit, and the potential end of the world, as Luke described it, if some vampire becomes immune through me. I never wanted any of it. But he's always lived this life. He always wanted it, and he loves his job, I can tell. He told me to keep the healing thing to myself, you know? He thinks the conduit council won't react kindly. It makes me question what they're like, whether I even want to be a part of it."

"I was wondering about that," Tristan said, running his finger along the spot on Kira's face where Diana had cut her. "There was no scratch or scar the next time I saw you. I thought Luke might have done something. I actually don't know very much about conduits."

"I think I'm the only one who can heal things. I don't know how I do it, it's just sort of an instinct." They stood in silence, Kira waiting for Tristan's inevitable question.

"So, what are you going to tell him?" Tristan asked, and Kira moved her head to look up at him, reading the vulnerability in his features. She knew what he meant, what would she tell him about them, about this conversation and the intimacy they now shared. Surely, Kira would tell him about finding Jerome and John in the woods, about the memory she recalled and how she could now control herself so much more. But what about the dance she and Tristan had shared by the lake, or the private moments they shared now, talking about the darkest parts of themselves? She couldn't hide from Luke forever, but she wasn't sure if she could come clean and risk losing him.

"I don't know. I'm so sorry. I just...I don't know how he'll react. And I need him, he's my only connection to the conduits, the only person I can learn from."

"It's okay," Tristan said, but Kira saw the quick flash of hurt in his eyes—eyes so icy blue she had at first wondered if there even was emotion in there. Now she saw them differently, not icy but deep, like a pond on a calm day when the surface seems hard at first, but something as small as a pebble can drop

smoothly in, destroying the semblance of steel. Kira had dropped in, broken the surface of his soul, and she didn't know when she would reach the bottom.

Tristan cupped her cheek with his hand, staring into her eyes as well. Kira wondered what he saw there. Were her eyes a raging fire that had suddenly calmed to a flickering flame? Her heart seemed to stop as he kept looking, reading her fears and desires, her vulnerability, and the parts of her she tried to keep hidden from everyone else. Then, almost as if in slow motion, he leaned his face down to hers, letting his lips gently grace Kira's, and the moment of calm was gone.

Her heart pounded, and she stood on her tippytoes, eagerly returning his kisses.



## Chapter Thirteen



When Kira awoke on Monday morning, a knot of dread tightened her stomach—she did not want to go to school. She hadn't seen Tristan since he had dropped her off at home on Saturday, and she had ignored Luke's calls all weekend, completely unsure of what to tell him.

When she finally got out of bed, it took her ten minutes to brush her teeth and wash her face—staring at her hollow eyes in the mirror the entire time. The thought of Tristan made a blush rise, but that warmth was quickly pushed away, replaced by self-loathing when Luke leaked into her mind. Eventually, her mother pushed Kira into the car and actually drove her to school.

Leaving her on her own in the parking lot, her mother scolded Kira to hurry up as she was obviously late. Kira listened and ran to the safety of her class, one she shared with neither of the boys. She kept her eyes glued to the scratched hallway floor when sprinting from room to room, not daring to even chance making eye contact with either boy, and she jumped at the sound of her name a few times, only to realize she had been dreaming it.

But then, the lunch bell rang.

It was time.

Unless she decided to eat in the bathroom stall, Kira would have to face Luke and Tristan. She meandered through the halls, waiting for them to thin and for the cafeteria to crowd, hoping her entrance would go unnoticed. Finally, she couldn't stall anymore, and Kira walked through the double doors into the chaos of lunch hour. Her eyes immediately honed in on the table outside where one lone figure sat—Tristan.

He was sprawled across the tabletop, basking in the sun with his hands crossed under his head and his foot tapping to the tune playing only in his mind. Almost immediately, he turned his face to meet Kira's eyes. Her heart stopped,

and he crinkled the corner of his mouth in a subtle greeting. Instantly, Kira flashed back to the hours they spent lying in each other's arms on Saturday, when all conversation had ended and all there had been were feelings. She had never been kissed so passionately, yet held so gently and treated like a lady. He had respected her and let her set the pace, which yes, had ended at kissing.

Kira's pulse started racing at the memories, switching from dread to excitement in a matter of moments. Her brain ran on overdrive, confused by the complete momentum shift that could only be caused by the delightful torment of falling in love.

She mindlessly bit her lip, hiding the grin that threatened to spread across her face and looked away first, right into the eyes of Luke. He was dodging students, weaving his way through the lunch crowd, and staring her down with a look of relief and anger. Without hesitation, he pulled her into a bear hug.

"What the hell happened to you? I thought you'd died. Why didn't you call me back?" He set her back down, but kept his hands on her shoulders, ensuring Kira couldn't run away.

"Nothing." Kira avoided his question when she saw the others making their way over. "We need to talk. Not here," she whispered and then shirked his hold to greet Emma, who squealed loudly and hugged Kira in a viselike grip.

"We were so worried. Oh my god. You don't just run out of a school dance like that."

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she said when Miles and Dave leaned in to hug her as well. *Jeez*, she thought, *they really must have been worried*. "My phone died, and I completely didn't realize it. I'm so sorry." Kira shrugged, feeling terrible.

"So what happened?" Emma asked when everyone had sat back down at the usual table. "One minute you're dancing with Carter Evans..." Emma wiggled her eyes. "And the next you've disappeared."

*Crap*, Kira thought. She had forgotten to prepare a cover story for the rest of the gang. Eventually she would have to tell Luke the truth, but what would appease them in the meantime? *Go with something gossip worthy*, she thought.

Emma would do all the work. "You'll never believe it, but Carter slipped alcohol into my drink. I got totally drunk, and he started freaking out, so he just drove me home. It was insane. I mean, he always seemed like such a nice guy."

As Emma's mouth dropped, Kira smiled to herself. *Perfect.*

"Oh. My. God. What a creep! I can't believe this. That must be why he gets so many girls. He totally tried to date-rape you."

*Okay, maybe too far*, Kira thought, and interrupted to rein Emma in. "No, no. I think I just didn't realize. Someone else could have spiked the punch, I guess. I mean, he drove me home. That was nice."

"Drove you home after he drugged you!" Emma looked over at Carter, shooting daggers across the room with her evil eye. Carter actually seemed to sense it, because he looked over and quickly sank down into the sea of letterman jackets that composed the football team's lunch table. "Yeah, that's right. Hide."

"Emma." Kira grabbed her friend's arm, forcing her around. "Seriously, it was no big deal. I just went home. I don't even blame him." *Woman scorned*, Kira thought with a mental shrug.

"So, where were you Saturday?" Luke interrupted.

"Yeah, what did happen?" Emma let Carter go and turned her attention to the bigger mystery.

"What do you mean?" Kira stared down at her sandwich, taking it out of the Ziploc bag she had packed it in that morning and pointedly ignoring her friends.

"I called you on Saturday, and you never picked up. It rang, by the way, which is unusual for a dead phone, and then I drove by your house, and your mom said you hadn't come home yet. Strange." Kira assumed from his sarcastic tone that Luke was pissed, but the raised eyebrows and rage-filled stare really cinched it.

"Um..." Kira's mind was racing. Nothing would sound convincing at this point. "I snuck in after they were sleeping and didn't wake up until like four. You know, drinking...hangover..." Kira nodded, trying to sound convincing as she

let the sentence trail off. Under the table, she pinched Luke, hoping he would connect it to conduit business, and let it go. He understood, and Kira sensed he had known it was conduit business all along, but wanted to make her squirm.

"Damn," Dave chimed in. "Sounds like Carter really got you wasted."

"Totally." Kira buried her face in her sandwich again and let Emma take up the conversation, telling stories about the parts of the party Kira had missed out on. Apparently a bunch of guys from the basketball team pantsed a cheerleader. Kira was actually disappointed she had missed it.

The lunch hour rolled to an end, and Luke grabbed Kira's hand as everyone started flooding from the cafeteria.

"Come with me," he instructed, leading her against the crowd toward the back door. Kira let him pull her along.

Just as they reached the door, she took one last look across the empty tables and through the windows at Tristan. He was sitting up now, his white T-shirt a little rumpled from the breeze, and he returned her gaze. His eyes were pained, almost as though he had been waiting for her eyes all lunch hour and hated to be the afterthought Kira had as Luke took her away. She wished she could give him one quick peck on the lips, letting him know he had been in her thoughts all along, but she was shoved through the door instead.

Tristan's eyes stayed with her as she and Luke snuck around the school grounds toward the parking lot. Kira knew she had to fess up and tell Luke everything. She just prayed he would be all right with it.

Easing into Luke's car, Kira let him drive, okay with wherever he wanted to go to talk. She thought Luke had maybe expected it. He had to have known she had been keeping things from him, especially things about Tristan. It wasn't fair to Luke, she realized, to be lying and going behind his back when he had given up everything to help her inherit her powers.

Luke pulled over next to a big empty playground, one slumbering until the town kids all got let out of school. He walked across the open field toward the jungle gym, and Kira followed. They sat on old swings that were covered in

flakes of rust and squeaked in the breeze. Kira played with the woodchips at her feet, waiting for Luke to start.

"I'm not an idiot, you know."

"I know," Kira said softly.

"Ever since he saved you on the beach, I knew something was going on. I just, once you realized who you are, I never thought you'd be so stupid." Luke's eyes bored into her head, daring her to challenge him, to say it was a lie. "I mean, he's a vampire. We were made to kill them."

"Not all of us," Kira spoke and finally looked up from the ground. "You're a Protector. You see the good in them."

"That's what I've been taught, Kira, but we all know the truth. There is no good in them. A vampire can't be saved."

"That's not true." Kira's throat constricted. If Luke were right, there would be no hope for her and Tristan, not ever. She couldn't let herself believe his words.

Luke moved his hand to hold hers on the swing. "It is. Listen to me and trust me, because I for one have never lied. Conduits have been alive for thousands of years and in all that time, not a single vampire has been saved. They are evil, Kira, and any Protectors who don't believe it are just fooling themselves."

"Maybe you can't understand this, but I swear Tristan is different."

Luke started laughing, a dark and hollow sound that turned into a sigh after a few moments. "If he's so angelic, what did he tell you about Bethany? Remember my ex-girlfriend, the one I saw him eating?"

"He swore to me that he hasn't had anything but bagged blood in decades. And I believe him. He said he was saving her, closing the wound after Jerome had bitten her." Kira shook her head, defiant against the charge. She knew Tristan.

"And you believe him? Just like that?" Luke released her hand, swinging away from her in his frustration.

"I do." She stood her ground. If Luke actually got to know Tristan, he would see it too. She knew he would.

"Kira, you just don't understand. You don't know enough. I've known people who went away to fight vampires and never came back. I've been part of a search party to rescue a Punisher from being held captive and tortured. The world is a much darker place than you realize. And I joke and I make fun because you have to be happy or you won't survive, but there's a different side of things you're just too naïve to see."

"I've seen some things," Kira said, lifting her hand away from the chain and letting her palm face the sky. She brought a flame up, small and controlled, and let it dance along her fingers. Throwing a tiny ball of light up in the air, she caught it with her other hand and absorbed the fire back into her skin.

"I had a vision of my parents' death. I relived it, and I think I know more about the world than you realize." Kira stretched her arm out and placed a palm on the fresh cut she had noticed on Luke's bicep. She waited until the skin underneath closed shut, seamlessly melding together, then took her hand away.

He let out a breath she hadn't realized he had been holding. Kira looked at him, at the freckles that spanned from cheek to cheek and the slightly crooked bend of his nose that was beautiful in its strangeness. Kira noticed the luminescent quality of his hair and finally the flaming irises they both shared, but she saw a difference for the first time. He always looked on with concern and fascination, but now sadness and maybe even defeat rimmed those eyes.

"What happened in your memory?" Luke asked.

"It was like you said about the conduit societies. I was a baby and I was playing around with my power, trying to control it and make my parents smile. But then we were jumped by vampires and they were killed while I hid under a bush, powerless to stop anything."

"I'm sorry," Luke said and reached for the hand Kira had let dangle beside her swing. She shrugged her shoulders, trying to act indifferent, as if the past was just that, in the past. But his hand was warm in hers, keeping her connected

to real life, and she appreciated it. "How'd you remember? Or did you dream it?"

"It was Jerome and John actually," Kira said. She continued to hold onto his hand, which now seemed more like a lifeline, and then told him about what had happened. How John and Jerome had almost killed that girl, about Diana's sudden appearance, and a little bit about her afternoon with Tristan and his history. Luke listened quietly—his morose frown slowly replaced by worried stress lines.

"I don't like it," he finally said. "Revenge is the worst kind of evil."

"But Tristan said it would be fine, that Diana wouldn't be able to do anything to make him go bad." Luke nodded absently, but Kira could tell his thoughts were wandering into ominous territory. "What? What is it you're not telling me?"

"Nothing," Luke said, still half-aware.

"Come on," Kira said and jerked on his hand, almost pulling him from the swing, but at least gaining his attention.

"It's just, Tristan might not have a choice. Conduit blood, it's like a drug to vampires. It makes them go crazy."

"But he would never bite me," Kira said dubiously, flashing back to the moment in the gym when she had been cut and all of the fighting had ceased—even Tristan had been totally distracted by her blood, and, for a second, had become completely animalistic because of it. When Diana smeared some on his lips, he couldn't resist taking a taste.

"Willingly, no. But, what if it's not in his control?"

"How could they do that?" Kira twisted in her swing, coiling the chains and facing Luke. "I have my powers now. They can't surprise me anymore. I'll fry them."

"All I'm saying is that they have a plan, or at least the start of one. And it involves you, and Tristan eating you, and some factor we don't see yet. This is serious, and we need to prepare somehow."

Kira sighed and turned slowly in a circle, winding the chain holding the

swing a few more times. She lifted her feet off the ground to let her chair unravel, and spun around, bouncing from side to side, done with these dark conversations that seemed to be creeping further and further into her life. When the world was a blur of green grass, blue sky, and sunlight streaking past her eyes, unidentifiable except for the array of colors, she felt much more at peace, like a carefree child. All the worries seemed to slip away when there was nothing to focus on but the wind in her hair and the dizzying of her brain.

When the twirling stopped, Kira looked at Luke, who watched her with a slight smile finally showing on his features. She let her feet fall to the wood chips, took a few steps back to gain some leverage and then released, surging forward. Kira pumped her feet, using her arms for extra power, and propelled herself forward with every lean back and thrust of her legs.

Luke began to swing next to her, catching up to her height quickly with his longer legs. Their clothes fluttered in the breeze and Kira's hair flew all around her. Her butt jumped off the seat as she started beating gravity's pull, just for a moment, and Kira felt like a kid again, when she was so young that she thought she could swing high enough to flip over the bar and even gain wings, like a fairy.

Finally, the time came when Kira knew she couldn't go any higher. She pulled her forearms and shins in, racing backward one more time, and then gravity shoved her forward. Leaning back, she stretched her feet out, and let go of the swing. The seat slid out from underneath her as she catapulted forward, flying through the air while her limbs flailed ungracefully, until the ground seemed to rise up and smack against her feet. She rolled forward, falling onto the grass beyond the wood chipped corral while dead leaves crunched into her hair.

Kira turned her head, watching Luke as he landed beside her with a thud and a somersault. Then they both started laughing.

"I haven't done that in years," Kira said as she stared at the sky. She watched the clouds blow by, changing from marshmallow white to smoky ebony to brilliant gold as they passed in front of the sun.



"Me neither. I think I can wait another ten years before trying it again though. I can actually feel a massive bruise growing on my butt right now." Luke groaned and rolled over onto his stomach.

"Home?" Kira said, wondering if they had talked about Tristan enough, hoping Luke had all the answers he needed for the moment.

"Home," Luke said and slowly stood up. He leaned over Kira, grabbing the hand she offered, and pulled her from the ground's clutches. She dusted the dirt and squashed leaves from her clothes, and followed him to the car.

The ride home was safe. They steered clear of vampire related topics and instead talked about their friends and the holidays. Every time Kira looked over at Luke, she knew he was only half-present. He was her guardian and her friend, and she knew he must be worried about her safety, but Kira couldn't think of anything else she could do.

As they turned the corner onto her street, Luke slammed on the brakes and Kira's head almost flew through the front windshield because she had tucked the strap of her seatbelt behind her back.

"Luke! What the hell?" She whipped around to berate him, but noticed the hard look in his eyes. Turning slowly, she followed his line of vision as it trailed right to the steps of her front porch where Tristan casually sat against the rail.

Kira's pulse raced at the sight of him. The whites of his eyes reflected the headlights and seemed to glow, while the rest of him, dressed in dark jeans and a black T-shirt, melted into the night. He saw the car and gracefully stood up, like a panther easing out of a nap. Kira smiled at him, feeling giddy, before twisting back around to say her goodbye to Luke.

He, she noticed, was not smiling at all. Instead, he had a viselike grip on the steering wheel, one that was stopping the circulation to his fingers. His stare was so forceful, Kira feared beams of sunlight would burst from his pupils and melt his front windshield.

"Luke?"

He twisted his hands around the wheel and the leather whined in protest.

His entire body had tensed up, and Kira noticed the bulge of muscles under his long-sleeve shirt.

"Luke?" Kira hesitantly extended her hand, barely touching his shoulder before he snapped his attention to her, still stiff, and now with bloodshot eyes from the strain of not blinking.

"Look, Kira, I tried to be a good friend and stay calm, I really did, but how can you be so blind?" He took his hands from the wheel, running his fingers through his hair, practically ripping the strands from his scalp. "He's a killer, okay? A killer. It's what they are. Every time he sees you, part of him wants to kill you. Every time. And I know he promised it wouldn't happen, but you're a fool to believe him. An idiot."

Kira reached for Luke's arms, trying in vain to calm him down. She tried to speak, but he cut her off.

"No, okay, no. You have to hear this. He lives by drinking human blood. Do you understand? Human blood and human blood, only. And he's going to live forever while you get old and die, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing in this world that will change that. Even if you wanted to become a vampire, you couldn't. There's no need to risk your life dating him when he'll just kill you eventually." Luke was yelling now, fogging up the windows with his spat out words. "Maybe not now, but what about when you're fifty or sixty and he still looks eighteen? What then? When you're old and wrinkled, he'll kill you while you sleep and you won't even know until it's too late because you trust him."

He made the word *trust* sound dirty, and Kira listened to his heavy breathing, failing to think of any response. The door behind her swung open and Kira jolted backward, into the hardness of what she knew could only be Tristan's chest.

"While I do love seeing you act like a complete ass, Luke, I've heard enough. I won't just sit here and listen to you talk crap about me. If you want to tell me something, say it to my face or shut up."

Kira watched Luke grow angrier by the second. She was too afraid to

move—too fearful that any action she made would just add fuel to the fire.

"Kira?" Tristan asked, and a hand stretch out in front of her, offering escape.

"Stop." Luke grabbed her around the wrist.

*Yup*, Kira thought, *I'll just stay right here and not move a muscle*. Luke was glaring at a spot just over her shoulder, and based on the tingle prickling her neck, Kira guessed Tristan's face was right about at that spot.

They sat like that for what seemed like an hour to Kira—a complete standoff—before Luke released her hand. For a futile moment, she thought that he had relented and was going to end the absurdly macho fight. But then he reached for the handle, jumped out of the driver's seat, and sprinted around the front of the car with his hand extended.

Kira knew what he was doing before the fire shot from his hand.

"Luke!" she shouted to no avail.

Tristan was hit right in the chest with the full force of Luke's power. He flew off the ground, sailing through the air to land on his back. Kira knew he could have run away had he wanted to, that the fire was hurting him but was meant to remove him more than to harm him. Still, he let Luke attack, not fighting back, but Kira saw the strain on his features and the taut pull of his lips. She leapt from the car, directly into Luke's flames, and let them absorb into her body.

It was the first time Kira had absorbed another conduit's power. She felt alive, electrified from the tips of her toes to the strands of hair on her head. She let his power funnel into her, felt it spread throughout her limbs and warm her, and Kira almost began to feel like she was pulling the power from Luke rather than he pushing it into her.

"Luke, stop. Someone might see. You have to stop."

He waited a second, full of internal struggles and rage, before ending his onslaught.

"Listen to me," Kira said, silencing him by covering his lips with her hand

when he started to protest. "No, listen. This thing with Tristan is something I have to do. I know you don't understand it, I know you hate it, but I need you to respect me and my decisions, and leave him be." She released Luke's mouth, but he remained silent.

Kira stepped back, forming a triangle between the three of them, looking from one boy to the other. "This goes for both of you, no fighting. None at all, or I will figure out something really terrible to do to both of you. So just stop. I'm not some toy to fight over. I make my own choices and nothing will change that. So, Luke, just go home."

A series of emotions fluttered across Luke's face, from anger toward Tristan, to embarrassment over his own actions, to what Kira dared say was apologetic for her sake. Regardless, he silently walked to the other side of his car, hopped in, and drove away without looking back.

"Well, now that he's gone..." Tristan supplied, and Kira faced him, noting the smug smile as he sauntered over and tried to hug her.

"Hold on." She put her palm against his chest, stopping him. "Thank you for not fighting him or running away, but you can't taunt him either, which you know perfectly well was your intention when you opened the car door." He had the decency to look guilty. "Promise?"

"Promise," he murmured, looking like a little boy whose favorite video game had just been taken away. But then his features brightened. "Care to seal it with a kiss?"

Kira's insides felt like mush instantly. Her annoyance melted away to make room for the butterflies now flying in her stomach. She reached up and kissed him on the lips, ending it too soon because she was afraid her parents would walk outside at any moment after all of the commotion.

"What did you come over for anyway?" she questioned, all of the sudden curious to know why he had been waiting outside her house.

"I saw you and Luke leave. I just wanted to see how everything went. Clearly, not all that well."

Kira shrugged. "Until about ten minutes ago, things were going great." She presented him with a wry smile, but he became suddenly alert and jerked his head toward her house.

"Your mom is about to come outside."

Kira's eyes widened and she pushed him away. "Hide!"

A moment later, the front door creaked open. "Kira, honey? Is that you?"

"Yeah, Mom." Kira walked closer to the house and out of the darkness. "I'm just making a phone call, be right in."

Her mother nodded, concern flashing in her features, before retreating back inside the house.

"Movie?" Tristan asked from somewhere beyond Kira's sight. She nodded, because what else could you do if a really hot guy asked to watch a movie with you in your bedroom? Kira knew he would sneak in silently, using all the speed and agility he could, and she prayed there were no stray pairs of underwear decorating the floor when he got there.

## Chapter Fourteen



The next few weeks passed quickly for Kira.

She and Tristan continued to date in secret, meeting at the beach or some private place from his past that he wanted to share with her. They picnicked at an old lighthouse that was almost broken down and ready to be demolished, but had an amazing view of the ocean. He snuck into her room after her parents went to sleep so they could lay in each other's arms and whisper sweet nothings. Kira was coming to love the way his eyes softened when they met hers, how he would gently brush her cheek with his thumb, holding her face as though it were the most fragile thing in the universe. He shared his travels with her, the years he spent in Europe, his impressions of English accents, how frightened he had been on his first African safari before he realized he could do more damage to the animals than they could to him.

And most of all, Tristan shared his art, the most personal part of him. He had sold most of it throughout the years, but he showed Kira some of his favorites—models in Paris, architecture from Russia, the natural beauty of the American West, and best of all, his family and the friends he had met along the way. Each drawing held a different story, a different facet of Tristan. Kira could tell which aspect of his personality fit with each work of art, and it was more intimate than talking could have ever been.

Sometimes, Kira wished she could let Luke in on some of these private moments when Tristan seemed more human and more vulnerable than ever. Maybe then he would understand, but ever since the night outside her front yard, Luke hadn't even spoken of Tristan, and Kira wouldn't be the one to break the silence. In school, she stayed around Luke, eating with her friends and pairing up with him in class. If Luke caught her and Tristan swapping secret glances or talking quietly to one another, his features would harden and his eyes would

cloud over with frustration. She needed him as her best friend, so she would quickly pull away, only managing to pain Tristan in the process.

Luke continued to train her, teaching her precise control of her powers, like where to aim at a vampire to do the most damage or how to conserve her energy while still firing a deadly shot. She was excited to learn more about her heritage and about the conduit society. But all the while, in the back of Kira's thoughts lurked dark imaginings about Diana and the plan she was concocting.

One night, when these tumultuous thoughts had kept her from sleep, Kira finally noticed the lump under her bed. She reached down, confused, only to find the old, dusty book she had stolen from Luke but had completely forgotten about. Eager for more information than Luke was sharing, she turned on her reading light and settled into her cushy pillows.

For an entire week, during her free moments without either boy and in the absence of schoolwork, Kira read nonstop. The first few chapters discussed the history of the conduit society, very similar to what Luke had already told her about the split between the Protectors and the Punishers, how the difference of opinions began, and how a natural genetic mutation formed the two different powers and breeds. The anonymous author discussed different opinions on vampires, whether they had souls or not, and one conduit historian actually believed that those of the ancient society, when the Punishers and Protectors had been one breed like Kira, had special powers of healing and knew the secret to saving a vampire's soul. Kira believed it, even though the other historians in the book discarded the theory, stating, like Luke, that no vampire in history had been saved.

Finally, Kira got to the fourth chapter, all about her kind, the mix that commonly meant chaos and destruction. She turned the page, excited to get cracking, but the chapter was gone. She skipped to the final chapter, about ancient prophecies, and those pages were missing too. The only pieces of evidence that those chapters existed at all were the fringed edges belonging to pages cut cleanly out with scissors or a knife.

Kira was furious—she wanted to know what this group of historians gathered under an anonymous title had to say. She felt deep in her soul that something had been revealed about her true calling—not for destruction, but for life. There was something in the prophecies that would help her. She knew it.

So, even though it was long past midnight, Kira crept down the stairs, through the dark living room of her house, and out the front door. She slid into her car and reversed, not turning her headlights on until she was already down the road and out of the line of sight from her house.

As she neared Luke's home, Kira slowed, suddenly regretting her rashness and hoping that Luke was awake. She didn't want to bother him over nothing. It was just a book, and she was sure there were other copies available in mint condition.

Kira stopped the car, turned off the lights, and sat quietly, totally unsure of what she was doing there, until she noticed a figure walk up Luke's front sidewalk and knock on the door. She was still down the street a little, too far away to be noticed, but also too far away to hear anything or really see anything. But when the porch light turned on and the front door opened, Kira recognized Tristan's tall, muscular build and imagined the shock on Luke's face.

When Tristan sauntered inside and the door shut behind him, Kira imagined the shock that must have been displayed on her own face at that moment. *What are the two of them possibly discussing?* Kira thought, instantly intrigued.

But then realized there was only one topic Luke would tolerate talking to Tristan about, and that was her safety. Something must have happened with Diana, who had been mysteriously absent for weeks, hidden in the shadows, planning something to ruin the happiness Kira had managed to build.

Carefully opening her door, Kira crept out and traversed the lawn, ducking down to stay hidden. She eased around the house toward a side window that looked into Luke's living room. Her sneakers sank into the muddy, unkempt garden while she lifted her head, just high enough that her eyes could see



through the blinds. Kira thanked god for the cover of darkness, because she could see into Luke's house perfectly, but it would be far more of a challenge for Luke or Tristan to notice her.

Inside, Tristan leaned against the wall with his hands in the pockets of his typical dark jeans. His eyes darted around the room nervously, and then he straightened as Luke walked in. Seeing Luke's ensemble, Kira couldn't keep in the laugh that escaped. He wore full-on flannel pajama pants and an old Marvel comics T-shirt speckled with holes from overuse.

Luke sat on his couch, not offering Tristan a chair, and Kira felt the tension even through the glass window. They stared at each other, not speaking, until Tristan finally pulled a wooden chair from the dining table and sat opposite Luke.

Kira couldn't make out any of their words, but she could tell Tristan was frustrated by the way he kept running his hands through his hair and shaking his head. Luke responded in a similar fashion, concern covering his features as he nodded along to Tristan's words, and then stood up to start pacing around the room as he sipped what Kira imagined was hot coffee.

Their movements became more animated as the conversation progressed, and at one point, Luke gripped the back of his couch with both hands and shouted what Kira assumed was a very bad four letter word in Tristan's direction. He in turn stood up, pointed at himself, then outside, and then spread his arms wide like some sort of act of surrender. Luke started pointing aggressively at the door, jerking his whole body and Tristan moved like lightning, running from Luke's house before Kira even had time to go inside and demand to know what was happening, something she had planned to do when the conversation seemed less heated.

Now it was too late, so she settled for talking to Luke alone, and she knocked on the window to get his attention, standing fully upright so he could see her. Kira watched as he noticed her, cursed, rolled his eyes, and headed for the door.

"Kira, you have unbelievable timing," he said when he opened the door.

She shrugged, smiled, and replied, "It's one of my many charms."

He shook his head, led her inside, and disappeared into the kitchen to make her some coffee too.

When Luke emerged, Kira got straight to the point. "So, what just happened? And don't even try to pretend like it was normal to have Tristan come over to 'hang out'." Kira made air quotations around the word, emphasizing how ridiculous of an explanation it would be.

"Relax, I was going to call you tonight as soon as he left, but you were already here." He sat down next to her on the couch and leaned all the way back, releasing a long exhale as his head came to a rest. Luke rubbed at his eyes and pressed the skin along his nose, letting another sigh escape. "Their plan is so obvious, I can't believe I didn't see it. Kira..." He turned to look at her finally, with a pained expression. "It will be all my fault if something happens to you. I should have seen this. And I yelled at Tristan, but I'm really just angry with myself."

Kira reached for his hand, holding his warm fingers, trying to give some comfort. "Luke, what is it? What did Tristan say?" He tightened his grip.

"When we're young, conduits are taught our one major weakness. It's something out of our control, but we need to be aware of it, always, that's one of the rules you do not forget, and I did."

"Luke, just tell me." Kira was dying from the not knowing. Finally, the fears she had pushed to the back of her mind during these few weeks of blissful oblivion were coming to the forefront. She didn't want to see Diana ever again, didn't want to face her, especially if Luke was this scared too.

"A total eclipse. That's the only thing that can take our powers away. Being in the eye of a full eclipse makes the sun inaccessible and makes us vulnerable to a vampire's attack. We lose all our strength. And, Kira..." He grabbed her shoulders, driving the point home. "The eclipse is today."

His hands dropped away and Kira's entire body slumped back against the

couch. She felt as though all the life had been knocked out of her. *Today?* She thought. Suddenly, time began to slip through her fingers like sand, when there had been buckets of it just moments ago.

"What do we do?" Her voice came out like a whisper, nearly silent and completely foreboding.

Luke abruptly stood up. "Let's leave, right now. We'll drive for a few hours—get out of the eye of the eclipse. Diana won't be able to touch you." He grabbed her arm, trying to pull her along.

"No," Kira said, resisting. "Luke, think for a moment. I have a family, my parents, Chloe. They would be defenseless. I can't abandon them."

He sank back down. "You're right."

"How much time do we have?" Kira asked. She assumed it was around three, maybe four, in the morning. The sun would rise in a few short hours.

"About eight or nine hours. It's supposed to happen around midday, a pure total solar eclipse. They only last for about fifteen minutes, and we will only totally lose our powers for maybe five minutes, but that's more than enough time for a vampire to kill you."

"So, how do we fight? Do we even have a chance to stand against Diana?"

Luke shook his head and bit his lip, hiding the sadness in his eyes. "I don't know. Tristan didn't know what her plan was—he just sensed her and the others in the area. He knew they were up to something, and then we both realized the eclipse at the same time. It's what they've been waiting for, why they've taken so long to move into action. And Tristan has got to be part of their plan."

Kira grabbed her phone and dialed his number—straight to voicemail. She tried again, hoping it had been a mistake, but the same thing happened. "He's not answering his phone. Do you think they took him? Are they hurting him?" Luke just shook his head. Neither one of them had any answers.

Kira's eyes wandered around the room, hoping the answers were written on the wall somewhere, but stopping when they came to rest on her handbag. The book, she realized, the whole reason why she came here. It seemed stupid

now, learning about mystical prophecies as if some ancient conduits had all the answers, but Kira realized she didn't know how much time she would have left to ask Luke about it. And even when the end of her life seemed horribly near, she was curious about those damn missing pages.

"Luke?" He gave her his attention as she pulled the old book from her open purse. "It seems silly now, but I stole this and I wanted to give it back, and ask—"

"Ask about the missing pages? I actually thought you'd notice it sooner. You stole the book a while ago," he interrupted. She shrugged her eyebrows and half-smiled at him, hoping he wasn't actually angry she took it. "They're all missing."

"Huh?" Kira questioned, not understanding.

"The councils from each conduit society met one year and decided that knowledge was no longer useful, so they cut the pages from every copy of that book and burned them. I have no idea what they said. No one does, this happened a long time ago—two hundred years ago maybe."

"But why?"

"The rumor was that there had been uprisings, across both the Punisher and Protector societies, urging for a reunited race, and the councils overturned it. They believed the prophecies were egging people on and giving them false hopes. But all of that is just hearsay now."

Instantly, Kira's curiosity was further piqued. What did that book say about mixed breeds that would lead to a revolt? It must have been something huge, something that could change everything. Maybe it had been about her ability to heal humans and conduits, surely a power any vampire fighter would want to have. But the price of potentially giving a vampire total immunity was too dangerous.

"Kira?" Luke distracted her from those thoughts. "I need to call the council. They'll know how to proceed. Why don't you go home for a while? Have breakfast with your family?"

Fear darkened his eyes, even though Luke was trying so hard to hide it. He worried that this could be her last meal. Kira knew he wanted to run, that he didn't care about her family as much as he cared about her, but when Kira thought of sweet, innocent Chloe, she knew there was no other option. She hugged Luke, pulling him in tight enough to lose her breath in the process, and closed her eyes against the emotion threatening to brim over. There was no time left for tears.

Kira drove home quickly, ignoring stop signs and racing past the speed limit. Suddenly, being home was the most important thing in the world. She knew Luke wouldn't sleep, that he would be working on a solution for all the time they had left. He was going to meet her at her house at eleven, an hour before the eclipse. Plenty of time to sit and wait and be terrified together. She hated pulling him into this. It was her fight with Diana. Luke had done nothing to deserve any part of the scorn, but she knew there was no way to stop him. He would never let her go down alone.

After she parked, Kira tried to slow her racing heart. Her parents couldn't know anything was wrong. She wanted them to live in blissful oblivion. *There is time*, she kept thinking, *enough time to work out a solution*. The answer would come eventually. All she could hope now was that Tristan was working on a plan of his own and was trying to save her as well. Kira feared his plan was to confront Diana before she could confront Kira, but deep down Kira knew it wouldn't work. Three-to-one odds were too large, and Tristan had probably been caught already.

The sky was lightening when she finally went inside. Kira could only sit in the car and ruminate for so long. Being afraid was no way to spend the potentially last few hours of her life. So she went inside, straight to the kitchen. Cooking always calmed her, and Kira grabbed the pancake mix from the pantry, cracked open some eggs, and let the serenity of whisking distract her.

When her mother walked down the stairs, Kira had a feast ready. Stacks of fluffy pancakes, bowls of fresh whipped cream, candied berries of all kinds, and

freshly squeezed orange juice decorated the table. She had gone a little overboard, Kira knew it, but she was also extremely satisfied with the way everything turned out.

"Kira, my goodness. What are you even doing awake?"

"I just couldn't sleep." Kira shrugged, feigning indifference, and pulled out a chair for her mom. Not a second later, thumps signaled her dad was descending into the kitchen too.

"Smells amazing, honey. What's the occasion?" her father asked, sitting down next to her mother to dig into the food.

"Nothing, I just couldn't sleep. Can't a girl do something nice for her family once in a while?"

"Not on a school day. This is more of a Sunday morning thing for you," her dad said with a mouth already full of food. Kira assured him she was just in a good mood and happy for the amazing, even if adoptive, parents she had. They talked lightly while they ate, until Kira's mother went to wake up Chloe. Within half an hour, Kira was hugging everyone goodbye, holding on for just a second too long, and assuring her parents that she was just going to quickly clean up and be on her way to school.

When the door closed, Kira raced back to the kitchen, splashed water on her face, and tried her best not to cry. She leaned over the sink, one hand on either side, looking out at her sunlit backyard and decided to just let the tears come anyway. Once started, they were impossible to control. She moved slowly, picking up the dirty dishes, putting them in the dishwasher, finishing the orange juice, and putting the leftovers in a Ziploc bag. The mundane tasks gave her something to concentrate on, but when they were done, she went up to her room and actually put her focus on what would happen.

Diana would come and attack her. That was certain. That Kira would not be able to stop her for what might as well be hours was another certainty. The only unknown was Tristan. Had Diana managed to turn him? Would he come looking for her blood or Diana's?

Kira sighed and reached for the drawings of his she had kept hidden in her bookshelf. All were of her. She had a collection of these portraits now. Kira looked through them until she reached the one Tristan had crafted when he had been secretly watching her in Battery Park. She took note of the flowing skirt and tank top she had worn and searched for them in her closet. She opted for a long-sleeve shirt instead, because even in South Carolina, December brought cool air.

On the drive home from Luke's, Kira had tried to think of a game plan, and like a typical girl, the outfit was a huge part of that. Would she go hardcore like Buffy the Vampire Slayer in nineties cargo pants and a tank top, maybe with a bomber jacket? Would she play it innocent to make Diana think of her as helpless and maybe gain some small upper hand? Or, would she appeal to Tristan and the human parts of him she knew existed? He was her last hope. Unless Tristan could fight Diana, Kira knew she was doomed, so she decided to wear the same thing she had worn when they had shared their first kiss and when he had first decided to open up to her and to let her inside his secret world.

By the time Kira had finished brushing her hair and getting ready, Luke had arrived. He came dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, deciding to downplay the situation just like she had. Kira tried to change her morose mood, but when she saw his face and the worry lines creasing his forehead, she allowed herself to be sad.

"What did the council say?" Kira asked as she led Luke through her house and out to the back steps where they had decided to wait for Diana to make her move.

"They said we should run. Ordered it in fact, because of how dangerous your capture would be. I told them to go to hell."

Kira laughed. Luke always had been a charmer. "I bet they loved that."

"Actually, I hung up as they were screaming at me. Assuming we survive, we'll definitely have some things to answer to."

"No point to live if not dangerously," Kira replied as she sat down to wait.

"When did that become your motto?"

"About the time I moved to Charleston." Kira let her tone become darkly humorous. Had she listened to Luke in the beginning, none of this would be happening. But it still all seemed worth the risk. She knew Tristan would be trouble from the start, but she guessed with boys, you never really could know how much trouble until it was too late and you loved them enough not to care about the consequences.

"If you could take it all away and go back to New York, would you?" Luke shifted his gaze from one of her eyes to the other, earnestly searching for the truth in her answer.

"No. I suppose I would have been a target no matter where I was. At least, down here in South Carolina, I had you."

"Have, you have me." He reached out his hand.

Kira squeezed it, letting him know she loved his support, but then released him. "I wish you would go and save yourself Luke. We don't know what's going to happen here, and I don't want you to die for me. Please, just go."

"You know I won't." He settled down, stretching his hands up toward the sky, acting brave and like he had no worries in the world.

And just like that, there were no words left to say. Kira knew Luke loved her, and he knew she loved him too. She could beg him to leave and fall into hysterics, but it would be useless and mentally draining. So instead, the two of them sat in silence, watching the sun rise higher, waiting for it to disappear.



## Chapter Fifteen



Before long, Kira heard a rustling in the trees. Luke did too and he sat up from the hammock, instantly alert. They moved as one person to the edge of her porch, four hands resting on the white painted banister, searching the woods at the back of her house for any movement.

Out of thin air, Diana appeared in the middle of her yard. She was dressed in a sequined, black party dress, one that reminded Kira of the pictures she'd seen of flappers in her history books. Her black hair flowed freely in the breeze, and her skin was like harsh marble, starkly white in the sunlight. Her sudden appearance struck Kira more like a magic trick than a natural movement. She had little experience with the special powers vampires possessed, and Diana seemed faster than even the wind. Luke's muscles tensed beside her. Diana was far quicker than they could hope to be, but Kira knew a lot of it was for show, to intimidate her and Luke before the real fight even began.

"My dearest little Kira, how are you on this fine winter's morning?" The words rolled from Diana's tongue. She knew she had complete control over the situation, and she lazily walked forward, trying to stir fear in Kira's heart.

"Diana," Luke said tersely. Kira remained silent, not wanting to give Diana the satisfaction of a response.

"Well, what a welcome. I hardly think you're even excited to see me."

"What gave us away?" Luke let the biting remark out evenly. Kira recognized his self-defensive sarcasm and used it to give her strength. She would resist for as long as possible, just like Luke planned to do.

Kira let a small flame rise on her palm, letting her power heal any weakness Luke and she carried, before firing it at lightning speed toward Diana's face. It struck before Diana had time to move, and she was thrown backward as if punched. Kira let herself have a moment of satisfaction. She and Luke knew

some cool tricks, too.

Diana stood slowly, her hand to her cheek and malice in her eyes. Kira watched her battle to keep her emotions in check, and Diana's weakness became all too clear. She wanted to draw this out and make Kira suffer. So Kira wanted to make it as quick as possible. She fired another shot, a long stream of fire she knew in her bones was meant to kill. She heard Diana whimper in the onslaught and watched as Diana retreated back into the trees and out of Kira's range.

"Bitch!" Diana yelled from the forest. "Do you have a death wish? I'm here to kill you, you know. Do you really want to egg me on?"

"I think I'm the one who almost killed you, Diana. Care to come out for another go?" Kira found her voice and her defiance. She was ready to fight, eager for it almost.

"I hope you don't think your boyfriend is going to save you, little Kira." Diana rushed out again, her calm demeanor returned but her hair clearly worse for the wear. The imperfection gave Kira a jolt of pleasure.

"I can handle myself, thanks."

"And what about when you can't spit that little flame of yours and chase me away? What then?" Kira shrugged, playing it cool, but was actually wondering the same thing herself.

As if on command, Jerome and John walked out of the forest slowly, with Tristan chained between them. Kira gasped. She couldn't help herself.

Tristan was shirtless and covered in blood. The streaks started at various points of his chest and arms, flowing from wounds that had since closed up because of his quick healing. Only another vampire's nails or teeth could have caused that damage. Jerome and John had broken his arms, the same way they had in the auditorium so long ago, and Kira knew they had only been able to catch him with those cheap tricks. They had twisted Tristan's limbs free of their sockets, tying his forearms to the stick they were using to carry him forward. His feet were chained too, but he still tried to put some weight on them, refusing to let his former friends drag him helplessly along the ground. He was trying to be

strong, even though his face was the only thing not trapped in constraints.

When his eyes met hers, Kira wanted to rush to Tristan. They were full of pain, both physical and emotional, and Kira knew he was killing himself over his failure. He had been her last hope and though she hated to admit it, the will to fight left her a little bit.

Diana saw the opening. "What? Did you think he would come in and save the day? I told you already, you stupid girl, he is going to kill you, and he is going to like it. Isn't that the promise I made?"

Diana walked in front of Tristan and held his chin in her hand, forcing him to look at her. With her other hand, she slapped him across the cheek, and Kira heard the crunch of his neck breaking and saw his limbs go fully limp. Jerome and John didn't even flinch. Tristan groaned, trying hard to clench his lips together to keep a scream from escaping. Even vampires could feel pain, especially at the brutality of their own kind.

A minute later, his neck snapped back in line. Diana leaned back for another slap.

"No!" Kira yelled. Diana stopped her hand, just barely. More than anything, Kira wanted to throw her fire like a huge blanket, smoldering them, but it was too risky with Tristan so weak and so close to the others.

"How sweet. A lover's plea." Diana clapped like a little child playing with her favorite toy. Everything was working out just as she had planned.

And as if on cue, the sky darkened just one shade, but it was enough. All six of them looked up, despite the blinding light, to take note of that small sliver of black piercing the sun's surface. There wasn't much time before her powers would be useless. Five minutes, maybe. Kira started forward, but Luke grabbed her hand, stopping her.

"You can't save him now. We have to get out of here," he whispered.

"Yes, run. It's so much more exciting that way," Diana responded, hearing Luke's request and playing off of his fears. Kira looked up again; already more of the sun had been covered. She needed to use the time she had.

With all the control Kira could gather, she shot flames at Diana, John, and Jerome and amazingly pushed them back. Jerome and John dropped Tristan in their shock, and Kira broke free of Luke to run to Tristan's side. He managed to get onto his knees and she sunk down to her own, all the while keeping her arm outstretched, creating a wall of flames behind the two of them—one that was weakening with each passing second.

"I can't hold it for long. Undo the chains now, Tristan!" She cradled his face with her free hand, trying to split her attention.

"It's no use. I can't. I've been trying. You have to run, Kira, now, before Diana has the chance to grab you. Go to your car and just start driving as far away as possible."

Kira shook her head. Tristan opened his mouth to argue, but she covered it with a kiss, breaking it off when her power weakened further. She pulled Tristan into a hug instead, looking past his shoulder at the three cowering vampires waiting for her shield to fall so they could pounce. Kira shifted her gaze to the sky, where the sun was now more than half covered by the black hole of the moon. The earth was being steeped in shadow, and even her light was dimming in the process. Slowly, like a ticking time bomb, the power seeped from her, until finally it winked out.

The total eclipse had come.

"I love you," was all Kira had time to whisper before hands grabbed her shoulders, throwing her like a rag doll away from Tristan. She landed, hearing the crunch of her ankle as a fierce shot of pain traveled up her spine, and let out a scream. Kira was satisfied that she at least had a moment with Tristan, a small sliver of time to say goodbye and to tell him she loved him. It was the first time those words had passed her lips, and Diana could never take that away.

"Kira, Kira, Kira," Diana purred and stomped her foot down on Kira's chest, holding her to the ground and crushing her. "You should have listened to them both, because now it's too late to escape."

Luke ran over and jumped at Diana, reaching out his hands to strangle her.

Diana backhanded him like a fly. He sailed away, smacking into the porch and landing on the ground with a thud. He didn't stir from the spot where he landed, and Kira screamed again. She stared transfixed at his immobile body, flailing her limbs like a mad woman trying to escape Diana's hold. Luke was dying, she was sure of it. She needed to hold him, to help him somehow.

Kira used all her strength, but she couldn't budge Diana's foot. It was useless, and instead of helping Luke, she was just hurting herself. Kira prayed, for what seemed like her first true prayer in ages, that Luke was alive—knocked unconscious, but alive.

Diana seemed to sense Kira's fading hope, because she reached down for a fistful of Kira's hair and used it to drag her across the yard, dropping her in front of Tristan. Kira refused to make a sound even though it felt as though her head were ripping free of her body. The pain was excruciating, but even still, she wouldn't let Diana win.

Jerome and John were holding Tristan again, but this time Jerome's hand was clenched over Tristan's mouth to stop him from uttering a word.

"Time's up, Kira," Diana whispered.

And before Kira could move, Diana's teeth sank into Kira's neck and her blood flowed freely into the vampire's system. She heard the gurgling of her own blood, felt the warm liquid seep down her spine where droplets spilled free of Diana's lips. She heard Tristan struggle and scream protests even through Jerome's hand, but Diana wouldn't stop.

"Enough." Jerome's deep voice startled Kira from the pain and the weakness spreading through her body from blood loss. Diana's head jerked up, freeing Kira. "The time for games is done. We must use her to fix Tristan."

*Fix him?* Kira thought. *He doesn't want to be evil!*

She wanted to scream the words at them, but Kira couldn't find the strength to speak. Her limbs felt like butter. They wouldn't do as she commanded, and Diana held her still.

John pulled a glass cup from his pocket and Diana took it. Kira barely

registered the cool touch against her skin, but when they pulled the cup away a minute later, it was full to the brim with her blood. Jerome reached his hand down, soaking one of his fingers, and licked it clean with a flash of pleasure.

Kira's only hope was that they would lose control, that one of them would end her quickly before they had a chance to change Tristan. If all hope was lost for her, she wanted him to at least be spared.

But as quickly as that thought came, it passed, because John took the cup, jerked Tristan's head back by his forehead and let her blood flow freely into his forcibly opened mouth. Kira saw him struggle, shaking his limbs against the chains, trying desperately to escape, and she wondered if he could fight the pull of her blood. Maybe all this time, Diana had been right—Kira would be Tristan's undoing.

His body started to slump as the glass emptied. Jerome refilled it, passing it back to John, and this time, Tristan didn't move while it was poured. When the third cup was filled, Tristan strained his head up, arching to get all of Kira's blood, swallowing it willingly, and even in her weakened state, Kira knew a change had occurred.

Diana let Kira fall to the ground and walked over to Tristan's side. They undid his chains and he stood quickly, faster than Kira's eyes could process it. Her blood had strengthened his body. He stretched his arms over his head, the muscles of his stomach flexing with the movement, and he cracked his neck bones before leaning forward to look at Kira. All the fight left Kira's body the moment their eyes met.

Tristan was gone.

A sob escaped her lips and tears dropped quickly from her eyes the longer she stared into his, which had become as hard as stone and colder than ice. She had never seen him look at her that way, like less than food, like vermin, even since the first time they had met. His pupils dilated, so the blue of his irises were almost paper thin. His fangs were extended, blood dripped from his lips and he licked it away, smiling the entire time. He hugged Diana, gave her a deep kiss,

bit her, and then shoved her away, chuckling at her hurt expression. Quick as a bullet, he ripped Jerome's T-shirt free of his body and used the rag to wipe the blood from his chest.

Then, as an afterthought, Tristan leaned over Kira, licking her open wound. With her blood fresh on his lips, he said, "Aren't you going to run?"

Kira found the strength to back up. Diana she could handle, Jerome and John she could handle, but this Tristan was more than she could stand. How had her blood changed him so much? He was more than animal. He was evil and she was the reason he had changed. Kira stood, swaying on her woozy feet, trying not to feel stabbing pains in her heart as he laughed at her struggles.

"Tristan?" she asked meekly, reaching her hand out as if she could recover some trace of the man she had lost.

"Yes, honey?" Tristan smiled, blood staining his white teeth. The word *honey* felt like a slap in Kira's face.

The sky confirmed what she felt in her bones. The eclipse was still complete. There would be no refuge in her power. With one last look at Tristan, one final gaze to see if he was acting, one final search of the lines of his face for some sign, Kira turned and ran away from the sound of the man she loved laughing in the face of her death.

"I'll give you a head start, little Kira," Tristan called. She winced as he used the name Diana had condescendingly called her but charged on into the woods beyond her neighbor's backyard, into the darkness where the eclipse had stolen every hint of light that ever previously existed.

Kira limped on the ankle she was sure she had broken. With each step, a knife seemed to pierce her leg. She was dizzy from the blood loss and her vision receded, warping into a tunnel, letting her see only the leaves directly in front of her. Kira tripped on tree roots and leaned against giant trunks to stabilize herself. She stopped for a moment to catch her breath before pounding forward again. Self-preservation was all Kira thought about. Her instincts had taken over because her thoughts had become too much to handle. All she could do was

concentrate on running as far as she possibly could.

And then she heard the cackling—a shrieking, high-pitched noise, right behind her. A finger, one she knew must belong to Diana, poked her back, sending her flying forward, and Kira kept running. A hand gently caressed her cheek, another slapped at her arm, another pulled on her hair, and Kira knew there was no escape. She felt like millions of ghosts were pawing at her, invisible but tangible, and Kira just stopped, tired of all the games, ready to see if this Tristan was so changed that he was willing to kill her.

"I'm done," Kira said to the empty clearing she stood in the middle of, knowing all four of them were close enough to hear. To keep herself going, she had to think of Tristan as a thing. Not as the human she knew, but as the vampire she needed to kill.

"That's no fun." Diana pouted and emerged from the shadows.

A hand clenched down on Kira's shoulder and spun her around. She stared directly into Tristan's face. He fangs popped out and he leaned down to her neck to finish the job. Kira pounded her fists against his chest, trying in vain to hurt him, but he stilled her easily.

Kira waited to feel his teeth puncture her skin and drain the life from her. She knew that the real Tristan would never go through with it and hoped he was in there somewhere, fighting the bloodlust her cells had created within him.

Her body involuntarily jerked when instead of teeth, his cheek gently caressed hers and he breathed in the smell of her hair—something he loved to do when they were lying side by side in her bed and he thought she was asleep. Kira bit her lip to keep from smiling. If this was a trick, it was the cruelest one of all, because before she even realized it, Kira let herself believe Tristan had been fooling them all the entire time.

When his lips brushed against the sensitive skin just below her ear and she heard him say, "I love you, too," Kira allowed herself to smile.

A moment later, Tristan pushed her to the side to punch the now charging Diana in the face.



Kira's legs collapsed and she sank down to the ground, all her strength gone. For the next minute, all Kira could do was watch as Tristan, rejuvenated and fortified by her blood, threw three vampires around like rag dolls. They all ignored Kira, too caught up in their anger at Tristan for tricking them. Thunder sounded every time one of their bodies flew into a tree trunk, snapping the bark and causing the forest to wobble on its foundations.

Kira looked up, past the tallest branch, through the swaying leaves, at the sun. An ebony circle covered the sun's surface, but a halo of light stretched past the shadow, fighting to touch back down to earth. After the excruciating wait, the few minutes of total eclipse had passed. Kira felt more than saw the moon move a fraction to the side. No visible change had occurred, but with Kira's connection to the sun, everything had altered within her.

With her hands behind her back, Kira brought a flame to life and used her power to heal her. The electric current raced through her veins, multiplying her blood cells, closing the cuts that streaked across her skin from the branches she had struck while fleeing, reconnecting the bones that had shattered in her ankle. And, most of all, the two little puncture holes at her neck sealed shut without a scar.

Kira jumped up, bringing her hands forward, and shot flames at John, who had failed to taste her blood. He would not be immune in the slightest, and quickly, Kira let the stream arch up in the sky and circle down, encasing him from above. For John, there was nowhere to run. Kira stopped paying attention to Tristan's fight, letting John have her full attention. She still lacked the control over using her protective powers versus killing powers, and before Kira knew it, John had collapsed into a pile of burning ash.

Kira looked at the sky. There was no evidence of an eclipse anymore. As usual, she had lost track of time when using her powers and she assumed Tristan had kept them away from her. When she turned, Tristan and Diana had hold of each other's necks and were squeezing, racing to see who would be decapitated first.

Kira started forward to help Tristan but tripped over the body she hadn't noticed at her feet. Jerome lay still, with a gaping hole in his chest, next to the crushed remains of his heart. Kira stifled a scream and jumped over him to escape the gruesome sight.

Diana squeezed free of Tristan, realizing he would have killed her first, and Kira used the open opportunity to shoot a blaze right at Diana's heart, crushing her against a tree, not letting her escape. Kira wasn't sure if enough time had passed. She feared that Diana's immunity hadn't waned, but Kira's emotions put extra force behind the punch, and Diana had nowhere left to run. The fight was over, but Kira was not playing nice this time. Diana was evil, pure and simple, and evil needed to be destroyed. Kira stepped closer, slowly, until her palm laid flat against Diana's chest, killing her all the faster.

"You don't want to kill me, Kira." Diana forced the words out, struggling to make a sound.

"Why not? You tried to kill me. You tried to turn my boyfriend against me. You might have killed my best friend. Give me one good reason." Kira leaned in with each word, staring into Diana's clear blue eyes, letting her meaning sink in.

"Your mother is alive, and I know where she is."

Kira jumped back, too shocked to maintain her control, and in that split second, Diana disappeared.

"No!" Kira screamed, trying to run after her. Tristan grabbed her around the waist, picking her up off the ground.

"It's useless. Don't hurt yourself. Diana has the gift of speed, even I couldn't catch her."

"But, my mother?" Kira let Tristan hug her close to him.

She had given up on her parents ever since she learned of their existence, but now Kira felt the loss all over again. She imagined the woman in her vision, with long golden hair that almost sparkled in the sun, and she wanted nothing more than to know her. She still wore the locket and ring around her neck, and even now its weight seemed heavier, seemed to weigh her down, until Kira

broke free of Tristan's hold and reached into her shirt to bring it out. She opened the picture, the sole image of her real family, and felt like she had been punched in the gut. That was the most horrendous trick Diana had played, because now Kira would never stop wondering.

"Come on." Tristan lifted Kira up as if she weighed nothing and started walking through the trees back toward her house.

"Tristan?" she asked, trying to push thoughts of her mother to the back of her mind. He looked down at her, waiting for the question she had prompted. Hoping it wouldn't hurt him, she said, "That was all an act, right?"

He stopped walking, set her down, and cupped her face in both of his hands. Staring into her eyes, he said, "I swear it was. I hated every second of it, I promise. Never, ever doubt that. For thirty years, I did evil things under Aldrich's control. All I did there was show you a part of my past that I never wanted to let resurface." Tristan wiped her cheeks clean of the salty tears she had let streak down and kissed her softly. "I love you. If I had lost you, I don't know what I would have done."

"I love you, too." Kira reached her arms up around his neck as he picked her up again. They both knew she could walk, but it was much more comfortable this way, she thought as she played with the short hairs at the base of his neck.

When they emerged from the forest into the freshly cut but now blood covered grass of her backyard, Kira told Tristan to let her go. She surveyed the damage, wondering how she would clean it up, when she noticed the body, Luke's body, slumped under the porch where he had fallen from Diana's throw. She screamed and threw her hands up to cover the sound as it escaped her mouth.

Instantly, Kira darted forward, dropping to her knees beside him, leaning her ear down to listen for a heartbeat.

"Tristan, on my god, Tristan! Is he dead? I can't hear his heart. I can't hear his heart." Kira was yelling, but she couldn't stop. Tristan forcibly moved her to the side, leaning down, listening.

"I forgot about him," Kira said, hardly understanding herself.

How had she forgotten about Luke? Her guardian, her best friend, her protector for all of these months? Kira couldn't breathe. She tried to suck in a breath, but she was hyperventilating from the shock. His eyes were closed, and the normally healthy tanned glow of his skin had been replaced by the ash gray now covering his body. She cradled his face in her hands. His body felt warm, but cool compared to the normal heat of a conduit's skin. She pushed open one of his eyelids, but his pupil had rolled back into his skull.

"Tristan!" she yelled again, and he sat up, shaking his head.

"He's not dead yet, but Kira, it'll happen any moment. His heart stopped. I don't know for how long."

"No!" Kira wailed, and then repeated the word over and over again, cradling Luke in her arms. He couldn't be dead. It wasn't possible.

Kira thought of how he jumped on Diana, risking everything to try and help her. She wasn't worth it, she realized, and she hugged him to her, letting tears fall freely.

Without even meaning to, her whole body began to glow, not just her hands, and Kira encased herself and Luke in her power. Tristan was catapulted away, thrown onto the other side of the yard and Kira kept her eyes closed, chanting, "No, no, no, no," as if it were a prayer.

Her power seeped out and melted into Luke's body. She was draining everything she had into his corpse, her very own life force.

"Kira!" she heard Tristan shout, distantly. "Kira! You're killing yourself. Stop!"

Hands grabbed at her, but she resisted, not allowing anything to move her from Luke. She kept her eyes closed, swaying back and forth, using all of the power she possessed.

Time passed without her realizing and before Kira even had the chance to let her power go, she was long gone. Her body fell back, and hit the ground next to Luke's—burned out, limp and lifeless.



## Epilogue



Kira's eyes fluttered open, stinging from the unfamiliar sensation of light, and everything was blurry. Slowly, the blobs of color sharpened, becoming more defined, and Kira recognized her mother's face. Her lips were moving. Kira tried to force her ears to register the sound. She felt as though she was underwater, that a barrier was catching the sound waves, until it finally broke.

"Kira, oh Kira, my baby." Her mother was crying, holding her by the shoulder and searching for recognition in Kira's eyes.

"Mom? What happened? Where am I?" Kira looked around at the sterile walls, the get well balloons in the corner, the beeping and blinking machines with tubes sticking into her arms, at her hospital gown, and started to remember. She sat upright. "Where's Luke? Is he all right? And Tristan?"

"Calm down, honey. Everything is fine." Her mother hugged Kira close and ran her fingers through Kira's curly and probably knotty hair.

Images from that afternoon flashed through Kira's brain at a mile a minute—Luke running at Diana, Tristan drinking her blood, Diana laughing in her face, Jerome's body mutilated on the ground, John burning to ash, Tristan whispering that he loved her, and Luke's crumpled body on the ground.

It was all too much. She felt dizzy and leaned back against the pillows while her mother called in the doctors and sent for her father and sister. The rest of her morning and afternoon was spent being pushed from room to room in a wheelchair and performing different tasks or enduring different procedures to make sure her neural functioning was completely normal. Chloe sat on her lap, enjoying the ride and making fun of the silly outfits and robes the doctors were wearing. When the procedures were finished, Kira forced her family to leave her side to go eat dinner, not allowing them to settle for hospital food. She asked them to bring back leftovers and let a nurse take over her care.

When the nurse finally rolled Kira back to her room, she had a visitor waiting. Tristan. Kira tried to stand to hug him, but he ran to her side almost before she had the chance to move. His arms encircled her, pulling her up to a standing position. His lips kissed her neck sweetly while he smelled her hair. His mouth widened into a smile and she leaned back, staring into his soulful blue eyes that were searching hers for recognition and love. Kira grabbed his face, pulling him in for a kiss.

The nurse left in a hurry, with a little cough and an "excuse me," making Kira laugh against Tristan's lips. She let her fingers sift through his silky black hair, and they pressed their foreheads together, sitting in the most comfortable silence she had ever experienced. They loved each other and it was obvious even without words.

"Sorry to break up the moment—"

"Luke!" Kira had turned around, reaching her arms out for a hug before he had the chance to finish. He gripped her around the waist, lifting her up off the ground before setting her down and helping her back onto her hospital bed. Tristan sat beside her, grabbing her left hand, and Luke leaned on the mattress to her right.

Kira looked from one boy to the other—her two loves—one friendly and one romantic, but both meaning the world to her.

"So...what happened?" Kira looked over at Luke. "The last thing I remember is trying to heal you. I thought you'd died." She had to grin now, happy beyond belief that he was all right.

"You healed me, maybe even brought me back to life. But, you almost killed yourself." He looked down at her, concern clouding his features. "And when I sat up, Tristan was leaning over you, shouting your name, but you weren't responding. We rushed you to the hospital and you've been in a coma ever since."

"How long?" Kira looked from one boy to the other.

"About three months," Tristan said and squeezed her hand in comfort.

Kira's body slackened in the cushions as she thought about that. It felt like she had been asleep for a while, like taking a really long nap, but three months? That was a long time.

"Are you guys friends yet?" she questioned, hoping three months of worrying about her might have done the trick. Luke and Tristan stared across her bed, sizing one another up, and finally Tristan replied, turning to Kira.

"I think we've come to an understanding."

Kira smiled. It was something. She asked about everything she had missed, about Emma and the boys, about school in general, and about her family. Tristan and Luke told her stories, all three of them smiling and laughing together, and a warm glow started inside of her, not from power, but from pure happiness.

After a while, a doctor told them visiting hours were almost over for non-family members, and Kira knew her own family would be back from dinner soon.

"Before I go," Luke said, poking his head through the door he had just vacated. "I just wanted to let you know that the council semi-forgave us, but they want you to visit Sonnyville with me...immediately. Okay, bye."

Luke jumped out before Kira could even mutter a protest. *Coward*, she thought. He knew she had no interest in the council, but she guessed seeing the conduit society could be interesting.

"What do you think?" she asked Tristan, liking how he rubbed her palm with his thumb while they held hands.

"It's probably inevitable," he sighed. If she went to the conduit society, he would not be able to see her or visit her for a long time.

"Well, there's still plenty of time to figure it out." Kira pulled on his arm so he would lie down next to her. Seeing Luke had been great, but having some intimate moments with Tristan out of Luke's watchful eye was amazing.

Tristan's fingers trail down her arm, dancing light circles on her soft skin, tickling her a little. Kira hugged her arm around his waist, turning to mold her body to his and resting her head on his chest to listen to the gentle thud of his



heart.

Her thoughts shifted back to the fight. Kira couldn't forget what Diana had taunted, that her real mother might still be alive. And she didn't want to imagine what sort of hell she had been living in all these years, probably trapped in a dungeon, the feeding toy of an evil vampire. Kira silently vowed to hunt Diana down and get the truth. She would find her mother and she would free her mother, no matter how many vampires she had to kill along the way to do it.

As if sensing her dark thoughts, Tristan started to hum a tune quietly in her ear. Kira recognized the jazz song. He had made her listen to it in the car one time, promising Kira she would fall in love with the sounds. She didn't love the song, but she loved Tristan and she loved the sound of his voice, a deep tenor that reminded her of rolling waves. Kira let her body relax and drift off into a deep sleep, content to push all thoughts of the future aside for the moment, to lie safely in the arms of her lover.

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## **Bonus Scenes!**

Join Kaitlyn's newsletter to receive three exclusive *Ignite* bonus scenes told from both Luke and Tristan's perspectives! What was Luke thinking the moment he met Kira? How does Tristan remember his daring rescue by the sea?

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###

**Simmer (Midnight Fire Book Two) is available now wherever eBooks are sold!**

**Keep reading for a preview of the first chapter!**



### **Description**

"Slowly, like a whisper almost blown away in the wind, two words streaked across her mind. Kiss me."

Kira may have survived the eclipse, but her troubles are far from over. She's headed to Sonnyville with one goal in mind: to learn more about her parents. But with Luke and Tristan competing for her heart and Diana gunning for her head, time is running out on the search for her mother. And the closer Kira gets to answers, the more terrified she becomes. The conduits fear her, the vampires fear her, and Kira is starting to wonder if maybe they're right...

## Chapter One



"I hate packing," Kira whined and collapsed onto the heap of clothes piled high on her bed. She did not want to move another muscle.

"Just pick out some outfits." Tristan chuckled, not looking up from the pad of paper he was scribbling on.

Kira arched her head, glancing in his direction. He sat with one leg outstretched and one knee bent, leaning against her headboard in relaxed concentration. With squinted eyes, he focused on rubbing in the graphite pencil marks he had just made with his already blackened fingers. If she wasn't so tired, Kira would have crawled a little closer to see what he was drawing, but instead she dropped her head with a sigh.

"Easy for you to say. You just have to sit on my bed looking all artistic and mysterious while I run around like a crazy person trying to get ready for two months at conduit boot camp."

"Then my plan is working perfectly." He smirked and finally put the sketchbook down. Kira peeked over at the pages, wondering what image of her he was crafting, but saw the last thing she ever expected—a self-portrait. Fighting her exhaustion, Kira jumped up in curiosity.

"What are you doing?" She spun the image to look at it closer, noting the strong cheekbones and crystal eyes he had drawn perfectly. The hairs that always threatened to fall over his eyes seemed just ready to spill, and Kira saw the faint outline of her own features. She realized he had been sketching both of them.

"Just something for you to take to Sonnyville, to carry around and show everyone, especially any guys ages eighteen to twenty-two."

Kira rolled her eyes. "You know I don't date men who are younger than a hundred. I can't stand the immaturity level."

Tristan grabbed her hand and pulled her against his chest, making her

giggle. With her arms wrapped around his waist, she let her breath slow to the pace of his heartbeat. Tristan's strong arms encircled her, hugging her as tightly against his body as he could, and he sighed.

"I'm going to miss you," he whispered, and Kira's mouth widened into a smile. She rested her chin on his chest so she could look into his face, taking in each hair on his head and memorizing the features she already knew better than her own.

"I'm going to miss you, too." She leaned up and kissed him quickly, her thoughts already wandering to what lay ahead.

A few months had passed since Kira had woken up from the coma. Luke had convinced the council to let her recuperate before forcing her to go to Sonnyville, and they all agreed that the day after graduation would be, what Kira liked to call, doomsday. Just this morning, she and her friends had all donned their robes and received their diplomas. And before she knew it, time had all but slipped away. But more than anything, Kira dreaded saying goodbye to Tristan. Luke had promised to sneak him into Sonnyville at least once, but Kira wasn't sure if it would even be a good idea to bring Tristan around so many conduits. Tomorrow morning they would have to say goodbye, and even though Kira knew it wasn't goodbye forever, two months was starting to seem like an impossibly long time apart.

"It's going to be fine," Tristan said and kissed her forehead. "And you'll be safe there, which is the most important thing."

"I know. I just wish it wasn't for so long. Do you think you'll be able to find Diana soon?" Kira questioned, bringing up the topic they had skirted around for the past few weeks.

Tristan knew Diana was still a threat. She had come back to Charleston multiple times while Kira had still been in a coma. She managed to evade Tristan, but he still sensed her presence and both of them knew that she was planning something. But neither Kira nor Tristan had known what, until about a week ago when a pack of vampires came to Charleston after hearing a rumor that

a mixed breed conduit was alive and in the neighborhood. Tristan had managed to persuade them, forcefully, to leave but more would come. The safest place for Kira was with the conduits, not with her vampire boyfriend, especially since Tristan would be off hunting Diana while Kira was away.

"I know where to look. She can only run for so long." Tristan tried to reassure Kira. He ran his hand along her arm in a soothing motion. Kira relaxed into his touch.

"And you'll find out about my mother?"

"I'll try," Tristan said, but he wouldn't look her in the eye. They had had this conversation before, with Luke too, and Kira was the only one with hope that her mother was still alive. Luke and Tristan agreed that Diana had used it as a dirty trick to shock Kira, giving her the chance to escape, but Kira felt something deep inside, a gut instinct urging her to believe that her mother was living and breathing somewhere on this earth.

Kira opened her mouth to say so, but decided against it. She was too comfortable resting in his arms to bother fighting, and the last thing Kira wanted was to argue with Tristan on their last night together. Instead, she inched up his chest, noting the glint in his eye and leaned in for a kiss.

He slid his hand up her back to cup the base of her neck and pulled her face into his, letting her know he was thinking the same thing. After a teasing moment of stillness, Kira leaned the extra centimeter forward and their lips met.

Instantly, her pulse quickened and her heart began to race as she lost herself in the sensation. The butterflies flying in her stomach seemed specifically tuned to Tristan, appearing every time he touched her. A warm feeling spread from her fingers to her toes, creating a titillating contrast as his cool fingers brushed over her skin.

With heavy breaths, Tristan grabbed her around the waist, easily flipping her over and pressing her body down into the soft bed as he took charge. A familiar twinge of excitement ran up Kira's spine, but she felt something else too, almost like a hint of anger stirring distantly in her mind. And then she heard

a cough in the doorway.

"Sorry to interrupt," Luke said with a smile on his face and a steely look aimed at Tristan. Kira sighed and pulled back, trying to scoot out from underneath Tristan. For his part, Kira noted wryly, Tristan made no move to help her escape and instead let his weight hold her down. After a few seconds, which seemed like a few hours, Kira freed herself from Tristan's arms.

"Hi Luke." She smiled and sat up, trying to fix her hair. Yes, she was happy to see her friend, but who wouldn't be slightly annoyed at the interruption and very annoyed at his obviously smug face? Yup, Kira mused, the coma hadn't really changed a thing. Their mutual fear for her health had allowed Luke and Tristan to stand in the same room once in a while, but they were a long way away from friendship.

"Clearly, you're almost ready to go. Now, if we could just find a way to teleport your room to Sonnyville..." He surveyed the empty suitcases and piles of clothes all over the floor. Kira threw a small pillow at him for the sarcastic remark, and he jumped out of its path, holding his hands up in surrender.

"All right, all right, but in all honesty...what the heck happened in here? It looks slightly like the Tasmanian devil tore this place apart."

Kira shrugged. "This is just how I pack."

"So, there's a method to the madness?"

"No, trust me," Tristan spoke up and turned over to lean against Kira's pillows. *Traitor*, she thought, *your hair is still rumpled from our make-out session and you're siding with Luke.*

"So, it's a little messy. I'll be ready by tomorrow, don't worry."

Luke copiously surveyed the room again with eyes wide in doubt. "It's not like you're going to see the queen—"

"There's a conduit queen?" Kira interrupted, ready to freak out.

"No, the Queen of England. Did you hit your head again?" Luke questioned, barely able to contain his laughter.

"No," Kira huffed and picked up the closest thing she could find, which

happened to be a dress. She looked at it and debated if she would need sundresses in Sonnyville. It wasn't like she would be trying to land a date; she was going there to learn how to fight. Kira cocked her head to the side, going back and forth between the options.

"What's the big deal? Just put it in your suitcase," Luke said, exasperated.

"That's what I said," Tristan chimed in again, and Kira dropped her hands to her side giving him a stern look. It seemed they had no trouble ganging up against her, but when she wanted everyone to get along they were enemies again. *I mean really*, Kira thought, *this is absurd*.

A beep sounded from the street, and Kira threw the dress back onto the floor, excited for the escape. Their whole gang was going out together, one last hurrah before Luke and Kira left, which meant she could put off packing for a few more blissful hours.

"Time to go!" Kira chirped and raced from the room, not waiting for either of the boys. Her parents were gone for the night, at a preschool summer event for her little sister Chloe, so she walked right out the door and into Emma's car. Luke appeared a minute later and hopped into the backseat.

Kira suspected that Tristan had already slipped away. Her friends liked him, but the tension with Luke was always obvious, and Kira and Tristan had both decided it was not worth the battle, at least not on her last night in Charleston.

"So, where to?" Kira looked around, eyeing her friends. As per usual, Emma drove and Kira sat in the front seat while the boys piled in the back. She took in Emma's short jean skirt and professionally applied makeup, then looked back at the boys again, seeing that Miles had replaced his usual comic book T-shirt for a button-down. It seemed as though everyone had gone fancy for their last night.

It suddenly dawned on Kira how strange it was that this would be the last time the five of them could hang out, at least for a while. They were sort of her family, especially after helping with her recovery. But with Miles going to



Harvard, Emma and Dave both going to Texas, and she and Luke "taking a year off," things would definitely be changing. Kira wasn't sure what she thought about it yet, but decided to just try to enjoy this night. She needed to have fun, because even though Luke hadn't said so, Sonnyville would be far more work than pleasure.

"Well," Emma began, and Kira knew there was a saga of a story about to begin. "I wanted to go out to a fancy dinner, and the boys wanted to play video games. So we decided that we needed to meet in the middle. You know, not go too fancy but still have fun. So, we thought about it and thought about it—"

"We're going to my place," Miles voiced up, knowing Emma could have easily talked for another ten minutes without reaching the point. She shot daggers at him through the rearview mirror.

"So, yes, we're going to Miles's house. His parents had to leave right after graduation, so we'll have the place to ourselves. And not that we really need to, but we thought about it and—"

"Now we can throw that rager we've always wanted to!" Luke cheered. Kira rolled her eyes when she heard the slap of a high five. Dave and Luke were clearly excited by the idea. Kira, not so much.

"Wait, you threw a party?" She turned to look at the three boys in the back seat, each with a goofy smile plastered on his face. She had been hoping they would have some time with just the five of them, not a crazy high school party.

"Not my idea." Emma threw an apologetic look in Kira's direction.

"C'mon. It'll be awesome. We'll be leaving with a bang," Luke said. His hand landed on Kira's shoulder and he shook her a little, trying, she assumed, to shake her into the idea.

"So, where's Tristan?" Emma asked, clearly trying to change the topic. Kira knew Emma was on her side. She could already envision the two of them chatting by the punch bowl, watching Luke and Dave try to convince Miles to talk to some girl, knowing that it would fail miserably. Kira hoped he would have better luck at Harvard; a fellow nerd would really love him, much more

than the cheerleaders or Goths that Luke and Dave antagonized him into asking out.

"I didn't realize we were having a party, so I told him to go home for a while. He has some packing to do. You know he leaves for his backpacking trip around Europe tomorrow," Kira said, ending with the cover story she, Luke, and Tristan had all decided on—Tristan was spending the summer in Europe, while, totally randomly, Kira got a job at a restaurant in Orlando, and Luke was working at Disney World.

"Don't worry, I told him before we left. He's going to stop by, I think," Luke said quietly from the back seat.

Kira turned around, shocked, and heard Dave mutter "dude" under his breath.

"What, what? I'm a nice guy," Luke said and shrugged. Kira turned back around in her seat, stunned. It was no secret that Luke hated Tristan—it meant a lot to her that he made the gesture. Maybe, she thought ruefully, he was only being nice because he knew she would be with him and not Tristan for the next two months.

By the time Emma pulled over outside of Miles's house, the party was already in full swing. His house had been closed off, but his family owned an old plantation, so their backyard was gigantic. With one look at the parked cars on his yard and ring of headlights, all Kira could think was that his parents would freak out when they got home. She couldn't imagine those tire tracks would go away very fast. And it looked as though their entire class was there, dancing on the grass to music blaring from a ton of cars set to the same radio station. Plastic cups already spotted the ground, and Kira saw that the football team had set up multiple kegs in the beds of their pickup trucks. She almost felt strange as they approached the house she had visited so many times before.

"We barely know these people," she whispered to Emma. The two of them were arm in arm, a few feet behind the boys who were rushing to join the fun.

"I know, but it'll be fun! And now, we'll be the people who everyone

remembers for throwing an awesome party after graduation." Emma grinned at the thought. Kira started to smile too; she could get on board with this. It would be far better to be known as a member of the party-throwing brigade than the weird coma girl.

Yeah, the last few weeks of school had been fantastic with her friends and Tristan, but everyone gave her strange looks. No one in the school really knew what happened on the night of the eclipse except for Kira, Luke, and Tristan. When Tristan had rushed her to the hospital, Luke stayed behind to clean up as much of the blood on her yard as possible. The cops still came to her house, and they had found traces of human blood despite Luke's attempts, so they started investigating. There were rumors that Tristan had beaten her up and Luke had to stop him, or that Tristan and Luke tried to kill each other. The three of them had tried to play it off as an animal attack, but it was still the town gossip for weeks. After a while, it became old news, but in high school, old news almost never disappeared completely. Going out with a bang suddenly didn't seem half bad, and Kira let Emma lead her forward to the party.

They both grabbed diet sodas and walked over to the boys who were stationed on Miles's porch, looking out over the party, surveying whom they could get him to dance with.

"I say Susie Harp." Luke pointed at the small, pixie-like girl with brown hair. Kira slapped his hand down when she and Emma got closer.

"Stop pointing," she chastised and rolled her eyes. Maybe Miles wasn't the problem; Dave and Luke could easily be holding him back.

Luke ignored her and pointed at Susie again. "Come on, she's cute and this is the last night I get to watch you in action."

"No way man." Dave put his arm around Miles's shoulder, steering him in the opposite direction. "Amy MacDougall, she's the girl you should go for."

All five of them looked over at Amy, who was dancing on the hood of a car while one of the basketball players stood at the ready in case she fell over. Her dress had wet spots from where she spilled her own drink all over herself, as

Kira had witnessed five minutes before. They all looked back at Dave—he was clearly going for the "she's drunk so she'll definitely dance with you" approach.

"David," Emma started, pulling him away to reprimand him for basically telling the group that Miles's only hope was someone who had no control over her senses.

"So, I win. Susie it is," Luke said, pushing Miles forward. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say okay, shook his head to get in the zone, and then straightened his glasses before walking over.

"This is going to be good." Luke put his arm around Kira so they could watch together.

"Why? What do you know?" Kira asked, not liking the mischievous glint in Luke's eye.

"Nothing, nothing," Luke shushed her.

"Luke," Kira said harshly. He looked over at her, slightly deflated, as though Kira were totally ruining his fun.

"Okay, so I might have already told Susie that Miles had a crush on her, and she might have already told me she would love to get to know him better, if you know what I mean." He wiggled his eyebrows and they watched as Miles led Susie to the pseudo dance floor that the circle of cars created. He shot both of them a not-so-discrete thumbs up, and Kira silently prayed he didn't screw it up.

"You're quite the matchmaker." She laughed.

"I do what I can," Luke said and looked over at her. Their faces were close together, and Kira could almost feel his pulse quicken. Not for the first time, she thought maybe she was reading his mind, because Kira knew before Luke even made a move where his thoughts were going. She broke his gaze, pulling away, and Luke released his hold on her arm to step a few feet backward. When she heard his shuffling feet pause, Kira turned her eyes around to face him and eased her body back to rest against the railing. The small space between them might as well have been miles.

"So, what about you?" she asked, trying to break the tension. "Amy's up

for grabs, you can always try for one last high school hurrah before we leave tomorrow."

Luke grinned at the joke, trying to ignore the fact that Kira had very clearly just blown him off. She wondered what would happen when they went to Sonnyville. He had not been overtly obvious about his feelings for her, and sometimes Kira thought she was making it up in her head, but at moments like this, when she caught a glimpse of his small tendrils of longing, Kira wondered what really went on behind his goofy exterior.

"So, are you excited for tomorrow?" he asked, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall opposite her. Under the porch lights, Kira thought his bleach-blond hair seemed to glow, and she realized she would be the only person for the next few weeks who didn't have almost white locks.

"It's strange to think about being surrounded by conduits. I'm excited, but it's a little nerve-racking too," she said honestly.

"Everyone will love you, don't worry. My little brother can't wait. I think he thinks you're a shiny new toy for him to play with."

Kira smiled, already picturing a miniature version of Luke running around with a wide smile on his face, fascinated by everything around him. Luke's family would be interesting to finally meet. Kira wondered what his sister and parents would think. Had he told them about Tristan?

"And," Luke continued talking, recognizing that Kira still needed reassurance, "the council really isn't that bad. Everything is going to be great, you'll see."

"I hope so," she said and glanced back out at the party. Miles and Susie were still dancing, getting friendlier and friendlier Kira thought, and Dave and Emma had disappeared. So much for the five of them hanging out. Everywhere she looked, she saw her classmates, but they seemed more like strangers to her now than ever before. She wasn't sad to be leaving this town, just the few amazing friends she had made there.

Kira looked back at Luke, ready to ask more questions about their travel

arrangements for tomorrow, when she saw him focus on something beyond her shoulder. The muscles in his face tensed, his usual laugh lines disappeared, and Kira saw his whole body stiffen. It could only mean one thing.

"Lover boy is here," he said, and Kira turned to see Tristan weaving his way through the crowd. Like a shadow sneaking between the rays of the headlights, he molded into the dark. Every part of him was hidden except for his pearly skin. Kira tried to smother the smile threatening to spread across her face and turned back to Luke to silently let him know she wouldn't abandon him to spend time with her boyfriend.

"I'll leave you two alone," Luke said, pushing against the wall to straighten his body and prepare to walk away.

"Luke, stay. I want to hang out with both of you."

He shrugged, as if to say *that's not possible*, and started to leave. Kira heard the porch steps creak behind her, knowing it was Tristan, and spun around.

"We need to talk," Tristan said, his voice full of concern. Luke stopped walking and looked back, alert.

"What's going on?" he asked. Kira could tell he had transitioned to business mode and had let the personal drama go for the moment.

"Privately. Can we get inside?"

Luke nodded and walked over to the door. Reaching above the doorframe, he pulled out a spare key that Miles must have told him about and opened the locked door.

Tristan grabbed Kira's hand, entwining their fingers, and quickly kissed the top of her head before following Luke inside.

Luke shut the door behind them. The kitchen was eerily dark and the soundproof glass dulled the strains of music coming from the party. Heavy shadows crept around the lines of light peeking through the windows, making the three of them seem very alone. Kira shivered with a sense of foreboding and dropped Tristan's hand to lift herself onto the granite countertop. She knew she would need a seat to hear the news Tristan clearly felt was urgent.

"What's going on, Tristan?" she asked.

With traces of sadness lining his clear blue eyes, Tristan looked at her and responded, "You and Luke need to leave now. Immediately. I brought Luke's car and packed your stuff." He ended quietly, as if not wanting to believe the truth in his words. Kira reached out to grab his arm, pulling him closer. There was something else, something he didn't want to tell her. In the corner of her eye, Kira could see Luke pacing around the kitchen, thinking.

"They're here, aren't they?" Luke stopped walking and faced Tristan, who just nodded.

"What?" Kira asked, feeling left out, before realizing Tristan of course meant vampires. "Wait? They're here? As in Charleston or the backyard?"

Tristan ran his free hand through his hair and turned to Luke in full protection mode. Kira had seen this act before, and she didn't like it. "The pack of vampires I sent away last time, they're back. We have five, maybe ten minutes before they reach the party and tear this place apart. You both need to leave now."

"But what about everyone else?" Kira jumped from the countertop, not allowing them to ignore her. She could not leave these people to fend for themselves.

"We need to do something," Luke said, walking closer to the two of them in order to figure out a plan. Tristan nodded in agreement. "Okay, Kira and I will just have to face them. We're powerful enough to bring down a few vampires, this will all be fine."

"No, that's way too risky," Tristan said, looking Kira in the eye. "You have to leave. You and Luke get in the car and start driving. I'm going to lure the vampires away, pretend I'm with them and that I saw you leave. Hopefully, I can lead them in the wrong direction for a while so you and Luke have a chance to escape."

"Oh, and your plan is totally foolproof," Kira smarmily replied. "I would rather fight them. It's what, eight or nine vampires? Luke and I can handle it."

You can't do this on your own, Tristan." She reached her palm up to cup his face, letting her finger brush against his hair. She wouldn't let him do this alone.

"No, Kira," Luke spoke forcefully. "Tristan's right. He needs to do this. It's the best way to make sure you don't get caught."

Kira turned to Luke angrily. "It's not like you wouldn't gladly watch him die," she hissed, then looked away, instantly sorry for the remark. Luke was better than that—she knew he was better than that.

"This isn't about that, okay?" Luke replied softly, staring at the ground to hide his involuntary wince. "Everyone at this party is at risk right now, and you being here only amplifies that. Tristan's plan is the best way to keep everyone safe. So, let's go." He grabbed her hand and started pulling her from the kitchen toward the front door of the house.

"Wait, Luke. Wait!" She tugged against his hold and stopped walking to glance back at Tristan. Drenched in shadow, he stood in the kitchen alone, turned slightly away from her and Luke as though he knew this was goodbye but couldn't bring himself to say it.

"Meet me at the car," Luke said and dropped Kira's hand to leave the two of them alone. He disappeared out the door, and before Kira could blink, Tristan was by her side. His hands gently cupped her face while he stared into her fire-laced eyes.

"It's going to be all right," he said, urging her to believe him. Kira tried to quell her racing heart and believe his words, but even if it was all right tonight, neither one of them knew what the future would hold in these next two months apart. He would be chasing down Diana, and though Kira knew he could take care of himself, even vampires could die.

Kira rested her forehead against his, enjoying the brush of his cool breath on her cheek in this one moment of peace.

"I love you," she whispered.

He leaned in to kiss her, and Kira pulled him closer, not wanting to let go and lose the touch of his soft lips on hers. Tristan lifted her off the ground,



hugging her close to his body, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. Everything felt perfect, at least for an instant before his body stiffened. He broke their kiss, pulled her in even tighter for a final hug, and then set her back down, still holding her.

Kira stared into his sapphire eyes, reading the sadness-tinted longing in his irises and knew the vampires were here. Tristan let her go and stared, moving his eyes so he could take in every inch of her face. She ran her hand through his hair, pushing the ebony locks off of his forehead one last time, breathing in the moment.

In the time it took for Kira to blink away a tear, Tristan had vanished, leaving just a memory, and she was left alone holding only the air.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bestselling author Kaitlyn Davis writes young adult fantasy novels under the name Kaitlyn Davis and contemporary romance novels under the name Kay Marie.

Always blessed with an overactive imagination, Kaitlyn has been writing ever since she picked up her first crayon and is overjoyed to share her work with the world. When she's not daydreaming, typing stories, or getting lost in fictional worlds, Kaitlyn can be found indulging in some puppy videos, watching a little too much television, or spending time with her family.

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