

Book One in The Gateway Trilogy

GATEWAY



Christina Garner

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CHRISTINA GARNER

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GATEWAY

EVERYBODY HAS THEIR DEMONS... EMBER'S WANT HER DEAD.

Ember has always known that she doesn't belong in this world, but when she takes matters into her own hands, she winds up in a mental institution.

There she draws the attention of Taren, a mysterious boy with a dangerous secret.

When demons attack, they are forced to flee together, and Ember learns her secret might be the deadliest of all.

With a gateway to hell opening in Los Angeles, Ember must choose—will she save the world...or end it?

READERS' GROUP

If you'd like to connect more personally and be the first to get the scoop on new releases, cover reveals, and giveaways, please [join my readers' group](#) . I'd love to have you!

PROLOGUE

In the end, only the Voice remained.
I told you it would be better this way...

I was drifting, floating on something too silky to be water. It was warm, and it penetrated the deepest parts of me.

The Voice was right. It was always right. Everything finally felt soft. My sharpest edges were being worn away, melting into oblivion. I felt like candle wax before it cooled; nothing to do but let the remaining drops of consciousness slide down...

Pain. Where did that come from? How could I feel pain when I didn't have a body anymore?

My throat. It was my throat, being stabbed, or—

Shh...let it go. Let all the pain go. Rest easy...

For a moment I was comforted, the gentle motion of the not-quite-water lulling me, pulling me back to safety.

But I was heaving. Huge, uncontrollable spasms. And then I was vomiting, although that word isn't strong enough. I was erupting. The contents of my stomach spewed from my mouth, my nose. The wetness hit my chest, then my belly, and finally dribbled down my chin. My mouth tasted of charcoal. The warmth receded. The peace went with it. And I knew.

My throat burned. My stomach ached. I felt like I'd been hit by a truck. It wasn't supposed to happen this way.

I tried to remember how good I'd felt...the sensation of floating, of being complete, wanting for nothing. I willed myself to drift, and after a moment, my lips twitched into the tiniest bit of a smile. But if I were truly approaching oblivion, I wouldn't even remember I had a mouth, and the realization brought the pain crashing back.

My eyelids heavy, I fought to open them. The light was too bright and I squinted against its harsh intrusion.

"She's awake! Nurse—she's awake!"

My mother sprang toward me and clutched my hand, her eyes wild with worry.

"Ember, honey, you're OK. You're in the hospital. You had an accident and..."

I stopped hearing her. I didn't want to process the relief on my mother's face when I was so disappointed. I receded back, if not into the comfort of oblivion, then at least into an inky blackness.

Sunlight warmed my face, causing spots to dance behind my eyes. I feigned sleep, wanting to gauge the emotional temperature of the room before admitting wakefulness to anyone else present. No voices in the room with me, but a low buzz of conversation drifted in from farther away.

When I opened my eyes, I knew I was somewhere different. From my slanted vantage point—I still wasn't willing to move my head—I saw that the tile was still institutional, but this seemed older somehow...more dingy. I remained draped in hospital linens, but the bed itself felt softer and lacked rails. No sign of my mother. I tilted my head.

A long bureau with flaking paint dominated the wall space between where I lay and an empty bed—neatly made and decorated with stuffed animals. Past the end of my bed I spied two closets, a bathroom separating them. The door to the room was halfway open, allowing only a partial view of the hall.

Psych ward. Where else would they put someone who had swallowed a cocktail of leftover prescriptions, put on some Ani DiFranco, and gone to sleep? It was so cliché. The worst part—other than being alive—was the knowledge that I was just another teenager who had tried to off themselves because life had gotten too hard. Another loser trying to run away from her problems. They wouldn't know I'd been running to something. And I certainly wasn't going to tell them. Life was bad enough before, but life in a mental hospital seemed even less appealing. I'd keep the Voice to myself.

The door creaked and I was too slow in closing my eyes.

“Well, nice to see you’re awake, Ember.”

She was middle-aged, dressed in a nurse’s uniform and spoke with the calm authority of one who knew she was in charge and didn’t need to prove it.

I wasn’t going to be able to bullshit her.

“Not feeling very talkative?” She approached my bed. “That’s all right. You’ve been through a lot these past two days.”

“Two *days* ?”

My surprise overrode my wish to be silent. My words came out as a croak, my throat still raw.

“Mmhmm,” she said, feeling my forehead. “Some of the pills you swallowed had metabolized before the doctor was able to pump your stomach. You slept in the E.R. for fourteen hours. They moved you here once the doctors were confident you were out of the woods. That was yesterday.”

I respected her lack of sugarcoating. She didn’t add the word ‘accidentally’ before the words “pills you swallowed.” She’d been through this before.

“I guess I needed some rest,” I said.

The truth sounded flippant when spoken aloud.

“Mmhmm,” she said again.

She was looking at me, sizing me up. Was I nuts? Looking for attention? Or was I one of the few who actually wanted to die? I didn’t answer the unspoken question. She was quiet for a moment, trying to see if I would be so uncomfortable with the silence that I’d have to fill it, hopefully giving her a morsel of information she could pass on to the shrink about why I’d ended up here. She had no idea how well I could play this game.

She broke first. “Dr. Shaw wanted to be notified when you woke. It won’t be a full session as he’s got a heavy schedule today, but he’ll do some intake and explain the way things work around here.”

Intake? That didn’t sound right. I thought the psych ward was just a cooling off place before they sent you home or carted you off to the nuthouse.

Realization dawned. My nurse friend noticed. A look of sympathy crossed her face and then was gone. She had probably learned not to get too involved.

“You’ll find your things in the bureau and the closet. Meet me at the

nurses' station at the end of the hall and I'll take you to his office."

She gave me a kind smile and left the room. Left it to me and my thoughts which, as usual, were too large to be contained. They were bursting out, seeping through walls, shattering the window.

Boy, you really effed up this time. You're screwed. The nuthouse? We're adding nuthouse to the resume now? They will never let you out of here. OK, here's what we have to do: play the game, you don't know what got into you, you love your life, you were upset about a boy, you realize it was stupid, you'll never do it again—no, eff them, I'm done playing games. I'll just tell them. The mistake wasn't the pills; the mistake was being born in the first place. You only have to look at me to know I don't belong in this world...

On and on the voices warred. Not the Voice, the one that wanted to help me, just my own, and they hated me.

I pulled myself back from the brink. As pleasant as my nurse friend seemed, I had a feeling that if I didn't materialize at the nurses' station soon, I'd be dragged to this Dr. Shaw's office regardless.

I opened the drawer closest to me and found my hairbrush, toothbrush, and some tooth paste. I stiffened, horrified at the thought of my mother going through my things in order to pack for my stay, but I quickly let it go. What—was she going to find some of my darker artwork? Read my diary? I was in a mental hospital; my facade of normalcy was surely blown. I had doubts it had ever been firmly in place.

I looked horrendous. There was no denying it as I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror. Black ringed my lips, my eyes more deep set than normal, my brown hair a rat's nest. Things weren't so good on the inside either—my mouth tasted like charcoal and death. Attempted death, anyway.

Washing my face helped some, returning my lips to a human color. For a moment I got lost watching the charcoal swirl down the drain, wishing I could follow. Brushing my teeth removed the fuzzy coating. My hair, on the other hand, was a lost cause. No comb was going to tame it. I twisted it up and attached it with one of the clips I'd also found in the drawer. My mother was nothing if not sensitive to the needs of vanity.

The closet was well stocked, also, which didn't bode well for my hopes of a speedy discharge. I pulled on my favorite pair of jeans and a hoodie, tossing the gown in a corner of the closet.

The hallway looked exactly as I'd thought it would. Nondescript, doors

every eight feet or so, inoffensive pastel artwork on the walls. Nothing to upset the unbalanced mind—unless, of course, it had any taste.

I reached the nurses' station. A large black woman looked up from the papers in front of her and smiled. "Jo said you were awake. How you feeling?"

I shrugged. I'd save my platitudes for the shrink.

Jo walked up then, saving me from another silent standoff.

"This way, Ember."

I followed dutifully.

She led me around the corner and down another hallway. She paused where it ended at large double doors, then slipped her hand under a covered keypad. Her fingers moved deftly as she punched in a code, and the doors lurched open.

A moment later, we paused at a doorway with a nameplate that read *Herbert Shaw, MD*. Apparently, I had graduated from psychologists and was now in need of a full-blown psychiatrist.

Inside was a receptionist and a small waiting area, which consisted of two chairs and some magazines.

"Karen, this is Ember Lyons. She's here to see Dr. Shaw."

Karen smiled warmly from behind her desk. "Yes, he told me we'd be fitting her in. Please, have a seat. He's with another patient right now, but he'll be with you shortly."

I took a seat, picked up an issue of a nature magazine dated two months prior, and opened to a random page. Jo gave me a reassuring nod as she left, while Karen went back to her typing. I glanced down at my magazine and became absorbed in a picture of hikers entering a darkened cave. I imagined I was there, entering the blackness...

Probably better you don't mention me.

Agreed. I had kept the Voice a secret for the past year; I certainly wasn't going to start blabbing about it now, when they already had proof I was disturbed.

I closed my eyes and found myself wondering where I'd gone wrong. I'd taken enough pills, I was sure of that. But I'd known my mother would be home by ten thirty and would check on me—she always did. Why hadn't I waited until after she had gone to bed? It had made sense at the time, but sitting in that waiting room, I couldn't imagine why. I wasn't an attention

seeker. If anything, I wanted to be left alone. Completely alone. People just let you down. I wanted an end to people. An end to everything. So why had I screwed it up so spectacularly?

The *click* of a door opening brought me back to the present. A waifish girl of no more than twelve emerged from the back office. She stared at the carpet as she made her way out, her long blond hair curtaining her face. When she neared me, her breath caught and she stopped dead, her head slowly turning to look at me. Frightened blue eyes stared into mine, her lips moved silently.

The moment stretched, the girl seemingly entranced, and me, too freaked out to say anything.

“Callie?” Karen asked. “Everything OK?”

The girl, Callie, pulled her gaze away from me and said softly, “Yes, fine. Sorry.”

She scurried out of the room. I stared after, disconcerted. I guessed I should learn to get used to that sort of thing if I was going to be spending time in a mental institution.

“Ember? The doctor will see you now.”

Karen gestured to the doorway Callie had just come from.

I tossed the magazine back onto the table and paused at the door. *Here we go.*

Dr. Herbert Shaw, MD, sat behind a large mahogany desk. His balding head was bent over a file folder stuffed with papers. He looked up, his smile revealing tobacco-stained teeth, and perched his reading glasses on top of his head.

“Hello, Ember. I'm glad to see you up and about. I'm Dr. Shaw.”

He rose from his desk and extended a hand. It was unnaturally soft for a man's hand. Not that I had felt the hands of many men.

He gestured for me to sit in the chair across from him.

“So, how are you feeling?” he asked, retaking his seat.

“I've been better.”

“I would think so,” he said, and flipped through the folder. He lowered his glasses and read aloud, “Lithium, clozapine, diazepam...That's quite a lot to ingest.”

I waited for something to respond to. He hadn't asked how I'd gotten access to such a mix of pills. My mother's condition must have been in the file. Being bipolar with a side of paranoia wasn't something she

acknowledged readily; she must have been terrified for me. I felt more than a twinge of guilt.

As if reading my thoughts, he said, "I have a full history on both you and your mother, but nothing on your father. Why is that?"

If he was trying to provoke me, he was about to be disappointed. The admission that had once pained me, now flowed without emotion.

"Because I've never met him."

"I see," he said, making a note. "Is he deceased?"

"I have no idea," I said. "Isn't that in the file?"

Instead of answering, he asked, "Does it bother you, the way you were conceived?"

So it was in the file; he just wanted to see if I'd squirm. I looked him square in the eye.

"Would it bother you? To be conceived in a bathroom at The Roxy while a hair-metal band played?"

He didn't blink.

"Yes," he said, "it would bother me very much. Although, I'm sure you know it was due to your mother's mania that she participated in such risky behavior."

I did know that, but knowing didn't change anything. I would never meet my father because my mother hadn't gotten his name.

Dr. Shaw folded his arms upon his desk. "There's no denying you've been dealt a difficult hand, Ember. I won't try to convince you otherwise. But I see that things have taken quite a turn for you this past year: lowered grades, repeated truancy, an inability to make friends. Can you tell me about that?"

"Nothing that isn't in the file," I said.

I couldn't deny the charges; they were all true. Except that part about not being able to make friends. I was able, just no longer willing.

"And this?"

Dr. Shaw held up a sheet of college-ruled paper, frayed where it had been ripped from my notebook. There, in ballpoint ink, was the drawing that had put me on the radar of the school administration. It was crude; the spiraling black lines pressed deep into the paper, causing it to tear in the center.

"It's just a doodle," I said.

"Were you angry when you did it?"

And therein lay the problem. I hadn't been angry—I'd felt fine. As fine as

I ever did, anyway. What most people found disturbing, I found comforting, even beautiful. When I'd started, I'd been drawing the inner rings of a tree, which is what I'd said when my teacher had caught me drawing in class. But as often happened, the piece had taken on a life of its own, morphing into something darker and apparently more sinister looking. She had held the paper up for the other students as a type of Rorschach test, people calling out what they saw in it.

"I don't know what it is, but it's creepy," a girl in the back had called.

"It's like a tornado. If they had tornadoes in hell," another had said.

"I'll tell you what I see—a lot of therapy in her future." That had been Todd McKey. We'd kissed once, back when I still went to parties.

The entire class had broken into laughter. My drawing had been confiscated and I'd spent the rest of the period staring at a spot on my desk, willing myself not to run from the room.

After class that day, Clare Humphries, cheerleader and all around high school superstar, had broken away from her group of friends to talk to me at my locker.

"Hey," she'd said, "don't listen to those jerks. I thought it was pretty."

"Uh, thanks," I'd replied, suspicious.

Clare Humphries had never spoken to me before in my life.

"No, I mean it, I could totally see your work in a gallery."

I'd let myself smile. "Oh, well that's nice of you—"

"Right next to paintings by Charles Manson," she'd said in a singsong voice, then turned back to join her snickering cohorts.

I'd spun to face my locker, tears stinging my eyes.

The next day, I'd been called in to meet with the school guidance counselor and Clare Humphries got elected to prom court.

"Well," Dr. Shaw said, snapping me back to the present, "this file may tell me what you've been up to, but it doesn't tell me why, and that is what we'll be delving into during your sessions with me."

I decided to cut to the chase. "How long do I have to be here?"

"I can tell you aren't going to like this answer," he replied, gazing at me over steepled fingertips. "But that will be entirely up to you."

He was right. I didn't like it one bit.

I remained with Dr. Shaw only a short while longer. He could tell he wasn't going to get much from me, and Jo had mentioned his full calendar. When I left, there was a boy about fifteen with cropped black hair occupying the seat I had recently vacated in the waiting room.

"There's an orderly waiting outside to take you back to your wing," Karen said as I made my way to the door.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

"Josh, Dr. Shaw is ready for you now."

"About time," the dark haired boy muttered as I shut the door behind me.

As promised, the orderly accompanied me back to the nurses' station, and thankfully, he did it in silence. Jo was drinking coffee when I returned.

"I see you got the rules," she said, nodding toward the rolled up papers in my hand.

"Yeah. No fighting, trading meds, hooking up... That's all I remember for now."

"Those are the big ones," she replied, "but make sure you follow all of them and you and I won't have a problem."

"Got it," I said, then looked around awkwardly. What was I supposed to do now?

"Your roommate is back from class," Jo said, coming out from behind the station. "I'll introduce you."

I followed behind, and when we reached my new home away from home, Jo opened the door to reveal a petite blonde sitting cross-legged on the bed.

She looked up from her beauty magazine and gave me a perfectly dimpled smile. What was her problem? The world loved girls like her.

Eating disorder .

Of course.

“Lauren, this is Ember. Play nice,” Jo said, giving Lauren a warning look before she exited.

“Don't listen to her, I'm harmless.” Her smile twinkled, but her tone left room for doubt. “What do you think of our room?”

I looked around and shrugged. “Um, it's fine, I guess. Hopefully I'm not here long enough to get too settled.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Aren't you here on a suicide?”

“So they tell me.”

She made a sound I couldn't distinguish, somewhere between sympathy and mocking.

“Come on,” she said standing. “I'll show you around.”

I had no choice but to be rude or follow. It didn't make sense ticking off my new roommate, so I trailed after her. Plus, getting the lay of the land couldn't hurt. Just past the nurses' station was a set of double doors propped open with chairs.

“This is the rec room. Group meets here on Monday,” she said, “and you'll have a one-on-one with Dr. Shaw once or twice a week.”

“Depending on how screwed up I am?” I asked.

“Basically. Your first real session with him takes like two *hours* , and after that he'll decide how 'screwed up' you are and give you a schedule. Don't get your hopes up—on a suicide you're pretty much guaranteed two.”

In the corner, a small group of patients huddled around a nineteen-inch television set from the '90s.

“Strictly basic cable,” Lauren said, rolling her eyes.

Another corner housed art supplies, which was the only bit of good news about the place so far. A middle-aged woman sat alone, doing a small watercolor of the trees outside.

“Can we use these anytime?” I asked.

“Except when the room is being used for something else. And you can't take anything from here into your room.”

We'd see about that.

Before I'd completed my mental inventory, Lauren was already leading

me down another hall.

“This is the dining area. Breakfast is at seven, lunch at noon, and dinner at six. The food sucks. If it weren’t for the vending machine I’d have to become anorexic.”

My mouth twitched into a smile. Bulimic. The Voice had been right. It was always right. So how had I ended up here?

She stopped short and fixed me with an intense gaze. “The peanut butter cups are mine.”

My smile broadened, but then I realized she was serious. “Um, OK... sure. You got it.”

She let out a breath I hadn’t realized she was holding. “Good. My last roommate just could not keep that straight. It was a real problem.”

On the surface she was everything I hated, but I kind of liked her for her honesty. It was refreshing. How often in life does someone just lay out what they need from you, no BS attached? I knew I wouldn’t be baring my secrets so easily, the least I could do was oblige her.

We came to a window at the end of the hall. From the looks of it, I guessed we were on the third floor. Lauren pointed to a small building across the lawn.

“That’s where we go to class,” she said.

“Yeah, Shaw told me about that. We’re in a nuthouse but we have to go to school? That is such crap.”

As if either weren’t bad enough on their own.

“It’s not so bad,” she said. “We take our time walking there—it’s nice to get outside—and everybody is in a different grade so half the time you’re just doing your own thing. And Mr. Morehouse is OK, as long as you don’t get on his bad side.”

There wasn’t much else to show, so Lauren went to watch TV. I felt anything but social, so I shuffled back to our room and laid down. I wanted to read, but for all the bath products in different scents my mother had packed, she had, of course, neglected to pack a single book. Who needs mind expansion when you can smell nice?

Again, the thought of my mother brought up feelings of guilt at what I’d done.

Like she consults you on major life decisions...

It had a point. Three different high schools in three years. We moved

whenever she had the whim, or whenever our neighbors complained too much. All in L.A., but still, back when I had friends, it had been nearly impossible to keep in touch once we'd left one zip code for another. In a city with traffic as bad as Los Angeles, five miles became a long-distance relationship.

Still, I wondered how she was, what she was doing. She'd been off her meds for over a month now, which is why there had been such a healthy supply for me to utilize. I imagined her pacing the floor of our apartment, chewing on her fingernails and muttering to herself, alternately worrying about me being under the care of doctors, and what might happen if I weren't under their care. My mother distrusted doctors. For a while that had worked to my advantage, helping me avoid having to see a shrink, but after my second suspension, the school had insisted.

Neither of us were prepared for me to be home-schooled, so she had relented six months ago and I'd begun seeing Dr. Borden, PhD, in Van Nuys. I hated everything about it. The bus ride was needlessly complicated, the office was cramped, and Dr. Borden was a self-important woman with yellow hair and fake breasts that protruded from a neckline too plunging for her age. It didn't take long for me to realize that the only way to get through those sessions was to parrot back the psycho-babble she was spewing and act grateful for her insight.

Mom had been so relieved when Dr. Borden informed the school that I had made real progress and now had the tools to cope with the everyday pressures of being a teenager. In reality, Dr. Borden was clueless to the facts of what my days were filled with.

Since waking up that afternoon I'd been on auto-pilot, numbly obliging to being led through the day, but as usual, being left to my own thoughts was an exercise in torture.

Only you could screw up a suicide. You're as crazy as your mother; they should just leave you here. How do I get out of here?

That was the most prominent question, and I waited for the Voice to answer, but It didn't. I was never able to summon It at will. It just popped in when It felt like it, giving me morsels of information. Still, I was grateful for It. For months It had been my only friend, if It could be called that. And if It was just a figment of my imagination and I truly was insane, then at least I wasn't completely alone.

Time passed, and I was no closer to figuring anything out. I found myself staring blankly out the small window near my bed, doing my best to block out the incessant chatter in my mind.

When six o'clock rolled around, Lauren popped her head in.

"Dinner time."

We walked down the hall with the rest of the inmates. Lauren gave me a sidelong glance, her nose wrinkling.

"So, um, if you don't have any bath products you're welcome to use mine..."

I barked a laugh. "Subtle."

She shrugged, unembarrassed.

"I guess it has been a few days," I said, "even if I don't remember them. I'll wash up after dinner."

Lauren chattered on as we walked through the dinner line. We both turned our nose up at the Salisbury steak and opted for the limited salad bar. I went to reach for a dinner roll, but Lauren gave me a slight shake of the head.

"Those are hard as bricks by now. Only go for those on Mondays and Tuesdays."

I trusted her at her word. We got to the end of the line and she pulled a container of pudding from the stack on the counter. She tossed one to me without warning. Even in my surprised effort to catch it, I noticed her shove two more in her knapsack. Then she added one to her tray. It was a deft maneuver, not her first time.

"You'll never get better if you aren't *self-aware* about your destructive behavior, Lauren," Josh said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. He'd apparently muscled his way to the front of the line.

Lauren very pointedly ignored him.

Undeterred, he went on in a low voice, "Give me one of the extras or I'm telling." His eyes shone with a cruelty that made me think he'd rather rat her out then get the extra dessert.

There was a brief standoff while the air around us buzzed with an intensity I wouldn't normally attribute to pudding. Lauren cracked first.

"Fine. Here." Her hand slid from inside her purse, depositing the contraband into Josh's jacket pocket.

As we turned away I heard him mutter, "Friggin' tapioca. Great."

Lauren winked at me. Served him right.

We exited the line and I surveyed the room. Most of the tables were already occupied with people dining. For a moment I wondered what had brought all of these people to be patients here. Did they all feel the way I did? That their lives were a mistake? Some major cosmic screw-up that had deposited them in a world where they were never understood, and rarely—if ever—happy?

“Ooh, Taren's table has seats.” Lauren zigzagged her way to a table near the back of the room.

The young girl I had seen exiting Dr. Shaw's office sat with her head down, pushing food around on her plate. Next to her sat a tall boy with honey-colored hair and angular features. At our approach he looked up, revealing a set of disarming hazel eyes. Callie looked up, too, startled.

“Hi, Taren.” Lauren beamed at him, saying hello to Callie only as an afterthought.

He gave Lauren the briefest of nods and turned back to Callie, who still seemed to be holding her breath.

“This is my new roommate, Ember. She tried to kill herself.”

Lauren's tone was matter-of-fact; my eyes bulged.

Taren looked up again, registering my presence. “Well, that's an introduction you'd only get in a place like this, isn't it?”

You can trust him.

I nearly dropped my tray. Of all the things the Voice had ever said to me, this was the first time It had told me to trust someone. *What?*

He's one of the good ones.

I was standing stock still with my mouth hanging open. Taren cleared his throat and I realized he had stood and was holding out his hand for me to shake. I gave an embarrassed smile and held out my hand.

“Sorry, I...um...”

“It's OK. Lauren is still learning tact.”

I nodded gratefully, but Lauren bristled and said, “Well, it's *true* ...”

We took our seats. I grasped for meaning to the words that had bloomed in my mind. It was always like that. Little hints about things that always proved true. But in the past, I'd been warned away from people. This girl is spreading rumors about you, that boy just wants to use you. I couldn't make contact at will. It just whispered things when It wanted to, and I vacillated between the certainty that I was losing my mind, and gratitude that I was

being given insight from some sort of all-knowing being.

“Have you met Callie?” Taren asked, gesturing to her.

“Not officially,” I said, then addressed Callie directly. “But I saw you coming out of Dr. Shaw's office. Nice to meet you.”

I did my best to sound pleasant, but when Callie lifted her eyes, she looked only marginally less frightened than when I'd first seen her. What had been done to this poor girl?

“Hi,” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

She lowered her gaze and hunched forward as she rubbed her forehead with the fingertips of one hand. Her entire presence held an air of fragility.

I bent my head toward my plate, but peered through my bangs to study Taren, who in turn was watching Callie. So, he was one of the good guys. I had no idea what to make of it, and felt the need to explore the idea. But before I could come up with anything to say, Callie began muttering to herself. I didn't understand the words, but she was clearly agitated.

“You OK, Cal?” Taren spoke with concern and put a hand on her shoulder.

Lauren rolled her eyes. “Here we go again.”

Taren looked up sharply and fixed Lauren with a glare, but instead of replying, he turned his attention back to Callie and began speaking softly to her. I couldn't make out what either was saying, but he was clearly trying to soothe her.

“What? It's not my fault that we can't get through one meal without an incident. Look at her, she's totally faking it.”

“She's not faking anything,” Taren said, breaking away from comforting Callie to admonish Lauren. “Not everyone needs to be the center of attention all the time.”

Lauren flushed scarlet and clenched her jaw. Taren stood.

“Come on, Cal, let's get you back to your room so you can rest.” He helped Callie stand and led her out of the dining hall.

Lauren resumed eating as if nothing troubling had occurred. “That girl belongs upstairs,” she said between bites.

“Upstairs?”

“With the really crazy ones. You know—perverts, schizophrenics, the occasional ax murderer. People who don't even get the plastic knives.” Lauren held up her own knife for emphasis.

“Lovely,” I replied, pushing my tray away. The wilted lettuce and anemic tomatoes weren't enough to rekindle my appetite. I felt sympathy for Callie. Twice I'd seen her, and twice she'd seemed like she was really losing it.

“Taren's gorgeous, huh?” She said it in a way that made me feel like we were discussing peanut butter cups.

“Sure,” I said casually, “if you like that type.”

Lauren smiled with satisfaction while I wondered what type Taren was.

When Lauren had finished dinner, we made our way to the rec room. She was content to watch more television, but I made my way over to the art supplies. There wasn't much of a selection, so I opted for a charcoal pencil and white printer paper. I sat at a folding card table and contemplated what to sketch.

“So, you're an artist?”

I hadn't heard Taren approach. He stood across the table from me, his hazel eyes holding mine in their steady gaze.

“I try to be,” I replied, then gestured to the blank sheet in front of me. “Not feeling very inspired, I guess.”

“This place has that effect on most people,” he said and sat down.

“How's Callie?” I asked.

“Better. She has a hard time with crowds.”

“Does she really do that at every meal?” I asked.

“No, that's just Lauren being dramatic,” Taren said, his expression registering distaste. “Which does happen at every meal.”

I gave the slightest of smiles; it seemed all I was capable of. There was a moment of silence between us, and it felt like I was being judged for the tenth time that day. I was afraid to ask what his verdict was, and his face revealed nothing.

Instead, I blurted out, “So, what are you doing here?”

Taren blinked in surprise and I hastily added, “I mean, not here, at this table, you can sit...wherever, um...”

He saved me from my complete awkwardness by shrugging and saying, “Behavioral issues.”

“That's pretty broad,” I said. “Don't all teenagers have behavioral issues?”

“Mine caused me to light things on fire,” he said, not seeming ashamed of the revelation.

This was the guy I was supposed to trust? An unrepentant pyro?

“Anyone get hurt?” That was a non-negotiable—no matter what the Voice said.

He smiled and shook his head. “No, my destructive tendencies apply only to abandoned property.”

Not ideal, but I could live with it. He’d seemed like a good guy earlier, with Callie.

“So, how many days a week does being a pyromaniac get you with Shaw?” I asked.

“Two,” he said, “but I’m making real progress.”

“How can you tell? We’re not allowed anything flammable.”

Taren gave me a smirk and said, “What are you drawing?”

I looked down to see that I'd been doodling without realizing it. It was the same swirling line over and over. I'd drawn it hundreds of other times as a way to calm my nerves. It dawned on me that having the Voice tell me to trust someone, when I'd learned to never trust anyone, was almost as unnerving as my current confinement.

“Oh, it's nothing, just— ”

“Taren, don't you want to come watch TV?” Lauren's voice dripped honey as she approached.

“Maybe later,” he said, without turning in her direction. “I'm talking with Ember right now.”

He gently plucked the paper from my hands and slid it over to his side of the table. For a moment his eyes flashed surprise, but quickly returned to casual study. I wasn't sure what to make of his reaction, it was hardly a complicated design, but I didn't have time to ask. Lauren's arched eyebrow indicated what was expected of me.

“Actually,” I said, standing, “I'm pretty beat. I think I'm gonna head back to our room.”

Lauren smiled with satisfaction. “Come on, Taren, I saved you a seat up front.”

He rose to follow her, but I felt his eyes on me as I exited the room.

Upon returning to our room, I decided to make good on my promise to Lauren and took a shower. It was a cramped stall, but the water was hot and had decent pressure. Muscles began to unwind and so did my emotional numbness.

Before I knew it, I was sitting on the floor of the shower, hugging my knees and sobbing. It had been months since I'd cried, and once the floodgates had opened, there was no stopping it. Even my internal dialogue was silent in the presence of such raw emotion.

Days earlier I had come to the decision that there was only one way out. Either the Voice was right and no one and nothing could be trusted, or the Voice was a figment of my imagination and I was already insane. Either reality wasn't one I had been willing to accept, so I had taken action.

But I had failed, and now things were even worse than before. I hadn't thought it possible, but here I was. In a mental institution. Rooming with an over-possessive bulimic cheerleader type who would never deign to acknowledge my existence in the real world. My meals regulated. Forced therapy sessions. My discharge dependent on my sanity, which more and more I was beginning to doubt I could even fake. My only comfort—when my already broken-down world had further deteriorated—had been that I wasn't the crazy one. It was all of them—the masses. But I was the one in here, so even if that were true, did it really matter? *I'm the one here...*

When my sobbing finally subsided, I was exhausted. I dried myself off and wrapped my hair in a towel. Lauren hadn't returned, for which I was grateful. I slid beneath the covers and hoped sleep wouldn't be long in coming. I'd had enough of being awake. Which I supposed was what had landed me in this situation in the first place.

Sleep did come, but was restless, and I woke that morning as I often did, with a feeling of dread. It took me a moment to register where I was, and once I did, the feeling grew.

“Breakfast in ten,” Lauren said when she realized I was awake. She was sitting on her bed, applying mascara with a deft hand.

The towel that had been wrapped around my head when I’d gone to bed was now on the floor, and I could tell just by touching it that my hair was a mess. I stumbled sleepily to the bathroom and assessed the situation. I decided it was salvageable and pulled a brush gently through the tangles. I didn’t have time to do much else beside get dressed and brush my teeth. I told myself I didn’t have anyone to impress, anyway.

The line for food was long, and Lauren seemed annoyed at having to wait. The eggs looked rubbery; I opted for cereal and juice. I wasn’t surprised when Lauren led us straight to where Taren was sitting with Callie. She was nothing if not persistent.

Callie seemed more bright-eyed this morning, but tensed at our approach.

“Good morning,” I said, trying to put her at ease, yet wondering what her problem was.

“Hey,” she replied in her usual soft tone.

“How was your first night?” Taren asked before taking a bite of toast.

“She thrashed around all night,” Lauren said. “I could barely sleep myself.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

"I get bad dreams, too," Callie said with a sympathetic smile.

"Do you have nightmares often, Ember?" Taren asked with an interest that bordered on obtrusive.

I wasn't sure I wanted to discuss my sleep issues, but Callie saved me from needing to.

"Taren, I don't feel so well," she said.

Lauren looked at me knowingly and mouthed, *every time*.

"You're OK, Cal, I'm here." Taren's reply was so low I almost didn't hear it. Not for the first time, I wondered about their relationship.

Callie was now panic-stricken. "No, I have to get out of here. Get me out—"

"Please," Lauren interrupted, "do as she says, get her out of here."

"Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP!" The voice that erupted from Callie seemed too big to have come from such a small girl. She lurched up from the table and launched herself across it—straight at me.

I was taken by such surprise that I didn't have time to react. One instant I was sitting in a folding chair, and the next I was knocked to the cold tile. Callie was stronger than her looks suggested; it was all I could do to fend her off. As blue as her eyes were, they seemed on fire. Her hand arced up and I saw it—a plastic knife. My eyes widened. My last thought was going to be, *What the fu—*

And then Taren was there, pulling her off of me. Stunned as I was, I saw him try to pocket the knife, but orderlies had rushed over by then and confiscated it.

Taren no longer needed to restrain Callie, she was sobbing into his chest. The orderlies pried her off, though she clutched at him.

Her eyes bore into me as they dragged her away. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I swear I didn't want to. I'm so sorry..."

The entire dining hall was silent, though it wouldn't have needed to be to hear Callie's scream a moment later.

"What are they doing to her?" I asked, still breathless and trying to calm my racing heartbeat.

"Taking her to the elevator. They're going to move her upstairs." Taren looked tortured, helpless.

I suppose I shouldn't have cared—she had just tried to stab me, after all—but she was so small, even if she was freakishly strong. And the way she'd

looked at me as she apologized... I believed her.

"Yeah, they'll let her chill out in solitary until Monday," Lauren said.

"Monday? But that's three days from now." I couldn't imagine Callie locked up that long with people who were truly dangerous.

Lauren shrugged. "It's a mandatory twenty-four hours, and Shaw is off on weekends. She should have known that today was the worst day to go off the rails."

"Hard as it might be to believe," Taren said, his voice brittle, "not everyone manipulates their behavior just to get attention."

Lauren's mouth hung open, clearly affronted, but before she could respond, Taren tugged at my arm. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

He didn't wait for my reply, just pulled me a few feet away.

"Did she hurt you? Your head hit the tile pretty hard."

That explained the spinning, and the pain that was starting to seep through the cracks of my shock. I reached up to touch the back of my head.

"Ow! Yeah, I guess she got me pretty good. What was that about, anyway? What's her problem with me?"

Before he could answer, one of the nurses approached. "We'll get you checked out now, dear."

"I was just going to get her some ice," Taren said, his hand on the small of my back, steering me away from the nurse.

"Don't be ridiculous," the nurse said. "She could have a concussion. We need to take her to the E.R. Wait here—I'll be right back."

She went to confer with an orderly, and I stifled a laugh. I *had* been wanting to get out of there. Maybe if my mother knew I was just as likely to lose my life inside the mental hospital as out, she'd spring me that much sooner.

"Ember." Taren leaned close, his breath warm in my ear. My pulse went back to racing. "Do you have any...birthmarks?"

His question was so bizarre, that heedless of the pain, I snapped my head to face him.

"What?"

His eyes were only inches away, boring into mine. He grabbed my wrist and pushed up the sleeve of my hoodie, searching. I tried to pull away, but his grip was too strong.

"Do you?" he asked again, checking the other arm.

“N-no,” I stammered.

Intensity didn't usually unnerve me, but at that moment, his definitely did.

“Taren, enough!” the nurse said, hurrying back to us. “What on Earth are you doing?”

She pried his hands from my arm, causing Taren to come back to himself.

“Nothing, sorry.” He dropped his gaze. “Sorry, I hope you feel better.”

He turned abruptly and strode away.

By the time I got to the E.R., my head was throbbing. A welt had formed despite the ice pack I'd been given for the ride. The waiting room was mostly empty, so I didn't have to wait long to be seen by a doctor. He ordered a CT scan, and the wait for that was considerably longer.

With nothing to do and no one to distract me, I was forced to process Callie's attack and Taren's strange behavior. I had no idea what to make of either. I'd been nothing but nice to Callie, and why Taren was interested in a non-existent birthmark, I couldn't fathom. I wondered if Lauren was right about Callie being seriously disturbed. If anything, the idea made me sympathize with her even more. If life with my mother had taught me anything, it was that being mentally ill didn't make you a bad person. Hard to deal with sometimes, yes, but not necessarily bad.

As it turned out, I didn't have a concussion, and after a few hours I was back at Windsor. I found Lauren painting her toenails on her bed.

“Your mom is a trip,” she said, admiring her work.

“My mom was here?” I had been both surprised and relieved that she hadn't shown up to the E.R.

“Is here. She's talking with Dr. Shaw, I think.”

I groaned. This would either be really good or really bad. As if on cue, my mother burst into the room.

“Ember!” She rushed to me, pulling me into a tight hug. “Thank God you're all right.”

Her tone was an octave too high; she was either close to hysterics or just coming off of an episode.

“Hi, Mom.” I could hear her heartbeat racing.

She let me out the embrace, but held my face in her hands. “They didn’t call me until an hour ago.” She glared over her shoulder at Dr. Shaw standing in the doorway, then turned back to me. “If I’d known, I would have come to the E.R. right away. You know that, right, baby?”

“Of course, Mom. It’s OK.”

“It is most certainly not OK, and I’ve let Dr. Shaw know it. Letting a dangerous criminal run around with knives, attacking people— ”

“She’s not a criminal, Mom, she just...” I struggled to explain what I still found baffling. “She was just...confused or something.”

“Well, you don’t need to worry, it won’t happen again. Dr. Shaw has promised that there will be a set of eyes on you at all times until you’re well enough to leave.”

Perfect.

“We’ll take good care of her,” Dr. Shaw said, in a conciliatory tone.

Mom gave him a withering look and turned back to me. “You just concentrate on getting better. I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you, so just do whatever they say and get better so you can come home. OK, honey?”

“Yeah, Mom. I’m feeling better already. I think if you took me home— ”

She cut me off with another too-tight hug. “Good. That’s good.” Her heartbeat had slowed a little—a positive sign. She held my face in her hands. “Now, they don’t like you to have any visitors your first week here, but I’ve informed Dr. Shaw that given last night’s incident, I’ll be dropping in quite often to make sure you’re being taken care of.”

“Thanks, Mom, that would be nice,” I said, trying to hide my disappointment that she wasn’t taking me home immediately.

She gave me a tight smile, her eyes growing misty. “I’m so glad. I was sure you’d be angry with me.” While my mind raced for a way to stop her tears before they started, she went on. “Angry that I had to put you here. I’m sorry, honey, I just didn’t know what else to do. If you ever left me...”

No, not the sobbing. Not in front of Lauren and Dr. Shaw.

“Mom, don’t be silly.” I said, trying to make my voice light. “Everything is fine. I’m fine, you’re fine. I know I didn’t leave you any choice. I’m not mad.” I held up her hand and inspected it. “Look at this, your nail polish is chipped. Why don’t you go get a manicure?”

She looked at her hand as if seeing it for the first time. “It looks terrible,

doesn't it?" She wiped away the tears that had been threatening to spill.

"You could never look terrible, Mom." I gave her my most reassuring smile.

After that, she left without incident, other than fixing Dr. Shaw with another firm stare. Once they'd both gone, Lauren turned to me, her expression a mix of shock and fascination. I waited for the onslaught of questions about my mother's mercurial behavior.

"Your mom looks *fantastic* ," she said. "What does she do to stay in shape?"

I couldn't help but laugh. Leave it Lauren to excuse her behavior simply because she looked good.

"Pilates," I said. "She's an instructor."

"Pilates..." Lauren breathed, as if she'd found the Holy Grail.

I'd only eaten a bite of breakfast and it wasn't yet time for lunch, so I paid a visit to the vending machine. I was contemplating my purchase—being careful not to include peanut butter cups in my decision—when Taren approached.

An orderly observed from a distance. Dr. Shaw was making good on his word. So far I'd noticed nurses and orderlies passing my room at regular intervals, always making sure to peer in. Being watched set my teeth on edge.

I stepped back from the machine. “Go ahead, I haven't decided.”

Even with the whole morning to figure it out, I still had no idea why Taren had acted so strangely. We were in a mental institution, so maybe that should have been explanation enough, but I really wanted to believe he was sane. That however bizarre his behavior, there was a reasonable explanation.

“I'm not hungry,” he said in a low voice. He continued to stare at the vending machine, as though deciding what to get.

“Um, OK.”

“I need to talk to you,” he said.

“Does it involve checking my body for birthmarks?”

He shook his head. “No, I should have known better, you're too—never mind,” he said, and took a breath. “Look, I'm sorry I did that. I wasn't trying to scare you.”

I shrugged. “Would it surprise you to know I've seen weirder?”

His face twitched into a wry smile. “No, actually, it wouldn't.”

“Was this what you wanted to talk about?” I asked.

“No,” he glanced at me from the corner of his eye. “I need a favor.”

“What kind of favor?” Why was my pulse quickening? It was the intensity in his eyes again.

“I need you to come with me to see Callie.” He cast a glance toward the orderly that had just passed, making sure he hadn't heard.

I blinked. “Callie? Why?”

“She's having a really hard time upstairs. She feels terrible about what happened and wants to apologize.”

“Oh, well, tell her I forgive her. I mean, my head hurts, but I'm not going to hold a grudge. There's clearly something wrong with her.” Life with my mother would have been impossible if I hadn't learned to excuse the inexcusable.

He gave me a considering look. “That's big of you, and I know she'll appreciate it, but I think it has to come from you. If I can arrange it, will you come with me to see her?”

“If she's in solitary, then how—?”

“Let me take care of the how,” he said. “Will you do it?”

Say yes.

Once again, I was taken aback by the Voice's apparent shift in focus: urging me *toward* a person instead of away. I was aware of Taren's eyes on me, waiting for an answer. My curiosity combined with my sympathy for Callie made it an easy decision.

“Yeah, sure. If the powers that be say it's OK, then—”

“Great. I'll come get you when it's time.”

He jammed some coins into the machine and grabbed the pretzels he'd chosen at random, before walking away. I was the one left to stare after him this time.

The rest of the day passed slowly. Lauren had visitors and forgot I existed, while Taren spent most of the day playing cards with some of the younger kids. I found myself almost looking forward to Monday, when I'd start class. At least there would be something that required my attention. As it was, I spent the day watching reruns of sitcoms. I hated sitcoms—all that phony laughter and tying things up within thirty minutes—but there seemed to be a hierarchy to who controlled the remote and I wasn't yet a part of it.

By the time dinner rolled around, my brain was mush. I stood in line by myself until Lauren muscled her way up to stand beside me.

“Thanks for saving me a spot,” she said. “I'm starving.”

She palmed her usual extra puddings and I wondered if the person in charge of inventory ever wondered why they were always off.

Taren's table was already full, much to Lauren's annoyance, so we settled on a spot in the corner. She prattled on about all of the gossip her friends had brought her about people I had never met and cared nothing about. I ate in relative silence, offering the occasional response only when required. I studied Taren out of the corner of my eye. He seemed to be thoroughly enjoying his meal, laughing and talking with a group of younger boys. There were plenty of people our age; I wondered why he preferred the company of kids.

After dinner, I went back to our room in hopes of avoiding more of Lauren's less-than-scintillating company, but she followed me and rambled on. I plopped down on my bed and opened a book that I had pocketed from

the rec room—a hint that was hard for even her to ignore. She left in a huff. I became absorbed in the yellowing pages of the novel, grateful for something to read even if it was mindless fluff.

Sometime later I heard a rustling, which brought me out of the light sleep I had drifted into. The room was pitch black, but when my eyes adjusted, I vaguely made out Lauren getting ready for bed.

“Ember? You awake?” Her voice was soft.

The room was too dark for her to realize my eyes were open, so I feigned sleep, continuing to breathe deeply. Instead of crawling under her covers, Lauren began rooting around under her bed. I watched with interest, careful not to move. Once she'd found what she was looking for, she sat on top of her bed and began opening packages. A familiar smell filled the room. Peanut butter cups. I closed my eyes and felt bad for even listening. It seemed like an intrusion. Shouldn't even someone as vapid as Lauren be allowed to indulge her illness without witness?

As the packages kept opening, I grew more and more surprised at their number. How many quarters had she plunked into that machine for just one binge? How long had she been saving up? Was it wrong to say I was impressed?

After a time she was silent, and I thought she might have fallen asleep. I was about to get up and change into my pajamas when her bed creaked and the bathroom door latched behind her. Over the loud whirring of the bathroom fan, I heard her purging. I covered my ears and thought about the word ‘purge’. Who couldn't use a good purging from time to time? Before she left the bathroom, I had fallen asleep.

It was the breath I noticed first. It was warm on my cheek and smelled of mint. I wondered if my conscious awareness meant I was having a lucid dream or hallucinating. Pondering this made me smile. Or maybe I was smiling because I knew it was him. Something warm and soft settled on my lips. I realized I'd been wondering what it would be like to kiss him since we'd first met. I parted my lips slightly. Would dream/hallucination Taren would kiss anything like the real Taren? As I thought of his name, I heard his

voice.

“Ember,” he whispered softly, urgently. His lips were so close to me I felt them fluttering against my ear.

But that wasn't right; he couldn't be whispering in my ear, or what was I kissing?

My eyes flew open to find Taren kneeling beside my bed, his face inches from mine, his hand covering my mouth. I froze, my tongue in mid-caress against his palm. To say I blushed would not adequately describe my mortification. His lips twitched, obviously holding back a smile, which made it that much worse. My tongue retreated and I closed my mouth, all the while his eyes holding mine.

“Hi,” was all he said, removing his hand from my mouth. He had the manners not to wipe it on my bedspread.

“Hi,” I whispered back, as if this were the most natural circumstance for having a conversation.

“I didn't mean to scare you.”

“You didn't,” I said.

Was he going to tell me what he was doing here? It seemed ridiculous to have to ask.

“It's time to go see Callie.”

My eyebrows must have climbed three inches up my forehead.

“What?” I said too loudly.

Taren tensed and looked back at Lauren, who continued to snore softly. Satisfied that she hadn't woken, he turned back to me.

“You said you would come if I could arrange it.”

“You can't seriously mean now. It's the middle of the night.”

“That's why it has to be now. There are too many people around during the day.”

“And this is what you meant when you said you could arrange it?” I asked.

“Yeah. Look, I promise we won't get caught, but we have to go now.”

I considered his request. It was insane, of course. The last thing I wanted was to get in trouble and find out how much worse life could get in a nuthouse, but my interest was more than piqued.

“Then I guess it's a good thing I'm already dressed,” I said.

I followed Taren to the door. He peered out, made a beckoning motion,

and then darted off. I hesitated, but a rush of adrenaline finally propelled me down the deserted hallway. We paused in the recessed doorway where meds were handed out. The sound of a late night talk show drifted out from behind the nurses' station a few feet away. Taren crouched low and dashed past, motioning for me to do the same. My heartbeat drummed in my ears and I questioned the intelligence of what I was doing.

I crept toward the nurses' station, my breath held tight in my chest. I ignored the look of impatience Taren was shooting me and edged close enough to peek around the doorjamb. A male nurse reclined in a chair, his back to me. Two steps and I would be once again hidden from view. Just two steps, yet I couldn't make myself take them.

Keep going.

It was the push I needed. I reached Taren and exhaled as quietly as I could. Now out of view, we both stood and padded down the hall to the double doors that separated our wing from the others. Taren slipped his hand beneath the shielded keypad. How had he gotten the code?

The doors opened with a soft *hiss* and we slipped through. I remembered this corridor from when I had met with Dr. Shaw, and I wasn't surprised to see it deserted at this late hour. A moment later we were at the end of the hallway and reached a door marked, *Stairwell* . Again, Taren's fingers moved deftly behind the plate that hid the keypad. With a *click* , the door unlatched and I found myself climbing a set of stairs. At the next landing he paused, and for a moment, seemed unsure of himself.

"What is it?" I asked.

Him being nervous made me even more nervous.

"Nothing," he said. "It just gets a little tricky from here."

I would have laughed if a shred of self-preservation hadn't prevented it. Now it would get tricky?

It didn't take long to see what he meant. The door opened easily enough, but immediately I could tell we were in a different world. Instead of the tomb-like quiet of downstairs, this floor echoed with strange sounds. As we stood pressed against the doorway of the stairwell, I heard a low moan drift down the hall. It mingled with a metallic tapping sound and a woman singing a lullaby in a disturbing monotone. And there were footsteps—multiple footsteps. They would stop for a second and then resume, thankfully getting quieter as they moved farther down the hall.

This is the part where he will make sure I want to go through with this , I told myself. What seemed like an adventure a few minutes ago—had it really been only a few minutes?—now seemed colossally stupid. As I tried to formulate a polite way to tell him he'd have to calm his friend—age-inappropriate girlfriend, whatever—down himself, Taren took off down the hall. In my shock, I froze. I couldn't breathe, let alone move. Seconds ticked by, and necessity forced me to inhale. I tilted my head a few inches, peering down the corridor.

Taren crouched in a doorway about ten feet away. Fifty feet away, a nurse and an orderly made their rounds, stopping at each door and making marks on a clipboard. Taren motioned for me to join him. I gave a slight but firm shake of my head. He nodded, still beckoning. My jaw clenched. *No*, I mouthed. He pressed his hands together in front of himself, as if praying, and mouthed, *Please* .

I watched as the nurse and orderly made their way to the last door and realized the hallway was a dead end. They wouldn't be rounding a corner, they would be turning back around to face me. I cursed under my breath. Taren's eyes were pleading. He held up a key and pointed to the door he crouched in front of.

I sprang from my hiding place. The nurse and orderly began to turn. I would have slid right past the door, but Taren grabbed me, hauling me through the now-open door. It shut with a soft *click* behind us.

My heart felt like it might leap from my chest. I took small sips of air, afraid that if I indulged the overwhelming urge to hyperventilate, my gasps would cause us to be discovered.

My eyes adjusted quickly, and the first thing I did was fix Taren with a hard stare. The rational part of my brain reasoned that I hadn't exactly asked him how he had planned to get us here before I'd agreed to come, but the part of me that was panicked needed someone to blame.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" I said.

But he wasn't looking at me. I followed his gaze to the corner. Curled into a tight ball, rocking back and forth, was Callie. Taren moved closer and I followed cautiously behind.

"Callie." His voice was more than soft; it was tender.

Callie didn't respond, didn't even seem to be aware that we were present.

"She wasn't like this earlier," he said.

He was worried, and for good reason. Callie looked terrible. In less than a day she'd gone from looking mousy to looking positively feral. Her eyes remained vacant even when Taren passed his hand before them.

"What do you think happened?" I asked.

At the sound of my voice, Callie growled. Without thinking, I stepped back. As frail as she looked, I remembered her strength when she was on top of me.

"This might not have been a good idea," Taren said, giving voice to my own thoughts, minus a few expletives.

Under normal circumstances I'd have had a sarcastic retort, but these weren't normal circumstances, and I felt fairly certain that the sound of my voice would set Callie off and cause a chain of events I'd rather not experience. I took careful steps backward until I ran out of floor space, my back pressed against the door.

Taren sat next to Callie, cradling her in his arms. "Callie, find your way back. Everything is OK. Find your way back. Remember what I taught you. Look for the pinpoint of light and follow it."

There was nothing romantic in what I was seeing, and yet it seemed so intimate. It was uncomfortable to witness. Listening to Lauren binge and purge might have given me perverse pleasure, but this felt wrong. Before me was a psyche that had completely unraveled, and Taren was trying desperately to will it back together. I stared at the floor.

"Taren?" Callie's voice was bewildered and shaky. I looked up in surprise. "I got lost in the dark place again, Taren."

"I know you did, kiddo. But you made it back. That's the important thing." Taren's voice was reassuring, big brother to kid sister.

"I still can't do it on my own, though. I need you."

"That's why I'm here," he said.

"But then you go away and I'm lost again." She clung to him as though her life depended on it.

"I know, I'm sorry. That's why Monday is really important. Your doctor will be back then and he's going to decide whether you need to stay here or can come back downstairs where I am."

"I want to come back downstairs, please. I'll be good. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. Did you tell her? Did you tell Ember I didn't mean it?"

"I did, and she knows you didn't mean it. She forgives you."

"You're just saying that," she said. "I was awful, she'd never forgive me."
Taren lifted his head to look at me. I took a hesitant step forward.

"I-I do forgive you, Callie. And I'm fine. See?" I stepped into a small pool of light that cascaded in from a high window.

Callie looked up, disbelieving. She stared at me for a moment, and then her whole body relaxed as she slumped against Taren's chest, her eyes closed.

"Thank you." Her voice was barely a murmur. Her chest began to rise and fall in a rhythmic pattern almost immediately.

"She's *asleep*?" My head spun. I had no context for what was happening.

"Yeah," Taren replied, "for the first time in a few days, I'd imagine."

"Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?" It came out more forcefully than I had planned, but it was a valid question, nonetheless.

Taren leaned his head against the wall and studied me for a long moment. He looked exhausted, yet it seemed natural that he would be holding someone, watching over them.

"I'm not sure how much to tell you," he said finally.

"I'm not sure how much I'll believe."

He gave the tiniest of smiles, and it made me want to think of ways to see it more often.

"Fair enough," he said.

I came to sit across from him, Callie still snuggled into his chest.

"Callie hears...voices."

Who doesn't? I kept my sarcasm to myself and let him continue.

"Usually they want her to do things to herself."

He carefully lifted one of her sleeves, revealing a line of scars, some old, some fresh, made by a blade. I winced.

"I'm not sure why she got violent around you, to be honest. I thought I might know, but..."

"But I don't have any birthmarks?" I asked, half-joking.

"But you don't have any birthmarks," he repeated, completely serious.

A distant alarm sounded. Taren and I locked eyes.

"Is that for us?" I asked, more than a touch of panic in my tone.

He shook his head. "It shouldn't be. Even if they'd noticed we were gone, they'd do a full sweep before sounding the alarm and panicking the whole hospital."

As if on cue, another alarm sounded, this one closer.

Callie stirred and opened her eyes. "Taren? What's going on?"

"Don't worry. It's just a fire drill." From the look in his eyes, he was trying to convince himself as well as her.

Before I could ask what we should do, the door to Callie's room opened of its own accord. The door to the room across the hall had opened, as well.

"The locks have been disarmed," Taren said in bewilderment. "What would—"

Figures raced past the door in hospital gowns. Screams and wailing could be heard, mingling with the shriek of the alarms. A nurse, eyes wild with fright, raced in the direction of the stairwell.

Taren motioned for me to stay back as he rushed to the door, scanning both directions.

"We need to get out of here."

He didn't need to say it twice; fear had turned my veins to ice. I struggled to help Callie to her feet.

"Which way?" I asked.

I peered past Taren into the hallway. In both directions chaos reigned; patients fought orderlies, nurses fought each other. Some were simply fleeing. A petite woman in a hospital gown swung at a muscular orderly, and though seemingly impossible given her size, she sent him crashing into a wall. With a *thud*, his head bounced off the wall and he slid to the floor, motionless. She turned, a trick of the light making her eyes seem to glow with a reddish hue. Another woman—vacant-eyed, her clothing in shreds—stumbled down the hall, moaning. Her hand dripped with something red and sticky-looking, streaking the wall as she went.

I backed away from the door, shaken. "Why is this happening?"

"I don't know," Taren shouted above the sirens, "but we have to get out of here. Now."

Before I could protest leaving the relative safety of the room for what waited in the hall, Callie clutched her head as if in agony and repeated, "No, no, no..."

Taren grabbed her by the shoulders. "That's good, Callie, fight it. You have to fight it."

"But there's so many, they want—"

"No, don't listen to them. Block it out. Remember what I taught you." Taren's tone bordered on frantic.

"I can't think of a song, I can't think of one!" she wailed. She was using a fist to beat at her temple.

"Do the ABC's," I said, desperate to help. "A, b, c, d, e, f, g ..."

Taren nodded and joined in. "H, i, j, k — "

"L, m, n, o, p ," Callie sang at the top of her lungs, "q, r, s ..."

"Keep going, say it over and over, don't stop," Taren commanded. He turned to me. "Come on, we're leaving."

Is he crazy? Of course he is, he's in a mental institution. Why wouldn't he be crazy? I'm probably crazy, too. The people in the hallway are definitely crazy, which is why only a crazy person would go out there. Wait, does that mean I should follow Taren, or I should —

"Ember!" Taren's voice was sharp, cutting through my babbling thoughts. "I don't want to have to leave you."

My eyes got as big as saucers. Leave me? He would leave me? *Here ?* The thought of crouching alone in the corner of a room without so much as a closet to hide in became more terrifying than facing what was in the hall.

He didn't wait for my response. "Now!"

He bolted from the room, dragging Callie with him, her still shrieking her ABC's. I leapt to follow. The stairwell seemed farther away than I remembered. Of course, fifteen minutes ago I was only worried about getting caught by an orderly, not a psychotic patient. The door to the stairs stood open and, amazingly, unguarded. We raced through and continued down the stairs. We'd reached the landing for our floor when the door burst open. We skidded to a halt in front of Lauren and Josh.

"It's coming, it's coming, go!" Lauren babbled hysterically.

Someone—no, *something* —large and terrifying appeared in the doorway, its flesh like burnt leather and covered with sores.

"Run!" Lauren shrieked and tore past us, up the stairs, Josh following.

Callie's eyes widened in recognition. "Taren said they couldn't come here, he said— "

She began convulsing, her eyes rolling back in her head.

The creature had eyes like slits and a nose like a squashed bug, but its mouth—its mouth took up the better part of its face. Gooey liquid—some of it blood-red, most of it black—oozed from both corners and when it opened, four rows of jagged teeth gleamed in the fluorescent light.

In my mind, I was racing up the stairs behind Lauren and Josh. In reality,

I was frozen in place as the monster advanced, its jaw flexing.

“Get her out of here,” Taren said, pushing Callie into my arms. “Drag her if you have to.”

He took a step toward the beast, a move that shocked me free of my paralysis.

“What? What are you doing? Run!” I screamed, tugging at his arm.

“I’ll be right behind you,” he said calmly, dislodging a fire extinguisher from its case on the wall.

Whether it was due to self-preservation or his commanding tone, I don’t know, but I left him there, pulling Callie along with me. I don’t know how many floors I ran up—I didn’t even know how many floors the building had—but when I reached the roof, my lungs were on fire and I was gasping for air. I slumped against the doorframe, letting Callie collapse into a heap.

Moments later, Taren stepped onto the rooftop. He was barely short of breath, his clothing drenched in foul-smelling black slime.

“How is she?” he asked.

It was my shock at seeing him again that made me realize I’d been certain he was going to die. Certain he was sacrificing his life, if not for me, then for the young woman in a heap at my feet.

“Ask her,” I said. Not the best way to say thank you—he had saved my life, however incidental—but in the past half hour of sneaking down hallways and running for my life, I’d begun to wonder what the hell was so special about Callie, anyway.

When I said as much, Taren replied, “You wouldn’t understand.” He was kneeling, trying to rouse her.

“Oh yeah? Try me.” I could hear the hysterical edge in my voice, but could do nothing to stop it. “And while you’re at it, why don’t you explain to me what that thing down there was. And why you seem not at all fazed that a giant bug with a mouth the size of *Jaws* is running around a mental institution—or anywhere, for that matter.”

“You need to calm down, Ember. Take a deep breath.” Taren didn’t spare me a glance; instead, he scanned the rooftop.

“Oh no, you don’t get to be patronizing,” I said. “I’ve put up with plenty of very weird behavior from both you, and now I want some answers.”

“I’m not trying to patronize you,” he said, turning to face me. “But there are things happening right now that are more important than your curiosity.

Callie needs the help of professionals, and it's only a matter of time before something very dangerous climbs those steps. Do you really want me to waste time explaining myself to you?"

I shuddered at a mental picture of the creature I couldn't explain, then looked back at Callie, who still lay motionless, and knew he was right.

With great care, Taren lifted her in his arms and moved away from the stairwell.

"I know a safe place, if you want to come with us," he said.

If ? I certainly wasn't going back downstairs, and I wasn't naïvé enough to think the roof would remain quiet for long.

I followed Taren to the roof's edge and peered over. We were only five flights up. It had felt so much farther when I was running for my life and dragging an uncooperative Callie. In the distance, I could just make out two shapes sprinting across the lawn toward the main road. Moonlight glinted off the bedazzled lettering across Lauren's rump—*Juicy* . Nice of them to wait for us.

Taren pointed to the fire escape that only went as high as the floor beneath us. "Do you think you can make that drop?"

"Probably not," I said, hoisting one leg over the ledge.

"No, let me go first," he said. "I need you to lower Callie down to me."

I would have protested—he was vastly overestimating my arm strength—but it wasn't as though there was another choice. Taren leaned his still-unconscious bundle against the low wall and I moved into place, doing my best to keep her upright and support her head and neck.

With the grace of one who was used to this sort of thing, Taren leapt over the ledge and landed softly ten feet below. Then he extended his arms, preparing to catch.

For all her diminutiveness, hoisting Callie proved no easy task. I struggled to keep my balance as I scooted her legs over the edge. Her head flopped forward as I took firm hold of her wrists. I tried to go slowly, easing her little by little and bracing for the moment when her weight shifted to the point that I'd have to let her go. Preparation proved futile, however, and a second later I found myself nearly airborne, releasing Callie just in time to clutch the ledge. With a *thunk* , she landed half in Taren's arms and half over his shoulder.

Knowing it was my turn, I came to sit on the ledge, and paused just long

enough to realize simultaneously that I was scared of jumping, and that this was probably the least dangerous thing I would do all night.

My landing wasn't nearly as cat-like as Taren's, and I crashed into the metal grating with all the grace of a hippopotamus.

We raced down the fire escape, Callie slung over Taren's shoulder like a sack of potatoes. As we passed the fourth floor, I looked in the window only to witness more carnage. I didn't make that mistake again, instead keeping my eyes on the steps in front of me.

The stairs stopped at the second floor, and with a kick, Taren released the ladder and started down. Callie's head bobbed and rolled as he did. The girl would be lucky if she didn't have whiplash.

Once on the ground, I made as if to follow Taren, but noticed he was heading in the opposite direction of the main road, toward a wooded expanse. "Where are you going?"

He didn't turn or slow his pace. "This way," was all he said.

I trailed after him, flushing with anger. "Yes, I can see that. What I *don't* see is *why* you are going that way. Why would you want to make an utterly horrific and terrifying night even more terrifying by taking a walk in what looks like the forest in every horror movie I have ever seen?"

"You ask a lot of questions," he said.

"Yes, thank you for once again stating the obvious," I muttered.

Given any other circumstance, I'd be telling this guy to shove it right about then, but the truth was that there was no way I was striking off on my own that night. I followed along in sullen silence.

As we walked, the adrenaline that had been keeping me going drained from my body. Within fifteen minutes, I felt like a rung-out sponge. The forest had grown denser and therefore creepier, but I was so tired that it barely registered. After stumbling for the third time, I broke the silence.

"I need to rest a minute," I said, stopping to catch my breath.

"No need," Taren replied.

"No need? I'm exhausted, and I'm telling you, I— "

"There's no need, because we're here," he said.

I had been staring at my feet, exhaustion pulling my eyelids down, but now I looked up to see that we had reached a clearing. A gravel access road ended a few yards away.

He set Callie down gently on the soft grass and made his way over to a

large group of bushes. Only they weren't bushes. He tore at the branches, which came loose in large chunks, revealing a car hidden beneath the foliage. Within minutes, it was completely cleared off. He pulled off his shirt to reveal a well muscled chest, slick with sweat and dotted with scars. Tossing the soiled shirt aside, he opened the trunk and retrieved a clean one.

“You have a getaway car stashed outside of a mental institution?” I asked, wondering if anything would make sense that night.

Instead of answering, he went to where Callie lay and scooped her up in his arms.

“Can you get the door?” he said.

I forced myself to my feet and complied. He slid her into the backseat and knelt down to feel for her breath and check her pulse.

I wanted to ask what was wrong with her, but had the distinct feeling I wouldn't get an answer. I slid into the passenger seat in silence.

The drive was slow going until we reached the main road. When we did, Taren turned in the opposite direction of the E.R. I'd been taken to just a day earlier.

"Aren't we going to the hospital?" I asked.

"She's not that kind of sick," he said.

"Well, exactly what kind of sick is she?" Screw him not liking questions, that girl in the backseat needed serious help. "And don't say she hears voices, because I hear one, too, and I'm not all unconscious about it!"

I'd never said those words aloud, and as soon as I did, I wanted to swallow them back up.

"You what?" His voice was made all the more intense by how quiet it had become.

"Well, I *was* in a nuthouse," I said, "I'd have to be a little nutty, right? And don't start in about birthmarks, because I'm telling you, I don't have any."

"You're absolutely certain? Not even..." A blush bloomed in his cheeks, but he barreled on, "Not even in a...private place? Or a place you might not actually be able to see yourself?"

It was my turn to blush, which only served to fan the flames of my anger. "No, I do not have any birthmarks! I have a few freckles, some scars from when I was a kid, and a small mole that may or may not be located in a more private place, but other than that, there are no marks on my body other than this, which I most certainly was not born with."

I pushed my hair aside and tugged at the neckline of my t-shirt to reveal my left shoulder blade and the intricate tattoo I'd had inked there almost a year prior. My mom had taken it surprising well when she'd found out. It was always hard to tell what was going to upset her and what she would laugh off as harmless.

I dropped my hair and turned back, fixing him with my harshest glare. He stared at me, astonished, not watching the road at all. Headlights flashed in our eyes and I grabbed the wheel.

"Look out!" I spun it just in time to avoid a head-on collision.

Taren regained his composure enough to pull to the side of the road, brakes screeching.

"Who did that to you?" He spun me around and yanked at my shirt.

"Fat Tony at All Night Ink," I said.

"And this design—it was Fat Tony's?" His tone was urgent, almost frantic.

"No, it was mine," I said, shaking off his grip. "I've been drawing versions of it for years. What is your problem? My mother didn't freak this much when she saw it, and she's a total head case."

But Taren was lost in thought, clearly trying to process something.

He turned and studied me for a moment, his eyes sparking with recognition. "I knew there was something about you..."

My flesh pebbled and I wanted him to say more. I told myself it was strictly out of curiosity, not the idea that he'd spent time thinking about me.

His cell phone buzzed and skittered across the dash, and I exhaled sharply, letting out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. With a glance at the screen, he answered.

"Did you hear?" He paused for the caller's reply. "There was at least one of them, but I'm guessing more." He paused again, glancing back at Callie. "Yes, she's with me, but she's not well. We're going to need a high-level Retriever. But there's something...else...happening."

He didn't need to look at me for me to know what he was talking about, though I still had no idea why.

"I'll be back in a bit. I need to make a stop first."

He ended the call without a goodbye, then started the car and eased back onto the road.

"You said you drew that symbol? That you've been drawing it for years?"

“Yeah, it started out as a few random doodles— ”

“Like the one you drew the other day?”

I remembered the swirling lines I'd sketched in the rec room. “Right, like that. It started when I was a kid, and then I began connecting them and then it just seemed...finished.”

“So I'm assuming you have some sketchpads, or paintings, or something to prove this?”

“Prove what? It's my design. I didn't copy it from anyone, if that's what you're implying.”

I was doing mental gymnastics, trying to track how we'd gone from sneaking around to running for our lives, and now to an interrogation about my tattoo.

Taren ground his teeth. “That is not what I'm—” He took a breath and continued, his tone calmer. “Look, this is important. Do you have other copies of that symbol?”

“Yeah...in sketchbooks, like you said, on the cover of my algebra book, incorporated in a mural on my bedroom wall...”

Other than my tattoo, the one on my wall was my favorite. Mom had been on a manic high—awake for three days—when I'd come home to find her stripping off the yellowing wallpaper that had decorated my bedroom in our latest apartment.

“You're such a brilliant artist,” she'd said, “it's about time you did a large installation!”

So together we'd worked—me sketching, her filling in the colors—until the following evening. Never one to let school get in the way of something she considered truly educational, Mom had called me in sick that day. When we'd finally finished, we both collapsed into our respective beds and slept for hours. The next day I'd gotten to school by third period; Mom had stayed in bed for two weeks.

“OK, that's good,” Taren said, bringing me back to the present. “They'll want to see those. Where do you live?”

I gave him my address, which he then punched into the GPS. I wanted to question him—why was he so interested in my artwork, and who was “they?”—but something about the intensity in his eyes and the speed of his driving kept me silent. A short while later, we pulled onto my street, Taren cursing when he saw the patrol car in front of my house.

"I was hoping we would beat them here," he said.

The living room was well lit, the drapes pulled back. My mother paced, gesturing frantically. The cops stood calmly in the face of her tirade.

"They're going to be here a while," I said, knowing she wouldn't allow them to leave until she'd exhausted her fury at my disappearance. At least this tirade was legitimate.

"Is there anywhere else you'd have a copy of the design?"

"There's a coffee shop I go to, Buzz. They have a few of my pieces on the wall."

"You've displayed it? In public?" He was incredulous.

"Why shouldn't I?" I said defensively. "I'm telling you, it's my work."

He didn't answer, just started the car and drove off.

This trip only took a minute or two. Buzz was less than a mile away, one of the reasons it was my favorite. The other was that it was open until four in the morning. I'd become quite an insomniac in the past year, and had started sneaking out around midnight, heading to Buzz to sketch. I'd stumble home too wired to sleep and lie in bed until it was time for school.

Taren parked in the alley, and with no other choice, we left Callie in the car while we went inside.

"Em!" Clyde greeted me with a broad smile. His mohawk was blue today, and he'd added a piercing to his eyebrow.

"Hey Clyde, how have you been?" I leaned forward on the counter.

"Can't complain. The real question is, where have you been?"

"Eh," I hedged, "here and there. But I haven't been cheating on you, I swear. Buzz is my one and only coffeehouse."

"I guess I can let it slide then. Here." Clyde hit a button and the cash register popped open. "One of your pieces sold."

"No way," I said as Clyde handed me forty-five dollars. "Which one?"

Clyde pointed to the empty space on the wall behind me. My breath caught. Taren didn't need me to explain.

"Do you know who bought it?" I asked, trying not to let the coincidence unnerve me.

“Didn't get his name, but he came in yesterday. He nearly choked on his bagel when he saw it hanging there. Wanted to know all about you, asked if you had any other pieces here. I showed him the two small ones upstairs, but he wasn't as interested in those. Sorry.”

“That's OK,” I said, my mind reeling.

That painting had hung in the same spot for months, and now two people were interested in it—Taren to the point of obsession—in one week.

“You said he wanted details about Ember. What did you tell him about her?” Taren asked.

Clyde shrugged. “Nothing. Not much, anyway. Said you were a regular but that you hadn't been by in over a week. He got your name, of course; that was on the card next to the painting. He took that with him, too. Did I do something wrong, Em? You did want to sell it, right?”

“Yeah, Clyde, I did. You didn't do anything wrong, don't worry.”

“We've gotta go,” Taren said, taking a firm hold of my arm.

“Hey, is everything OK?” Clyde wasn't the kind of guy to let a girl be even remotely manhandled. He straightened, showing his full height and bulk.

If Taren was intimidated, he didn't show it. He pulled me along without a backwards glance.

“Everything's fine, it's just been a really weird night,” I said over my shoulder, trying to diffuse the situation that Taren wasn't even aware was developing. “I'll see you soon, OK?”

Clyde's response was cut off by the swing of the door. I yanked my arm from Taren's grip.

“You need to start telling me what is going on, like now,” I said. My head buzzed with the effort of trying to put all the pieces of the evening together—pieces that Taren seemed convinced included me.

“I will. Get in,” he said.

“Not until you start talking. And something tells me that this time, you're not going to threaten to leave me behind.” I folded my arms in front of my chest, daring him to call my bluff.

Headlights flashed in our eyes as a car rumbled to life behind us. The windows were tinted, and in the dark of the alley I couldn't make out a shape behind the wheel. I wondered if someone had been sitting in the car when we'd pulled up. The thought made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Slowly, the car backed up and swung wide as if to leave, but instead came to a stop, blocking the only way out.

Taren and I exchanged a look over the roof of the car and simultaneously got in.

“What do they want?” I said.

“I'm beginning to think they want you,” he said quietly.

I knew better than to ask why—that would have to come later—so instead I asked, “How do we get out of here?”

“We're about to find out,” he replied, gunning the engine.

He fastened his seatbelt and I quickly did the same.

Taren threw the car in reverse and hit the gas. It skittered wildly for a second and then came to a screeching stop, the other car dead ahead about a hundred feet away.

“Hang on,” was all the warning I got. With a burst of speed we barreled ahead—straight at the other car.

I knew I was screaming, but the sound of the engine drowned out the noise. The impact was sudden and violent. Despite bracing myself against the dashboard, my neck snapped painfully forward and then slammed back against the headrest. I coughed, choking on the acrid smoke that poured from the beneath the hood. Taren continued to gun the engine, tires squealing, the car in front of us only budging by inches.

A hulking man with glowing red eyes, calmly exited the driver's side and strode toward us. In one motion, he punched through the glass of Taren's window and grabbed him around the neck.

Taren's eyes bulged as he struggled for air, but he stayed focused on moving the other car. I clawed frantically at the man's hands, trying desperately to loosen their hold.

With a jolt, our car broke free of the blockade, then barreled down the alley. Astonishingly, the man held fast, allowing himself to be dragged along with us. His hands no longer around Taren's throat, he clung to the door. Shards of glass had made a bloody mess of his hands—their crimson color an exact match of his terrifying eyes.

Taren held the wheel with one hand, while the other jerked open the glove box, revealing an impressive cache of blades. He grabbed a knife and sliced it across our attacker's hands, severing most of his fingers. Even then he didn't scream, just crashed to the pavement. Through the rear window, I

watched in horror and disbelief as he continued to crawl after us.

I was panting, taking in air in huge gulps. I was beginning to suspect that this was somehow a normal day at the office for Taren, but it wasn't for me. I felt cold, icy fingers wrapping themselves around my spine, my teeth chattering violently.

"You're going into shock," Taren informed me. "Put your head here and elevate your legs."

The aforementioned shock kept embarrassment from getting the best of me, and I did as instructed, resting my head on his thigh. I propped my legs against the door and stared at the ceiling, not really seeing it. Taren drove with one hand, the other rubbing my arms briskly, trying to warm me.

"Hang on, Ember. It's not too far," he said.

I wasn't sure if I should be comforted or scared that he was finally treating me like he did Callie.

The minutes stretched, and eventually I stopped seeing streetlights zip by in a blur. Whatever road we were on was sparsely lit. Taren drove at a more reasonable speed and my shaking began to ease.

We came to a stop and I sat up too quickly, causing my head to swim. We were parked in the driveway of a modern two-storey house jutting out from a hillside.

"Do you need help walking?" Taren asked.

Although I was still struggling for composure, I eyed Callie's limp form and said, "Not as much as she does."

Callie had made it through the crash intact, and I envied her lack of awareness. If I could have, I would have erased the entire night from my memory. I felt changed, soiled by the brutality of all I'd witnessed. Something had finally replaced teenage girls on my list of things most heinous, and I didn't even know what to call it.

I followed Taren as he carried Callie up the stairs that led to the house.

He opened the door, revealing the most exquisite living room I'd ever seen.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"This is where I live," he said, for the first time seeming self-conscious.

Even with the lights off, the room was bathed in an ethereal glow. I looked up and saw two skylights letting in the rays of a full moon. For a long moment, I stared at the giant orb, and as I often did, felt as though I was

falling up, being pulled by its rays—right into the moon itself. I knew I wasn't really, of course, but something about it soothed me, and soon my memories of the night had receded enough that I was breathing deeply.

When I looked away, I found Taren watching me intently, a curious expression on his face. Uncomfortable with his scrutiny, I stepped toward the wall of glass that looked out over the city. The lights of Los Angeles glittered below.

"Wow," I said, taking in the sight, "this is better than the view at Griffith Park. You live here?"

"When I'm not in mental institutions," he replied, a hint of wryness in his voice. "I don't get to enjoy it much anymore."

"You've been in more than one?" I said, surprised.

He nodded. "It's part of the story I have to tell you, although I have no idea where to start."

Taren laid Callie on a sleek designer sofa.

"What about her?" I asked. "Is someone coming to help?"

"Soon," he said. "They're on their way."

I studied him then—his eyes tight with worry, his shoulders finally sagging under the weight of all that had happened. What had been black slime now encrusted his pants, and his shirt was stained with the blood of the red-eyed man. In that moment, empathy trumped my need for answers.

"I'm beat," I said, knowing Taren would never give in to his own exhaustion, but might acquiesce to mine. "And I reek. If you think we're safe here, and if your parents wouldn't mind, would it be all right if I took a shower?"

Taren exhaled, relieved. I couldn't be sure if it was because he wanted to clean up, or because he was eager to delay having to explain the horrors of the evening.

"Yeah," he said, "my parents are out of town. You can use their room."

He led me down a hallway and into a room large enough for a king-sized bed and sitting area. Off of that was a bathroom the size of my bedroom at home.

"You should have everything you need," he said, and shut the door behind him.

Once I spied the luxury tub, I decided to forgo the shower and opted instead for a bath. The jets were strong and the water hurt at first, but soon

they were softening all the parts of my body I'd been clenching for hours. Thick bubbles surrounded me and smelled delicious—Asian pear, maybe. I scrubbed the grime off my body with a fresh loofah and globs of mandarin body wash, delighted for once to smell like a fruit cup. I wasn't sure how long I languished, but it was only when I realized I was nodding off that I forced myself to leave the water. The towels were thick and luxurious, not like the ones I'd grown up with, which felt like they'd been hung on a line even when we used the dryer. I chose a robe from the linen closet and wrapped its plushness around me.

I stepped from the bathroom to the bedroom and sat on the edge of bed. My hand ran along the silky smoothness of the duvet and I lay down just to feel its softness against my cheek. It reminded me of the smoothness of Taren's hand when I'd thought he was kissing me. I sighed. I needed to rest a minute. Just a minute before I acknowledged that my life had completely changed.

I couldn't afford the luxury. Not when Taren thought something was after me. Not when I'd seen that something and it scared the hell out of me. I left the comfort of the bed, determined to get some answers.

The rest of the house was dark, and I hoped Taren hadn't taken advantage of my lengthy bath to turn in for the night. I was startled by a female voice coming from two doorways down.

“How long has she been gone?”

It was Taren's voice that answered. “About two hours.”

I crept forward and looked through the crack in the door. The room was lit with candles. Callie lay motionless on the bed, Taren in a chair beside her. He was in fresh clothing, looking as weary as I felt. An older woman with gray hair stood on the other side of the bed, studying her. A second female stood with her back to me, auburn hair cascading down her back.

“Not good, but not impossible.” The dark-haired woman's tone was all business. “What's her tether?”

“Her cat, Dexter,” Taren said.

There was no more talking. Taren and the redhead stayed where they were, but the older woman knelt beside the bed and closed her eyes. What had Taren said on the phone? Something about needing a Retriever for Callie. *Is that what she's trying to do? 'Retrive' Callie from wherever she is?*

I wondered how it worked; the woman was just kneeling there. The

minutes stretched, and my worry deepened. What if she didn't succeed? Would Callie just stay comatose forever?

Eventually my eyelids drooped, and I slumped down against the wall. I tried digging my fingernails into my palms, determined not to sleep until I knew Callie had come back to herself. When that wasn't enough, I stared at the cream-colored wall and noticed a small chip in the paint. So small, but it felt like I could slip right in...

"Taren?" Callie's voice cut through the silence.

"Hey there," came Taren's reply. "Glad to have you back, Cal."

I breathed a sigh of relief, but then stood, and padded back down the hall. Something told me that Taren wouldn't appreciate being spied on, and I was too exhausted to fight any more that night.

The bed looked even more inviting now, and I slipped under the covers, letting their comfort envelop me, drowning out the need for anything else but sleep.

The light of morning filtered through the curtains and came to rest gently on my eyelids. For a moment, my only awareness was of how safe I felt. Then came memory.

My eyes snapped open. One thing I knew for certain: after the previous evening, I would never really feel safe again. I'd seen things that shouldn't even exist, and as comfortable as I was with things that didn't fit in, this was very different. Something inside me had shifted, and an innocence I never knew I'd possessed was lost to me forever. I shuddered.

"You're awake."

The voice startled me, and I whipped my head to see Taren stretched out on a chair, his feet propped up on an ottoman. His gaze was soft, a feather on my skin, and I clutched the robe to make sure I wasn't exposing myself.

"Have you been there all night?" I said.

"Most of it," he replied, "after I indulged in a shower of my own. And then we had to perform the Retrieval."

"And what is that, exactly?" I didn't let on what I'd witnessed.

"It's what we do when someone gets lost," he replied. He seemed to be searching for words. "Callie was in... a dark place. She couldn't find her way back, so we needed to send someone in after her."

"And did it work? Is Callie OK now?"

"We got her back. It took longer than it should have, but the important thing is that she's back." Taren paused for a moment, then continued. "I know you have a lot of questions..."

“Don't even try to put me off any longer.” My patience for his evasions was no longer thin; it was non-existent.

“I'm not,” he said. “I'll tell you what I can, but I need a favor. You can't tell anyone about your tattoo, aside from the two people I'm going to take you to see later today. Not *anyone*. And you can't draw it. Or even parts of it. Promise me.”

Before I could answer, the door burst open and a stunning girl entered the room. The redhead I'd seen last night. Her skin was creamy perfection. A smattering of freckles only served to make her more appealing. Her mouth was a plump berry, just short of looking petulant.

“I thought I heard voices,” she said brightly, coming to sit on the arm of Taren's chair. “Figured I should say ‘hi’ to the newbie.”

She was the kind of girl that made me involuntarily shrink back, feeling unworthy to exist in the same space. I struggled not to dislike her on sight and ran my fingers through my hair, wondering what condition it was in.

“Ember, this is Kat. She works with me. Right now she's supposed to be watching over Callie so she doesn't wake up alone.” He gave Kat a pointed look.

If Kat was bothered by his scrutiny, she didn't show it. Instead she shrugged and took the chair next to Taren. “After how long she was gone, she'll sleep for at least a few more hours. Besides, watching someone sleep is boring.”

Their children would be supermodels. They had to be dating—they owed it to the gene pool. Maybe that was why Taren always ignored Lauren's advances when most guys would have jumped to respond.

“Well, we can't have you bored,” Taren said dryly. “Fine, you can stay, but you'll have to keep checking on her.”

Kat saluted him and turned to me. “Isn't he insufferable? Typical guy. He's probably been barking orders at you all night and refusing to answer even the simplest of questions.”

Taren's only response was to roll his eyes.

“Well, there was a lot going on,” I said, surprising myself by defending him.

“Well, there's absolutely nothing going on right now,” she said, “so fire away.”

Taren gave me a warning look—clearly Kat wasn't one of the people I

could mention my tattoo around.

"I guess the first thing I want to know, is what that thing in the hospital was. I've been trying to convince myself it was a rabid bear, or someone in a really good costume, but it's just not working," I said.

Taren and Kat exchanged looks.

"It was a demon," Taren said finally. "A Dahrak demon, to be exact. Slow moving and not very intelligent, but if one ever caught you, it would be a very painful death."

"A demon?" I said, my eyebrows climbing. "Like from Hell?"

"Not Hell, exactly, although it would feel that way to us," he said. "It's an alternate reality."

"Well, that makes much more sense." I was Alice, falling farther down the rabbit hole.

"I know it sounds crazy, and if you aren't ready to hear this..."

"No, keep going." Now that I had him giving me answers, I wasn't about to let him stop, no matter how terrifying they might be.

"There's a Gateway that separates our world from theirs. A Gateway that those with certain birthmarks, like you," he said, his eyes flashing with intensity, "are charged with keeping closed."

Why does he want the supermodel to think I have this magical birthmark? I wondered.

"I see," I said, although I was more confused than ever. "And what does my birthmark do, exactly?"

"There isn't just one birthmark," he said. "There are nine. Nine markings that combine to form the symbol that keeps this world safe from demons."

My breath caught in my throat. "And what does this symbol look like?"

The look Taren gave me made my hair stand on end. I knew it must be a trick of the mind that caused my tattoo to suddenly burn as badly as it had when I'd first gotten it. I had a demonic symbol? On my *shoulder*?

"Well, at least tell her *why* you can't answer that one," Kat said, cutting the tense silence. She turned to me. "You're not ready yet. It's too dangerous until you've had training."

Taren's incredulity at my tattoo and my artwork was finally making sense. In a way that still made no sense at all.

"What I want to know," Kat said, "is how old you are."

"Huh?" The mundaneness of the question broke the cycle of my spinning

thoughts. "I'm sixteen. I'll be seventeen in a few months. Why?"

"Because you should be dead by now. Or, at the very least, completely nuts," she said, matter-of-factly.

"Damn, Kat, a little tact?" Taren said.

"Tact is a luxury we can't afford. The truth is," she said, "that if we don't discover a Keeper by the time they're twelve or thirteen, we lose them. Sometimes one will survive until they are fourteen, but that's rare. To find you at sixteen, seemingly sane... Well, I doubt it's ever happened before."

Despite my desire for answers, they were coming too quickly. I struggled to absorb them. "Lose them how?"

Taren continued to look uncomfortable, but Kat barreled on. "To madness, to catatonia—like with Callie, pulled into the demon world, unable to escape..."

"To suicide," Taren finished quietly.

"Oh," was the only reply I could manage.

I thought of that night, seemingly so long ago. The way I'd felt, the Voice urging me on.

"What about the Voice in my head?" I asked. "You said Callie hears one, too. Is it the same one?"

The idea that a demon had access to my deepest thoughts was utterly bone-chilling.

Taren shook his head. "I don't think so. And she hears several voices, not just one. That's another anomaly."

I exhaled with relief, but Taren's expression grew troubled.

"What does your voice tell you to do?" he asked.

I hesitated. I'd been hiding Its presence in my life for so long, it seemed wrong to share it, even with what I'd been told.

"It's all right, you don't have to tell us," Taren said. "We have counselors; you can talk about it with them."

I groaned. More shrinks?

"For now, it's just important that you believe me when I tell you that the voice you're hearing is dangerous, and it will do whatever it takes to deceive you."

Was he right? If my Voice was different, then how could he be so sure? It had facilitated my suicide attempt, true, but It had also told me to trust Taren. And It had never urged me to harm anyone...

My mind reeled. Each answer led to more questions. If Kat was one of the good guys, why couldn't she know about my tattoo? I wanted to ask about the man with the red eyes that had attacked us, but that might have led to a conversation about my artwork at Buzz. Was the work really even mine? I didn't know how much longer I was willing to comply with Taren's request to keep it secret.

He must have sensed my restlessness, because he stood and stretched. I remembered that he'd spent the night in that chair, and the thought comforted me.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm starving," he said.

Desperate as I was for more answers, I couldn't ignore the painful emptiness in my belly. "I could eat."

Kat excused herself to check on Callie while Taren led me to a spacious kitchen filled with stainless steel appliances that looked as though they'd never been used. I took advantage of the moment alone with him.

"Why do you want Kat to think I have some mystical birthmark? And why can't she know about my tattoo?" I said in a hushed tone.

"Because you are in serious danger," he said, his tone equally hushed, but urgent. "I'm trying to protect you. Not from Kat, but from things you don't understand and that are worse than you can imagine. Please, just trust me for a little while longer. When Callie wakes up, I'm taking you both to the Institute, and then I promise you will get the answers you need."

We had a brief standoff before I nodded in acquiescence.

"Thanks, I owe you," he said. "And while I'm racking up debts, I have another request. Callie's state of mind is still very fragile, and she doesn't remember much of last night. She's younger and not as strong as you. It's important we don't talk about any of this in front of her."

I agreed, pleased with the knowledge that he found me strong. Then Kat entered the room and I instantly felt invisible again.

"Look who was up," Kat said, smiling.

Callie yawned. "You woke—"

"Well, the important thing is that you're awake," Kat said quickly, "which means we can leave sooner than we expected and don't have to eat here."

Kat turned a dubious eye to the meal Taren was putting together for us. He'd placed a box of dried cereal and a tin of sugar cookies next to a half-eaten jar of applesauce.

“Not much for cooking?” I asked, the corners of my mouth twitching into a smirk.

“It's not like I've been home in the past few weeks,” he said defensively. “And my folks...travel.”

I wondered whether Taren's parents knew he was some sort of demon fighter, or if they really thought he was a pyro. I added it to my growing list of questions.

He surveyed the spread and sighed. “All right, let's go.”

Kat brightened. “Great! Come on, girls, I'll loan you some clothes.”

She grabbed both Callie and me by the hand and led us down a short flight of stairs. The lower level contrasted sharply with the upper. Where the upstairs décor was sleek, with clean lines and a place for everything, the downstairs bedroom was chaotic and painted in bright colors. The walls were covered in pop art, the shelves adorned with kitsch. Kat went to a large closet and flung open the door to reveal rows and rows of stylish clothes.

So she lived here. It was a mark in the “they're dating” column. But they didn't share a room, which was a mark in the “what the hell is up with them?” column.

She reached all the way into the back and pulled out a bag, tossing it to Callie.

“Here, take what you like. All that stuff is from when I was your age—I could barely squeeze a toe into it now. Lucky for you, I'm terrible at throwing things away.”

She looked me up and down. “I'm kinda guessing you've got an alternative vibe going, right? Nothing too girly, nothing to make you fit in except with all the other people who don't want to fit in?”

I was flustered by the accuracy of her assessment, especially given that I was wearing a bathrobe. “Um, yeah.”

She pulled a t-shirt from its hanger. “Here, my older cousin gave this to me as some kind of joke. You probably know who it is.”

She tossed me the shirt. It bore the logo of an indie trip-hop band I'd seen more than once. A camisole flew my way and I snagged it, grateful. I didn't want to wear the bra I'd discarded last night; it was filthy and reeked of perspiration. Not that I was pleased that my breasts could be kept under control by such a thin sheath of fabric, but it did have its advantages. A pair of jeans sailed my way. I was surprised that they fit even reasonably well,

though they were tight in the waist and loose in the hips, reflecting how much more of an hourglass shape her figure was. I rolled up the bottom hem a good three inches to make up for our difference in height.

“Not bad,” Kat said, appraising Callie and me. Then she eyed my rolled-up hem and shook her head. “Except for that.”

She reached into a drawer and pulled out a pair of scissors, cutting off the excess fabric and fraying the ends. I protested—didn't we have more important things to worry about? But I looked in the mirror and had to admit, if only to myself, that it was an improvement. I used one of the brushes laid out on the dresser to work out the tangles caused by sleeping with damp hair.

Taren was waiting for us upstairs, keys in hand. Instead of leading us to the car we'd all but wrecked the night before, we piled into an SUV parked in the garage.

We rode mostly in silence. Anything I wanted to talk about was off-limits for now. Occasionally I would glance at Callie out of the corner of my eye, noticing her right wrist—or, more to the point, the markings on it. To most people they would seem inconsequential. But I thought of my tattoo, and how if you shrunk the dimensions just enough, the pinkish brown birthmark would overlay it perfectly—a complete match of one section.

Partway through the drive I remembered my mother, and immediately felt guilty for having forgotten her for so long. I knew my disappearance would send her into a spiral. I imagined her insisting on being brought to the police station, and then staying all night to make sure everything was being done to find me and bring me home safely. I pictured her exhausted by her histrionics, but refusing to go home.

Taren indulged my request to call her, but with precautions. We pulled over to stop at a convenience store, where he bought three disposable cell phones, each loaded with only small amounts of money. He ripped open the packaging on one of them and handed it to me.

“Send a text first. Tell her you're fine and are going to call her in three minutes, but she has to make sure she's alone. If your suspicions are right, she's probably surrounded by cops right now, and that's the last thing we need.”

I struggled with texting on the archaic keypad—who wasn't using QWERTY by now?—but eventually pulled it off. I waited the three minutes and dialed, Taren sitting on the curb next to me. I knew he was afraid I'd say

something to lead the police right to us, but doing so was the furthest thing from my mind. I wanted answers more than I wanted safety, and I wasn't so sure that even the LAPD could protect me if I'd been marked for death by some alternate demon universe. The absurdity of that thought was not lost on me even then.

"Baby? Is that you?" My mother's voice was frantic.

"Yeah, Mom, it's me. I'm fine." I answered. "Please don't worry."

"Where are you?" she said. "Why haven't you come home?"

"Because there's something going on right now and I just...can't yet." I thought about the demon I'd seen, thought about its gaping mouth and shuddered. I knew that even if I didn't need answers, going home would only put my mother in danger.

"But you will? Soon?" The pleading in her voice almost broke me.

"Yes, Mom, I promise. Please just trust me." I didn't have to see Taren's face to know he was growing impatient. "I'm really sorry, but I have to go now."

"All right," she said, resigned, "wait, wait—one more question. When you come home, will you bring some tartar sauce? I'll make fish sticks, your favorite."

What the...? It took a moment before I recovered, finally remembering the obscure reference. "No, Mom, I hate fish sticks. Will you make something else?"

"Oh, yes," she said, overjoyed. "Yes, I'll make anything you want. Be safe and come home as soon as you can."

"I will," I promised, not sure I would make good on either.

I flipped the phone shut and handed it to Taren. He tossed it in the trash.

"Hey, there was still money left on that. What if I want to call her again?"

"That's what these are for," he answered, holding up the two extras. "Disposables are hard to trace, but no sense taking chances. Use a new phone for each call."

I was comforted by the extra phones, but less so by the fact that he held onto them, a clear indication that wherever we were going, my communication with the outside world would not be up to me.

"What was that bit about fish sticks?" he asked, climbing back into the SUV.

"Oh, pretty clever of her, actually, though I thought it was ridiculous

when she came up with it. Sometimes Mom gets paranoid, thinks people might be out to get her, out to get me.” I laughed nervously at how close that now hit home. “Anyway, one night she was really freaked out and came up with a code. If I was ever kidnapped or something, she would say something about me liking fish sticks. If I said I wanted fish sticks, that meant I was in danger and needed help, no matter what else I’d said to her that I was fine.”

“So by saying you hate fish sticks...”

“She knows I’m OK and doesn’t need the police. Who says bipolar disorder can’t be useful?”

If anyone in the car was uncomfortable with the admission that my mother was mentally ill, they didn’t let on. Although I guess Callie battled mental problems of her own and was therefore unlikely to throw stones, and if Taren and Kat’s jobs entailed bringing people back from the brink of crazy, they probably weren’t easily shocked.

We had passed through the heart of Hollywood and were making our way toward the Sunset Strip when Taren made a right, heading up the mountain that served as a boundary between the rest of Los Angeles and the dreaded Valley, where aging movie stars who had run out of residual checks went to die. Where club-going poseurs who worked as production assistants lived because they were spending all of their money to lease a BMW Z-4. Where I lived. Even my city didn’t fit in.

This border town, known as Laurel Canyon, was an elite colony nestled between the two worlds. One of the few places in Los Angeles where trees hadn’t been torn down to accommodate housing needs. The roads were narrow, houses perched precariously on hillsides, and deer were not an uncommon sight. As with most places, the higher you went, the more expensive it got. Having seen Taren’s place in the Hollywood Hills, I was unsurprised that we kept winding up and up, until my stomach lurched and it was all I could do to not give in to car sickness.

We came to a stop in front of a gated driveway. A guard stepped out of the small shack and gave Taren a polite wave. The gate slid open and we eased through. The narrow driveway curved its way through a canopy of trees that filtered out all but the softest rays of sunshine, then opened to reveal a sprawling estate. Fruit trees dotted the landscape, as did the occasional marble bench. The beautiful scenery did nothing to calm me, however. Instead, my pulse quickened and bile rose in my throat.

“Thank God we're here,” I said. “I don't usually get motion sickness but I'll be very glad to get out of this car.”

Taren and Kat exchanged glances.

“No, not again...” Callie moaned softly.

“Hold on, Callie. We're almost to the safe place I told you about,” Taren said, easing to a stop.

“What’s bringing this on?” I was concerned for my safety as well as hers. If she was hearing voices, they might be telling her to attack me again.

“It’s being this close to the Gateway. The voices will be louder and more controlling,” Taren answered. “It's also why you feel sick. Aren't you hearing anything?”

“Not a thing.” I was glad for yet another distinction between the Voice in my head and the ones in Callie’s. “So you both feel nauseous, too?”

“No,” Kat said. “Only Marked Ones are connected to the Gateway like that.”

Taren locked eyes with me in the rearview mirror.

We piled out of the car and Taren brought us not to the mansion set atop the gently sloping hill, but to a path that led to a dormitory-style building. My stomach continued to churn, while Callie clutched her temples and muttered nonsensically.

The moment my foot touched the packed earth of the trail, I felt better. Still queasy, but noticeably improved. I looked at Taren, who gave me a comforting smile. With each step, my stomach calmed even more. Callie looked around with wide eyes. I'd never seen her smile before, but now she wore a wide grin.

“They're quiet. I can tell they're still here, but they're not talking anymore.” Her voice was filled with awe. “Is this the place you told me about? The Sanctuary?”

“That’s right,” Taren said, pleased. “This part of the property holds a special protection against the demons. You’re safe here.”

“I'm never leaving,” Callie said reverently.

She was transforming before my eyes. It was like a switch had been flipped. Her eyes were bright with excitement, her skin already losing its gray cast.

As for me, I was just happy to back from the verge of vomiting. Other than that, I didn't feel particularly different.

We reached the front door of the building and stepped inside.

The entryway led to a large common area. It was like the upscale version of the rec room at Windsor. A half dozen comfortable chairs faced a flat screen television. The walls were lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves. I marveled at the diverse collection.

A plump woman in her fifties walked out of an office to greet us.

“Young Mr. Hart, I've been expecting you,” she said.

Taren's last name was Hart? I wasn't sure which struck me as funnier: his last name, or that I'd spent half the night running for my life with a guy whose last name I hadn't even known.

The woman eyed the rest of us. “I knew we had one new student, but I didn't know you would be bringing one as well, Katrina.” Her tone held a hint of reproach.

“I'm sorry, Mae, that's my fault,” Taren said, “This is Callie, whom you know about, and this is Ember. She's here to meet with Annys and Master Dogan. They should be on their way down.”

“I see. Well, the more the merrier,” Mae said. “We certainly have the extra beds. Why don't you wait in my office? I'm sure they'll be wanting privacy. I'll take Callie to her room.”

Kat went with them, offering to show Callie around the rest of the grounds. I followed Taren to Mae's office.

Once seated, I asked, “So these two people who are coming—Annys and Master Dogan—they are the ones I can trust? I can show them the tattoo and they'll explain to me what I have to do with all of this?”

Taren nodded. “Both are members of the Elders' Circle, which Annys leads.”

“Sounds like they're pretty important. All of that just for me?” The thought made me squirm.

“I told you, Ember, you're special. And more powerful than you know. Don't let Annys intimidate you. It'll be easier said than done, but show them you can stand up for yourself. Someone with your talents is going to need to be strong, and it's important you prove that you are.”

My talents?

Before I could ask what he meant, the door opened and in strode an imposing woman with dark blonde hair and eyes like a falcon. Behind her was a man with a closely shaved head. His face was still, a pond filled with

clear water, not even a ripple to mar its surface. I couldn't put an age to him.

After the introductions, Annys took a seat behind the desk. "Taren, you may leave us now, but wait outside. We'll have need of you when we're done with her."

When they were done with me? Taren spared me a regretful glance before doing as he was told. Annys turned her intense gaze to me.

"Show us this marking of yours."

I stiffened at the abrupt command but complied, turning away and revealing my tattooed shoulder.

Master Dogan gasped and I turned back to see shock on his face. Annys masked her emotions, instead saying, "And how did you come to be marked this way?"

"I brought the completed design to a tattoo artist." I knew she wanted more, but her interrogation style put me on the defensive, afraid to say too much.

"I see. And you claim to have come up with the design on your own? You never saw it anywhere? Were never shown a part of it by someone else?"

The arrogance of her tone raised my hackles, and I found anger surpassing my fear. I returned her gaze, hoping mine was as harsh. "I don't claim it; it's the truth."

"And just how do you plan on proving that?" she asked, unfazed.

"I don't. Look, I didn't come here to be called a liar," I said, unable to soften the edge in my tone. "Taren said the two of you would give me some answers. If that symbol is supposed to be some big secret, why don't you tell me how it's possible that I would start drawing it? Or why the nuthouse was attacked by demons? Or how it is that demons actually even exist?"

Annys suffered my brief tirade. When I had finished, she leaned forward on the desk.

"Young woman, you do not know what is at stake here—"

"Annys, if I may." Master Dogan's voice was soothing. Annys's jaw tightened at being interrupted, but she allowed him to continue. "Ember makes a good point. She's been through quite an ordeal in the past twenty-four hours and we are asking her to take a lot on faith. Perhaps if we are a little more forthcoming, she might be inspired to be, as well."

"And what information do you suggest we share, Dogan? Which of our secrets do you feel safe in divulging?" She gave him a warning look.

Master Dogan turned his serene gaze to me. “What has Taren told you about the symbol?”

“That it's broken into nine segments,” I said. “And that those segments are borne on certain people who then either go crazy or help keep the Gateway closed somehow.”

“All true. Would you like to know how the Gateway came to be?”

I nodded. My anger at being doubted by Annys melted at the kindness in Master Dogan's eyes and the soothing tone in his voice.

“Many millennia ago, there existed not only humans, but Daemons,” he said, emphasizing the pronunciation of “DAY-muns.” “While physically indistinguishable from their human counterparts, Daemons possessed abilities far beyond those of man—abilities such as telepathy and telekinesis.”

“Telekinesis?” I said, making no effort to hide my disbelief. “You want me to believe that these ‘Daemons’ could move things with their minds?”

Master Dogan's placid expression remained unchanged as he said, “I assure you that I speak the truth, but only you can decide whether to believe.”

It was such a straightforward statement that I found myself closing my mouth and opening my mind—if only a crack.

“Sadly, the origins of the Daemons has been lost to time,” Master Dogan continued. “Were they simply a much older species than man and therefore more evolved, or were they terrestrial in nature? Or even angels of some sort, sent to guide man? Whatever their genesis, man and Daemon lived in harmony for centuries. In fact, some posit that it was the Daemons who were responsible for the dramatic leaps forward in man's development—as with the Etruscans, or the ancient Mayans.

“As humans advanced, they began to intermarry with the Daemons, creating hybrid offspring. Some Daemons looked down upon this joining of races, considering themselves above humans. They saw mankind as a sort of pet, a dog to be put to work and occasionally rewarded, but not with whom to mate.

“This difference in attitude caused a huge rift within the Daemon society, and eventually resulted in a war. Much like America's Civil War, family members were pitted against each other, and countless lives were lost. Because Daemon warfare consisted of more than just physical weaponry, psychic attacks were common, causing victims to become insane, comatose, or worse—lead them to kill their own people. There came a time when both

races were threatened with extinction.

“The Daemons aligned with the humans knew that something drastic needed to be done, or both societies would be lost forever. They devised a scheme to send the enemy Daemons to a separate yet identical reality. It was a planned attack across continents and required the participation of every available Daemon, even their hybrid offspring. For three days, a battle raged. To the humans it looked as though the Daemons were simply sitting—sometimes moaning or blacking out—but for the Daemons on both sides, it was agonizing. On the third day, the enemy Daemons simply vanished, and in the nine places where the others had gathered were Gateways—access points to the identical world they had sent the Daemons to.

“For a time, it seemed as though the plan had worked—life was harmonious on this side of the Gateway, and it was assumed that our sister world thrived as well. But then came the mental attacks. You see, instead of flourishing, the Daemons on the other side had grown more and more resentful at having been cast out. Resentment turned into rage, and rage to hatred. That hatred twisted the Daemons, both figuratively and literally. They became a terrifying shadow of their former greatness—so much so that it affected every living creature in their world, turning them into what we now call demons. These demons wanted only one thing—to come home.

“From then on, this side of the Gateway needed to be guarded at all times. The remaining Daemons became the first Keepers of the Gate. But the demons were relentless, and it only took one generation to wipe out all of the remaining Daemons—including their hybrid offspring. Thankfully, they’d created a fail-safe—they used their power to imbue the Gateways themselves with life, including a self-preservation instinct. Which is how Marked Ones came into existence—humans that were born linked with the Gate. These first human Keepers were trained by the last remaining Daemons. Once they were gone, the Institute was created to continue guarding the Gateway and protect mankind from being overrun by demon hordes.”

When Master Dogan finished his story, the room was still. I sat in stunned silence while he and Annys studied my reaction. I was torn between belief and incredulity. I knew it was crazy, and yet...

Why couldn't it be true? I probed further.

“But I wasn't born with a Mark,” I said. “Even if I believe you, which I'm not sure I do, what do I have to do with any of this? And why...” I paused

and took a deep breath. “Why did I start drawing that symbol?”

The two exchanged a long look and then Annys faced me, her eyes boring into mine.

“Because,” she said, “we believe you are part Daemon.”

My eyes bulged. It seemed an appropriate response. It took a moment before I was able to speak.

“You think I’m not human? That I’m a demon, or Daemon, or whatever? That’s insane.”

“There was a time when I would have agreed,” Annys said, “but there are too many signs pointing in that direction not to explore the idea. You claim to have channeled the Gateway symbol of your own accord, you’ve been involved in altercations with both a demon and a Red, Callie was compelled to attack you, and you hear a voice. And I would wager the arrival of that voice coincides almost exactly with you getting that tattoo.”

I stiffened. Was it true? A demonic presence had access to my thoughts? The possibility terrified me even more than the idea that I might be crazy. Annys could tell by my reaction that she was right. The two events had been almost simultaneous.

“Now the question is, how do we proceed?” I waited for her answer, as I had none. “What I propose is that you remain here at the Institute. You will be enrolled in classes and treated like any other new student. We can smooth things over with your mother. Given where we generally find our students, the Institute is recognized by the state as alternative schooling for troubled youths, and we have a generous scholarship program. Here you will be safe and receive an excellent education while we determine whether or not you are equipped to aid in our fight to keep the Gateway closed.”

My thoughts raced. I didn’t see that I had a choice. I still wasn’t buying

the idea that I wasn't human, but there was no denying I was in danger. But would I really be safer here?

“What about the other students?” I asked. “Like you said, Callie tried to kill me. What if the voices tell her—or even a group of others—to finish the job?”

The look Annys gave me was meant to be reassuring, but seemed incongruous on her harsh features.

“Most of your studies will take place within the Sanctuary, where demons cannot infiltrate. You will be perfectly safe.”

“And my mother?” I said. “If she knows where I am, won't she be in danger, too?”

“That has already been taken care of. Taren dispatched a security detail to her last night.”

I nodded, grateful for his foresight but annoyed he hadn't told me. How much of this had he known all along?

“Aside from the rules that all new students must follow, you will need to be absolutely vigilant about two additional ones. You must reveal to no one that you know the entire symbol until such time as you are taught it, and you must never, under any circumstances, show anyone your tattoo. Dogan, Taren, and myself will be the only ones who know of your possible lineage. Even the slightest violation of either of these rules will mean your immediate expulsion. Should others ask, you will tell them your birthmark looks like this.” She sketched briefly and passed the paper across the desk. It was the center design of my tattoo. “It is not unusual for Keepers to have their marking on, say, an inner thigh, and not show it to others.”

Again I nodded, my thoughts moving faster than my mouth.

“Good, it's settled, then. Mae will show you to a room. Send Taren in on your way out.”

I almost protested the dismissal—I still had so many questions—but I wasn't sure how much more I could process. I left without a word.

Taren sat in the common room chatting with Mae. His face took on a relieved expression at the sight of me.

“Sorry to interrupt,” I said, trying not to appear as shellshocked as I was. “They want to see you now, Taren. And Mae, I guess I'll be needing a room.”

Mae balked. “A room or a bed? New students— ”

“She'll be needing her own room,” Taren said hastily. “She's as old as

most third years.”

Mae looked perplexed, but said, “All right, then. I've got something on the third floor.”

“I'll find you when I'm done,” Taren said before slipping into the office.

I followed Mae down the hall. We passed a doorway and I peered in to see a small room with two neatly-made bunk beds and a desk. So it was usually four to a room for new students? I was grateful I was being afforded my own. Each doorway held a similar sight: the color of bedding, the style of the desk—all the same except for some personal touches: a poster on the wall, an extra blanket.

Mae led me up the stairs, past the second floor, and up to the third. Partway down the hall she opened a polished wooden door to reveal a small but nicely furnished bedroom. It held a twin-sized bed, a nightstand, a desk, and a tall wardrobe. As tiny as it was, it didn't feel cramped because of the window that overlooked the grounds. I took in the bright green grass and majestic trees that lined the landscape. The main house—the one I'd thought I'd be going to when I'd first arrived—stood farthest up the hill, its marble gleaming in the sun. *Is that where the Gateway...*? I swallowed hard.

“The bathroom is just down the hall on the right,” Mae said.

I pulled my eyes away from the view, a different panic now rising in my throat. I had to share a bathroom with strangers? A whole floor of them? Then an even more frightening thought occurred to me.

“The bathroom—is it...unisex?” Didn't they sometimes do that at colleges?

Mae laughed. “Oh, no, hon. Don't worry. There are no boys on this floor. They have the second floor, and there is no visiting between the two. The first floor is co-ed, but the living room and kitchen divide the facilities.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd never shared a bathroom with a boy, and I wasn't ready to start. Not by a long shot.

As the tour continued, Mae gave me what I assumed was helpful information about life at the Institute, but I wasn't listening. Instead I was wondering, *What's a Red?* Annys had used the term in reference to the attacks aimed at me. I had to assume it was the man with the red eyes. Was he a demon? And did that mean he had special Daemon powers? He'd been scary strong, but he hadn't “psychically attacked” me or anything. And how were they going to determine if I was part Daemon? Was I signing up for

weird biological tests?

We passed a window and movement caught my eye. It was Taren, his expression grim as he stormed off in the direction of the woods that bordered the property. I felt a mix of concern and disappointment. He'd promised to find me. I wondered what had upset him so much.

"Ember?" Mae was looking at me expectantly.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said that I need to get downstairs to supervise dinner prep. Do you have any more questions before I go?"

"No thanks. I'm good." It wasn't the truth, but it was the only polite thing to say.

When Mae left, I made my way back downstairs, planning to raid the book collection. I noticed Mae's office door was open, no trace of Annys or Master Dogan. I felt very alone. How long would it be before I could talk to my mother again? As difficult as she could be, at that moment I longed to hear her voice.

I heard laughter and turned to see Kat entering through a side door, followed by Callie.

"Everything all squared away?" Kat asked me.

"I think so. I've got a room, at least. And I'll be starting classes."

"Me, too," Callie said. "Isn't it cool to be with people just like us? I don't feel like such a weirdo anymore."

If anything, I felt like even more of a weirdo, but I returned her smile.

"Where's Taren?" Kat said, looking around.

"Gone," I said, trying to keep the disappointment from my voice. "He said he was going to come get me when he was done talking with Annys and Master Dogan, but I just saw him taking off into the woods."

Kat's eyes tightened at the corners. "He's been doing that lately when he needs to think."

Think about what? I wondered.

I didn't press the issue. "Where is everyone else? You don't have classes on Sunday, do you?"

"No classes, but there is a tournament today. I was about to take Callie over. Want to come?"

Part of me wanted to be alone with my thoughts, but another part warned me against it.

“Sure,” I said.

Kat led us down a path that ended at a small field ringed with bleachers, the benches filled with teenagers. We climbed four rows to the top and took our seats. On the field, two young men were sparring with swords.

Callie watched with rapt attention, but I was dubious. “A thousand years of demon fighting and you people are still using swords?”

Kat shook her head. “Not usually—too conspicuous for an every-day weapon. But every Guardian learns swordplay. It teaches proper balance, timing, hand-eye coordination. It's the foundation for all of our other training.”

“Do you hold tournaments like this often?” I said.

“Once a month. The competition inspires diligence with training. It's not just sword fighting, though. Anyone can enter with their weapon of choice. The mixed battles are the most fun to watch—like a short sword against a halberd.”

A halberd? Had I enrolled in the Renaissance Faire? I feigned interest, but began sizing up the other onlookers. Most were within a few years of me in either direction. For all intents and purposes, they looked like normal teenagers, albeit with a few more piercings. Had all of them been in mental institutions when their mark had been discovered? Would any of them try to hurt me if they knew my secret? I had a feeling the knives weren't plastic at the Institute.

The crowd erupted in applause. I looked up to see one of the boys, a tall blond, standing over the other, his blade at the prone boy's throat. The blond withdrew his blade and helped his rival to his feet. The victor waved to the crowd and both exited the field. Two new competitors entered the field; this time it was girl against boy. The boy carried a dagger; the girl held no weapon at all.

Callie made the same observation out loud, to which Kat replied, “She is the weapon.”

It didn't take long to see that she was right. For every thrust the boy made, the girl danced aside and landed a blow of her own.

“Not that she seems to be in much danger,” I said, “but what happens if he strikes her? Wouldn't she get hurt?”

“Just bruised. With a few exceptions, we train and compete with practice blades.”

Though intrigued by the current match, I found myself looking off into the woods, in the direction Taren had gone. When would I see him again? He didn't live on the property, and it didn't seem like I would be allowed to leave any time soon. Was he done with me now that he'd turned me over to the Institute? His job was over. He would probably be off again soon, sent to find other Marked ones. I felt a sense of loss at that, and told myself it was because he was the only one I could really talk to, and not at all because my heart beat faster when he was around.

A flurry of movement brought my attention back to the field. The girl was in mid-leap. She extended her leg into an impressive kick, which landed squarely in the center of her opponent's chest. I winced as he stumbled backward, landing hard on his backside.

Kat grinned. "That's gotta hurt."

The boy scrambled to his feet, but not before the girl knocked the dagger from his hand.

"His blade might be practice, but those kicks aren't," I said. It was hard not to be impressed.

At that point, the battle was pretty much over. A few more punches, and the boy surrendered. He smiled good-naturedly as he shook her hand, but gingerly rubbed his jaw as they walked off the field.

A horn sounded and everyone stood to leave.

"That's it?" I asked. "Do they win anything?"

Kat shrugged. "Bragging rights. They only award prizes once a year. That tournament is much more formal."

We made our way through the crowd to the bottom of the bleachers.

"I've got a shift at the Gateway in fifteen minutes," Kat said. "Will you two be all right finding your way back to the dorm?"

"Yeah, sure, we're fine," Callie answered.

Who was this confident girl? It was as if she'd evolved into a different person over the past two hours. I was glad for her, but confused as to why I wasn't being affected in the same way.

The tall boy who had won the sword fight approached us. He had blue eyes and a dimple in his left cheek. "Hey, Kat. What did you think of my moves out there?"

"Pretty good, Tom. Congrats on the win." She leaned in close to his ear. "You still can't beat me, though." She pulled back with a wink.

“We'll see about that,” he said, smirking. “Who are your new friends?”

“This is Callie, and that's Ember. Keepers in training, fresh off the boat.”

“Two at once? Impressive. Maybe we're finally starting to turn our numbers around.” Tom shook each of our hands. “Welcome. We're happy you're here.”

Kat excused herself and started up the hill toward the mansion. I'd been right—the Gateway was up there. A Gateway that led to a world overrun by demons. Housed in a mansion overlooking Los Angeles.

Kinda makes sense .

Tom joined us on the walk back to the dorm.

“Are you two all settled in?” he asked.

I wasn't sure how to answer. Could I tell him that all I had were the clothes on my back because we'd left Windsor in such a hurry? I wasn't supposed to mention the demon or even the attack that had forced us to flee.

It was Callie who answered. “Yeah, although I haven't met my roommates yet. I hope they like me.”

I let the newly-chatty Callie do most of the talking, preferring to remain silent for fear of revealing something I shouldn't. When we reached the dormitory, Tom excused himself to clean up.

The living room was now bustling with teenagers. Some sat watching a crap reality show on television, some were reading, and others just passed through, talking with friends.

“I'm going to go see if anyone is in my room,” Callie said. “I'll save you a seat at dinner, OK?”

I nodded. “Sure, sounds good.”

She bounded down the hall as I looked around, feeling awkward and alone. I wasn't the type to just start introducing myself to strangers. I made my way down the hall and trudged up the stairs. Female voices drifted my way, but I couldn't make myself stick my head into one of their doorways. I opened the door to my room and was relieved when it clicked shut behind me.

At least if I was actually alone it wasn't odd that I felt so lonely. I leaned against the door and studied the room, then went to the wardrobe. On the inside of one door was a mirror, and the other held hooks, a bathrobe hanging from one. I glanced down to see a duffel bag, recognizing it as the one I'd had at Windsor. I unzipped it to find the clothes and toiletries my mother had

packed for my stay there. Someone must have picked it up for me. They certainly moved fast around here. It only took a few minutes to organize my scant belongings, but I was grateful for them.

I sat on the bed, contemplating a nap, but was too restless. Instead I went to the desk, opening the drawers to reveal notepads and pens. I took out one of each, meaning to write, but I hesitated.

The door to my room didn't lock. Was it safe for me to journal my innermost thoughts? I didn't want to think anyone would read them, but how could I be sure? While I contemplated, I doodled, and when I looked down, was horrified to see I'd been drawing parts of the symbol. I had to learn not to do that. I'd been sketching it for so long that it had become just something I did naturally while I thought. I crumpled up the paper, then thought better and ripped it into several pieces. I couldn't take chances on someone going through my trash and wondering how I knew those symbols. My level of paranoia was entering Mom territory.

Afraid to do much of anything else, I settled for staring out the window at people milling about on the grass. I knew that I was supposed to feel like I belonged here, but how could I? Annys and Master Dogan weren't even sure what I was. In an institute filled with freaks, I was too abnormal to truly be one of them. Here I was, still having to lie in order to fit in.

I glanced at the clock. More time had passed than I'd realized. I pulled a lightweight jacket from the wardrobe and made my way downstairs for dinner, avoiding eye contact with anyone until I saw Callie in line. She motioned for me to join her.

“Ember, meet two of my roommates. This is Crystle and Bridget.”

Crystle was blonde, her curves and beauty reminiscent of Anna Nicole Smith, while Bridget had the look of an athlete, her muscles toned, her brown hair cropped short.

“Hey, nice to meet you,” I said, relieved to have two more familiar faces.

“What room did they put you in?” Bridget asked as she scooped steamed vegetables onto her plate.

I took the serving spoon when she was done and helped myself. “Thirty-six.”

“They put you on the third floor?” Her eyebrows knitted in confusion.

“Um, yeah. They said it was because I'm almost seventeen. I got found late.”

“Really late,” Bridget said with surprise. “How have you kept it together? When they found me at fourteen, I was practically feral.”

I struggled for an adequate answer and failed. “Just lucky, I guess.”

Crystle's eyes narrowed. “I'm sixteen and I still have to share a room.”

This conversation was filled with land mines. Maybe I should have skipped dinner.

“That's because you haven't tested past your first year,” Bridget said with a laugh.

“Well, neither has she,” Crystle protested.

“Oh, don't be salty. It's not her fault she got her own room. Who knows why the Elders do what they do?”

Bridget was fast becoming my new favorite person.

“I can't argue with that,” Crystle said as we made our way over to the beverages. “They seem to be getting weirder all the time.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

This sounded like information I should have. I followed the girls to an empty table and we took our seats.

“They keep holding secret meetings,” Bridget said. “I mean, what goes on at their meetings is always a secret, but now they're actually meeting in secret—like late at night.”

I was intrigued. “What do you think that's about?”

“No idea,” Crystle said around a forkful of mashed potatoes, “but Michael has been called to stand guard outside the council room doors. He claims he hasn't eavesdropped, which is totally annoying.”

“Who's Michael?” Callie wanted to know. I was more intrigued by the clandestine gatherings.

It was Bridget who answered. “Crystle's boyfriend. He's almost nineteen and a Guardian. His arms are like tree trunks.”

Crystle beamed. “That's my man.” Her expression turned sour. “When I get to see him, that is... That's another thing they're doing. They're sending out extra patrols to hunt for Reds, and they have so many Guardians up at the Gate lately, you'd think they were expecting a demon horde to come crashing through.”

“Why wouldn't they be?” I said, thinking back to the Dahrak demon. The thought of just one made me shudder; I couldn't imagine an army of them.

Crystle laughed. “You *are* new. There hasn't been a breach at any of the

Gates since they were first formed.”

I choked on my salad. When I'd recovered, I said, “So...you mean that if there were a demon running around right now, it would be a couple thousand years old?”

I looked to Callie, but there was no hint of recognition in her eyes. Taren was right; she didn't remember seeing one.

“No, I mean that there are no demons on this side of the Gateway—there never have been. When the Gate was created, the bad Daemons disappeared, sucked into the alternate world,” Crystle said, echoing what Master Dogan had told me. “They didn’t become demons until after that.”

“Right,” Bridget added. “So don’t look so freaked out—you’re perfectly safe.” She gave me a reassuring smile as she reached for her soda.

My spine tingled and I felt lightheaded. They didn't know. How could they not know? And why?

“What about Reds?” I asked, doing my best to sound calm even while my stomach twisted.

“How do you know about Reds?” Crystle asked.

“Just a term I’ve heard,” I said, feigning nonchalance. “They look human, right? With red eyes?”

“That's what they say,” Crystle shrugged. “I've never seen one, thank God. I'm pretty sure most of the stories about them are exaggerated, though.”

“But what are they, exactly?” I toyed with my food, my appetite having disappeared.

“Marked Ones that chose the wrong side,” Bridget answered. “You'll learn all about them in class. Some were born with the mark and just happen to also be bad people, but others weren't found in time. Instead of going crazy, the voices convinced them to be emissaries. In exchange, Reds get certain powers, like strength and speed. Speaking of which, how were *you* able to go this long and not go nuts or become a Red?”

I hadn't wanted the conversation to come back to me. I struggled to come up with an explanation for something that was still a mystery. I wasn't used to thinking of myself as fortunate in the sanity department. Had the Voice been trying to turn me evil? But It was the one that had convinced me to take the pills. What good would I be to It dead? I was missing an important piece to this puzzle.

While my head spun, something caught my attention out of the corner of

my eye. It was Taren, leaning against the wall, arms crossed, looking at me.

I stood. "Excuse me. There's someone I need to talk to."

All three girls followed my eyes.

"Oh, yum," Crystle said. "Lucky you. It was Taren who brought you in?"

"He brought both of us," Callie said, her voice filled with affection. "He's so nice."

"Yeah, nice," Crystle said with a sly smile. "Nice eyes, nice butt..."

"Oh, stop already. You're a taken woman," Bridget said, rolling her eyes.

"Taken, but not blind. Taren is a total—"

Whatever Crystle thought Taren was, I didn't hear. I was already halfway to where he was standing. He smiled at my approach, but I could see a wariness in his eyes.

"Hey," I said. "Not hungry?"

He shook his head. "No, but I didn't mean to interrupt your meal."

"It's a good thing you did. They were starting to ask questions I don't have answers to." It was hard to keep the edge from my voice.

He sighed. "I was afraid of that. You want to go for a walk?"

The setting sun streaked the sky with pink and orange. It was my favorite kind of Los Angeles evening—just cool enough to need my jacket, but mild enough to enjoy being outside. I would have considered it romantic, were it not for the fact that I still wasn't sure whether Taren and Kat were dating, or if I was one hundred percent human.

"So I hear that there aren't any demons on this side of the Gateway," I said once we were out of earshot.

A look of alarm took over Taren's face. "You didn't tell them, did you? What you saw at the mental hospital?"

"I can keep a secret," I said, annoyed. "But aside from telling me not to say that I saw a demon, it might have been helpful if you'd told they aren't supposed to *be* on this side of the Gateway."

"I was trying not to bombard you," Taren said, "and I didn't think it would come up so soon. How did it, anyway?"

"Crystle and Bridget were talking about how things have gotten weird

lately. Secret meetings, extra Keepers and Guardians at the Gateway...”

Taren gave me a sideways glance. “You got into all of that in the first ten minutes of dinner?”

“Never underestimate the ability of teenage girls to disseminate information,” I said. “I also hear Crystle's boyfriend has arms like tree trunks.”

He broke into a wry smile. “Well, that part is true, at least.”

We reached a stone bench and Taren motioned for me to sit. He joined me, and I became acutely aware of our proximity.

“And the rest of it? The meetings, the extra people—that isn't true?”

“I can't talk about that,” he said, pressing his mouth into a firm line. “I've been forbidden to.”

“You can't be serious,” I said. “After everything that's gone on in the past twenty-four hours, you still don't trust me? I've done everything you've asked of me, and you promised me answers. Annys and Dogan were a veritable font of bizarre information—like I might be a space alien—but nothing they told me made me less confused. And you promised to come find me, but instead you bailed to go on a hike and I was left alone to try and not completely flip out.”

I was rambling and my voice was an octave too high but I couldn't help myself. I felt my eyes begin to water and I willed myself not to cry, not in front of Taren. He thought I was strong. What would he think if I started bawling like a baby?

Taren turned to me, and when he spoke his voice was as tender as when he'd been trying to bring Callie back from the brink. “Ember, I'm sorry. Everything you said is true. You've been asked to carry an incredible burden. It's not that I don't want to tell you—”

“Then tell me! Tell me something, at least. Why don't people here know there are demons running around? Shouldn't you be preparing them to—” My eyes widened in recognition. “They do know, don't they? The secret meetings, the increase in patrols, the extra Guardians at the Gate. The Elders know, and the Guardians know. But the Keepers don't—at least, not the ones in training.”

Taren was silent, but his expression told me I was right.

“So the extra patrols are to hunt them down and the extra Guardians at the Gateway...” My heart pounded in my chest. “There's been a breach, and the

demons have gotten through.”

Taren shook his head in disbelief. “Anyone ever tell you you're too smart for your own good?”

“Yeah,” I said when I could speak, “but this is the first time I've agreed.”

I had spent most of my life longing for a different one—any one—but the one I had. And now it was different. So different and so frightening that I longed for my old life. Even if I'd been forced to spend a month at Windsor before I'd been let out, I'd gladly have gone back to the uncertainty of my mother's moods and my outsider freak status at school.

So what if I had a Voice in my head? In my old life, it was either my guardian angel or a figment of my imagination. In this reality, it was a demonic entity. One that wanted me dead. One that could come for my mind if I left this small patch of the world, and apparently could come after me physically not only via possessed humans, but maybe even in the flesh.

“Are you all right?” Taren's voice brought me back to the present.

A bitter laugh escaped my lips.

“No, I am definitely not all right,” I said. “I am so far from all right it would take the light from all right a thousand years to reach me.”

“Would it help if I told you you're taking all of this really well?”

Easy for him to say—he wasn't privy to my racing thoughts. I wanted to run screaming from this place, but where would I go? I sat very still and focused my attention on a smooth black pebble on the ground.

“Where are you?” Taren's voice came from far away.

I broke my gaze and looked at him. “What do you mean? I'm right here.”

“You were staring at the ground and you got calmer. Your breathing got deeper and your shoulders relaxed. Were you meditating?”

“Meditating? No, I was just...staring. Trying to make sense of all of this.” I wasn't going to get sidetracked. “Why don't the Keepers know what's happened? Or is it just the students who don't know? And don't tell me you can't say, because I swear I'll start telling everyone in that dorm what I've seen. Annys neglected to cover that part in her threat of expulsion.”

Taren considered for a long moment and then exhaled, his shoulders sagging.

“The Keepers know,” he said. “It's the students who don't, not yet. We're hoping to contain the situation so that when we tell them, the danger will have passed. They aren't skilled enough to help and it would only frighten

them. It's important they stay focused on their studies, just as it's important for you to try to forget about everything else and throw yourself into learning to become a Keeper.”

“So you think it's true? That I'm a space alien?”

“Being Daemon doesn't mean you're an alien,” he said quietly, and for a moment, he was the one who seemed far away. “That's just one theory based on speculation. But yes, I do think you are part Daemon. It's the only thing that makes sense.”

“And that doesn't freak you out?” I searched his face for a hint of revulsion, and was relieved to find none.

“We're all freaks in our own way,” he said softly.

“Oh yeah? What's so freaky about you?” I asked, then flushed at the unintentional suggestiveness of my question. “I mean...”

He grinned. “Well, I like you. If you're to be believed, that automatically qualifies, right?”

My stomach did a somersault and a smile spread on my face. “Yes, liking me qualifies. Though if you claimed to understand me, I might suggest you check yourself back into Windsor.”

“Well, then I guess it's a good thing you're still so much of an enigma.”

His words made me feel different, but in a good way—not like a mutant, but like a mystery he wanted to solve layer by layer.

I was locked in place by his gaze and felt myself being drawn forward, closer to him. He put his hand on my cheek, tilting forward so that our foreheads met. His touch sent a current throughout my body and my breath caught. He closed his eyes and exhaled, the warmth of his breath passing through my parted lips.

And then he was standing, turned away from me. It took a moment to get over my shock. He hadn't just been comforting me for feeling like a freak, he had been about to kiss me—I was sure of it. What made him change his mind?

“I'll take you back now,” he said finally. “You should get to know the other students.”

Why wouldn't he face me? Was I that repulsive? Or was it Kat? I still didn't know if they were dating. In any case, the awkward silence had gone on too long.

“Right, get to know the other students,” I said, trying to keep the

bitterness from my voice. “As long as I don't tell them the truth about anything.”

I started down the path back to the dorm, heedless as to whether Taren was following. But he was, the crunch of his boots just steps behind.

“Ember, I'm sorry...” he called after me.

I turned. “Sorry for what?” I could think of a few things, but I was curious how he would answer.

“That I can't—” He looked away and then back. “That I didn't tell you about the breach. I was following orders.”

That wasn't what he had been about to say. But the moment had passed, I could tell by the set of his jaw.

“How was the Gateway opened?” I asked, seizing the opportunity. “Is it closed now? And why now, after all of this time?”

A look crossed his face and he was about to say he couldn't tell me, but instead he said, “Demons trying to break through isn't new, and there have been some close calls over the centuries, but we've always managed to stop them before they succeeded. This time we weren't so lucky.”

“So the Gateway—it's open? Or broken, or something?”

We were alone, but Taren glanced around before replying. “It's closed again. The Keepers are able to channel the part of the symbol they are marked with. They form a link with each other, and that link reinforces the strength of the seal that holds the demons in their prison. About six weeks ago, the demons were able to break the link. Only a handful got out before the link was reformed, but that's why you saw the Dahrak demon, and why there are extra patrols.”

“So it's closed again? Other than the few that got out, there's no more danger?”

I was relieved. For once, something wasn't as bad as I thought.

“It's closed,” he said, his face grim, “but it's not locked.”

I lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling of my new bedroom. The mattress was firmer than I liked. I giggled at the absurdity of that. The Gateway that kept a pissed off army of demons in check was “unlocked,” and I had complaints about my mattress. At least this new danger superseded my fear that I was something other than human. Which had, incidentally, supplanted my long-standing greatest fear—that deep down I was as crazy as my mother and would end up living like her. Would I, too, have a child just so I’d have someone who couldn’t leave me no matter how messed up I got?

When I’d asked Taren what the plan was to lock the Gate, he’d said they were “working on it.” *Well, of course*, I thought, clamping my hand over my mouth to stop the peals of hysterical laughter threatening to burst forth. *What else would you do but work on it?*

After his admission about the current state of the Gateway, Taren had clammed up, even when I pressed him. He finished walking me the short distance back to the dormitory and left, without a mention of when I would see him again. Inside, the atmosphere was lively, with more than a dozen students in the living area, but I hastened up the stairs to my room. At least I was used to the loner reputation I was sure to be garnering.

I decided to take a shower, knowing I’d want the extra minutes of sleep the next morning. As I changed into my bathrobe, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and my breath caught. My tattoo—the real reason I’d been given my own room. How could I keep my tattoo secret if I were sharing a room with three other girls? Even with my own room, I’d need to

be vigilant about what I wore—even to bed. It would be just my luck to use the bathroom in the middle of the night at the same time someone else did.

I slunk into the shower stall, only disrobing once I'd shut the frosted door behind me. I must have come off as a complete prude to the other girls about to shower, but it was the only way.

The iciness of the water was shocking, and I pressed myself against the tile to avoid the spray. It warmed quickly, and as I worked the shampoo through my hair, my thoughts drifted to Taren. Why didn't he kiss me? I hadn't realized how much I wanted him to until he'd almost done it. Now it was all I could think about.

It wasn't like I'd never been kissed before—I'd done more, in fact—it was just that Taren seemed different. My first boyfriend, Corey, had been when I was fourteen. We would hang out for hours, drinking espresso after espresso and talking about music and art. He played guitar, and once during an open mic night, he'd sung a love song right to me.

And then one night my mom had come home in the middle of an episode. She'd accused Corey of trying to poison her when he'd offered to get her a soda. She'd railed at him for ten minutes until I had shoved him out the door, his eyes as big as saucers. The next day at school I'd found a note in my locker saying things had gotten too serious with us and he thought we should break up. I'd tried to talk to him, to tell him that we didn't have to hang out at my place ever again, but he had just shaken his head and told me it wasn't about my mother, he just needed some space. Three weeks later, he'd had enough space and was dating someone else.

And then there was Matt, blue-eyed and on the football team. Our relationship had consisted of us making out at parties when he was drunk. That was back when I still went to parties. He was always so sweet when it was just the two of us, but at school he had ignored me completely. Once, I'd asked if he was ever going to hang out with me when he was sober, and he just looked at me, confounded, and said, "Why?"

I finished my shower and opened the door just enough to stick my arm out and fish around for my towel. I pulled it inside with me and dried off before tugging on my robe and exiting the stall.

Which was how I found myself stretched out on my new bed counting ceiling tiles and contemplating Taren, demons, Daemons, and Gateways. And the Voice. What was the deal with the Voice? It had encouraged me to kill

myself. But It had also told me to trust Taren. Why would a demon want me to trust the one person who could introduce me to a group of people that fought demons? People who had built an institute on the one place I could go and be free from the Voice. I wondered at that. Did I want to be free from it? I wasn't convinced It was demonic. If I heard It here, while on consecrated ground, wouldn't that prove It wasn't? That maybe It was my friend? I mentally reached out, willing the Voice to come to me.

Please, prove to me you're not evil.

But there was nothing.

I woke up grainy-eyed and disoriented. At some point during the night I had crawled under the covers. The robe was bunched up around my waist, evidence of my tossing and turning. And yet, as I rolled over to quiet the alarm clock, I was aware that I actually felt rested in a way I had forgotten was possible. The vague sense of foreboding that usually greeted me upon waking was absent, as well. I was nervous, yes, about my first day of classes, needing to keep track of who knew what about me, and a host of other reasons, but there was an odd sense of calm. I wondered if the consecrated ground was responsible.

My room was dark, the sun not yet risen. So this is what five in the morning looked like. I had balked when I'd seen the daily schedule posted on the back of my door: morning meditation at five fifteen, breakfast at six, class at seven.

I pulled on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, then ran a brush through my hair. I studied myself in the mirror. How often had I done that, wondering who I was? Now I was wondering *what* I was.

I exited my room and padded down the hall, a handful of sleepy-eyed girls doing the same. I was glad I wasn't the only one who thought it much too early for conversation. A couple of them smiled, but continued walking in silence. Once downstairs, the group was a mix of boys and girls, some more awake than others. A handful of hushed conversations filled the air.

I wasn't sure where the meditation hall was, but everyone seemed to be going in the same direction, so I allowed myself to be swept along by the

growing tide of people.

We exited the dormitory and walked a short distance to a large yurt. Once inside, I saw Callie sitting cross-legged next to Bridget and Crystle. The meditation cushions were placed in several rows, forming a semi-circle. Sitting completely still at the head of the room was Master Dogan, his gaze unfocused and soft. I chose an empty seat not far from where Tom was sitting. So the Guardians in training meditated? Interesting. I supposed that meant that Taren did, too. I stopped myself from looking for him. This hall was filled with students; he was probably fast asleep in his house in the hills.

Instead, I looked around at the décor, taking in the iconography from multiple religions. A statute of the Virgin Mary had been placed beside Kwan Yin; a Weeping Buddha shared altar space with an alabaster Jesus and a dancing Shiva. In my struggle to make peace with my life, I had studied several faiths, never finding the answers I sought. I did, however, appreciate the art that came out of others' devotion.

"All right, everyone," Master Dogan said a moment later. "Close your eyes and become aware of your breath as it moves in and out of your body."

I did as he instructed. Even with my eyes closed, I could sense the room growing still. The only sound was that of others inhaling and exhaling. My nose itched. I tried to ignore it, but it only got worse. I lifted the lid of one eye. Master Dogan's eyes were closed, along with everyone else's. I quickly scratched my nose and went back to stillness. But then my leg was falling asleep. When the tingling became unbearable, I wiggled my toes. When that didn't help, I flexed my ankle just slightly, hoping no one would notice. But it was no use; my leg was on fire—I had to move it. If I just crossed my legs the other way... I did it as discreetly as possible. The relief was overwhelming as blood flowed back into my left calf and foot. OK, now I could concentrate. *My breath—just focus on my breath.* Was I supposed to be slowing it down? What was the purpose of meditating, anyway? Maybe it helped with the link that Taren said the Keepers formed. But why did Guardians need to do it? You can't fight when you're sitting still.

Why was I so bad at this? I opened my eyes, exasperated. Master Dogan was looking right at me. I lowered my eyes in shame. Some Daemon I was. Shouldn't that have made me better at this than the others instead of totally inept?

With my head lowered and my hair falling in front of my eyes, it would

have been impossible for him to see that my eyes were still open. I stared at a spot on the carpet where a tuft had been pulled loose, leaving a tiny hole. I became completely absorbed in it, noting its irregular shape, the colors of the loose threads.

A chime sounded and there was movement among the other students. I looked up and saw that the clock read ten of six. I'd zoned out for thirty minutes. I was a horrible meditator and had cheated my way through my first session. *Guess I'll put that in the column of me not being a Daemon .*

I stood and stretched the stiffness out of my legs. I felt eyes upon me and noticed that Master Dogan was studying me intently. He said nothing, though, so I followed the others as they streamed out of the room

I made my way to the dining hall, where, once again, Callie was already in line. She motioned me over.

"Morning, did you sleep well?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, surprisingly so. You?"

"Great. Better than I have in months. Oh, this is Madison, by the way. My third roommate." Callie gestured to a girl wearing stylish eyeglasses, with curly hair the color of caramel.

We said hello and I greeted Bridget and Crystle, who were also in line.

"How did you do during meditation?" I asked Callie as we filled our plates. "I couldn't seem to stop fidgeting."

"That's normal," Madison answered instead. "It takes practice."

That was comforting, I supposed. I just had the feeling that my progress was going to be measured using a different scale than the other Keepers in training.

We got to the beverage line and I was overjoyed to see coffee. I pulled the lever and watched as my cup filled with steaming black goodness. I stirred in two sugar packets and took a sip. Not the best cup I'd ever had, but certainly not the worst.

We took our seats and I warmed my hands on my coffee mug, content to inhale its aroma before I started on breakfast.

"So what's going on with you and Taren?" Crystle asked with a sly grin.

"Ooh, do tell," Madison chimed in. "I heard you two went for a little stroll last night."

I blushed. "Well, yeah, but he was just checking in on me, making sure I got settled."

“He didn't check in on me,” Callie said with a frown.

“Sounds like someone has an admirer,” Crystle said. “So what did you two love birds talk about?”

“Nothing,” I said, a bit too quickly, “just...stuff. You know, he told me to study hard, make friends. He said to tell you the same, Callie.” It was the least of the lies I was currently perpetrating, and it seemed for the best.

“And did this ‘nothing’ lead to kissing?” Crystle asked.

“No, no kissing,” I said. “But if we had...would that have been all right? He's not dating anyone? Like Kat?”

The three girls erupted in laughter, while Callie and I exchanged a bewildered look.

“What's so funny?” I asked.

“Ember,” Bridget said, her smile softening her angular features, “Kat is gay. Like, really, really gay.”

Heat colored my cheeks, both at my embarrassment for not having known and my relief that Taren wasn't dating the flame-haired goddess. But then why hadn't he kissed me?

“Don't take it personally if he hasn't made a move,” Bridget said. “He's always been a bit of a loner, but lately you almost never see him with anyone, except maybe Kat and a few others from his Guard set.”

“Why is that?” I asked

“It started when his parents left,” Crystle answered. “His mom got called to help at another Gateway and his father went with her.”

“They're both Keepers?” I should have asked these girls about Taren last night. They were a wealth of information.

Crystle shook her head. “Just his mom. His dad is a Guardian. But it's not unusual for a Guardian married to a Keeper to request the same post.”

“So he just misses his parents?” It seemed an odd reason for Kat to be worried about him, or for him to need long walks in the woods.

Before they could answer, a girl no more than twelve approached our table. Her corn silk hair was pulled back in a French braid.

“Pardon me, are you Ember Lyons?”

“Yeah,” I said, “can I help you?”

“Master Dogan wishes to speak with you,” the girl replied. “Instead of going to first period, you are to follow me to his office.”

I looked around the table, but was greeted with shrugs.

“Um, OK, sure.” I looked down at my untouched breakfast. “I can be ready now.” I grabbed my bagel and tore off a piece to eat on the way.

“Excellent,” the young girl said. “This way.”

She spoke with an authority beyond her years. I wondered what she was in training for.

“I’m Sarah, by the way,” she said as she led me through the dining hall and outside to one of the many paths that crisscrossed the property.

We exchanged pleasantries, but I was too busy wondering what Master Dogan wanted, to put much effort into chatting. Was he going to get on my case for not meditating? I tried to imagine him scolding me, and it was completely incongruous with the man he seemed to be. Maybe he and Annys had realized how unprepared I was for all of the grilling I’d be getting from the other students. I made a mental note to ask him what the appropriate response was to the question about how I had remained sane for so long. Regardless, it was a definite improvement over the usual question of how I’d become so jaded so young.

Sarah led me back to the meditation yurt. It was empty and eerily silent as we made our way through the center of the room to a door in the back. Sarah gave a gentle knock.

“You may enter,” came Master Dogan’s reply.

Upon opening the door I was greeted by the scent of sandalwood. Master Dogan’s office seemed more like a Zen meditation space. Candles rested in ornate holders throughout the room, many of them lit. Cream-colored shades filtered the harshness of the sunlight, giving the place a feeling of warmth. A small fountain bubbled gently with water that flowed over black river rocks. In the center of the room was a large, low wooden table in the shape of an octagon. Large pillows surrounded the table, and it seemed that Master Dogan used it as a desk, because he was seated on one of the cushions, a stack of papers in front of him, pen in hand. He smiled kindly at me.

“Good morning, Ember. I hope you slept well. Please, come in and sit down.” He gestured to a cushion across from him. “Thank you, Sarah, that will be all.”

Sarah made a slight bow and left the room, closing the door behind her.

I sat down cross-legged on the cushion he'd indicated.

"Would you care for some tea?" he asked, already pouring.

When I declined, he sipped from the steaming cup. "Did you enjoy this morning's meditation?"

I knew it. Busted.

"I don't think I'm very good at it," I said. "Sorry."

"On the contrary, Ember, you did very well."

Was he making fun of me? "But I couldn't even sit still until..."

"Until?"

"Until I zoned out," I said. "When I was trying to relax and breathe or whatever, I was hopeless."

It seemed best to be honest. If I didn't belong here, it would be better to find out sooner rather than later.

"Tell me about this 'zoning out.'" He peered at me over his teacup.

"I'm not sure how to explain it... It's something I started doing when I was a kid," I said. "My mom gets on these rants sometimes. They can get pretty intense. And long. I needed a way to escape, but I was a kid. There was nowhere for me to go. So, I'd pick a spot—maybe on the ground, or my hand, or the sofa, and I'd just sort of...fall into it."

If he thought that was odd, he didn't show it. "And how do you feel when you do that?"

"I don't," I said. "That's the point."

"When you're in this place, this spot you've chosen, are you aware of what's going on around you?"

"Mostly. It's like there's this small part of me that's paying attention, just enough to keep me out of trouble. I used to lose myself completely. Mom said I would just go catatonic sometimes and it freaked her out. She'd shake me and I'd come back, but wouldn't remember anything she'd been saying. So I learned to control it—to pay just enough attention that I could respond appropriately, but still feel far enough away that nothing could touch me."

"I see," he said thoughtfully. "Would you mind demonstrating for me?"

I looked around for a moment. My gaze fell upon the polished wood of the table. There was an interesting knothole at the edge...

"Ember?" Master Dogan spoke from far away.

"Yes?"

Speaking simple words and phrases wasn't difficult, it was simply a matter of allowing the part of my brain that was still in the room to handle such rudimentary tasks. Similar to not having to think about breathing, feigning attention required little effort.

"Can you tell me the sum of two plus two?" He asked, his voice traveling down the knothole to reach me.

"Four," I replied.

He rose from his cushion and walked behind me. There was a crash, but the sound was muted. I didn't flinch.

"Are you all right Master Dogan or was that a test?"

Instead of responding, he passed his hand in front of my eyes. But not letting me see the knothole had the same impact as locking the door to a room that had already been entered—I was already inside.

He went back to his cushion and sat. "Would you please come back now?"

I blinked rapidly and forced myself to become completely aware of my body, my surroundings.

"I'm here," I said.

"So you are," he said, pleased. "That was quite impressive. To develop such an effective coping mechanism at such a young age—it probably saved your life. Certainly your sanity."

I frowned. "If I'm so well-adjusted, why did I try to kill myself?"

"You tell me," he said.

I had walked right into that one. "I guess this was where you prove you're a real head shrinker?"

"No, this is where you tell me why someone as bright and capable as yourself would rob the world of your potential."

There was nothing accusing in his tone, and I realized I wanted him to understand. Daemon or not, I was beginning to believe that this man could help me.

"I just...wanted to be done," I said. "I look at this world, and I think about me in it, and it just feels...wrong. I see other people and they seem to get it—whatever it is that makes things make sense in this life—and I just don't. And I don't want to, because then I think I really would be crazy. I know to the rest of the world I seem nuts, but to me, they seem nuts—walking around living their lives, totally unaware that there is just something

wrong here..." I struggled, unsure how to encapsulate all that had led up to that night. "I was just done trying."

"And the voice you hear, it encouraged you to take the pills?"

Taren had told him about the Voice. I supposed it was his duty, I just wasn't used to my secrets being laid bare.

"Yeah. I mean, I'd thought about suicide even before I started hearing It, but the actual planning didn't start until recently."

"So you planned and yet you didn't succeed," he said.

"Yeah, which I've been trying to figure out since it happened. I really did want to die. So why did I take the pills before my mom had done her nightly check-in?"

"Maybe you wanted to be found," Master Dogan said.

I shook my head. "No, I'm telling you, I was done. I wanted out. I researched the meds online and went through the trouble of calculating what would be a lethal dose. Then the Voice—"

"The voice...what?" he asked.

"It urged me to start taking them—right then. It took up so much space in my head that I couldn't think of anything else. All logic was gone; I only felt pain and hopelessness. What had once been an option became the only solution, and I had to take action."

Master Dogan just waited.

"But why? If the voice in my head is demonic, why would it have urged me to take those pills when I'd be almost certain to survive it? Doesn't that prove It isn't evil? That It wanted me to live?"

"What if it did want you to live *and* it is evil? What if you are right where it wants you to be?"

"But why?" I said again. "I'm safe here. I haven't heard It since I arrived."

"Ember, if you are what Annys and I believe you to be, you are connected to the Gateway in a very powerful way. As with all power, that connection can be used for good or ill. If this voice of yours has designs to use you, what better place than here, at the Gateway itself?"

The hairs stood up on the back of my neck. "What do you think It wants me to do?"

Master Dogan was silent for a moment, then said, "We have reason to believe the demons are gaining strength and planning an invasion. I suspect they wish to use you to that end."

He didn't know I'd been told about the breach, yet even admitting this much seemed difficult for him.

"Why do I only hear one voice?" I asked. "Callie, the others—they hear several, right?"

"They do. I believe that it's due to your lineage. Over time, the imprisoned Daemons have gone through a de-evolution of sorts. Though the world they started with was an exact mirror of our own—meant to be a solution, not a punishment—it is now a place of utter darkness. What was once an advanced society has become ruled by hatred and vengefulness. But what if not all of them have become such base creatures? With more and more troubled children to weed through, it has become difficult to find the Marked Ones in time. What if there are demons that have been biding their time, waiting for the proper time to strike?"

"And that time is now?" I asked, failing to keep the fear from my voice.

"Once you marked yourself with that symbol, you made it known who and what you are. You put yourself on the radar, so to speak."

I wanted to claw the ink from my shoulder blade. "What if I had it removed—lasered off? Would that change anything?"

Master Dogan looked at me with sympathy. "I'm afraid not. Think of your thoughts like a radio signal. Now that it knows your mental frequency, it can tune in at will. With that access comes the knowledge that you were not born Marked, yet know the symbol in its entirety. That fact makes you very valuable."

"Valuable, huh? So I'm not a lost cause?" I had long since given up hope that I was going to make something of myself in this life.

"Ember, when was it that things took a turn for you? I don't mean your outside circumstances—I've read your file and know the difficulties you've faced: absent father, a mother who suffers from mental illness. I'm talking about when you stopped being determined to overcome those obstacles."

I struggled against the sadness threatening to envelop me. For so long I'd soldiered on, fueled by the surety that one day I'd show them—anyone who had ever doubted me—but that had ceased being enough.

"I guess when I realized it was no use. That the life I wanted to create couldn't exist. Not in this world."

"And why is that?" he said.

"Because nothing good can survive here. Friends betray you, guys are

creeps...”

Even as I said it, I was aware that I no longer fully believed it, not after all that had happened. Having met Callie, Master Dogan, Taren...

“And when was it, exactly, that you began to think that no one could be trusted?”

With that question, the pieces clicked into place. The Voice telling me when I was being gossiped about, when I would be betrayed; reveling in Its assurance that I didn't belong in this world and would finally be free if I just let go. It had told me, but I'd been eager to believe.

Then there was the failed suicide attempt that had landed me in Windsor. And the Voice urging me to trust Taren, which had ultimately led me to go with him to see Callie, which in turn had caused us to be together during the attack. Our escape was the sole reason Taren had found out about my tattoo, which had led me here, a mere hundred yards from the doorway to a demonic world.

I locked eyes with Master Dogan. He'd known all along, but had led me expertly down the path so I would see it for myself.

“So it's been using me, and I fell for it,” I said, no longer willing to give this *demon* the respect I once had. “All this time I've been afraid I was crazy, but really I'm just colossally stupid.”

“You are not stupid, Ember—far from it. You've grown up with untenable instability and needed someone you could always rely on, so that is what it became for you. Which lends credence to my suspicion that we are dealing with a highly evolved entity—one not easily beaten. Luckily, we can keep you safe while you learn techniques to block it out.”

“That's possible? I can be free again?” I needed to believe there was hope. I couldn't bear the thought of never leaving this small patch of earth for fear of being some demon's puppet—or worse—escape plan.

Master Dogan studied me. “Yes, I believe it's possible. What I need to know from you now is if you are still feeling suicidal.”

I shook my head. “No. When I woke up in the hospital, I was so disappointed to have failed, but now...at least it makes sense. My depression, the voice. It's terrifying, but it makes sense. And if you think I can be of use here...”

“I'm glad to hear that, and yes, you can be of great use. You will need to apply yourself to your studies even more so than your peers, and some of

your training will need to take place in secret. I will be handling that personally. Unlike today, however, our sessions must not detract from your class time. We'll need to meet when you are done for the day. I've arranged my schedule to see you three times a week at four o'clock. Should anyone ask, you will need to say we are working on personal issues."

Great, even in an institute full of people who had struggled with sanity, I was going to be a standout. I reconciled myself to the idea. Something was coming alive inside of me—the need to be a part of something. I had spent so long trying to separate myself from everyone and everything that the idea felt foreign, and yet it felt right.

Our session concluded with Master Dogan instructing me that instead of "falling in" during morning meditation, I should practice going in slowly, with awareness. Once I'd mastered that, I was to attempt it with my eyes closed, imagining a point of light in my mind's eye and entering that. I agreed, and Master Dogan told me he'd see me in two days.

Sarah was waiting for me when I exited Master Dogan's office. She popped up from where she sat doing what looked like schoolwork.

"I'll show you to your second class now," she said. "It starts in five minutes."

"That would be great, thanks," I replied and followed her through the yurt and back outside.

The air was crisp and the sun bright. The warmth matched the feeling that was growing from within me and I wanted to prolong it. I took small strides, forcing Sarah to match my pace. I wasn't crazy. I was safe here. And with practice, the Demon would no longer be able to control me.

"You'll be in room two, next," Sarah said when we had reached a small cluster of one-room buildings.

As if on cue, the doors to the four buildings opened and students began shuffling between them.

"Thanks for showing me around." I gave her a smile before turning and joining the crowd.

I entered room two and took a seat. Callie filtered in shortly after and

joined me.

“So what did Master Dogan want?” she asked.

“He just wanted to make sure I'm not still feeling depressed,” I said. “I'm totally not, but he wants follow-up sessions anyway. How was first period?”

“So cool. The teacher gave us a lecture about demons and how they started as good, but then there was a war. It's a whole thing.”

“Sounds like it,” I said, feigning ignorance.

I looked around at the other students and realized I was the oldest by a few years. I wondered what I would have made of all of this if I'd been brought here when I was twelve.

A stern-looking woman in her fifties entered the classroom and spoke. “All right, settle down.” Her gaze settled on Callie and me. “I see we have two new students. My name is Mistress Bowen, and this is where we discuss the different types of demons that inhabit the world beyond the Gateway. Who can tell Ember and Callie how we know what we do about the demon world?”

A hand shot up that belonged to a short boy with brown hair and freckles.

“Go ahead, Jason,” Mistress Bowen said.

“From Keepers who've been Retrieved,” Jason said. “Once they make it back, their observations are recorded. Over the centuries, certain species of demons have been seen over and over.”

I shot Callie a glance, which she returned with a slight nod. Apparently she'd been debriefed after her ordeal. I made a mental note to ask her what she'd witnessed, wondering why I hadn't thought to do so before. I'd only seen one demon and felt scarred by it; what had she endured?

The class continued, and Callie and I were assigned textbooks that contained drawings of various demons. I recognized the Dahrak demon and shuddered. Why wasn't Callie more afraid?

Because she thinks she's safe now. None of them know the Gateway is unlocked, that it's only a matter of time before the demons try again. Even if they've seen the horror of the other world, they think they're out of harm's way.

My good feeling dissipated.

My next two classes were Algebra and English. I shared those with Crystle, presumably since we would be in the same grade were we in a normal high school. Mundane subjects were a welcome break from Mistress Bowen's lecture. By the time it had ended, I was feeling queasy from her detailed description of a race of slug demons that consisted mostly of pus.

After that was lunch, where I sat with the usual girls. I was surprised to realize I now had 'usual girls.'

While we ate, I reiterated the explanation I'd given Callie about my meeting with Master Dogan, adding, "Yeah, and I guess I now know the answer as to how I survived this long. It's unorthodox, but I have some sort of self-taught meditation skill."

I couldn't very well admit that I'd been kept alive in order to help the demons escape their prison. The girls seemed appeased by the answer and moved on to other topics. When lunchtime was over, a chime sounded and we went our separate ways, Callie and I heading to Tai Chi.

It was Master Dogan who taught the class. He did so with his usual mild manner, explaining that both Keepers and Guardians in training learned the martial art as a way of centering and grounding their energies. I paid close attention and found the practice soothing.

Next up was History—the normal, human kind. After that, I had a study period which I used to pore over the textbook I'd been given on demons. There was so much to learn, and I was determined to do as much as I could as quickly as possible.

My final class dealt with Gateway theory and linking.

By the time class let out at three forty-five, I was worn out and needed to do something that required zero brain power. I strolled aimlessly around the lower grounds, careful not to cross the markers that designated an end to the Sanctuary. I had always enjoyed nature, and I found myself drawn to the path I'd seen Taren take into the woods the night before.

The dense canopy of trees filtered out much of the waning light and I zipped my hoodie against the drop in temperature. I thought about turning back, but there was still enough light to see, so I continued on down the path.

I wondered how far Taren liked to walk into these woods, and how long it would be until I saw him again. I noticed some boulders several yards away and stepped off the path to take a seat on one. Within seconds, cold penetrated my jeans and I stifled a shiver. A moment later, a distinct smell of

rot wafted my way. I scanned the ground for its source, and was about to get up when it occurred to me that this might be a good opportunity to practice meditating. I placed my hands in my lap and looked down, noticing the pitted texture of the rock. I focused on one, and instead of falling in, I approached it gently with my mind.

I've missed you, Ember.

I froze, terror gripping me.

You must come to me more often.

My pulse pounding in my ears, I leapt from the boulder and sprinted toward the path. The putrid smell, the queasiness—I'd passed a boundary when I'd left the trail. *Stupid, stupid!* My feet hit the path, but I kept running until I reached the clearing that marked the end of the forest. I doubled over, gasping for breath.

The crunch of rapid footsteps propelled me forward. Something had followed me. Visions of demons and Reds flashed in my mind, and I was about to cry out a warning when I heard his voice.

“Ember! It's just me—stop!”

I spun around to see Taren. I sank to my knees, breathless.

“Are you OK? What happened? Was something chasing you?” He knelt beside me and scanned our surroundings.

“Just you,” I said between gasps. “I thought you were...” I couldn't get the rest of the sentence out.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I heard such a commotion—I thought there might have been another attack.” He placed a hand on my back.

When I could breathe again, I said, “I was just taking a walk and I...I heard it. The Demon.”

“You strayed off the path?” His tone wasn't accusing, just matter-of-fact.

“How would I know I'm not supposed to?” I said defensively. “If that's the boundary between sanity and Crazytown, maybe they should mark it better.”

Taren nodded in agreement. “I'll see what I can do. I don't think most first-years head out this way.”

“Apparently, I'm not most first-years.”

Taren grinned. “Yes, I think that's been well established.”

We sat there for a moment—me staring at the ground, Taren scanning the trees. His hand still rested on my back, sending ripples of warmth through

me.

“What did the demon say to you?” Taren asked, his voice touched with worry.

“That it missed me. That I needed to come see it more often.” It no longer felt like a violation to share its words. If anything, I wanted to purge myself of them.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “That must have been really frightening.”

“Leave it to me to have a demonic admirer,” I said, trying to play it cool. “I wonder what it will get me for Valentine's Day.”

“Black roses?” Taren said.

“Ugh, I hope not. Who wants the demon presence in their head to be that cliché?”

“Yes,” Taren said, “that would be the worst part—the cliché-ness.”

Taren rose and extended a hand to help me to my feet. When our hands touched, a tiny jolt of electricity passed between us. I wasn't the only one to notice. For a moment his gaze settled upon me. Then he dropped my hand and cleared his throat.

“It's dinner time,” he said, “I'll walk you back to the dorm.”

I longed to feel his touch again, to know why it penetrated to my core. Twice I'd felt it, and twice he'd pulled away. Was it me? For all his seeming acceptance of my Daemon-ness, was that what kept him from kissing me? There wasn't a rule against Guardians dating students—I knew that much from Crystle's relationship with Michael. I knew I should just ask Taren what was up, but the mere thought was mortifying.

We reached the back door of the dormitory and he turned to face me.

“You should know, I'm headed on assignment to another mental hospital tomorrow,” he said, his eyes on the ground.

My heart sank. “Oh. How long will you be gone?”

“Depends on what I find,” he said, looking up. “But I won't be around to check on you, so you have to promise me you'll be careful. No more walking in the woods.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Sure.”

I knew I wasn't succeeding in keeping the disappointment from my voice.

“I mean it, Ember.” Taren's eyes matched the intensity of his tone. “It's very important you not expose yourself to any demons—not yet. Promise me you won't cross the boundary without permission.”

“I promise,” I said. “I’m not eager for a repeat of tonight’s pants-wetting.”
Nice. Nothing hotter than a joke about peeing your pants. *Wait, he knows I’m kidding, right?*

“Good,” he said with a small smile. “Fear is the right response. It will keep you from doing anything stupid.”

He opened the door, but didn’t follow me inside.

“So I guess I’ll see you around, then,” I said, trying to salvage a scrap of casualness.

“Yeah,” he said, “see you around.”

He let the door swing shut, and by the time it did, he was gone.

I was quiet during dinner, mentally replaying my conversation with Taren. The other girls were happy to chat without my input.

As I scraped the remains of my mostly untouched dinner into a trash bin, Mae approached me.

“Master Dogan has requested you be granted phone privileges this evening,” she said. “Would you like to go now?”

I told her I would and followed her to a room off of the common area. Three cubicles held students talking on telephones, a fourth stood empty.

“Dial nine to get out,” Mae said, handing me the receiver. “The call will cut off after fifteen minutes, so plan accordingly.”

I thanked her and sat down. I dialed my mother’s cell and waited—both anxious and excited—while it rang.

“Hello?” It had only been a day, but so much had changed since I’d last heard her voice.

“Mom, it’s me,” I said.

“Ember, baby.” Her smile traveled through the phone line. “How are you? I was so worried when you disappeared after that gas leak at Windsor.”

Gas leak? I guess any story would fly when the only witnesses were mental patients and a handful of nurses traumatized enough to believe anything.

“I’m sorry, Mom. Things got pretty crazy that night, but I’m safe now. Did someone from here call you?”

Master Dogan had assured me that things would be squared away with her.

“Yes, a woman named Annys called yesterday to tell me where you've been transferred to, but it's so good to hear your voice and know you're safe. You are safe, right, baby?”

“Yeah, Mom, I'm fine. I like it here. Did they tell you when you would be allowed to visit?”

I surprised myself with how eager I was to see her. It wasn't just because I missed her—I was anxious to see if being on the Sanctuary grounds did anything for her mental health. If being a Daemon was hereditary, did that mean that she was one, too? I'd have to ask Master Dogan.

“Not this Saturday, but next. And I won't embarrass you, I promise. I...I started taking the meds again.”

I had figured as much. Her voice sounded even, her thoughts cohesive. I was glad for her, but we'd been down this road before. I wondered how long it would be until she was sure she was cured and stopped taking them. All the same, I gave her the response she was hoping for.

“That's great, Mom, I'm really proud of you.”

“No, Ember, I'm proud of you. Just follow the program there—do everything they tell you—so you can come home. Things will be different, I swear.”

The earnestness in her voice broke me. What would she do when she realized I wasn't coming home? She'd had me at nineteen and had never been on her own before. I struggled to keep the worry from my voice.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, Em.”

We chatted for a few more minutes, me telling her what I could about life at the Institute—the grounds were beautiful, the food a huge improvement over Windsor, the education top notch. I was in mid-sentence when the line went dead. Mae hadn't been kidding when she said to plan accordingly.

I left the phone room and entered the bustling living area. I found I recognized many of the faces. I'd met several new students in class, and it felt nice to be less of an outsider. One of the plush recliners was empty, so I pulled *Catcher in the Rye* from the bookshelf and settled in.

An hour passed, and I found myself nodding off as I read. It was only eight o'clock—that was usually the time I got my second wind. I wondered

if, after years of insomnia, I was making up for lost sleep. I reminded myself that I'd been up since five in the morning, and was going to be again, so I made my way upstairs, took a shower, and went to bed.

Before drifting off, my thoughts returned to Taren. His hazel eyes, his just-crooked-enough-to-be-perfect smile. I told myself he wouldn't be gone long, and then we could pick up where we'd left off. I fell asleep wondering where that was.

No matter when you fall asleep, five a.m. comes way too soon. I was groggy as I pulled on cargo pants and a vintage sweater I'd bought at a thrift store. By the time I brushed my teeth and made it downstairs, the cobwebs were clearing and I found myself saying hello to some students I'd met the day before. I wondered what had changed—even before my own personal demon invasion, I hadn't been much of a people person—and I realized it was hope. I had hope in myself, and hope in the Institute. I believed in what we were doing and wanted to be a part of it.

Meditation began, and instead of fidgeting, I looked down at a freckle on my calf. A tiny, brown freckle... I attempted to ease in, as Master Dogan had instructed. I reminded myself that for once I wasn't trying to escape anything. I was safe here; I could enter slowly. But after a brief struggle, I was unable to keep myself from falling as I always did—pulled into the void. I drifted until a chime sounded, indicating the end of the session, and I pulled myself back into the room. I waved to Master Dogan as I filed out with the rest of the students on our way to breakfast.

The rest of that week passed in a blur of classes, meals, and private sessions with Master Dogan. I was living an accelerated reality where there was something new to learn every day. Every hour, at times. Mistress Bowen's class was a wealth of information. Her lecture on Reds and those only temporarily overtaken by demons explained so much about Callie's attack on me, including her strength. Crystle might have thought the stories of Reds were exaggerated, but I knew better. At the end of that class, Callie

had again apologized. I wished I could tell her that she had never meant to kill me, no matter what the voices had told her. It had been a ruse, just as everything that had led to my escape to the Institute had been.

I found myself thinking of the string-pulling the Demon had done and how sure it must be that I could be brought over to its side. I was determined not to let that happen. My desire fueled my studies, and for once in my academic career, I paid attention in every class.

My teachers marveled at my progress, but it was Master Dogan's praise that meant the most. For the first time, I looked forward to sessions with a therapist. I found myself opening up and telling the truth about what I was thinking and feeling. In return, he answered me honestly, which was also a first. When I asked him if being part Daemon might account for my mother being bipolar, he hedged, saying that she didn't display the signs, including not recognizing the symbol when she'd seen it either on my skin or on my wall. I was saddened by that, having been holding out hope that the Institute might be able to cure her, as well. He then asked me about my father, but, as usual, that discussion went nowhere.

I often thought of Taren, wondering how he was, what mental hospital he was in. It was hard to fathom the sacrifice it took to spend so much time in and out of institutions, just on the hope of finding another would-be Keeper. But whenever I noticed my thoughts drifting in his direction I brought myself back, bent on not losing focus. By the end of each day I was spent, my normal nighttime brooding giving way to dreamless sleep.

The following week, my class in linking with others became more than just theory. Mr. Conrad brought us outside to one of the boundaries that marked the consecrated ground. My stomach twisted at the thought of stepping beyond the threshold. It had been less than two weeks since I'd heard the Demon and gone fleeing back to the Sanctuary. Mr. Conrad stepped past the marker, then turned to instruct us.

“You will each step past the boundary one at a time and stay for as long as you are able, up to one minute. There is no shame in crossing back to the other side before the minute is up. This is not a contest. The purpose is to

simply expose you to the forces that lay beyond the marker. It takes time to master holding your center, and we will do it over and over for the next few weeks in preparation for forming links.”

His explanation did little to calm my nerves. I imagined myself leaping back over the line after half a second. So much for my stellar progress.

“The first step before you cross is to relax,” Mr. Conrad said. “Use your meditation training to become still and focused. Indicate you are ready by raising your hand, then wait for me to call you forward.”

“I hate this part,” Crystle muttered. “I think my record is forty-five seconds.”

“What happens to you?” I whispered back.

“The voices, the darkness. An all around symphony of badness. I can't handle it and bail. That's why I'm still in first year.”

I sympathized; it would be upsetting to never progress to the point of freedom.

The others settled down, and Crystle and I followed suit. I still wasn't able to meditate with my eyes closed—the concept of entering light was foreign to me—so I stared at a leaf on the ground. It was mottled with dark spots, and I chose one to focus my awareness on.

I was getting better at approaching slowly, and I felt myself inching inward. My stomach unclenched. I was aware of my fear, but it was muted. I took a few more breaths and raised my hand. Another student was across the boundary, but before his minute was up, he crossed back, dripping with sweat.

“Ember, you're next,” Mr. Conrad called, his voice drifting down a well to reach me.

I took a hesitant step forward and then another. One more and I would be across. I forced myself to take the step, coming face to face with Mr. Conrad.

“Just keep breathing, stay focused,” he said, his eyes locked on mine.

I gave a slight nod, still holding his gaze. Queasiness seeped through my wall of concentration. My vision dimmed, but I held fast.

You're learning, Ember.

I blinked. Mr. Conrad noticed and put a hand on my shoulder.

“Steady, you're doing fine,” he said.

A bead of sweat trickled past my brow and down my cheek. I was on the verge of vomiting, and I swallowed hard. *I can do this. I can—*

Of course you can. That's why I brought you here.

I dove back into the Sanctuary. I tumbled, coming to a stop on my hands and knees. My focus broken, I was hit with a tidal wave of nausea and proceeded to retch noisily. Once the contents of my stomach had been expelled, I slumped back on my heels and noticed the entire class watching me. I flushed, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. Crystle rushed to my side.

“Are you OK?” she asked.

I nodded weakly.

“Come on, then, let's get you cleaned up,” she said, and helped me to my feet.

My legs felt like those of a new doe, ready to buckle at any second. Mr. Conrad gave me a concerned look, but allowed Crystle to lead me away.

Once out of earshot, she grinned and said, “And I thought I was bad at that.”

An hour later, I was physically recovered but still shaken as I sat talking with Master Dogan.

“What do you think it meant?” I asked when I'd relayed the story. “What does the Demon want me to do?”

Master Dogan was seated on his usual cushion, gazing at me from across the table. “I suspect it wants to use you to open the Gateway.”

I bit my lip to keep from telling him I already knew the Gate had been breached, and I hadn't been necessary to accomplish it.

“But I'm here learning to fight it,” I said instead, “and am only exposed to it when I choose to be.” *Or when I wander off paths in the woods.*

“True, and you are doing remarkably well. You must not look at today as a failure in any way. This demon you hear is more powerful, more cunning, and much higher functioning than the lesser demons that invade the thoughts of other Keepers. It will require greater vigilance on your part to block it out, but if your current progress is any indication, I have faith you will succeed.”

His words were a soothing balm to my wounded ego. I drank them in along with the jasmine tea he served me.

From then on, each time I crossed the boundary, both the nausea and the Demon's voice became more and more distant and my time got longer. By the following week, I was able to stay still for the full minute before Mr. Conrad instructed me to cross back over, which I did, stepping calmly. That night at dinner, Crystle asked if I'd be willing to give her pointers, and I happily obliged.

Later, as I was gathering my things for my nightly shower, movement from outside my window caught my eye.

Taren.

I could tell by the posture, the set of his shoulders. Taren was back? Was he coming to see me? My pulse quickened. But instead of entering the dormitory, he kept walking, past all of the buildings and toward the path that led into the woods. I didn't stop to think about it. I threw on a jacket and raced downstairs. Curfew wasn't for another half hour, I could at least say hello. A nagging voice told me that if he'd wanted to see me, he would have, but I shoved it into the background.

The sky was streaked with golden hues, the L.A. air pollution putting on a spectacular sunset. I hastened down the path that Taren had taken. In the two weeks since I had last seen him, I hadn't allowed myself to indulge in longing, but seeing him again brought it all back. His expressive eyes, the strong angles of his face.

I reached the tree line and quickened my pace even more. With the leaves filtering out the last of the sunlight, I couldn't make out anything more than a

few yards in front of me. My feet were still on the path, but an eerie feeling settled over me.

“Taren?” My voice drifted into the darkness. I took a few more steps and called again, louder this time, “Taren, where are you?”

I heard his footsteps first; a moment later, he came into view.

“What are you doing out here?” he said.

I hadn't thought about what I'd say when I actually caught up with him. “Oh, well, I saw that you were back...”

“I thought we agreed you wouldn't go walking in the woods again,” he said, his mouth set in the firm line I'd come to know meant he was angry or annoyed.

Was it me? Or had something gone wrong on his mission?

“Is everything OK?” I asked. “You seem...different.”

“I'm fine,” he said in a way that let me know that he was anything but.

“If you need to talk— ”

“Actually, I just need to be left alone,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, suddenly feeling very small.

It wasn't that I couldn't understand the need to be alone, but why wasn't he as happy to see me as I was to see him?

“Did I...did I do something wrong?” I asked.

Taren looked me square in the eye and said, “Not everything is about you.”

“I-I know that,” I said, “I just thought...”

My pride wouldn't let me finish. I was grateful the waning light hid the embarrassment rising on my cheeks.

“Look, Ember, you're a cool girl. But I think you might have gotten the wrong idea. Once I realized what you were, it became my job to get you here safely. And you are safe, as long as you stay where you're supposed to. That's the end of it. You're not my responsibility anymore.”

Taren's words hit harder than if he'd struck me. I stared at the ground, wishing it would swallow me whole. Had I really misread every signal?

“I'm sorry,” he said, his voice softening a fraction, “I just think it would be best if you made other friends.”

“So...we're not even friends, then?” I thought he was saying he didn't like me in a romantic way, but he was really saying that he didn't like me at all.

“I can't be who you need me to be,” he said quietly.

“But I— ”

“I have to go,” Taren said.

He turned away from me and paused, his shoulders hunched. He took a deliberate step off the path, past the boundary, then continued on.

I stared after him, frozen. My mortification quickly thawed to anger and I strode after him. He didn't know how far I'd come in the two weeks he'd been gone. At the sound of my footsteps he whirled around.

“What are you doing? Get back on the path. Do you have any idea what could happen if— ”

I stopped hearing him when my chest exploded.

I looked down, shocked to see my body still in one piece. The pain was unbearable, as though I were tied to horses running in different directions.

“The Gateway!” My words were a strangled cry.

Taren loomed over me, fear etching his beautiful face. I’d fallen and was looking up at the darkened canopy of trees. He was trying to help me up, but my muscles refused to cooperate, locked in spasm.

An alarm sounded, then another. I was right—the Gate was being breached.

Taren dragged me back to safety. The pain receded, though my muscles still twitched with aftershocks. He looked down the path and then back at me.

“Go,” I told him through clenched teeth, “they’re going to need you.”

He gave me one last pained look and fled, tearing down the path and out of sight.

I knew what I had to do, and I braced myself. It was a struggle getting my body to cooperate, but I pulled myself back across the border, pain slamming into me the instant I succeeded. I wrapped my arms around myself and curled into the fetal position, willing my body and my psyche to stay in one piece.

Don’t fight it, Ember, this is meant to—

NO! I wouldn’t listen. I focused on the hole in my chest. It wasn’t physically real, but I knew that the hole opening in the Gateway was. I squeezed my eyes shut so tightly that spots danced behind them. I picked one of them and dove in. I was still on fire. I was still being ripped to shreds. But it was just far enough away that I could focus on pulling the pieces back

together.

I heard distant screams and knew that demons were streaming through, maybe even attacking the dormitory. I thought of Callie, of Crystle and Bridget. And I thought of Taren, having reached the battle by now, fighting not just for his life, but for all of our lives. I was writhing back and forth on the ground, hugging my knees into my chest.

Back together, be whole, back together...

I repeated it over and over, every second an eternity. I imagined the crack that ran the length of my torso being knitted back together, each tug of the thread making it smaller. The minutes stretched, and I knew that soon it would be too late. It would win, and I would die. We all would, in the horrible ways I'd learned about in Mistress Bowen's class. I had to be stronger, had to work faster.

I shut out everything: the agony, the sounds of battle, my fear. There was only me and the Gateway. It pulsed with life and I could feel its desire to be whole. The sense that it was working with me emboldened me, and I pushed harder, the hole closing more quickly.

And then it was done. I lay on my side, panting, knowing there was nothing left to do. The Gateway wasn't fully formed—I could tell by the feeling of wrongness in my gut—but it was closed. For now.

Eventually, I struggled to my hands and knees and crawled back toward the path. The voice--the undeniably *demonic* voice-- was a low buzz, my head splitting with the effort it took to silence it. I collapsed in a heap on the dirt path, my mind finally quiet but the pain all too real. Though I tried, I couldn't stand, my legs buckling beneath my weight. I crawled, inches at a time, never able to see more than a few feet in front of me. At last I reached the end and saw a group of Guardians, eyes wild as they scanned the grounds. The last scrap of strength left me, and everything went black.

I woke with a start, the smell of ammonia deep in my nostrils. My head jerked to the side, sending an avalanche of pain throughout my skull.

“She’s awake,” said the woman looming over me, the small vial of smelling salts going back in her pocket. “No need for a Retrieval on this one.”

I shut my eyes against the harshness of the fluorescent lighting. When I opened them again, the smelling salt woman was gone and Annys stood over me. Her clothing stained with blood, her hair uncharacteristically wild, but her expression giving away nothing.

“Where does it hurt?” she said.

“All over...” I said, “but my head, mostly.”

“Any blurred vision?” She shone a small flashlight in each pupil.

“No.”

She palpated my abdomen. “Any pain when I do this?”

Before I could tell her no, she bent down, her face inches from mine.

“Taren told me you felt it opening,” she said quietly, probing my scalp for injuries. “He sent a group of Guardians looking for you. He’d have gone himself if I hadn’t insisted he get stitched up.”

“Stitched up? Is he—?”

“Just listen. No one can know about this. When you are asked, you must say that you were out walking when you heard the alarm. You ran back, but were confronted by a demon that hit you—hard. The next thing you remember is waking up here. Do you understand?”

Dumbstruck, I nodded, sending another cascade of pain through me.

A woman in a nurse's uniform approached. Annys straightened and said, "She doesn't appear to have internal injuries, but she'll need a CT scan in order to rule out a concussion. She suffered quite a blow."

The nurse nodded, making a note on her clipboard. "We'll get her in as soon as we can. Thank you, Annys, for helping with triage."

"Of course," she said, "all hands are needed." Then she moved on to the next bed.

The infirmary was in a state of ordered frenzy. People rushed about, but seemed focused on their tasks. I heard some patients pronounced too injured to be cared for by the Institute's medical staff. Those unlucky souls were rushed to the hospital. For a time I was forgotten, which in itself was comforting; I was appreciative of not needing serious care. Knowing I didn't really have a concussion, I allowed my eyes to close and tried in vain to still the pounding in my temples.

"You saved a lot of lives today."

My eyes flew open at the sound of Taren's voice. He sat next to my cot, his shirt off and his chest crisscrossed with fresh wounds, the largest a four-inch gash along his rib cage, held together with blue stitches. A nasty welt bulged on his forehead.

"You're hurt," I said, struggling to sit up.

"So are you," he said, easing me back to the pillow. "I mean what I said. You saved lives. Exposing yourself like that—it was very dangerous, but very brave."

"To be honest, I'm not sure what it is I did." I had known when it was happening that I was connected to the Gateway, but still didn't understand how.

He looked around, careful not to be heard, and said, "You closed the Gateway. Demons were streaming through, dozens got loose, lives were lost. But you...you stopped it."

My heart sank at his admission. I hadn't been quick enough. "How many died?" I said, my eyes cast downward. "Who was it?"

"Now isn't the time for you to focus on—"

"Who?" I said again, my eyes now meeting his. "Please, I have to know."

Reluctantly, Taren answered. "Two Keepers—Matthew and Carissa, and four Guardians—Hunter, Jessica, Jeremy, and...Tom."

My mind registered the one name I knew. “Tom? But he was just a student...”

“He advanced last week. It was only his second shift.” Sadness darkened his face.

“I didn't know...” Tears welled up in my eyes and slid down my cheeks.

He reached out, his thumb caressing them away. “Ember, when we become Guardians, we know the risks; this isn't your fault. You did everything you could—which is far more than the rest of us are capable of.”

“But it wasn't enough,” I said. I had to be stronger, had to learn faster.

He looked into my eyes for a long moment, a mix of pride and sorrow on his face, and I knew he was back—the Taren I knew. The Taren I'd been falling for since the moment I'd met him. It was small comfort on such a terrible night, but I clung to it.

He leaned over and kissed my forehead, his lips barely brushing my skin, sending shivers down my spine. He put his lips near my ear and whispered, “Be careful.”

I reached for him, but he was already gone, striding out of the infirmary. I wasn't sure what had just happened, but it felt final.

This time, my tears weren't only for Tom.

It was well past midnight when I was released to go back to the dormitory. Though the grounds had been thoroughly searched and deemed safe, I was escorted by a Guardian. Walking hurt, but so did lying still. As the night wore on, the pounding in my head receded to a dull throbbing, but my muscles grew stiffer. The spasms mixed with adrenaline had left them raw.

Once inside the dorm, the Guardian left and I shuffled to the common room. The air crackled with tension as frightened students huddled in groups, arguing in hushed tones. Most seemed to have a theory about what had caused the breach and what to do about it. Others sat in silence, too traumatized to participate.

All eyes turned to me and Callie leapt from her seat.

“Ember!” She threw her arms around me and I couldn’t help wincing. “Annys said you’d be OK, but I was so worried.”

I answered through gritted teeth. “I’m fine, just banged up.”

Callie released me and said, “She said you got attacked by...a demon.”

The last word hung in air of the now-quiet room. All eyes were on me. I repeated Annys’s story.

“You’re so lucky you survived,” Callie said when I finished.

“Not luck—strategy,” a boy said from across the room. “The Guardians say they weren’t interested in fighting, just freedom. They fled, probably in search of a hiding place and easier prey.”

I had overheard a similar account while I was in the infirmary. Had the Guards been willing to let the demons flee, they surmised they would have

suffered no casualties at all. The demons had only fought when engaged. None of us were foolish enough to think that would have been the end of it, though. For every demon that got loose, dozens of lives would be lost to their appetite for death and destruction. I thought of Tom and hoped he'd managed to take out his fair share before falling.

"What kind of demon was it?" asked another boy.

I hadn't prepared an answer for that. "I-I don't know. It was dark and it happened so fast."

The boy was dogged. "Was it really tall? Or did it wriggle on the ground? Did it spit any paralyzing fluid on you?"

"Um, medium height. No wriggling, and no fluid." My headache was getting worse with the effort it took to manufacture more lies.

Crystle stood. "Jeez, people, give her some space. She's got to be freaked."

I smiled gratefully as she walked over. "Seriously freaked," I said.

"Right, so let's all just leave her alone for now." She took my hand and guided me to an empty chair.

I remembered her boyfriend and said, "What about Michael? Was he hurt?"

"Tracking as we speak," she said. "Those demons don't stand a chance."

She was putting on a brave face, but I saw the worry behind her eyes. I gave her hand a squeeze.

Bridget was seated nearby, her face drawn. "Why?" she said. "Why after all this time?"

Even knowing what I did, I couldn't answer her question. Why had it happened two months ago? Was the Gateway just too old to work properly? It had felt so weak, even while pulsating with—

"Huh?" I had missed something. Crystle was looking at me expectantly.

"I asked if you'd seen Taren before he stormed off."

Stormed off? "I saw him a few hours ago in the infirmary. He didn't seem upset."

That wasn't true. He had seemed upset—cryptic even—but not angry.

"That must have been before. Michael said he was fit to be tied," Crystle said. "He's been temporarily relieved of active duty."

"What? Why?" I asked.

Crystle leaned forward. "The official reason was that he was too injured,

but Michael said his hunting party included Guardians worse off than Taren. The truth is, he had a screaming match with Annys and took off.”

He'd had a screaming match? With Annys?

“That doesn't make any sense,” I said.

“Nothing does anymore,” Bridget said, still looking dazed, and I had to agree.

It was almost dawn when collective fear and the need for camaraderie gave way to exhaustion. I stumbled up to my room and stripped off my mud-stained clothes before crawling under the covers. Classes were cancelled for the day so I turned off my alarm clock and slept the sleep of the dead.

When I woke, the sun was high and the clock read 1:12 p.m. I rolled over, using my pillow to block the light. I wanted to go back to sleep. How many times did the world need to shift on its axis before I stopped being thrown by it? Tom with the blue eyes was dead, Taren was gone, and the Institute was reeling. Which meant, I decided, that I didn't have the luxury of reeling, as well.

I sat at the edge of my bed, my body protesting the movement. My muscles ached but were no longer on fire, my mind dull but no longer caught in a vise.

The warmth of the shower was a comfort. I let it cascade over me, watching as the rivulets ran down my legs and into the drain. I started to follow them, sliding down one of the small holes, but stopped myself. I couldn't afford to be distanced from the pain I was feeling. I needed to use it to make me better, stronger—able to lock the Gateway for at least another few thousand years.

I fumbled my way through getting dressed and went downstairs. The dining hall was half-empty but open, so I made myself a plate and took a seat at a vacant table. I chewed methodically, each bite tasting like ashes. At the table next to me, a group of students discussed the events of the previous

evening.

"I heard the tiles just slid back into place," one of the girls said.

"That's what I heard, too, but how is that possible?" another girl asked. "The pieces just moving by themselves?"

"The Daemons were telekinetic, and the demons came from Daemons," said the lone boy.

"Yeah, but the demons want it open. Why would they close it back up again?"

They continued to argue, but I tuned them out. The pieces had moved. Was that what I had done? Was I telekinetic? I looked down at the napkin balled up near my plate and willed it to move. It didn't so much as flutter.

I bussed my plate and left the dorm, on my way to Master Dogan's office. I wanted to check to see if we would still have our meeting at four o'clock. His door was closed and his small In Session plaque hung from the knob, so I took a seat on one of the meditation cushions and waited.

When the door opened, I recognized the six adults that emerged as Elders. Each looked shaken and scurried away. All but Annys, who was back to looking regal, her hair pinned up, her clothing crisp.

"It's as well you're here," she said. "I was going to send for you."

She motioned for me to enter, and when I did, I saw Master Dogan, seated in his usual place, his trademark cup of tea absent. Shadows ringed his eyes and I wondered if he'd slept at all. I sat, but Annys remained standing. She paced back and forth.

"It's good to see you. I'm glad you're all right," Master Dogan said, his smile looking weary.

"Me, too," I said. "Glad you're all right, that is."

Annys went to look out the window and I wanted to assure her I'd done as she'd instructed. "I've told everyone the story about being knocked out by a demon. No one suspects it isn't true."

She replied without turning. "That's good, Ember, thank you."

I wanted to ask what was wrong, but, of course, I knew so much was wrong. They looked as stricken as the students, as though they were finding out for the first time that the boogeyman was real, but the Elders had been grappling with the unlocked Gate for months.

I chose my words carefully; Annys wasn't the type to be questioned. "Has something happened? Other than the breach?"

Master Dogan and Annys exchanged glances.

“The manner in which the Gateway was closed,” Master Dogan said. “It was distinctive. The Elders had questions, and we felt it necessary to tell the truth.”

My pulse quickened. Their expressions at seeing me took on new meaning. “About me? Is that bad?”

“They were displeased,” Annys said, coming to sit at the table, “but at us, not you. We broke protocol by keeping them in the dark. You needn't worry, though, we've smoothed things over.”

“Oh, that's good, then,” I said. “Am I allowed to tell the other—”

“No,” Annys said, then softened her tone. “Now is not the time for that. The students are still shell-shocked from the events of last night. We'll need to wait until nerves have settled before revealing your...lineage.”

“That I'm part Daemon,” I said.

“I think we can all agree that there is no longer any doubt,” Master Dogan said.

I nodded. I might not be able to move so much as a napkin under normal circumstances, but clearly, I was what I was. And I could use it to save lives.

“Is it true? Did the Gateway seal itself?” I needed to hear it from a reliable source.

“It appeared that way to those of us present,” Master Dogan said.

They were both watching me, and I knew they wanted details of what had happened.

“I was walking. I...stepped over the boundary,” I said, knowing that was forbidden for a first year unless instructed. “It felt like...like I was blown to pieces. It took me a second to realize it was the Gateway that had broken apart, not me. And then I just knew that I had to do something. I couldn't go in slowly—there wasn't time—but once I was inside, I knew what to do. I could feel the Gate wanting to be whole. Does that make sense?”

Master Dogan nodded. “It was the Daemons that created the Gateway; it makes perfect sense that you would be attuned to it. The texts refer to it being imbued with a self-preservation instinct—which is why Marked Ones continue to be born now, millennia after it was created. That also explains the feeling you had of the Gateway wanting to be reformed.”

“I'm really not sure how I did it,” I said. “I just knew that it needed to be done.”

“And so you did,” Master Dogan said, a spark of pride behind his weary eyes.

“We would like to show our gratitude,” Annys said, “though our options are limited just now.”

“What? No, I don't need a reward,” I said hastily. “I'm grateful Taren found me; that he brought me here, where I'm not a freak. Or, well, still a freak, but a useful one.”

“It's really nothing to get excited about,” Annys said. “I feel badly that because of our current state of disarray, we won't be allowing visitors for a time. Your mother was scheduled to visit this week. I thought perhaps you might like to go see her, instead.”

“You mean leave the Institute?”

It was the last thing I wanted. This was the one place I felt safe, and it had been Annys who had assured me that my mother was safer with me gone. I'd just make her understand the delay in visiting.

Annys's expression was contemplative for a moment, but then changed to one of resolve. “I didn't want to say anything,” she said, “but your mother doesn't seem to be doing well in your absence. She's made several calls over the past two weeks, and I think seeing you might do her some good.”

“Oh.” She had sounded OK when we'd spoken on the phone, but that didn't mean things couldn't have changed since then.

“It's not just for her,” Annys continued. “As you can imagine, the Elders have questions and would like the opportunity to observe you and be kept abreast of your progress. When classes resume on Monday, I fear your schedule will be even fuller than it has been.”

I pictured myself as a lab rat running through a maze, the Elders holding clipboards and stopwatches.

“What about the Demon?” I asked, my mouth suddenly dry. “It'll be inside my head the whole time.”

It was Master Dogan who answered, his tone reassuring. “Ember, you've progressed leaps and bounds from where you started, and even before, you weren't under its control, not really. It convinced you of certain things that then led you to act, but now you know not to believe it.”

“And remember,” Annys said, “the influence of the demons is strongest here. Away from the Gateway, their strength wanes. In addition to the Guardians already protecting your mother, I've arranged for Katrina to join

you, as your own personal protection. It's not unusual that programs for at-risk youth require a peer mentor to accompany them on trips."

Annys was saying I had a choice, but I had the feeling the matter had already been decided. My mother must have been driving her crazy with phone calls if Annys was willing to go to all this trouble. I couldn't see the harm; it seemed safe enough with Guardians watching us, and I had gotten better at blocking out the Voice. And, as Master Dogan had pointed out, listening didn't mean believing. I had to admit, it would be good to see my mother; we'd never been apart this long.

"Thank you," I said finally, "for going to all this trouble."

Annys waved her hand dismissively. "It's nothing. Especially when compared with what you did for all of us—for the world—last night. Go, enjoy yourself. Come back Sunday, refreshed and ready to learn."

I smiled, my spirits genuinely lifted. "I will," I said, "I promise."

Kat came to get me at four o'clock that same day. She looked as bone-weary as the rest of us, but on her, it seemed sultry.

"I hope you know I'm giving up some prime demon-killing to babysit for the weekend," she said.

Her tone was teasing, but had a sharp edge. Could she actually be disappointed to not be out fighting? The concept was foreign to me—I hated conflict. I didn't like raised voices, let alone raised weapons.

"Sorry," I said with a shrug, "but if you're good, I'll take you to an open mic night where lesbians spout angst-ridden poetry."

"Whoa, someone's feeling sassy," she replied, raising a perfectly plucked eyebrow.

She was right. The good mood that had started in Master Dogan's office had only grown. I was being allowed out in the world again, to the land of Indian food take-out, perfect lattes at Buzz, and unrestricted Internet usage. If Master Dogan and Annys both felt I was ready to be released into the wild, who was I to doubt them?

We exited the dorm and strolled down the path toward where Kat was parked. We reached the boundary line and she glanced at me.

“Ready?” she asked.

I took a step past the boundary and smiled. “Piece of cake.”

It wasn't cake, exactly—more like Brussels sprouts. I didn't enjoy the walk, but got through it. By the time we reached the car, I was queasy, but held it at bay. The nausea eased as we wound our way down the mountain. I leaned my head out the window, delighted by the breeze and the fact that, so far, I'd heard nothing in my head but my own thoughts.

“Kat,” I said, when my curiosity got the best of me, “what happened with Taren? Why did Annys take him off duty?”

She gave me a sidelong look and said, “You heard about that, huh?”

“It's a small institute,” I said, hoping I sounded casual.

Friday rush hour traffic was in full effect, and Kat wailed on her horn. “Come on, it's not going to turn another shade of green.”

We moved forward a few car lengths, but stopped again when the light turned red.

“Perfect,” she muttered.

I waited. I couldn't ask again; I didn't want to seem desperate for information.

“The truth is, I don't really know what happened,” she said finally. “He won't tell me, which is infuriating.”

“He didn't say anything?”

I couldn't let it go. It wasn't purely selfish—I was worried about him.

“I made it back to the house around dawn to get some sleep—demons are less likely to strike in crowds or during daylight—figuring I'd meet up with Taren and arrange to go on a sweep later. When I got there, the house was empty. I called him and texted him a dozen times, out of my mind with worry, and then he showed up an hour later, slamming doors and cursing. I asked what was wrong and he told me to mind my own business and shut a door in my face. I took the hint and crashed at a friend's place. I haven't heard from him since.”

“Have you tried calling again, or—?”

“Ember, I've known Taren most of my life—we trained together, became Guardians together, and in all the battles where it counted, he's been there to watch my back. It's killing me that I have no idea what's going on with him, but he's made it clear he doesn't want my help. And I swear I'm not trying to be a bitch, but it sounds like he's made it clear to you, too.”

The words cut deep, more so because she was right. Even before Taren had been suspended he'd been distancing himself from me, and my attempts at closeness had only driven him further away.

"I'm sorry," Kat said. "I had hopes for you two. If it makes you feel any better, he's said some really nice things about you. And who knows—when he gets over whatever he's going through, maybe there's still a chance."

"Yeah," I said, the word sounding hollow.

"See, this is why being a lesbian is so much easier. You don't have to deal with men," she said, cracking a smile.

At first my smile was forced, but then became genuine when I realized that she was right—there was still a chance for Taren and me. Neither of us was going anywhere anytime soon—he was too valuable for Annys to suspend him permanently, and aside from this brief trip home, I was going to be at the Institute for the long haul. I could be patient.

"So," Kat said, "where's this Mecca of lesbian poetry goodness you told me about? I could go for some coffee."

We left Buzz with bellies full of latte and pastry. It was too early for poetry, but Kat found a table of cute girls to flirt with while I caught Clyde up on my new "boarding school." I also inquired if anyone had been in asking about me, but thankfully, the answer was no.

An hour passed and I got antsy to get home.

"Hey Kat, you ready?" I called to her from the bar.

She was whispering in the ear of a petite blonde with cropped hair who then giggled, a blush rising in her pale cheeks.

"Kat?" I said again.

She looked up. "Yeah, sorry, I'm ready." She walked over to me. "Not sure what you had in mind for tomorrow night, but Magda says her band is playing down the street."

"Oh really? Is that what Magda says?"

"So are you up for a little music?" she said, ignoring my smirk.

"Is that OK?" I asked. "To be out?"

"Crowded place, remember? And don't worry—anything pops up, I got

your back.”

It was a tempting idea; I loved live music. Who knew when I'd get the chance to go to a club again. Besides, Kat was giving me the puppy dog eyes—which I was apparently not immune to, despite being straight.

“OK, sure. Sounds fun,” I said.

“Awesome, I've already got all the info,” she said, holding up a flyer. She waved to Magda and I gave Clyde a hug before leaving.

Minutes later, we were pulling up outside of the apartment I used to share with my mother. I felt the need to warn Kat that Mom might not be on her best behavior.

“So, my mom is kind of...”

“Bi-polar,” she said, “I know, you told me. Don't worry, being raised within the Institute, I've been exposed to all levels of sanity or lack thereof. Wherever she's at on the mood scale, we'll deal with it.”

I sighed with relief. What a difference it made not to feel ashamed.

It was strange to knock on the door, but I realized as I walked up the steps that I had no idea where my key was. Probably still in the dish on my desk where I'd left it that dark night weeks ago. My hand still in mid-knock, the door flew open, and before I could say anything, my mother pulled me into an embrace.

“Em, it's so good to see you.” Her heart wasn't pounding, her breathing even. I relaxed into her arms.

“It's good to see you, too, Mom.”

She gave me a last squeeze and released me. Her eyes were bright; she looked great. I wondered how long it had been since Annys had spoken with her and deemed her on the brink.

“Mom, this is Kat,” I said, “Kat, this is my mom, Rachel.”

“Nice to meet you,” Kat said. “Thanks for letting me stay over.”

“My pleasure. I was thrilled when Annys said Ember could come home for the weekend. Make yourself at home.”

She stepped back from the doorway and we entered. The place looked lived-in, but tidy. It was when things got too dirty or too clean that I worried.

Kat went to the living room to put down her overnight bag. All I'd brought was my satchel; everything I needed was already here. I followed Mom into the kitchen where she poured us some iced tea.

“What did you want to do tonight?” she asked.

“Whatever you want, Mom, really.”

“How about pizza and a reality TV marathon? I recorded a whole season of one of those housewives shows.”

“Sounds great,” I said. “Let's do it.”

She put an arm around me and guided me to the living room. A part of me would always be on the alert around her, waiting for the other shoe to drop, but I'd learned to enjoy her during these times when she was lucid, happy, and just my mom. Kat joined us on our garage sale sofa to watch crap television on our outdated set, and I couldn't have been more content.

As it turned out, Kat's threshold for reality programming was apparently lower than mine and Mom's; she drifted off after the first few episodes.

When I went into the kitchen for another slice of pizza, Mom followed me.

“Honey, I didn't want to ask in front of your friend, but how are you? Do you like where you are? Do you think you'll be ready to come home soon?”

It was the one question that could spoil the evening. How could I tell her that I wasn't coming home? That I belonged at the Institute, and I'd be living there until I graduated. I'd always known that as soon as I turned eighteen, I'd be out of her house. I think she knew, too, and was preparing for it. But to leave a year and a half early... I was worried how she would react.

“I like it, Mom. A lot, actually.” It had to be done. Whether to break the news slowly or all at once was the question. “The classes are really advanced. I'm learning stuff I never would have gotten to in public school.”

I searched her eyes for a reaction. So far so good.

“It's not just a place for troubled teens. Even once they decide I'm not a threat to myself, I can stay, if I want to.”

“And do you want to?” Her voice was quiet but didn't break, and no tears were forthcoming.

“If you say it's OK, then, yeah, I think I would like to stay.” There, it was done. I added, “But I'll come home as much as they'll let me.”

She let out a long sigh. “Well, if that's what you want. I miss you like crazy, but you look better than you have in a long time. If being there is making you happy, then it's what I want for you. God knows I don't want you to end up like me...”

Her face clouded, but her eyes remained dry. “I'm sorry, Mom,” I said.

“No, Em, I'm sorry. I know...I know what I am. And I can only imagine

what it's done to you. Don't end up like me, and don't raise a child like this. Whatever they're teaching you, it's working. I guess it's time I grew up too.”

I threw my arms around her and hugged her tight. “Thank you, Mom. Thank you so much.”

With the television marathon over and Kat already fast asleep on the sofa, Mom and I climbed the stairs to our respective bedrooms.

“Love you, honey, see you tomorrow,” she said.

I returned the sentiment and opened the door to my room, finding it exactly as I'd left it. Art supplies in stacks on the floor, bed unmade. I entered and stopped cold.

The mural.

My heart raced. Kat was right downstairs. She couldn't be allowed to see this. I didn't even want to see it. It loomed in front of me like a gaping mouth, threatening to swallow me whole. I scanned my room. The only paints I had were in small tubes, not nearly enough to cover the wall. In a panic, I pulled one of the blankets from my bed. It was lightweight and meant for a king-size bed. I'd folded it to fit my twin. I shook it, watching it unfurl. The fabric was all black with a violet lotus woven into it. It would more than cover the symbol.

I yanked open the drawers of my desk and found a full box of thumbtacks. They would have to do; I couldn't start pounding nails at midnight. My mother might not have found it odd, but I was certain Kat would come running. I pulled my chair over to the wall and began the arduous process of pressing thumbtacks through drywall. Fifteen minutes later my fingers were raw, but the blanket provided a thin sheath that covered the symbol completely.

I sat down on my bed, spent.

Covering it up doesn't change what you are.

I don't want it to. Otherwise, I couldn't stop you.

If the Demon replied, I didn't hear it. Master Dogan was right; I was much better at blocking it out now.

My sleep was fitful, but I'd been expecting that. If there was a way to meditate while asleep, my classes hadn't yet covered it.

In the morning I stumbled downstairs, the smell of coffee filling my nostrils and making me smile. Kat was already seated at the folding card table we ate at. Mom was at the stove, flipping a pancake.

"This one's for you, babe. Kat's already had three," she said with a grin.

"I couldn't help it, they're too good." Kat said, patting her belly.

I poured myself some coffee and refilled Kat's cup.

"What do you girls want to do today?" Mom asked, sliding my pancake onto a plate.

"Up to you," Kat said to me. It stood to reason; Kat could come and go as she pleased from the Institute.

I poured a generous helping of syrup and considered the options. "How about some shopping?"

"Ooh, I like this plan," Kat said.

I wondered if she realized that our shopping trips consisted of hunting for treasures at secondhand stores.

"Great, it's settled, then," Mom said, stealing a bite of my pancake.

As I ate, I noticed the pill minder on the table. When she was on the wagon, my mother portioned out her meds into the daily slots. Friday's and Saturday's were still full. Missing one day didn't usually have an adverse effect, but I popped open today's and held them out for her to take.

She shook her head. "No thanks, I'm good."

I tilted my head. We'd had this conversation before. "Yes, you are good. Let's keep you that way."

"Em, it's fine, I'll start again tomorrow. You know how cloudy they make me. I just want to be awake enough to enjoy your visit."

"Mom, you know—"

"I said it's fine. Now please stop embarrassing me in front of your friend."

My mother's tone was firm, and I knew it was a lost cause. I put the pills back in the case. Kat just stared into her cup.

An awkward moment later, my mother smiled and said, "Which store do you want to hit first?"

As expected, Kat was less enthusiastic once we pulled up to the first thrift store. Mom and I searched the racks while Kat chatted with a painfully emo kid. For her part, my mom seemed to be doing well, but I found myself in the familiar role of studying her, watching for any sign of an impending apocalypse.

I tried on multiple pairs of jeans; Mom modeled a poodle skirt and several hats. We didn't find anything at the first store, so we headed off to the next. Kat was a decent sport about it, never complaining, but never trying anything on, either.

A few hours and several thrift stores later, I'd found a pair of jeans, an alligator shirt I hoped I could pull off as ironic, and a vintage dress I had only tried on at my mother's pleading and then bought at Kat's insistence. Mom had made out like a bandit, her best find a tailored pea coat. We were at our last stop, and Kat was clearly bored.

"Try this on," I said, holding out a tie-dyed lime green jumpsuit.

She laughed. "Yeah, sure."

"Try it on," I said again, "and I'll try on these."

I held up a pair of gold hot pants and a black sequined halter top. Kat laughed in spite of herself.

"You're on," she said, grabbing the jumpsuit.

We each disappeared into a dressing room and changed into our outfits. I was painfully self-conscious as I emerged—I looked ridiculous—but a deal

was a deal. I stepped out to see Kat in the one outfit that could make her look less than gorgeous. The jumpsuit was four inches too short and sagged in the crotch. I looked just as outrageous, the pants skin tight and the top dipping low where there should have been more cleavage to fill it out. We both burst out laughing. Mom walked over to see what was going on and howled. She pulled out her cell phone to take a picture and Kat and I dashed back into our respective dressing rooms.

“Not fair, Mom! That's against the rules,” I called out, hastily changing clothes.

“Sorry, sorry, you're right,” she said. “You girls ready for some food?”

We were, and the three of us went to my favorite Indian place. It was fun to hit all of my favorite places in one day, like living a highlight reel. It was early evening by the time we made it home. Mom had already OK'd us going to the all-ages show, so Kat and I laid down for what Mom called a “disco nap.”

I woke, groggy in the way you can only get from sleeping in the middle of the day. Downstairs, Kat was watching television.

“Where's my mom?” I said.

She shrugged. “She wasn't here when I got up.”

“I'm going to hit the shower. You need anything?” I asked.

“Nope. I'll hop in when you're done.”

Kat refused to let me look in the mirror.

“I've been doing my own hair since I was six,” I said above the noise of the hairdryer.

“Don't I know it,” she said, her concentration on my dark locks.

“Hey—”

“Oh, hush,” she said, “I'm teasing. I just thought you could use a break from the norm. If you don't like it, I will personally get out my flat iron and give you back stick-straight hair.”

She was using a diffuser, twisting and rolling sections of my hair as she blew it dry. I closed my eyes and submitted to the treatment. She had already done my makeup, and I could tell by the soft brown colors she'd used that it

wasn't my normal look.

“And *voilà* !” She spun me around so I could see myself. Soft waves framed my face and fell past my shoulders with just enough of a tousled look to make them seem effortless. My eyes looked bigger than usual, with just a hint of smokiness at the corners.

“Well?” Kat asked. “What do you think?”

I considered my reflection. It didn't quite look like me. There was nothing edgy or different looking in what I saw, especially wearing the dress Kat had insisted I buy. I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

“I guess I didn't know I could look... pretty,” I said finally.

“Ember, you're always pretty,” she said. “You're beautiful. I just thought you might want to try something new.”

I had to admit, the look was growing on me.

“Thanks,” I said, giving her a hug, “you did great.”

“So no flat iron?”

“Not tonight,” I said and laughed.

“Good, because it's almost nine,” she said. “We should go.”

I grabbed my bag and slung it across my body. “All set.”

We bounded downstairs, her excited to see Magda, me just happy to go out after dark.

I stopped short when I saw my mom on her hands and knees cleaning the kitchen floor. She'd come home soon after I'd gotten out of the shower and had been busy downstairs ever since. Seeing her now, scrubbing a non-existent spot, my heart sank.

“It looks pretty clean, Mom. Why don't you relax and I'll make you a snack?”

She shook her head. “It is not clean. And it wouldn't kill you to give me a hand before you take off for the night.”

“Can I help tomorrow?” I asked. “The show starts in— ”

“Forget it, I'll do it myself,” she said, dusting herself off.

She strode into the living room—her pace too quick, her tread too heavy. I wanted to beg her to take her meds, but I knew it was too late for that.

“No, Mom, we'll help. It's no big deal to miss the first few songs.”

I tidied the coffee table, lining up remotes and stacking magazines. Kat caught on and folded her blanket. She began fluffing pillows, giving one of them a smack, which caused a cloud of dust to rise. She had no idea what

she'd just set in motion.

“Look—look at that. It's filthy in here. You can't just slap the dust around, Kat. Don't you know what dust mites are?”

Kat looked like a deer caught in headlights. “I'm sorry, Ms. Lyons— ”

“Forget it. Just go, both of you.”

Kat looked at me, unsure of how to respond. I'd seen this before and knew she was going to be at this all night. The neighbors would be complaining about her vacuuming at two a.m. again.

“OK, Mom. We'll see you later,” I said, but she was paying no attention. She was busy pulling the covers off the couch cushions and muttering.

I edged out of the room, Kat close behind.

“Is she all right?” she asked when we reached the door.

I shook my head. “No, but once it's started, there's no choice but to let her go. If we stay out late enough, she'll burn herself out and be asleep by the time we get back.”

The door clicked shut behind us, and I knew I'd have a different mother by morning.

The club was filled with smoke despite the No Smoking signs posted throughout. We'd been too late to say hi to Magda before the show, so Kat flirted and muscled us up to the front of the stage. The lights dimmed and the crowd erupted into applause as the all-girl band sauntered onstage. Magda was stunning in thigh high boots and a short red dress. Her face brightened upon seeing Kat at the front of the crowd.

The music started, and when the applause died down, I was impressed with the hypnotic sound. Kat was entranced, too, but by Magda, not the chords emanating from her guitar. I closed my eyes, swaying to the music.

Be careful.

The intrusion was jarring, but I refused to give in to fear.

Shut it, I replied, then opened my eyes and gazed at the soft glow of a blue stage light. Slowly, I sank into it. Though I hadn't mastered meditating on a point of light in my mind's eye, I had learned to be selective about what I shut out. I opened more fully to the music, letting it wash over me while silencing the Voice.

The first set was over too quickly. Kat took me by the hand and led me backstage, where Magda was having a smoke.

"I'm glad you could make it," she said.

"Wouldn't have missed it," Kat said.

Magda turned to me. "How about you? Are you enjoying the show?"

"Definitely," I said. "I love your sound."

We made small talk for a few minutes, which included Magda inviting us

to a party when their set was over. We agreed, wanting to put some distance between us and the cleaning frenzy going on at my apartment. The lights dimmed, indicating it was time for the band to go back on. The audience had grown, and people crowded the stage.

“Why don't you watch from here?” Magda said. “Best seats in the house.”

We agreed, and Kat went to stand at the edge of the stage while I took a seat on an amplifier not in use.

Once again I concentrated solely on the music. I wondered what it would be like to kiss someone while I was this focused. I closed my eyes and imagined Taren's lips touching mine and having that be all I could feel, every part of me surrendering to him. The image was so real, it was like he was there, touching my shoulder, his warm breath on my neck. His hand slid from my shoulder and clamped over my mouth.

My eyes flew open, darting wildly. Out of the corner of my eye I saw who had a hold of me. A man wearing dark sunglasses. I clawed at him, kicking furiously, but to no avail. I was no match for the strength of a Red. He pulled me backward. The last thing I saw before darkness engulfed me was Kat staring transfixed at the stage.

My eyes adjusted quickly. We were in a storage room. Extra chairs were stacked atop each other, a large broom and a mop bucket in the corner. My eyes dimmed again, but this time it was because I was losing consciousness. One of my attacker's hands was still clamped firmly over my mouth while the other encircled my throat, thumb pressed deep into my carotid artery. My feet drummed weakly against the floor.

From far away I heard the door bang open, and I was dropped to the cement floor. Air rushed into my lungs and I welcomed the pain of it, taking huge gulps. My vision cleared and I looked up to see Taren fighting the Red with a short blade. The Red's eyes glowed like fire, his sunglasses now broken on the floor. He was also armed with a blade, and the two sparred. For all of the Red's strength, his skill was outmatched. Within a minute, Taren knocked the knife from his hand and pinned him to the floor. Without hesitation, he plunged his blade into the Red's chest, sending a spurt of blood into the air. The Red gurgled and blood streamed from his mouth before his head lolled to the side, the unnatural light in his eyes winking out.

I shook uncontrollably. I'd never seen anyone die before. I knew he—it?—had been about to kill me, but it was still too much.

Kat hurtled into the room, coming to a halt and taking in the scene.

“What happened? Are you OK?” She rushed to kneel by my side.

I was still too stunned to respond. Kat probed tenderly at my neck.

“Guess we'll be heading back to the thrift store,” she said, forcing a smile. “We're going to need to get you some scarves to cover the bruising.”

“Scarves?” Taren said, wiping his blade on the dead man's pants. “You almost get her killed and you're worried about her wardrobe?”

He rose. He'd never looked so dangerous, not even while killing the Red. Kat stared at the floor when he spoke.

“Well, Katrina, what have you got to say for yourself?”

“Nothing,” Kat said. “There's no excuse. I'm so sorry, Ember.”

I opened my mouth, but didn't get the chance to speak.

“Sorry doesn't keep her alive,” Taren said, his anger showing no signs of abating.

I wanted desperately to diffuse this powder keg. “Honestly, Taren, it happened so fast. One second— ”

“Which is why she should have never taken her eyes off of you,” he said. “Because a lot can happen in a second. Annys will not be pleased.”

“Annys?” Kat said, rising to her feet. “You're going to report me?”

“You haven't left me much choice. Ember needs a Guardian who is more committed to taking care of her than lusting after some— ”

“Hey! Lay off, Taren.” No longer abashed, Kat now fixed him with a level gaze. “Don't forget, I've saved your ass a time or two. You're not always so perfect.”

“This is different,” he said. “She's different.”

Because I was a Daemon.

For a moment when he'd been battling the Red, I'd let myself believe that he was fighting for my life because he cared about me. But he was just worried what it would mean to his cause if I died.

“Do you have any idea what would happen if— ”

I didn't let him finish.

“What are you even doing here, anyway?” I asked, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice. “Shouldn't you be sucking up to Annys so you can get your job back?”

My words hung in the air.

“Kat, guard the door.” Taren's voice was all the more commanding for its

quietness.

Kat looked to me, not moving until I gave a slight nod. She shut the door harder than necessary on her way out.

When she'd gone, Taren paced a moment before speaking. "You have no idea—"

"I have every idea," I said, standing. "I know what I am, and I know what I'm expected to do. You've made it very clear that your concern for me is strictly professional. I'll ask you again; what are you doing here?"

He stood in front of me, a pained expression on his face. "Ember, if anything happened to you..."

"I mean it, Taren. I'm over it. Don't pretend—"

And then he was kissing me. One hand gripping the back of my neck, the other at my waist, pulling me closer. I melted into him, leaving no space between us. Every atom of my being came alive and mingled with his. Our mouths pressed together urgently, then slowed and became soft, fluttering against each other, until we were still, our lips barely touching, breathing each other's breath.

"Not *completely* over it, I guess." I was delightfully dizzy, torn between wanting to kiss him more and wanting to bask in the moment just as it was.

"Good," he said, his fingertips tracing my jaw.

"I thought..." I couldn't say it.

"I know what you thought," he said, "because it's what I wanted you to think. I thought it would be easier."

"Easier than what?" I asked, searching his eyes.

"Everything OK in there?" came Kat's voice from the other side of the door.

Taren released me and went to open it. "Yeah, Kat, we're fine. I'm sorry I was a jerk."

She took in the scene—Taren now calm, me flushed—and smiled. "No, problem. Glad it all worked out. Except for him, of course."

Taren and I followed her gaze to the body lying on the floor. The most romantic kiss of my life had just taken place next to a corpse.

"We should go," Taren said. "There's no way for me to get him out of here without being seen, and I want us long gone by the time he's discovered."

We exited the storeroom and walked back toward the stage. Taren's hand

was on the small of my back, sending shivers of the nicest kind up my spine.

What did he mean, that he thought it would be easier to push me away? I had a feeling it wasn't just some guy thing. I was torn between wanting to know, and not wanting to spoil the feeling that hung between us. I scanned the crowd. I felt safe with both Kat and Taren protecting me, but I couldn't help wondering if more than one Red had been sent after me. They were rumored to work alone, but they were also rumored to avoid crowds, so it seemed the usual rules no longer applied.

Instead of stopping in the wings, Kat continued down the steps and into the audience.

"Hey, don't you want to wait for Magda?" I had to shout over the din.

"Ember, I almost got you killed tonight because I was distracted. I'll just text her that something came up." She turned and continued toward the door.

Once out front of the club, Taren said, "We need someplace with a lot of people. Well lit, even at this time of night. Cameras would be good."

"City Walk?" I hated to be the one to suggest it, but it did fit the bill.

Kat groaned. Universal City Walk, perched atop a hill overlooking Universal Studios, was filled with theme restaurants, souvenir shops, a megaplex theatre, and a bowling alley. From open to close, it was crammed with tourists snapping photos and locals who liked all of their chain restaurants in one location. It was a place I wouldn't normally be caught dead in, but since it seemed the most likely place to keep me alive, I was willing.

"Perfect," Taren said. "I'm parked just down the street."

We left Kat's car where it was and piled into Taren's. Kat made a point to take the backseat, leaving me to sit up front.

"Why do you think the Red came after me in such a crowded place?" I asked once we were underway.

"I don't know," Taren said, "and until I do, we're all going to have to be on high alert."

I wanted to ask if it was because the Demon had finally realized I couldn't be won over to its side. With me able to influence the Gateway, maybe I was too much of a liability to let live. But Kat didn't know those details, so I held my tongue. Besides, there was something that tugged at my memory about what Taren had just said. *We had to be careful...* Then it came to me.

"That's what I heard the Voice say just before the attack—that I had to be careful. Why would It warn me like that?"

“You heard it say ‘be careful?’” Taren asked. “And you're sure it was the same voice you always hear?”

“Positive. It's very distinctive.”

“Maybe there's some kind of discord among the demon races,” Kat said, “or some wires got crossed.”

“Maybe,” Taren said, but I could tell he was as troubled as I.

We drove up a steep hill and entered the Curious George lot. The parking garages at City Walk were named after cartoon characters and actors. It was the weekend, which meant spaces were hard to come by. Taren finally spotted one, and once parked, we made the long trek to the elevator.

We reached our floor, and the moment the doors opened, our ears were assaulted. The sound of 90's pop hits blasting from one establishment mixed with the mariachi band from another, and intermingled with the screams of excited children up way past their bedtimes. All three of us recoiled.

“Come on,” Taren said, stepping out of the elevator. “it's exactly what we need.”

He was right. Besides, it had been my idea. Kat and I followed, our faces grim.

Taren led us to a faux-fifties diner, and over a side of fries, he asked when my curfew was. Kat and I shared a look.

“It's kind of fluid tonight,” I said. “My mom stopped taking her medicine so the apartment is crazy central right now. We're kind of hoping to wait it out. I'm thinking three-ish?”

“Perfect,” Taren said. “Plenty of time for a game.”

I followed his gaze upstairs to Lucky Strike.

“Bowling?” I hadn't been bowling since I was seven, and I was pretty sure I hadn't liked it.

He gave a small shrug. “Have you got a better idea?”

Kat and I surveyed the chaos around us, and then in almost perfect unison said, “Bowling it is.”

The lanes were brightly lit and Taren chose one smack in the middle. He stood confidently at the line, poised to release the ball. And then he did—

right into the gutter.

“Wow,” Kat said when his second ball did the same, “that's going to be hard to top.”

I stood up to take my turn, which also resulted in a gutter ball. On my follow-up, I managed to take down two pins, but only after adopting the stand-with-wide-legs-and-roll-it-with-two-hands stance that all the little kids were doing. I took a bow all the same.

Kat jumped up and grabbed a hot pink ball, which she then held overhead while she twirled around, releasing it almost directly into the gutter.

“Maybe we should ask for bumper rails,” I said.

“Or...we could score on style points,” Kat said. “I think that last effort was worth at least six.”

She hoisted a ball as it emerged from the machine and strutted like a supermodel down a catwalk. She turned, struck a fierce pose, and released the ball backwards through her legs. From then on, bowling got way more fun. Taren was fond of air-guitaring, while I was more comfortable with interpretive performances. At the end of our first game we realized we'd been too busy laughing to keep score, but that didn't keep us from starting a second one. Kat went up to the snack bar to grab us some soda leaving Taren and me alone for the first time since we'd kissed.

“How are you doing?” he asked. “That was a pretty close call you had earlier.”

I nodded. “I was freaked at first, but... I kind of need to get used to it, right? Until the Gateway is locked it probably isn't safe for me to leave the Institute again.”

“They should have never let you leave in the first place,” Taren said, his eyes darkening.

“Annys and Master Dogan were doing me a favor by letting me come home. They couldn't have known I'd be in any danger.”

The set of Taren's jaw made me think he was holding something back. I probed further.

“What happened, anyway?” I asked. “Why did you fight with Annys? And how long are you suspended for?”

“I wish I knew. Once she cut me, I didn't stick around to find out. As to why...I guess it's because Annys is being Annys. Which is usually a good thing, but lately we haven't seen eye to eye on much.”

I thought about going up against Annys and knew I'd probably never manage it. Remembering how dangerous Taren had looked when confronting Kat, I could easily believe he had.

"Heads up," Kat said. She was balancing three sodas and a bag of chips.

I jumped up to help her, disappointed that I hadn't gotten the chance to learn more before she'd returned.

Lucky Strike closed at two a.m., and by the time we got to the car and made it back to where Kat was parked at the club, we were on track for our three a.m. target. I prayed my mom had finished her frenzy and was asleep. Taren pulled up beside Kat's car and let the engine idle.

"I'm going to follow you home," he said, "just to make sure you get there safe. After that, your mother's detail can take over."

"Em, would you mind riding with Taren?" Kat asked as she opened her door. "I'm going to give Magda a call, and I could use some privacy."

The move was transparent, and I didn't help matters by responding, "Sure," just a little too quickly.

Once Kat was safely in her car, Taren and I pulled away. We rode in silence until I couldn't stand it anymore, the words coming out in a rush.

"Why would it be easier if I thought you didn't like me?" I asked.

His brow furrowed.

"Because I'm afraid one of us is going to get hurt," he said, "and I don't want that to happen."

"Why would one of us get hurt?" I asked, sensing he meant more than just typical guy-girl stuff.

"There are things going on," he said, "things I can't talk to you about. Not yet."

He came to a stop in front of my apartment building and I wished we still had father to go.

"Why not? I haven't blabbed any of the other million secrets I'm keeping."

"It's not you I don't trust," he said.

"Then what—"

“Please, Ember, can we just leave it for now?” His voice was pleading and he placed his hand on my cheek. “I’m not sorry I kissed you. I wish I’d done it sooner. But I need you to trust me. Can you do that for just a little while longer?”

I responded by leaning in and touching my lips to his. A spark of electricity passed between us, and I don’t think I was the only one who trembled.

She’ll never forgive me.

I pulled back with a start. That hadn’t been the Voice.

“What?” Taren said. “What is it?”

I shook my head to clear it. “I-I don’t know, I heard something when we kissed. It wasn’t the Demon—it was...something else.”

“Maybe you’re starting to hear the other demonic voices,” he said. “What did it say?”

“It said, ‘She’ll never forgive me.’”

Taren’s eyes widened briefly, but his voice was calm when he said, “I’m sure it was nothing. All kinds of weird things run through my brain.”

I wasn’t convinced. It hadn’t sounded like an errant thought, it had sounded like a voice speaking inside my mind. Maybe he was right and I was beginning to hear the other demons now. It was an unsettling thought.

By this time, Kat had parked and was waiting in the driveway.

“I better go,” I said and opened the door. “And to answer your question, yes, I can trust you a little while longer.”

I smiled at him, and he smiled back, but it seemed forced, like his mind was already on something else.

“Get some sleep if you can,” he said, “and I’ll see you back at the Institute tomorrow afternoon. Annys and I have some things to discuss.”

Kat and I paused at my front door. The lights were off and all was quiet. I breathed a sigh of relief as I pulled my keys from my purse. Once inside, I left the lights off. Kat grabbed her blanket from the sofa and began to follow me upstairs.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

“I'm sleeping on the floor of your bedroom. If anything happens, I'm going to be there this time.”

The glint in her eye told me not to argue, and I had to admit, her presence would make me feel safer.

“Thanks,” I said.

We crept upstairs together.

The next morning, I woke before Kat did. In truth, I hadn't really slept—more like fitfully dozed. Whether I was more shaken by the attack or the new—possibly demonic—voice popping into my head, I felt the need to be on guard.

I stepped carefully over Kat and made my way downstairs. No coffee smell this morning. I wasn't surprised, just sad. I pulled the grounds from the freezer and brewed a pot in the now immaculate coffee maker. The whole place was spotless. The grout gleamed, the stove sparkled, and a faint smell of bleach hung in the air. I entered the living room to find that the furniture had been rearranged. I liked it. I picked up a pillow and gave it a shake—no cloud of dust this time. I set it back down, making sure to leave it as perfectly placed as I'd found it. I went to the pathos plant in the corner. She'd wiped down each one of the leaves and trimmed the yellow ones. Small wonder she was still sleeping.

Back in the kitchen I made myself some cereal. I didn't want to wait any longer for coffee, so I held my mug underneath the stream and let it fill before setting the pot back in its place.

I was munching corn flakes when what sounded like a herd of elephants came down the stairs and Kat burst into the kitchen.

She stopped short when she saw me and said, “Do *not* do that to me again. You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I was hungry and it looked like you were going to sleep for a while.”

“You move, I move,” she said, grabbing a mug from the cupboard. “That’s how this is going to work until I get you safely back to the Institute.”

“Got it,” I said.

“How’s your mom doing?” she asked.

“I’m not sure yet. If history is any indication, she’ll probably spend most of the day in bed. After that...if she stays off of her meds, things will only get worse.”

I knew my tone was matter-of-fact, and it wasn’t that I didn’t care—I had just seen it all before. There were only so many times I could get my hopes up. Still, I was grateful for the fun time we’d had at the thrift shop, and glad that Kat had gotten to see her on a good day, and not just a bad one.

It was after eleven, and I was expected back at the Institute by one o’clock. When we’d finished breakfast, Kat and I worked on packing some stuff to take back with me. While she was concerned with clothing, I was concerned with art supplies, books, and finding my iPod. Kat informed me that until I was a second year I wouldn’t be allowed to bring my cell phone and to be prepared to have my bags searched once I got back. First year students were considered too fragile to have unregulated contact with the outside world. By the time we’d filled my oversized duffle and a backpack, it was time to leave.

After we loaded my things into the car, I went back inside to say goodbye to my mother. I knew she wouldn’t want to see Kat right now, and Kat seemed to understand.

I knocked, but when there was no answer, I entered my mother’s room. She was snoring softly. She’d passed out fully clothed on top of her comforter.

“Hey, Mom,” I said, kneeling beside her bed, “it’s time for me to get going.”

Her eyes fluttered open. “So soon? Can’t you stay another day?” Her voice was husky with sleep.

“No, I’m sorry. But I’ll come back soon.” I felt guilty making a promise I wasn’t sure I could keep, but I wanted to avoid a scene.

She groped until she found my hand and squeezed it. “I can call them—the people at the Institute. I’ll tell them I’ll bring you back tomorrow. What’s one day?”

I shook my head. “I’ve got to go, Mom. I love you.”

“Please don't leave me,” she said, her voice cracking. “If you leave, you're not ever coming back. I need you, Em.”

She did. I knew she did. But I also knew that the Institute needed me. And not for selfish reasons, but because together we needed to find a way to lock the Gateway again, lest the world be overrun by demons. The breaches would only get worse; when I connected to the Gate, I'd sensed how weak it was. It was only a matter of time before it failed completely. I couldn't let that happen, even if it meant breaking my mother's heart in order to save her life.

I pulled my hand away. “I'm going, Mom. I love you, but I'm going.”

I stood and walked to the door. Her sobs were quiet, each one pricking my heart. I imagined her face buried in the pillow, but I didn't turn back. I shut the door behind me.

By the time I got into the car I'd wiped my eyes of tears, but they felt puffy. I'm sure Kat could sense I wasn't up for conversation, and we made the drive back to the Institute in relative silence.

Winding up Laurel Canyon, I was focused on nothing but keeping out the voices and the motion sickness. For the most part it worked, and as we approached the front gate, I felt a sense of pride.

Three Guardians stepped in front of Kat's car as we approached the guard shack. All looked the worse for wear.

“Where have you been, Kat?” one of them asked when he recognized her. “We needed you last night.”

“Why—what happened? Was there another breach?” Her tone was anxious.

“During the ritual,” the Guardian replied. “Why weren't you here?”

“What ritual? What are you talking about?” Kat sounded as confused as I felt.

“To reseal the Gateway. The Elders called upon every Keeper, every Guardian, and every student to help. Word went out at dinner. Everyone was there except you and Taren. And her, I guess.” He pointed to me and a chill ran down my spine.

My mind raced with thoughts too quickly for me to pluck them out of the

air. Was it possible that this “ritual” hadn’t been planned when I’d spoken with Annys and Master Dogan? Even if not, why wouldn’t they have called us back? If anyone was qualified to help re-seal the Gateway, it was me. Wasn’t it?

“Who was hurt?” Kat demanded. “Did we lose anyone?”

The Guardian shook his head. “Thankfully, no. With so many Guardians present, we didn't lose anyone, but dozens were injured. At least three-dozen more hostiles escaped, and the Gate is in worse shape than ever. You really didn't know about this?”

She gave him a flat stare. “If I had known, don't you think I'd have been here, Adam?”

She then slapped the steering wheel and cursed.

A conclusion was solidifying in my mind. Annys and Master Dogan hadn’t wanted me present at the ritual. It was impossible to think there was any other explanation. But it made no sense. I was their best chance at repairing the Gateway—they themselves had told me as much. Why was I training so hard otherwise? Why was I leaving my mother to cry alone if I was just going to be pushed aside? Anger welled up from deep within me, causing me to clench and unclench my fists. A moment later, I jerked on the door handle and launched myself out of the car.

“Ember, where are you going?” I heard Kat jump out the car, heard her footsteps behind me.

“I'm going to talk to some Elders,” I said, quickening my pace.

Perhaps we should talk first.

I'll deal with you later, I told the Demon, pushing it to the recesses of my mind.

Wrong.

I was falling, tumbling through endless darkness, being pulled by a force stronger than gravity. Just when I was sure I would fall forever, I landed, face-down, the impact reverberating through me. It took a moment before I could move. Was my back broken? I was sure my cheek had shattered. But when I was able to lift my head and probe it with my fingertips, it seemed intact. I struggled to sit back on my heels.

I was in a dark wasteland, the only light an eerie red glow that filtered through the blackest clouds I'd ever seen. Wind whipped at my hair and blew acrid smoke into my nostrils which made me double over in a fit of coughing. It subsided only to be replaced by retching. What came up wasn't the cereal I'd eaten for breakfast, but a tar-black slime that continued to coat my mouth no matter how much I spit. It tasted how I imagined a rotting corpse would smell. A scream ripped through the landscape, followed by a *crunch* that sounded like bones splintering, and I turned, wild-eyed, searching for a place to hide.

BEAUTIFUL, ISN'T IT? YOU CAN SEE WHY I AM SO DESPERATE TO LEAVE.

The voice was beyond loud, it crushed down upon my mind, allowing no other thought. I clutched at my temples, panting. Time passed differently in this world, and I had no way of knowing how long I'd really been here. Was Kat already racing to find someone to do a Retrieval, or had I not even collapsed to the ground yet in the human world?

IT ISN'T THE HUMANS' WORLD. IT BELONGS TO THE

DAEMONS. IT WAS STOLEN FROM US, AND NOW IS THE TIME TO TAKE IT BACK .

I howled in pain and had to stop myself from beating my head against the cracked earth. I had to hold on. It couldn't be much longer, it couldn't—

YOU WILL NOT GO BACK UNTIL I RELEASE YOU, AND I WILL NOT RELEASE YOU UNTIL YOU HAVE SEEN.

My mouth hung open and my throat contracted, but no more sound came out. There was no voice left in me, none but its.

The landscape around me shifted and blurred, and I had the sensation of flying, even though I remained on my hands and knees, gripping the dirt. It wasn't me, but my surroundings that were moving. When it finally stopped, I opened my eyes and everything had changed.

I found myself in the passenger seat of a car. I couldn't will myself to move; I was just an observer in this body, not the animating force. We passed a small market and I could tell we were traveling through Laurel Canyon.

"I wish you would tell me what's bothering you," a male voice said.

I turned to see a handsome man in his mid-forties with a salt and pepper beard. "It's nothing, honey, I'm fine." The voice wasn't mine, but I knew it had passed through the lips of the person whose body I was inhabiting.

"It's not nothing, you toss and turn all night lately. Are you having nightmares again?" The man's face was etched with concern.

"No," I said, "it's just headaches. I made an appointment with Dr. Wilson to get checked out, but I'm sure there's nothing to worry about." I reached across and rested my hand on his leg, giving it a squeeze. I looked up to see the Institute coming into view. A Guardian stepped out of the guard shack.

"Morning, Richard, Gretchen. Have a good shift," he said and hit the code for the gate to open.

The world spun and for a moment I was back in the wasteland, back in my own body. But then—

I was pacing back and forth in a dining room.

"You're being completely irrational. You're not making any sense," Richard said. He was seated at the table, his expression pleading.

I stopped pacing. "Stop calling me irrational! I know what I saw." My voice boomed.

Richard stood and grabbed me by the shoulders. "Gretchen, listen to me,

please. This isn't you talking. I can feel you slipping away. We have to get some help."

Again my surroundings blurred, the motion making me queasy.

I was now in Master Dogan's office. All of the Elders, including Annys were gathered around his table. They looked tense—eyes tight, posture stiff.

"It's not that we don't have sympathy for what you're going through," said a female Elder with dark hair, gray streaking her temples, "we just have no one to replace you yet."

"The Centers are always the hardest to find, as you know," said a plump man with thinning hair, "but we are trying."

"Three more are due to graduate in the summer," Annys said. "Surely you can wait until then to take a leave of absence."

Master Dogan is studied me with his tranquil eyes.

"I have an idea to mitigate your exposure," he said, "if you and Richard are willing."

The world lurched.

Then I was in a bathroom, fumbling with a bottle of ibuprofen. I heard running bath water. My hands were shaking, my head pounding. At last, I unscrewed the cap and poured four tablets into my palm, then tossed them back with a gulp of water. I leaned against the counter until I stopped shaking. I pulled off my robe and stepped into the steaming bath, so hot it was painful. I sunk in slowly, getting acclimated. I soaked long enough for the bath to have cooled. The throbbing in my head receded, leaving a dull ache. Back in my robe, I exited the bathroom to find Richard reading in bed.

I slid under the covers next to him and leaned against his chest. He was reading Hemingway.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Better," I said. "I haven't had a headache since we got here."

The scene shifted and—

I was entering what looked like a grand ballroom. The floor was tiled in a beautiful mosaic, the walls decorated with rich tapestries. The space was circular, with a wooden staircase leading to a balcony that ringed the entire room. I was holding tightly to Richard's hand, and he gave me a kiss before going to stand against the wall with other Guardians. I walked to the center of the room and look down. I stood on the center tile of the Gateway.

The time is now.

No, comes my mental response . Not now, not ever. Eight others surrounded me, dressed in the same white robe I wore. We all took our seats. I closed my eyes and saw a beautiful ball of golden light pulsating at my third eye. I reached out, ready to form the link.

You know what I'll do to you.

It doesn't matter. I will never help you.

The first connection slid into place. A ribbon of energy pulsated between us. The second connection was made and I exhaled.

It's only going to get worse.

Stop it! The thought was loud in my head, and the connections broke, sending shooting pain through my body. I opened my eyes. Looks of shock painted the faces of the other Keepers.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Let's begin again."

I formed the links hastily, one after the next. There was nothing elegant about it, but my heart was racing, my palms sweating; I was afraid to go slowly. But the strength of the symbol beneath me had a buoying effect, and I began to relax. Little by little, the tension left my shoulders, my breath deepened. I felt myself at the center, connecting all of us together.

You will help me.

The link wavered, but I struggled to hang on, and didn't respond. It required all of my focus to keep the connection now.

Are you surprised, Gretchen, that I can reach you even now? Do you think yourself safe when you link with these humans?

Perspiration beaded on my forehead. My teeth were grinding with the effort.

Do you think there is anywhere you can go where I cannot find you?

The connection slipped a fraction, but I regained it. I was swaying now, trying desperately not to pass out.

It's no use fighting it. You will help me destroy the Gateway and release—

NO! The thought consumed my mind, blocking out all other sensations. I WILL NEVER HELP YOU. NOT EVER!!!

I pushed back against the Demon with everything I had. Too late, I realized what I'd done. The link had been severed; the eight lights pulsating around me winked out. My eyes flew open to see the other Keepers knocked backwards. The Guardians at the wall rushed forward, but the ground began

shaking violently below us. They struggled to keep their footing. Looking down, I noticed the tiniest of cracks appear.

“No!” I screamed as it spread, spidering in different directions.

The other Keepers hadn't stirred, other than being shaken by the force that felt like an earthquake but was much worse. The center tile split beneath me. I felt my insides threatening to erupt. I cried out in agony as the pain overwhelmed me, paralyzed me. Richard grabbed my arm and hauled me out of the way as a gaping hole opened where I'd been just seconds before.

The other Guardians reached the Keepers and dragged them back from the ever-widening maw.

“Run, Gretchen!” Richard stood, sword drawn, doing his best to balance on the shifting floor.

The rumbling slowed and from the hole came a mass of demons, clawing their way to freedom. The Guardians hacked and slashed at the monsters. An alarm sounded, barely audible over the clash of battle. The demons came in torrents, raining down upon the Guardians. We were outnumbered, but the demons seemed more interested in fleeing than fighting. They streamed toward the doors only to be met by the now-rallied forces. The Guardians made easy work of them, but they kept coming.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I imagined the symbol, glowing brightly. Not just the center this time, but the whole Gateway. The ribbon of energy pulsed throughout my body. I was the Gateway—pieces fragmented, but still alive.

Something was coming, something huge, and it was going to grind me to bits.

I willed the pieces back together. I'd blocked out the sound of battle, but was acutely aware of tile scraping slowly across the floor.

The something that was making my heart pound in my chest and my blood turn to ice was still coming.

I heard a click as one of tiles slid back into place. With part of the link formed, I pulsed with even more power. Inch by inch I went, reaching out energetically to form the link, the tiles following suit and sliding into place. The center was the last and hardest one. Unlike the others, it was in pieces. My guts twisted with effort as I imagined it whole, complete, perfect. The connection was made, though the center glowed much more weakly than the others. I opened my eyes. The battle was ending, the last of the demons being dispatched. I crawled to the center of the symbol, my body like jelly, and saw

the center stone, still cracked down the middle. Richard raced to my side and I collapsed into him, tears streaming down my face.

"I did this," I whispered. "I did this."

The vision faded and I was slammed back to the present, once again jarred to my core. I stayed completely still, but this time the world didn't shift around me.

"Oh my God, Ember, what happened?" It was Kat's voice, though I knew it was an illusion.

But as my eyes adjusted, it wasn't the scorched earth of the demon world below me, but ordinary grass. I twisted enough to see Kat kneeling beside me, concern marring her exquisite face.

"I-I was... How long was I gone?" I asked. Moving my mouth was agony.

"What do you mean, 'gone?' You were storming off to find Annys and Master Dogan and then you just collapsed."

"When?"

"Like ten seconds ago," Kat said. "You're really freaking me out. I'm gonna go get the nurse."

"No," I said, grabbing her arm. My head swam, but I fought against it. "I want you to tell me about a Keeper named Gretchen."

“Gretchen?” Kat said, confused. “Do you mean Gretchen Hart? What do you want to know about her?”

“Hart?”

I trembled.

“Well, yeah,” she said. “The only Gretchen I know is Taren's mom.”

As my world collapsed, Taren came racing toward us and skidded to a halt. “I saw you fall from across the lawn. Are you all right?”

He crouched at my side but I just stared at him, unable to form words.

“She asked how long she'd been gone and then asked about your mother,” Kat said when I didn't answer.

“You were...gone?” His brow creased with worry.

“Your mother,” I said, “she's a D—”

“Come on, let's get you to the nurse,” Taren said, trying to help me to my feet.

I snatched my hand away. “I'm not going anywhere with you.”

“Ember, please,” Taren said, his eyes pleading, “let me take you to the nurse.”

I stood, wincing with the pain of my fall. “Fine, let's go.”

Kat made as if to follow, but Taren waved her off. “I've got it, Kat. Annys wants to speak with you anyway.”

“Good,” Kat said, “because I've got a few questions for her. You sure you're OK, Em?”

My nod was a lie, but she believed it and strode off in the direction of the

main house.

“You better not be seriously thinking you can pawn me off on the nurse,” I said when she'd gone.

“No, I just said that so Kat would leave. Let me take you somewhere I can explain.”

“Explain what?” I said, my voice rising. “That your mother is a Daemon? That she's the one who opened the Gateway in the first place?”

Taren's eyes darted, looking to see if anyone was close enough to have overheard.

Satisfied no one had, he said, “Yes. I'll tell you everything, but we have to go where no one can listen. Please.”

I allowed him to lead me down the hill and onto the Sanctuary grounds.

“Why didn't you tell me?” I asked when we were well away from anyone else. “How could you make me think I was the only one when your own mother...when *you* are part Daemon?”

“I wanted to tell you, I swear I did, but I was forbidden to.” His eyes clouded with pain.

“By Annys,” I said.

I was sure of that.

“And Master Dogan,” he said.

His words stung like a slap. I had trusted Master Dogan completely.

“They were afraid that if we told you too soon— ”

“Told me what? That if a trained Keeper like your own mother wasn't able to escape the Demon, I never will, either? Or that no matter how hard I fought, I'd end up giving it what it wants anyway?”

That had been abundantly clear from the vision. It would always be one step ahead, pulling my strings to its liking. It had already played me—the suicide, my training, and, most recently, making me think I was stronger than it was. That there was even a chance I could defeat it.

And Taren had known all along.

“Why did you bring me here,” I asked, “when you knew I'd do more harm than good?”

“I don't know that,” he said. “You're so strong, and so determined...”

“And your mother wasn't?” She had seemed determined to me.

“She was—she is—but your progress has outstripped hers. At your age, she wasn't able to do what you can.”

“Where is she now?” I asked, ashamed that this was the first time the question had occurred to me.

Taren looked toward the path that led into the woods. Realization dawned.

“She's here? She's been here this whole time and you never said anything?”

Before Taren could answer, I strode away from him—toward the path. I'd gotten two paces when he stopped me, his touch gentle but firm.

“She's not ready,” he said, and I knew the admission pained him. “After what happened, she's very fragile. I want you to meet her, I do, but I can't let you until she's strong enough.”

I relented. I knew how it was to need to handle a mother with care.

“When was she discovered? Are there more of us?”

Taren shook his head. “No more that we know of. She was the only one until you. And she was discovered young. She had a breakdown at age twelve and was institutionalized near San Diego. She was there for over a year before she was found by a Guardian sent to that area in search of Keepers.”

I shuddered at the thought of being trapped in a mental hospital for a full year. “How did they know what she was?”

“Her drawings,” he said. “Her room was plastered with depictions of demons so exact they could have been culled straight from our textbooks... and fragments of the Gateway symbol, too.”

“Only fragments?”

Taren nodded. “That's what I mean when I say you're special. It's not just that you're a Daemon. Whether the bloodline is stronger in you, or life with your mother prepared you better, you came to us knowing the symbol in its entirety. That has to mean something.”

I wasn't convinced. “And what she was—that remained a secret even after...?”

“The Elders knew. Once they had determined she wasn't Marked but could still channel the symbols of the Gate, she was told she would be a Center and train with the others. She never revealed her origin to anyone until my father proposed. She thought it only right he should know before joining his life with hers. After the first breach, when she...” His voice broke, and he took a breath. “After what happened, the entire incident was swept under the rug. The alarms were blamed on the earthquake, the Keepers and Guardians

were ordered not to reveal the attack, and the other eight Keepers on duty that night were knocked unconscious, so no one could say for sure what had happened. I was only told what my mother was—what I am—after the fact.”

“Why aren't you training to be a Keeper?” I asked.

“Because I can't channel the symbol. I've been tested—believe me. I've got the genetics, but not the ability. I don't think they were disappointed by that. After what happened with my mother, the Elders were so afraid of there being others out there capable of doing what my mother had done...”

“That's why the Elders weren't told about me. Annys and Dogan wanted me trained, and the Elders would have demanded they send me away,” I said.

Taren nodded. “But once the story of the Gateway pulling itself back together circulated...they knew.”

“Because they'd seen it before,” I said. “And that's why I was kept out of the ritual they did last night. They were afraid I might destroy the Gateway completely.”

Annys had lied. I wasn't sent home because my mother needed me, but because Annys and the others had wanted me gone.

“Yes,” he said, a bitter edge to his voice, “but I didn't know anything about that until this morning when I got here.”

“Why were you kept out of it?” I said. “And why were you suspended?”

Knowledge was coming fast and furious and it bordered on being too much to take, but I had to know the truth.

“After you closed the Gateway, I went to Annys and demanded we tell you everything. I knew you needed to be warned of the extent of the demon's power, but she refused, saying you weren't ready yet. We argued and I was relieved of duty 'until such time as I could obey orders.' I now realize she'd hoped she would never have to tell you the truth. If they had been successful in sealing the Gate...” His voice got quiet. “I think you would have been expelled.”

Master Dogan's dishonesty was nothing compared with this betrayal.

“Expelled?” I could barely get the word out.

“With the Gateway properly sealed, you would be the only one capable of opening it again. I don't think they would have risked it.”

My legs gave way and I landed on the grass with a *thud*. Taren joined me, eying my reaction.

They had been using me. A small part of me had always known that, of

course, but I'd gone along with them because I believed in the cause. But to be expelled, cast back out into the world with no protection against the Demon and no one to talk to about any of it...

"But they weren't successful," I said quietly.

"No," Taren said, "they weren't. After the attack on your life, I came to Annys this morning to let her know I was going to tell you everything, even if it meant she would dismiss from the Guardian ranks. That was when I learned about the ritual."

"So what, now I'm not expelled? At least not until they can figure out a way to seal the Gate or until I somehow do it for them?"

"I honestly don't know," Taren said. "I didn't get to finish my conversation with Annys. I was in mid-rant when I saw you fall."

A ball of rage grew in my belly at the hypocrisy, at the betrayal. I didn't need the Demon to tell me what a fool I'd been for trusting anyone but myself. Even for all his remorse, Taren had still lied to me and let the Institute use me. I had been so sure he was different, which only proved that I couldn't be trusted, either.

I stood, my legs made stronger by my fury. Taren scrambled to his feet, reaching for me.

"Where are you going?" he asked when I pulled away.

"For a walk," I said, neither turning nor slowing my pace. "I need to think."

I strode across the lawn, trying to calm my tornado of emotions.

It was my fault, really. My fault for thinking I could fit in anywhere. My fault for letting my guard down. I had wanted so much to believe, and that desire had made me weak. And I had reveled in it...the thought that I wasn't alone, that people—some of them, anyway—could be depended upon. I had allowed myself to forget what I'd known long before I'd ever channeled the symbol: people always let you down. It was just part of the human condition. Look at Kat and Callie. One had tried to kill me, the other had almost gotten me killed. Neither intentionally, but did it matter? My mother had never meant to hurt me, and she'd all but ruined my life. It didn't matter what people meant to do, it mattered what they did.

Eventually my pace slowed and my fury slowed with it, morphing into cold rationality. I couldn't allow myself to act out of hurt; I had to think logically.

I hadn't consciously chosen a direction, but I found myself at the edge of the forest. I stepped on the path, and once I did, I knew where I needed to go.

Gretchen was Taren's mother, and she was part Daemon. The scenes of her life played through my mind. She had done everything she could to block out the madness, finally going to the Elders, who had had arranged for her to live inside the Sanctuary. Her only exposure to the Demon was when she was at the Gateway, and yet, it was still too much for her to handle because the Demon was always five steps ahead. It had been alive for who-knew-how-long; how could I ever hope to outsmart it—let alone defeat it—by myself?

The trail stretched out in front of me, beckoning me forward. The farther I walked, the more resolute I became. I had long since written this world off—my recent misguided faith in certain people, notwithstanding—but that didn't mean I could just stand by and watch it be destroyed. The Gateway, the Institute, they were bigger than my pain. I hated that I'd been used, but that wasn't important anymore. The only thing that mattered now was making sure that what had happened to Gretchen never happened again.

I walked deeper into the forest, the path becoming narrower and filled with weeds.

Eventually my thoughts turned to Taren. For all my hurt and anger, I conceded that he hadn't had much choice but to keep the truth from me. His sense of duty had been bored into him since childhood. What I was doing now would hurt him even more than he'd hurt me, and I hoped he could forgive me someday.

I came to a chain-link fence and climbed over it. The path disappeared, but I knew from the way I felt that I was still within the Sanctuary. Dirt gave way to rock, and within a few paces, I had reached my destination.

The city of Los Angeles lay before me, and I paused to take in the view. It was a clear day, no smog marring the skyline. I could even see the mountains in the distance. I looked over the edge of the boulder I stood upon and saw the long drop below.

Unlike that night so many weeks ago, I wasn't romanticizing death. I had been sure then that something waited for me. The voice in my head had assured me of that. Assured me I would be warm, that I would be at peace. But that had been a lie designed to make me court death like a lover. Now I had no idea what awaited me. Limbo? Hell? For the first time, I hoped there was no afterlife at all. A complete lack of awareness would suit me fine.

I kicked a small rock and it cascaded down the hillside, showing me the way.

“Don't do this, Ember,” Taren said from behind me. “Please, don't do this.”

I wheeled around, startled at his presence. He stood only a few feet away, his eyes filled with worry.

“I have to, Taren. It's the only way.”

I stifled the part of me that wanted to go to him, that still wanted to believe.

“No,” he said fiercely, “it's the easy way. You're stronger than this.”

I barked a laugh. “You think I'm doing this because I'm scared?” In truth, I was scared—terrified, in fact—but that wasn't what this was about. “I'm doing this because I'll never be able to trust myself. Not ever. Even when I think I'm making the right decision, it will be the one that it wants me to make.”

“What if *this* is what it wants you to do?”

The pleading in his voice cut deep into my heart, but I shook my head.

“It isn't. It wants me to open the Gate all the way. That's why it showed me the truth about your mother. So I would be so mad at the Institute, at the world, that I would unleash Hell on Earth.”

The Demon knew my every thought, knew what it would do to me to realize I'd been used by the only people I trusted.

“It's been trying to keep me alive this whole time—making sure I was discovered the night I tried to kill myself, warning me to be careful.”

“What about the Red last night?” Taren said, determined. “He was trying to kill you.”

“Maybe,” I said, “or maybe it was just another ruse to guarantee I'd end up back here, doing its bidding. All the more reason for me to do this. If I'm expelled, they'll pull the protection detail and I'll be hunted down, probably along with my mother. By doing this, I can at least save her.”

“You know she won't survive losing you,” he said, taking a tentative step forward.

I held up my hand, warning him to come no closer.

“It doesn't matter,” I said, trying to numb the painful truth of his words. “It's the only way. You of all people know it's true, Taren. Your own mother... I'll never be able to trust myself.”

“I trust you,” he said.

“Because you want to.”

He was as much a victim of hope as I had been.

“Because I see who you are,” he said. “And because you won't make the same mistake my mother did.”

“Then I'll make a different one, but it will be just as costly. I'll fight and I'll try, but it will be for nothing. I'll end up insane and I'll open the Gate whether I want to or not. Nothing I do will matter.”

“But it will matter. You'll be saving lives, Ember. Do you have any idea

how many people are out there, suffering, with no idea why? At least your suffering will have a purpose. Do you have any idea what that would mean to the people I meet in mental institutions? To know their pain isn't all for nothing? And when the voice gets too strong, you won't keep it to yourself. You'll tell me. And I don't care what the Elders say—I will get you out. I promise you, Ember, I will not lose you.”

I looked at the pleading in his eyes and longed to believe. He took another step closer.

“You don't have to forgive me,” he said. “I knew you wouldn't. But I'll protect you anyway. Always.”

My breath caught in my throat. “The voice, the thought I heard in the car...”

“Was mine,” Taren said. “Don't you see? Even after thirty years at the Institute, my mother wasn't telepathic. That has to mean something. You're the one, Ember. You're the one.”

That familiar electricity passed between us, though we were still a foot apart. I willed myself to fall into his arms and believe it would all be alright, but the time for that had passed.

An alarm pierced the forest. Birds took flight and coyotes howled in eerie unison. For a moment, Taren and I stood, transfixed.

I broke the stalemate by rushing forward past Taren and toward the fence. Taren cleared it first and helped me over. We raced down the path, Taren slowing to match my pace.

“We'll find you somewhere safe, away from the Gateway,” he said. “You're strong enough to help at a distance, and I can't risk you being attacked by a demon.”

“No,” I said, already breathless, “it's time to finish this.”

Taren protested most of the way to the main house, stopping only when he realized it was futile.

The grounds of the Institute were in chaos. Guardians and Keepers alike raced toward battle, the students split between fleeing for safety and going on the attack.

The instant we crossed the boundary, my whole body was wracked with spasms. I fell to the ground, my back arching to the brink of snapping.

“Ember, get back— ”

“No,” I said through gritted teeth, snatching my hand away when he tried to pull me back to safety.

The Gateway was collapsing. That much was evident. I reached out, clutching for the void. I had to find a way to mute the pain or I wouldn't be able to move even an inch closer. I had to get to the Gate.

Taren bent down over my contorted figure, casting a long shadow. I mentally hurtled into it, no time left for delicacy, or trying to find a light behind my eyes. The moment I crossed the threshold, the spasms ceased and the pain lessened. With Taren's help, I regained my footing. He opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off.

“Don't tell me to get back to safety. I know what I need to do.”

I let go of his arm and lurched toward the main house. Demons streamed through the doorways, the battle spilling onto the lawn. A tiny creature that looked more like a howler monkey than anything else sprang at me with astonishing speed. It screeched, exposing razor-sharp fangs. I opened my

mouth to scream, but Taren was there, flinging it aside just before it made purchase. The Demon landed inside the Sanctuary, its howl piercing through the sounds of battle. It leapt back across the boundary and darted out of sight.

We raced forward, Taren hacking and slashing to make a path. A giant slug-like creature oozed its way down the steps until a cudgel-wielding Guardian bludgeoned it to death. A moment later, the same Guardian was disemboweled by the claws of a beast half his size. Innards exposed, he rolled down the steps, dead before he reached the bottom. I wanted to shrink back, but instead we pushed on.

We scrambled up the stairs and fought our way through the cavernous doorway. Splattered in blood, the entryway reeked of death, the demon corpses especially pungent. The stink filled my nostrils and I struggled to keep from heaving. Flame-red hair caught my eye, and I saw Kat making mincemeat of a Dahrak. Black pus splashed her as the beast fell. She let out a battle cry and turned to take on another. Annys joined the fray, racing in from another hallway. Dressed in battle gear and brandishing a sword and shield, she was every inch a Guardian. With one stroke, two demons fell, decapitated.

“Stay back,” Taren shouted, his knife slicing into the heart of another Dahrak.

I pressed against the wall as he took on two more. I noticed a set of double doors off to the left and recognized them as the ones I'd seen through Gretchen's eyes. After one last look at Taren, who was still occupied with fighting, I shoved my way inside.

The fighting was even thicker here; the demons with the upper hand on sheer numbers alone. For every one that fell, three more streamed through the gaping hole in the floor.

The center of the Gateway wasn't broken—it was dust. The eight other tiles remained intact, but deep fissures ran their length. With the center tile destroyed, the Gateway would never be whole again. Left like this, the demons would have free access to this world. The world where my mother had always been free to be crazy in relative safety, where Kat, Taren, and the like would fight to their last breath. Where I had taken living for granted enough that I'd resented being alive. And now there was no stopping it. The Demon had kept me alive for the sole purpose of finishing it.

Yes, Ember, finish it. Finish it so that I can come forth. Do this, and I

promise safety for you and those you love.

Its words were soft, a gentle caress across my mind, and I considered them.

What had this world given me? What did I really owe it, beyond safety for my own small patch?

Even muted, sensation overwhelmed me. Every painful memory, every wrong committed against me fused with a physical sensation and I fell to my knees, struggling not to black out.

That's right, just focus.

I did as instructed—what other choice did I have? It was the only way to save the people I cared about.

I became one with the Gateway. I felt the Keepers through the link, pulling, pushing with all of their strength, willing the cracks to heal. Couldn't they see there was nothing left to save? There was only one thing left to do. One by one, I severed the tenuous threads they held onto. With each cut, I knew the damage I was doing—to the Keeper who held the link, to the Gate—but I was ruthless.

Yes, yes...

Its urging made me stronger. With the last link severed, I was aware that new Keepers rushed to replace those who had fallen unconscious. I pushed against them, forcing them out. In the bedlam, the Keepers screamed, shouting orders to each other on how to proceed. Had they known it was me, I'm sure I would have been cut down, but a Keeper in training huddled on the floor hardly posed a threat. If they only knew.

“We must be stronger! Push harder.” Master Dogan's voice sliced through the din. I crouched lower, knowing he would stop at nothing to protect what remained. He didn't realize that the time for fighting was over.

I stared into the gaping hole in the center of the Gateway, allowing it to pull me deeper.

I was no longer one with the Gateway. I was the Gateway. I vibrated with an energy, a power too big to be contained. I felt every heartbeat as it pulsed through my veins; felt the interchange of blood in my capillaries as they cycled carbon dioxide back into the oxygen I needed to survive. All of life was like that, cycling over and over again in a never-ending exchange of good and bad, poison and medicine.

It never has to be like that again.

Its words firmed my resolve, and a feeling—a powerful force that I couldn't explain—flooded through me. I used it to blow the remains of the Gateway apart.

A deafening sound reverberated around the hall; dust and gravel showered the room. For a moment, battle was suspended as all turned to look at the twelve-foot gash. The Keepers who had been connected to the Gate screamed in agony and collapsed. Through the debris, Master Dogan locked eyes with me.

“What have you done?” he cried.

His face twisted in anguish, and I almost succumbed to his grief. He was a broken man, weeping openly.

With the Gateway destroyed, I was no longer linked to it, and the feeling of being ripped apart ceased. I stood, knowing what would come next through the giant hole in the floor.

Taren skidded into the room, halting at the scene. I locked eyes with him and he knew.

“Ember, no!”

In his shock, Taren dropped his weapon. Now unarmed, one of the monkey creatures flew at him, fangs tearing flesh from his shoulder. A second later, Kat was there, pulling the beast off of Taren and smashing its skull.

The suspended reality stretched out as more and more Guardians spilled into the room and learned the condition of the Gateway. Dozens of demons escaped unimpeded. The ground began to rumble.

Finally free after all of these centuries, I assumed the Demon would shoot forth like a laser. But real power didn't require speed. Like the schoolteacher that whispers, *shh* to calm a room of children, it is within the intent, not the action where power lies.

The Demon came through sinuously, slowly, taking pleasure in its ascent. It was as wide as the Gateway itself, and once stretched to its full height, would extend past the balcony. There were empty sockets where its eyes should have been, and its mouth was ringed with fangs. It had the appearance of having been bathed in acid, its oily black flesh looking burned and hanging off in strips.

Ever since I'd gotten my tattoo, the Demon had been able to see life through my eyes. Now, our link was complete, and I could experience us

through it. We were so small, so unimportant—valuable only if useful.

Slime dripped from its limbs, too numerous to count. They reached out, heedless of the Guardians cutting them, severing some completely. Its mouth, as large as the domed skylight overhead, opened in a cruel rictus.

Leave now if you wish to be safe.

Without warning, the Guardians closest to the Demon flew backward through the air, crashing to the floor. Dozens more rushed forward, only to meet the same fate.

Though no longer connected to the Gateway, I was still connected to the power that had created it. I hurled it at the Demon.

It swayed, but sustained no injury. It swung its awful head in my direction.

I offer safety to you and your—

I sent another bolt of power, this one concentrated at its chest as it emerged from the opening in the floor. The flames that erupted were quickly snuffed out.

You know you're not strong enough to defeat me—I can hear it in your thoughts—yet you fight on like a pitiful human. Like the half-breed dog you are.

It was right. I would never be strong enough to defeat it; I had known that before I'd blown the Gateway apart.

With every scrap of strength I had left, I tried again, this time aiming a bolt of energy straight at the Demon's skull. When it opened its mouth to let out a snarl, I was already racing toward it.

I dove headlong into the mouth of the beast. Sometimes you cannot drop in, you must careen headlong into destiny. Darkness closed around me. Acid stung my whole being. I hadn't started this, but it was mine to end.

Visions flashed behind my eyes. My mother, looking years younger, having a fit about something and me running to my room in tears. Taking out a journal and sketching, being soothed by the repetition of drawing a series of lines that I would later realize belonged on the bottom left corner. Feeling alienated at school, and scribbling designs on a math test—the bottom right of the symbol. One by one the visions came, showing me each time I'd received another segment of the Gateway.

With each vision came clarity, and each shone brighter than the one before it. I had spent my life hoping to be shielded from the pain of my

existence, the pain of being so alone. But I wasn't alone, and never had been. With each segment I had been given, I had been protected, given what I needed to keep going.

The Demon was wrong—there was no ending the cycle of good and bad, wrong and right, poison and oxygen. The Daemons had tried it, and both sides had paid dearly. The Daemons on this side falling to madness and suicide, those on the other turning in on themselves until they became nothing but a horrifying shadow of their former greatness. There was no ending the cycle, because the cycle was life itself. Even my death would be a part of it.

And I was dying.

I was being digested, my skin dissolving one layer at a time, and as it did, I felt one thing: regret. Regret for all of my years spent railing against life, against unfairness. What did I owe the world? I wasn't sure, but I knew what it owed me. Nothing. It owed me nothing, and yet had given me so much, and I'd squandered it. As the scenes of my life continued to flash by, I knew one thing with a certainty stronger than I'd ever experienced.

I wanted to live.

Even if my mother never took her meds again. Even if Taren and I didn't work out. Even if I were drummed out of the Institute. I wanted to be around to see it.

For the very first time, a ball of light blazed in my mind's eye.

The light was a combination of silver and gold, molten lava that burned so pure that no ash was left behind. I was no longer channeling it. I had become it. I stopped feeling the burning pain, the fire inside me burned hotter than the acid that engulfed me. I surrendered myself completely, willing to follow where it led.

“She’s awake! Nurse—she’s awake! Ember, honey, you’re OK. You had an accident and...”

I stopped hearing her. So Hades did exist. I was Sisyphus and this was my boulder. After all of my years spent resenting life, I couldn’t think of a more fitting way for me to spend eternity.

“She’s definitely awake—look at her smiling.”

The sound of Taren’s voice was a shock. And if I could register shock, then that meant I had a nervous system. If I had a nervous system...

My eyes flew open and tears welled up in them when I saw Taren and my mother leaning over me.

“Where’s Kat? Is she—?” My voice came out in a raspy croak, as if I had spent hours upwind of a bonfire.

“She’s fine,” Taren said. “We’ve been sleeping in shifts. She’ll be back soon, I promise.”

I’d heard it said that there are moments, perfect moments, when the stars align and all is right with the world. I’d heard about them, but I’d never actually had one. Until this one.

My eyes took in my surroundings. Smaller than a hospital room, it reminded me of the nurse’s office at school.

“The infirmary?” I said.

“We would have taken you to the E.R., but Dr. Meade swore she had a salve that would work better on your burns than anything they would have there.”

Dr. Meade entered holding a jar filled with a sticky green paste. "It's true. Nothing in a hospital can treat demon burns as well as this will."

My eyes bulged and darted to my mother.

"Mom, what she means is..." I groped for an excuse.

"It's all right, she knows," Taren said.

My eyes narrowed. "She knows...what, exactly?"

"About the Gateway. And the demons. And the demons coming through the Gateway," my mother replied, as though she were discussing the weather.

"What?" I said and tried to sit up.

My head swam and I sank back into the pillows. The change in pressure set my back on fire. Covered in bandages as I was, it still wasn't enough to dull the pain.

"We thought it best to tell her the truth, under the circumstances. You'll be recovering for a while and we had to explain your injuries somehow," Taren said. "She took it very well."

"To be honest, it sort of fits with some theories I had anyway," Mom said. "I mean, you can't live in Los Angeles as long as I have and not believe there are a few demons running around."

"Good point," I said, my laugh more of a husky bark. "But I thought it was against the rules to tell her."

"Well, you've caused quite a bit of discussion about the rules and which of them might need changing," Taren replied, his voice filled with pride. "You're quite a heroine, you know."

"I am?"

I hadn't meant to be heroic. I had just wanted to save whatever lives I could, and killing the Demon had seemed the best way.

"Of course, it was an incredibly dangerous thing to do, and as your personal Guardian, I'm going to have to insist you never do anything like it again," he said. "But yes, it was courageous and selfless, and all-around heroine-like."

"My Guardian?" I asked, bewildered.

"You had someone else in mind?" Taren said.

"No, but to have a Guardian, I would need to be..."

"A Keeper," he said. "Don't act so surprised. You more than earned it."

My mind had spun with the knowledge I'd been allowed to remain at the Institute's infirmary; now it reeled.

“But...the Gateway,” I said. “I destroyed it.”

“The Gateway,” Taren said with a smile, “is something you're going to need to see to believe.”

It was two weeks before I was well enough to be wheeled into the hall where the Gateway was. Dr. Meade had been right—her salve was working wonders—but the burns were severe, and I spent much of that time in terrible pain. Taren, Kat and Mom continued to sleep in shifts, and a moan never escaped my lips that wasn't answered with a soothing word and whatever else I asked for. The bandages had been removed the day prior, revealing new, healthy skin. I continued to peel, some of the skin flaking off in strips, but the doctor assured me that this was normal, and scarring would be minimal.

I insisted on being taken to see this new Gateway I kept hearing about. Mom was resting. For all their willingness to tell her the truth, the less physical evidence they showed her to support that truth, the better. I had my doubts as to whether the Institute would have been so free with that truth had my mother's word not be tainted by an already documented mental illness.

Taren pushed my wheelchair through the main house. The hall was undergoing construction. The chaos of the battle could not simply be swept away. Scaffolding rose to the ceiling where workers were repairing burned areas of walkway. Singed tapestries and broken fixtures were being replaced. As we neared the spot where the Gateway was, what Taren and Kat had been telling me finally sank in.

Nine Keepers sat in meditation at their appointed stations, but where there once had been nine heavy stone slabs, there was now one sheet of thick glass, the Gateway's seal intact. The darkness beneath it absorbed the light of the

room, allowing me to see glimpses of shadows that moved beneath, as well as my own reflection.

“The sand...” I whispered, remembering the granular dust that each of the nine segments had been reduced to.

“You melted it when...”

Taren’s voice trailed off. He didn’t like talking about that night. The thought of losing me was too painful, he’d said.

It was Kat who’d filled me in on what had happened after I’d leapt inside the Demon. According to her, It had burst into flames and then melted, leaving nothing behind but ashes and me, naked and severely burned, in a heap atop the new Gateway.

The sound of footsteps pulled our attention and we watched as Annys and Master Dogan entered. Neither had been to visit, though Taren told me they asked about me regularly. The oversight would have once caused me to feel unimportant in their eyes, unworthy of their attention, but I found my old thoughts creeping in less and less. We had all had our parts to play in this, and had each not been carried out perfectly, we might have gotten a very different outcome.

“Ember,” Master Dogan said. “It warms my heart to see you up and about.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m glad to see that both of you escaped unharmed.”

Scores of others hadn’t been as lucky. Taren had tried to shield me from the realities, but news had trickled in of the casualties sustained before the Gateway had been reformed. I had wept for them, hoping that if there was a Heaven, they were all in it. But when my grandfather had passed away when I was six, my mother had told me life was for the living, and I finally agreed with her.

“We have much to beg forgiveness for,” Annys said.

For once her expression was soft, her hawk-like eyes downcast.

“We all do,” I said, “if not for this, then something else.”

“That’s very...Zen of you,” Master Dogan said.

I laughed. “Don’t get used to it. I’m pretty sure it’s a near-death thing and will pass, but let’s enjoy it while we can.”

Annys and Master Dogan both chuckled at that.

“Tell me, how did you do this?” Master Dogan said. “You will soon be called before the Elders to answer that as well as many other questions, but

before the formal inquiry, please, I must know.”

I reached for words, for jumbled memories to coalesce into a linear timeline so that I could explain.

“As Taren and I ran through the Sanctuary to get to the Gateway, my mind raced for a way to fix things, to make the Gateway whole again. But once we crossed the boundary I knew the damage was too great. The filth and the evil was overwhelming, and it was all I could do to keep it out and to stay focused.

“But then I saw the horror of the battle, saw the condition of the Gateway, and I realized how present it made me. I was meditating, but as usual, I was using it to numb me, to push away the bad feelings so I wouldn't have to feel them. But this—this was too much, and it required all of my strength to hold the pain at bay. And it occurred to me how much more powerful I might be if I embraced the pain. If I channeled it, not allowing it to control me. I didn't know if it would work, but I knew I had to try. And I knew for there to be any chance of success, I had to be as close to the core of the Demon as possible.”

My explanation complete, I waited for their reaction.

“You couldn't have known you would survive,” Annys said finally.

“No,” I said, avoiding Taren's eyes.

“And yet you don't seem like the girl with a death wish that you were when we first met,” she said.

“I think—or at least I hope, anyway—that there is a difference between sacrifice and suicide. I didn't want to die, but I was willing to, if that's what it took.”

“Thankfully, it did not,” Annys said. There was a genuineness to her words, and I found myself thinking that perhaps she was seeing me as more than just a valuable asset.

“Your reason for opening the Gateway completely,” Master Dogan said, “I'm curious if it matches a theory I've been working on.”

I shrugged. “I just never understood why all of the Marked Ones hear multiple voices and I only heard one. At first I used it as an excuse to explain why my voice couldn't be demonic. Even when I'd accepted that it was, I still questioned the difference—why the singular voice I heard was so focused and intelligent. The only answer was that it was no ordinary demon.”

“It had an organizing ego,” Master Dogan said. “An agenda.”

“Right, although I would have never come up with ‘organizing ego,’” I

said with a laugh. “It was like all of the other demons—the ones you were killing with arrows and daggers—were just weeds and this one...”

“Was the root,” Annys finished. “Clearly this ‘Root’ demon was too large to fit through a small opening of the Gateway. It needed the Gate destroyed.”

“It tried to use Gretchen to get the job done, but when that didn't work, I guess I became plan B,” I said. “So It got me to attempt suicide, knowing that I'd end up in the hospital with Taren. Then the attack made sure we escaped together, so that he would bring me here.”

“It was a brilliant thing you did, Ember,” Master Dogan said, “brilliant, and very courageous.”

“Yes, and she must never, ever do anything like it again,” Taren said, fixing me with a firm gaze.

“Don't worry,” I said, “I have no plans for a repeat performance. Besides, I don't see that there would be a need. The Root, as we're calling it, is dead, and the Gateway is sealed. We're safe.”

I smiled in satisfaction, but the others seemed troubled.

“Ah, well, that's not exactly the case...” Master Dogan said.

“You see, some of the other Gates have been seeing an increase in activity,” Annys said. “Trainees going mad, Keepers requiring Retrievals at an alarming rate. If this Root demon had been responsible, the activity would have ceased when you destroyed it.”

I chill ran up my spine. “What does that mean?”

“It means that as the only two Daemons able to channel the entire symbol,” Annys said, “we will be needing you and Gretchen to visit those Gateways and report your findings—perhaps helping if you can.”

“You would put them both right back in danger?” Taren said, his voice heated. “How can you— ”

“Wait, Gretchen is all right?” I asked. “She's well enough to go on that kind of mission?”

I'd never met the woman, yet I felt a kinship with her. I'd seen life through her eyes, felt her pain.

“No,” Taren said firmly, “she isn't.”

“Not yet,” Annys said, “but she will be. She's progressed remarkably since the death of the Root demon and is eager to get back to work. And to meet you, Ember.”

I looked to Taren. His eyes were tight with worry when he said, “She's

coherent, but it's a long road, and she has yet to leave the Sanctuary. But what Annys says is true—she is anxious to meet you. I just wanted to give you both time to heal.”

I nodded, grateful his mother was recovering, but the sense of calm I'd felt just minutes ago was replaced with a twisting in my stomach. Eight other Gateways, possibly eight other Root demons to face. And there was the issue of all the demons that had escaped during battle, presumably already procreating.

I had been right those many weeks ago, on the night we fled the hospital, when I realized I would never feel safe again. I shuddered, but instead of pushing aside the fear growing in my belly, I held it gently. There were enough demons in the world; I didn't need to grow any more of my own.

“You OK?” Taren asked.

I imagined myself enveloped in a radiant light and became aware of every cell, every thought, every fear, every mercy.

“Yeah,” I said, and for the very first time I knew it was true. “I'm going to be fine.”

END BOOK 1 IN THE GATEWAY TRILOGY

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Chasm

Book 2 in The Gateway Trilogy

CHASM

Ember has a hot, demon-hunter boyfriend, a job she loves, and a purpose in life. Too bad that Demon she slayed wasn't the only one she needs to worry about...

Lesser demons are populating Los Angeles. Gateways around the world are weakening. Even one of Ember's best friends is losing the Mark that makes her a Keeper. With so much at stake and so many questions, Ember is glad to be traveling to other Institutes in search of answers. That is, until an attack on her life confirms she'll never truly be safe.

When she meets Alexander, Ember can't be sure if he's an ally or a deadly enemy. Either way, she needs him in order to reach... the Chasm.

CHAPTER 1

I can't open my eyes.

No, not can't.

Won't.

The air surrounding me is electric, and thick enough that I am suspended in midair.

Blind, I have no idea how high up I am. How far I have to fall.

So I hover—skin prickling, heart racing—while an energy I can't name swirls around me.

It wants something—no, needs it. From me.

The energy darts in and out of my body, sending shivers up and down my spine, testing my defenses.

The shivers turn to jolts, and it's like I'm being tasered.

The pain builds and I open my mouth to scream, but the electricity rushes in, sending shock waves no human could survive.

No, no, it's too much, it's too much!

CHAPTER 2

I bolted upright, drenched in sweat, in my room at the Institute.

I'm not trapped; I'm fine. It was just a dream.

I untangled myself from the dampened sheets and lifted my hair, heavy with perspiration, away from my neck. I definitely wasn't going to get away without showering.

I gave myself one more minute to catch my breath, then forced myself out of bed.

I did what I always did first thing in the morning: check my phone for a message from Taren.

Made it home safe , the text read.

I smiled, relieved that he hadn't gotten injured on patrol, and because Taren always had that effect on me.

The hallway was deserted as I made my way to the showers. As the only person living in the dorms with a shift at the Gateway, I was also the only one with a reason to be up at five a.m. on a Saturday. At least I was guaranteed the shower with the best water pressure: third from the end.

The water cascaded over me, sending rivulets down the all but healed scars that crisscrossed my arms. Dr. Meade assured me that in another week or two the scars would be gone and I'd no longer have physical reminders of—

I forced my attention to the dream. Although "dream" was no longer a strong enough word. It seemed to have crossed into nightmare territory. After three other occurrences, this was the first time the energy had been painful;

the first time I'd had reason to scream.

Still, it wasn't as frightening or painful as the nightmare I'd been having for two months—ever since I'd killed the terrifying demon that had invaded my consciousness and persuaded me to attempt suicide. The one strong enough to break through the Gateway, leaving death in Its wake. The one we called the Root.

Could it really be considered a nightmare if it was a memory, I wondered? An exact replica of events as they had unfolded?

Me, diving headlong into the gaping mouth of the Root. Darkness engulfing me. Acid burning my entire body, my flesh dissolving layer after—

No. It was bad enough that half of my nights were filled with that horror, I didn't have to surrender my days too.

I closed my eyes and turned my face into the stream, letting the memory slide down the drain with the water.

I fumbled my way through the rest of my morning routine, which consisted of twisting my wet hair into a clip, donning clothes comfortable enough to sit cross-legged in for six hours, and brushing my teeth.

And coffee, of course.

Whoever was up first on the weekends had the task of making the first pot, which meant it usually fell to me. I brewed it the way I liked it, heedless of the complaints I knew it would garner about being too strong. As far as I was concerned, when it came to coffee there was no such thing.

Impatient, I stuck my mug under the stream and filled it before placing the pot on the burner. I added some ice cubes to cool it, knowing I'd need to down this cup and get a second before making my way to the Gateway.

I yawned, wide enough that my eyes watered. Nightmares or not, this schedule was killing me. My days started at dawn and went until late into the evening, due either to homework or a shift at the Gate.

The Gate. Out of context, it seemed a fairly benign word. Within context, it was anything but. Short for the Gateway, it was one of nine access points between this world and the demon world.

What would once have been too fantastical to believe, now seemed

routine. And not just the part about there being real, live, flesh and blood (or more accurately, flesh and bubbling black tar) demons, but that I was a descendant of Daemons, a highly advanced race capable of telepathy as well as telekinesis. The same race that had created the Gateways in the first place, when war had broken out over Daemons mixing with the “inferior humans.” Some of my ancestors used their power to split the world, creating a mirror image, with the Gateways in between. Whatever “separate but equal” intent they’d had, the result was that the other Daemons felt trapped, then angry, finally morphing into the killing machines we called demons—a harsh example of what happens when power turns to hatred and twists in on itself. Over time, their fury infected the entirety of the world they’d been given, causing it to rot and wiping out all but the hardiest species, eventually turning even them demonic. The end result was the demon world: a harsh, barren land populated by the most horrific perversions, including Monkeys, Birds, Snakes, and even Dahraks—a hybrid species of some sort.

I slugged the last of my coffee, refilled my cup, and then made my way outside.

The light of dawn streaked the sky and cast a warm glow on the grounds of the Institute. From the direction of the parking area came the low hum of car engines and wheels crunching gravel as my fellow Keepers arrived for their shifts. Not for the first time, I was grateful for my lack of commute.

Not that I’d had much choice. As the only student in the Institute’s history to have ever been raised to Keeper before turning eighteen, I had also become the only Keeper to have ever lived in the dorm housing reserved for Guardians and Keepers in training.

Living with my mother had been deemed out of the question. Not because she was bi-polar, I was used to that, but because it would put both of our lives in danger. Whatever had caused a Red—a human who’d fallen so deeply under the mental control of demons that their eyes glowed crimson—to attack me in a nightclub a couple of months prior could still be lurking. The safest place for me was within the confines of the Institute.

So, while the other Keepers lived wherever they chose—some braving the drive from the beach, others preferring the heart of Hollywood—I simply walked up the hill.

Truthfully, the arrangement suited me just fine. Within the Sanctuary, I felt as safe as I was ever going to, and I’d grown to care deeply for my dorm

mates. Some of them, anyway; I still wasn't exactly a "people person." And as much as I loved my mother, living with her was anything but the peaceful state that Master Dogan had been teaching me to cultivate.

For Mom's part, she didn't like me living away from home, but the liberal visitation she was allowed seemed to help. Whatever else her flaws, my safety wasn't something she was willing to gamble with. The Guardians assigned to protect her both agitated and comforted her, and she alternated between expressing frustration and gratitude for their existence. Whatever her feelings, the Guards were necessary, so I weathered both her complaints and compliments with the same response: "I know, Mom."

A few more steps and I felt the change that always accompanied leaving the Sanctuary. Stepping over the invisible boundary always caused my stomach to roil, albeit less than it once had. Much of the Institute's grounds had been enchanted millennia ago to create a sort of haven, free from demonic influence. However, the land immediately surrounding the Gateway had resisted the process, which meant that while at the Gateway, Keepers had to be especially vigilant. Thankfully, I'd never been bothered by the cacophony of lesser demons that hounded the other Keepers and trainees. Of course, they never had to deal with the Root, so I felt confident in saying that they had the better end of the bargain.

An older Guardian held the door for me as I entered the mansion. I took one last swig of coffee and set the empty mug in my cubbyhole.

I padded down the hall, the early hour and the perma-hush that surrounded this area causing me to all but tiptoe.

Another Guardian, closer to my age—Marissa?—opened one of the massive doors that led into the circular room that held the Gate. All but demolished when the Root had broken free, it had recently been reconstructed. The long wooden staircase that wound its way up to the observation deck shone with polish, the floor tiles gleamed.

Regardless of my commute, I was the last to arrive. Eight other Keepers, each with a Mark that corresponded to a section of the Gateway symbol, stood silently, waiting for me.

Once I'd joined them we moved in unison, coming to kneel atop the Gateway next to the Keeper we would be relieving. I positioned myself next to Manuel at the center.

I, myself, wasn't actually a Center, born with a Mark that matched the

midpoint I stood atop. In fact, I wasn't born Marked at all—instead doing the job myself, with a little help from Fat Tony at All Night Ink.

Not that I'd known what it meant to be Marked back then. How it would set in motion a series of events that would irrevocably alter the course of my life.

First had come the Voice. It knew me inside and out; always saying just the right thing to make me trust It. Until the night It convinced me the only way out of the pain of my life was to end it.

Then came the mental hospital. Windsor had proven to be a turning point: It was there I'd learned not only that demons were real, but that they wanted to kill me. It was also at Windsor that I'd met Taren, who had changed my life in every conceivable way.

He was the one who'd figured out I was part Daemon, knowing the signs because his own mother, Gretchen, was also Daemon—the only other one known to exist. “Known” being the operative word; I was sure there must be others of us out there.

Being what I was enabled me to channel any segment of the symbol, but with only six Centers currently active at the L.A. Institute--the fewest in history--it was the position I most often held. It was also the most difficult to maintain. Though all nine Keepers held the link, it was the Center who was responsible for keeping the energies balanced, making it possible for Keepers of different skill levels to work together. And it was the Center who was charged with making sure there were no points of weakness, energetically filling in gaps as needed.

A chime sounded, signaling it was time for the transfer. A moment later, Manuel placed the thin strands of energy he held into my virtual hands. He handled them skillfully, like the old pro he was. He might not be Daemon, but he'd been a Keeper for over twenty years and never bungled the transfer.

I felt the Gateway pulse beneath me, and not for the first time I was reminded of a heartbeat, as though the symbol were alive. More and more I became convinced that in some way, it was. My ancestors hadn't just created the Gateway, they had birthed it. There was a piece of them, of their magic, in it. And now, because of what I'd done, this Gateway held a piece of me.

Diving into the Root hadn't just burned my flesh, it had melted the stone tiles of the Gateway, turning them into a solid slab of thick glass. Where once there had been nine segments, now was one fluid symbol, a direct match to

the one on my left shoulder. The one I no longer had to cover up--at least not at the Institute--which meant, welcome back, tank tops; you've been missed.

Others at the Institute were still skittish around me, which irked me to no end given the risk I'd taken to save their lives. Flaunting my tattoo didn't help, and might even be perceived as a not-so-subtle "eff you," but the sooner they got used to what I was the better. I considered it immersion therapy.

I settled into a cross-legged position and went deeper into meditation. Someone—the upper left corner?—wasn't pulling their weight. I sent a flow of energy to strengthen the link. A shift at the Gate was akin to balancing on the tip of a sword: always shifting, struggling to remain balanced. Not that I was complaining. However arduous, it certainly beat the alternative.

It might appear that demons had already taken over the City of Angels—a casual glance around the average party taking place in the hills of Hollywood was proof enough—but hard as it was to believe, there were creatures more predatory than a producer, more dangerous than an agent.

At least two types of those creatures—Dahraaks, with their clawed hands and double rows of jagged teeth, and Monkeys with their cunning minds and razor-sharp bite—had managed to escape during the breach, and were multiplying at an ever-increasing rate.

Without opening my eyes, I knew it was Gina who stood next to me, ready to take over. It was as though each person had their own resonance, a way of imprinting on the space around them. Gina's energy was warm and bright, like a sunny day at the beach.

Master Dogan, my mentor and the wisest person I knew, praised me for the skill, saying it was akin to the telepathy inherent in Daemons. Though it was kind of cool, it hardly seemed as useful a skill as, say, being able to levitate something. Or nothing, as had been the case when I fought the Root. I'd flung... air, or energy... something. Almost as disturbing as not knowing how to do it again, was the fact that no one, not even the Elders seemed to know how I'd done it in the first place.

With a careful delicacy I transferred the energy to Gina. I always felt both a sense of loss and freedom being relieved of duty. Loss at the lack of connection, and free from the responsibility inherent with a shift at the Gate.

I opened my eyes and saw that next to each of the other Keepers knelt their replacement. I waited until the entire transfer was complete before rising in unison with my co-workers and exiting the room silently.

I collected my coffee mug and made my way to the front door.

“Ember?”

I turned to see a Guardian-in-Training, his eyes bright and cheeks rosy. They seemed to be getting younger every week as of late.

“Annys would like a word with you,” the boy said.

Words to strike fear in the bravest of Guards, and I was no Guard, as Taren had grown fond of reminding me.

I knew better than to ask what she wanted; instead I followed the boy without comment. On our way we passed a large picture window that overlooked the practice yard and I was surprised to see men hard at work, even on a Saturday.

Must be the retirees.

Far more palatable than the decreasing age of students was the policy allowing former Guardians to return to their posts. Until recently, demons had never crossed over to our dimension, leaving Guardians charged solely with protecting Keepers and fighting the occasional Red. Now, with Dahraks and Monkeys running loose, the Institute had put out the call asking all former employees to return. By a large margin they’d done just that, even those too old to wield a weapon. Their knowledge was invaluable Taren said, and they often sat in on strategy sessions.

We reached Annys’s office and the boy knocked tentatively.

“I’ve brought Ember Lyons,” he said, blushing when his voice cracked.

How soon would he be sent to die?

Both the thought and the bitter truth of it were jarring and I pushed them aside. “Deal with what’s in front you,” Master Dogan would say. Annys gave the word and I stepped into the office.

“Hello, Annys,” I said.

“Ember, sit. Thank you, David. You may go.”

She was as regal as ever. I wasn’t as unnerved by her as I had been when we first met, but whatever guilt she’d felt about plotting to expel me seemed to have abated; once again Annys was very clearly the boss. I took a seat, her hawk-like eyes watching me from across the mahogany desk.

“Are you prepared for your trip?” she asked.

I and a small group of others, were about to embark on a trip to the other Gateways. With the one in Los Angeles seemingly well in hand, we were needed at the others. Though it hadn’t been stated outright, I knew they

hoped I could work my Daemon magic and remake the remaining Gates. The demons were growing bolder; it was only a matter of time before another breach occurred. It was a race to see whether we could beat them to the punch.

“All set,” I said.

Her expression told me she might know I hadn’t even started packing.

What she said was, “Excellent. Of course, you are missing one very necessary item.”

Ah, that’s what this was about.

“She still hasn’t given it to you?” I said.

My mother had agreed to get me a passport and had taken all the steps necessary to obtain one, but she still hadn’t actually handed it over. With me scheduled to leave the country in less than a week, it was a problem.

“No,” she said, clearly displeased. Annys was not a woman used to being denied.

“She will,” I said. “I know she will. She’s just being dramatic.”

Annys’s expression told me she was well aware of my mother’s penchant for drama. But she wasn’t, not really. For the past two months Mom had been taking her medication consistently, for the most part alleviating her bi-polar symptoms, meaning Annys had no idea just how dramatic she could be. I kept the thought to myself.

“You know that I cannot allow her to come,” she said, folding her arms in front of her and leaning on the desk.

That had been the sticking point. Mom said she wouldn’t give the Institute permission to “haul me all over the world” unless she was allowed to come with me. But while six weeks was a long time to go without seeing her, I knew it would be problematic bordering on impossible to have her along. She knew the truth of the Institute, but that didn’t make her any less of a liability. On the other hand, without my mother’s permission--or my passport--I wasn’t going anywhere.

Not that the Institute wasn’t fully capable of acquiring a fake passport, but the attention my mother would turn on them was a risk they’d prefer not to take.

“What would you like me to do?” I said. Up until now I’d avoided getting in the middle, allowing them to hash out the details, but it was clear Annys now wanted me to take a more active role in the negotiations.

“I want you to get the passport,” she said.

My mouth dropped open in surprise. How was I supposed to do what Annys herself couldn’t?

“She is scheduled to come up tomorrow, correct?” she said, glancing at a copy of the visitor’s log.

“Yes.” She was coming to celebrate my seventeenth birthday, but I saw no reason to bother Annys with that information.

“Then I need you to make this happen. We are simply out of time. We have been extremely fortunate that both you and Gretchen have remained unfazed...”

I killed It, It can’t come back, I’m fine, totally fine...

She continued as if my thoughts weren’t deafening, “But with the rise in incidents of Retrievals—even in the most senior of Keepers, the demon population growing at an alarming rate, the increase in skirmishes with Reds coupled with the decrease in finding Marked Ones who haven’t already become Reds... We are out of options, Ember. If you are going to make this journey--and you must--it needs to be now, before we can no longer spare you.”

Even as I pushed the terrifying memory of the Root Demon to the recesses of my mind, I was aware that everything she said was true. Not only were the other Gateways starting to show signs of weakness, but both Gretchen and I needed access to more training. Master Dogan was doing his best, but he wasn’t a Daemon, and had no firsthand knowledge of how to train us.

There was also the little matter of how I’d killed the Root. Not just how, but what. Yes, Daemons could levitate, but I’d done something else. I’d somehow flung nothing at It—except maybe air—yet managed to do damage. It remained a mystery and was the subject of much debate.

Logic told me that it was unlikely I’d receive better instruction at one of the other Institutes, but I couldn’t stop myself from hoping that maybe something an Elder might say or do would trigger something in me. Something to wake up the power that lay dormant, locked somewhere deep inside.

When it became clear that the only way Annys was going to dismiss me from her office was for me to agree to her demand, I did so, promising I'd get the passport from my mother.

My steps were heavy as I made my way down the hill to the dorm, until I saw the one person who always lightened my load. Taren.

His eyes lit up at my approach and I smiled broadly.

"What are you doing here?" I said when I reached him. "I thought you had to work."

"What? Can't a guy visit his girl?" he said, his smile too innocent to be trusted.

I was about to question him further, but then he kissed me and all rational thought disappeared, dissolving in a warm pool that started in my belly and spread throughout my whole body. My fingertips pressed against his chest, I could actually feel his heartbeat, the rhythmic pulse growing quicker the deeper our kiss became. Balanced on the precipice of an exquisite oblivion, I felt myself falling—

Taren pulled back, and a rush of air filled the space where he'd just been.

"Sorry," he mumbled, tilting his forehead so it touched mine. "Sometimes when I'm with you, I forget where I am."

"I'm not complaining," I said, still breathless.

"No, but Mae might," he said.

Mae, the dorm supervisor, had busted us more than once for "inappropriate PDA."

I made a point of looking around and said, "I don't see Mae."

I leaned in for another kiss, but Taren stopped me with the shake of his head.

"We can't risk it," he said. "Not with your birthday tomorrow."

He'd been hinting at a birthday surprise for the past couple of weeks, but I'd been keeping my expectations low. With more and more Reds cropping up and demons running loose, I hadn't been allowed to leave the Institute since the night I'd killed the Root, which meant I was fairly certain his surprise would entail a long walk and a nice picnic.

I'd been pleading with Annys, emphasizing both my mental state and Taren's expertise as my personal Guardian, to let me venture outside for a day trip. In full daylight, in a crowded place, who would dare to try anything? But thus far, my pleas had fallen on deaf ears and I continued to gnash my teeth.

“OK, OK,” I said, humoring him. A birthday stuck at the Institute with Taren was still better than a birthday anywhere else without him. “What time should I be ready?”

“How about noon?” he said with a grin.

My smile matched his. I'd traded my shift at the Gateway to get my birthday off, so if Taren didn't pick me up until noon I was free to sleep in, which was a gift in and of itself. I could roll out of bed at ten and still have plenty of time to meditate and get ready.

For the past several years I'd dreaded my birthday; it only served to make me painfully aware of how many friends I didn't have. And Mom never understood why I didn't want to have those non-existent friends over for a "pizza party." Now, my cheeks barely contained my smile.

There could only be one explanation for my sudden change of heart: love really did make you crazy. Or maybe you had to be crazy in order to let yourself be this in love. Or I had finally just accepted that I had to take the good where I could find it, because there was certainly enough bad to go around.

Not that I knew for sure that Taren was in love with me. I really hoped he was, but we'd only been dating a few months and neither of us had actually said it out loud. I'd said it in my mind a dozen times, but even I knew that didn't count. Why wouldn't he just say it already so I could?

“You were right,” Taren said, interrupting my reverie. “I do have to work, so I should probably get going.”

“You work too much,” I said, hoping I didn't look as pouty as I felt.

“Look who's talking,” he said, lifting my chin. The flecks in his hazel eyes shone extra golden.

“Yeah, but I'd take time off if they let me,” I said. “You...”

Taren had been volunteering for extra shifts, wanting to get ahead of the demon procreation.

“I'm a Guardian,” he said. “It's what I do.”

“I know,” I said and laid my head on his chest. “I just worry.”

He kissed the top of my head but remained silent. What was there to say? We led dangerous lives and we each feared for the other on an almost constant basis. It was why I still hadn't mentioned my nightmare. Nightmares plural, now. I just couldn't add another burden, however small, to his already heavy load.

“I’ll text you later,” he said.

I never texted him first when he was on patrol--what if he forgot to silence his phone and the sound revealed his location just as he was sneaking up on a nest of demons?

“Be safe,” I said, then kissed him, not caring who was looking.

Before either of us could get too carried away, he pulled back a fraction and said, “I’ve really gotta go. Have a good night and I’ll see you at noon.”

One last peck and he was walking away, his long legs taking him in the direction of the parking lot.

I entered the dormitory and found it quiet. Though the Institute might have liked to confine all students within its walls, they were forced to maintain a rotating schedule that allowed them periodic visits home to their families. True, there was an increase in the unwelcome demon chatter that bombarded Keepers, and the only completely safe place was within the Sanctuary, but the farther one got from the Gate, the less influence those voices had. Besides, there would have been no way to explain to parents not in the know about what the Institute really was, why they could suddenly no longer see their kids. And having dozens of parents wandering the grounds was out of the question. As far as they knew, the Institute was an alternative to the mental institutions where most potential Keepers were found. A higher-end, yet somehow free home for their troubled teens, complete with top-notch schooling and counseling services. One glimpse at Guardians practicing swordplay and that cover would be blown.

I passed the two students watching TV and climbed the stairs to my floor. My friends, Callie, Crystle, Madison, and Bridget had invited me to meet them after my shift—they were planning to use the student kitchen to make cupcakes—but I had too much to do.

Upon entering my room I noticed my sheets, still in a tangle, which reminded me of the prior night’s dream. I wondered if it was time to tell Master Dogan about it.

My iPhone chimed and vibrated on my nightstand. One of the perks of being a full-fledged Keeper was that even though I was in the dorm, I was allowed a cell phone. Another was getting paid, which is how I afforded an iPhone in the first place. I wouldn’t have access to most of the money for another year, when I turned eighteen, but I was given an allowance that took care of incidentals. Which, because of my current confinement, mostly

amounted to online purchases. My days of hunting for treasure at thrift stores with my mother were behind me, at least for now.

“Happy almost-birthday, Em!” the text read, followed by half a dozen x’s and o’s.

“Thanks, Mom,” I wrote back. **“C u tmrw .”**

I set the phone back on my nightstand and took a seat at the small desk placed below my lone window. Cracking open a textbook, I settled in for some quality time with algebra.

A few hours later I was cross-eyed and not sure I’d retained anything about the subjects I had just studied. Why did a demon fighter need to graduate high school anyway? I mean, my career was pretty much sealed once I’d learned what I was, it’s not like I was suddenly going to want to become a math teacher.

I gathered my books and papers and stuffed them into my messenger bag. I had no intention of even looking at them again until Monday. Homework on a birthday was anathema.

I then took a seat on my bed and pulled up the browser on my phone. As I had so many times in the past several weeks, I began searching for credible incidences of telekinesis or telepathy. Could the reports of one twin feeling the pain of the other be a result of Daemon lineage? What about Hindu maharishis who claimed powers of levitation? I scrolled through report after report, looking for something I could bring to Master Dogan.

He never said it out loud, but I could tell even he realized Gretchen and I needed more than what he could offer. When it came to meditation and focus, there was no one better than Master Dogan, but accessing our powers? How could he teach what he’d never experienced? Not that he didn’t try, poring over ancient texts for clues on how better to guide us.

Still, I was desperate to find another Daemon—someone who already knew how to do the things I needed to learn. A war was coming, one we had to win, yet all we could achieve was the smallest of our potential. I’d been unable to even come close to replicating the power I’d displayed the night I’d-

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No. Not now. Focus.

I went back to searching.

CHAPTER 3

“Rise and shine, birthday girl!”

I woke with a start, my eyes flying open as I bolted upright.

“Whoa, easy there,” Bridget said, making a soothing gesture with her hand.

“Sorry, Em, we didn’t mean to scare you,” Callie said, looking sheepish. “We just wanted to surprise you.”

I swallowed and tried to slow my racing heart. Who needed cardio when you lived at the Institute?

Disoriented, I took in the sight of Callie and her roommates, Bridget, Madison, and Crystle, all looking abashed. Callie and Bridget held trays heaping with French toast, berries, syrup, and plates, while Crystle and Madison each carried a large, impeccably wrapped gift.

My phone lay beside me; I must have fallen asleep mid-search. Had I really slept more than fifteen hours? Without nightmares, no less. Happy birthday to me.

As per usual, my efforts had yielded nothing of value. The last thing I remembered was a link titled, “Body Found in Griffith Park. Fatal Injuries Resemble Shark Attack.” Taren hadn’t mentioned that Dahraks had taken up residence in Griffith Park, but I was sure he was aware. What else but those double rows of jagged teeth could--

One of the girls cleared their throat and I realized all four were still standing in the same positions, awkward and expectant.

“Oh, God, sorry. Come in, sit down,” I said. “Sorry. You know I’m

useless before coffee.”

Relief flooded each of their faces and they settled on the floor. I slid down off my bed to join them.

“Funny you should mention coffee,” Crystle said, smiling, and handed me the large package she’d brought.

“It’s from all of us.” Bridget said.

“And Kat, too,” Madison added, sliding the other present toward me. “She had to be out late on patrol and said she’d be seeing you later, anyway, so she decided to skip round one of the Ember Birthday Extravaganza.”

Round one? What was round two? What did Taren have planned?

Not one to open even beautiful packages delicately, I ripped open the wrapping on the first box to reveal a coffee maker. Not just any coffee maker, but one of those high-end, one-cup-at-a-time beauties I’d been coveting.

“You always say that by lunchtime the coffee around here tastes like you’re licking an ashtray,” Madison said. “Now you can come sneak up here and make your own.”

“And maybe one for me, too,” Crystle said with a grin.

“Sneak up? Am I not allowed to have this?” I asked. I hadn’t gotten far enough in my plans to purchase one to ask.

Crystle shrugged. “We figured it was better to ask forgiveness than ask permission.”

I laughed. A motto after my own heart.

“Thanks, guys. This is awesome,” I said.

“Open the next one so we can fire this baby up,” Madison urged.

I did as she said while Bridget opened the coffee maker box and set about reading the instructions. The second box was a sample box filled with different flavors of coffee.

“There’s even espresso,” Callie said, pointing. “That’s your favorite, right?”

“It is,” I said, pleased.

I hadn’t had espresso in months. Not since I’d been given leave to visit my mother and Kat and I had gone to see a band play. The terrible memory of being dragged backward from the stage, struggling futilely against the impossible strength of a Red, and of Taren killing that Red, flashed before my eyes. I took a deep breath and tried to get centered.

Callie was busy dishing up breakfast. She handed me the first plate,

which I accepted greedily.

By the time I'd demolished half my breakfast, Bridget was handing me a steaming cup of espresso. I inhaled deeply, the aroma of a good cup was as pleasing as the taste.

"I am so gonna use this," I said. "And you all are welcome over anytime for a cup."

"Does it make hot chocolate?" Callie asked, wrinkling her nose.

At twelve, she had yet to develop a taste for coffee. Which really meant, she'd yet to feel the glory of a caffeine high. Master Dogan had been trying to get me to kick the habit, but I didn't see it happening any time soon. Between classes, three shifts a week at the Gateway, and my daily training sessions with Dogan and Gretchen, he was lucky caffeine was the worst of my habits. My days started at dawn and frequently went until past nightfall before I was able to start my homework.

"No," Crystle said, "but it does make mochas. We'll get that cherry popped, don't you worry."

The rest of us laughed while Callie blushed. No doubt Crystle meant cherry in reference only to coffee, but with Crystle, you just never knew.

"So," Crystle asked, "has Taren dropped the L-word yet?"

"Lesbian?" I arched my eyebrows. "No, why? Do you think he's a lesbian?"

She rolled her eyes. "Not lesbian, you goofball. Love. Has he told you he loves you yet?"

"It's only been a couple of months," Madison said, always the rational one. "We don't all fall in love right away."

"Exactly," I said. "We're taking things slow."

Which was a total lie, of course. I was completely in love with Taren. I'm not sure when the scales tipped from like-way-too-much-for-my-own-good to love, but I suspected it was about the time he saved me from the Dahrak demon at Windsor. Or maybe it was seeing how carefully he handled Callie when she was losing it. Or when I woke up in his parents' room to realize he'd slept the entire night in a chair, just so I wouldn't wake up alone. It was one of those. Or all of them. I really wasn't sure when it happened, but I was sure that it had happened; that it continued to happen every time I saw him. I was trying not to take it personally that he wasn't in love with me. Or that if he was, that he wasn't telling me. It's not like either of us didn't have our

hands full, and Taren had good reason to fear loving a Daemon hybrid. He'd agonized over all that had happened with his mother.

But, Daemon hybrid demon fighter or not, I was still a girl, and I couldn't help daydreaming about the day Taren would pull me close, look into my eyes and tell me he was in love with me. That I was the one. Not like last time he told me I was the one, when he meant I was the one who could save the Gateway, but, you know... The One.

"Well," Callie said, "I think it's obvious Taren loves her. You just have to see the way he looks at her to know."

I smiled. Callie had recently admitted she'd never even kissed a boy, so it was hard to consider her an expert on boy behavior, but I appreciated the sentiment.

Before the conversation could spiral farther into a dissection of my relationship, I said, "How about you, Crystle? Things still good with Javier?"

"Javier? He was so three weeks ago," she replied. "I'm dating Colin now."

Ever since her long-time boyfriend, Michael, had said he needed to focus more on work than on being in a relationship, Crystle had been on a mad tear as far as guys were concerned. She tired of each as quickly as she became infatuated, though, and I suspected she was still pining after Mike, though she'd never admit it. As an outgoing, beautiful, Rubenesque blonde, Crystle was used to commanding the attention of any guy she wanted. Not having the one guy she really wanted had to be a blow not only to her ego, but her heart. But still, Colin? Even with her recent scattershot method, he hardly seemed her type--gangly and unsure of himself, a full year younger.

"How does Michael feel about you dating one of his Guard set?" Bridget asked.

Ah, that explained it. He hadn't reacted to her recent string of beaus, so she was pulling out the big guns.

"I wouldn't know," Crystle said, her forced casualness belying her true feelings, "and I don't care. He made it clear what's important to him. What I do is none of his concern anymore."

The three of us exchanged glances, none of us willing to call her bluff.

Callie broke the tension by asking, "So what does Taren have planned for today?"

"No idea," I said, looking at the clock. "But I should probably jump in the

shower soon if I'm going to be ready by noon."

Crystle looked at me askance.

"What?" I said. "I am capable of putting some effort into my appearance. Some of us don't have the easy schedule of a student-in-training, you know."

Bridget snorted, and rightly so. Even as students, their days began as early as mine and included a full day of classes and homework on topics ranging from calculus to the evolution of demons. Still, they knew I had all of that and more, so no wonder that on days I wouldn't be seeing Taren I did the bare minimum of upkeep, and on days I would see him, my beauty routine was still pretty basic. Luckily he didn't seem to mind, always telling me I looked beautiful.

"Well, if you are gonna get all sexed up for Taren, I'm the last person who's gonna stop you," Crystle said, grinning and starting to clean up.

"Don't get carried away," I said, stacking dishes, "there's only so sexy I can get when hiking is on the agenda."

Madison gave me a sympathetic frown. "Still no word on when the embargo might be lifted?" she asked.

I shook my head and sighed. "Not yet, but I hold out hope."

I thanked the girls again for my birthday breakfast and my dream-come-true coffee maker and a few moments later I was on my way to the shower.

Over an hour later, my hair was dry and tousled the way Kat had shown me, and I was putting the finishing touches on my "daytime smokey eyes"—also courtesy of Kat—when my phone chimed.

Taren's text simply read: **Here** .

My heart skipped a beat. It was my birthday. And I had a boyfriend. A super-sexy almost super-hero like boyfriend. This birthday ruled.

One last look in the mirror and I bounded down the stairs, slowing when I reached the bottom so I could project some semblance of cool as I walked toward the common room.

I found Taren chatting with Callie. While she no longer needed him to silence the demons that still buzzed in her brain, the brother-sister bond they'd developed for each other remained. When I was a few steps away Taren looked up. Even had I been trying to sneak up on him I wouldn't have been able to. Taren was never caught off-guard.

"Wow," he said, his hazel eyes widening and his jaw on the verge of dropping.

I blushed furiously and looked down. I'd tried too hard.

"You look..." he walked over to me and took my hand.

"Maybe a little overdone for a picnic?" I said. I should offer to go change; this was ridiculous.

He smiled that semi-crooked smile of his and said, "Breathtaking."

He gave me the lightest of kisses.

"Well, I'll let you two get to your picnic," Callie said with a mischievous grin.

"Later, Cal," Taren said as she practically skipped away.

"What was that about?" I asked.

"I think she thinks you're going to approve of your birthday surprise," he said. Now he was grinning!

"Well, don't keep me in suspense," I said, "What is it?"

I readied myself to react with great enthusiasm when he told me we were going for a walk before my mom got here and we all ate lunch in the cafeteria.

"Wait, what?" I was so busy mentally preparing I was sure I'd misheard him.

"A day pass," he said again. "Or, part of a day, anyway. Long enough to get lunch at your favorite Indian restaurant.

Now my jaw dropped. "No freaking way," I said.

"What can I say?" he said, putting a hand on my waist and pulling me closer. "I'm good."

"You are," I said, my grin nearly splitting my face. "You are so good."

I threw my arms around him and squeezed him tight. "That is so the best gift you could have gotten me."

Even wrapped in the safety of Taren's arms, a memory bubbled to the surface that was frightening enough to send a shiver down my spine: Taren killing the Red that had grabbed me in the club. His blade flashing, the blood—

I was a little abrupt in pulling away. "Will we, um...have security?"

"Ha!" Taren pulled back so that he could look me in the eye. "Will we have security? That was how I sold Annys on this deal in the first place. With you and Mom being prepped for travel, your Guardian detail needs a dry run. We had to do one anyway, so why not today? She saw the necessity and came around. There will be a lead car and one tailing us, plus a slew of

Guardians at the restaurant. And check this out. We're wired for sound."

He turned his head and for the first time I noticed a tiny earpiece in his right ear.

"All of that, for me?" I asked.

"And Mom. She's coming, too. But don't act so surprised. You know how important you are. And not just to me," he said, and kissed me lightly.

"So, is that, um, on right now?" I whispered.

"Not until we're in the car," he said with a grin. "Which means I should probably tell you again how beautiful you look."

I blushed again. "Thanks, you too. Handsome, I mean."

We stood there for another moment, our faces inches from each other the way we often did, breathing each others' breath, when Mae, the dorm mother, interrupted.

"Now, I'm giving you two a little leeway since it's Ember's birthday and all, but you two know the rules," she said, her arms crossed.

Taren and I both blushed scarlet now, and stepped back from each other.

"Sorry," Taren mumbled. "We should take off anyway."

Taren took my hand and led me out the front door. Before I was fully aware what was happening, we were walking down the path that led toward the parking area. My mind cycled through a litany of thoughts.

Are you crazy? It's all well and good to wish you could leave the Institute, but there are Dahrak demons out there.

I suddenly wished I hadn't read that article last night.

But it's been months! And Indian food! And Taren went to so much trouble...

And Reds will go to a lot of trouble—

They'll be guards everywhere protecting me. Besides, it does make sense to do a dry run with Gretchen and I about to travel to other Gates. For security. If we're going to do one anyway, why not today?

"You OK?" Taren said, interrupting my stream of thoughts.

"Yeah," I said, squeezing his hand. "Just excited. And maybe a little nervous. It's been awhile since I've been out in the real world."

"Trust me," he said, "up here is as real as it gets. Down there, all they're concerned with is Botox and carbs. Besides, I'm here. And as long as I'm here, nothing bad gets near you."

He put his arm around me and squeezed my shoulder, which pretty much

settled things as far as I was concerned. I smiled and leaned into Taren as we made our way toward the edge of the Sanctuary. This was going to be my best birthday yet.

[Keep Reading Chasm](#) .

<<<<>>>>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christina Garner began writing stories at the age of six. Her first—about a young girl who busted up a nefarious ring of furniture thieves—was a huge hit with her mother.

Since then she has written and directed 10 short films and penned several novels, including the completed *Gateway Trilogy* . She is currently working on her new series, [*The Witches of Coventry House*](#) .

Christina lives in Los Angeles and when she's not writing novels spends her time traveling, watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reruns, and playing with her dog, Griffin.

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