

You know when you have that dream?

The one where you haven't been to math class all year, and suddenly you're taking the final exam? Or the one where you're about to go on stage, and not only have you forgotten your lines, but for some reason you aren't wearing pants?

This dream wasn't like that.

In this dream, I stood on the roof of a building, looking down across the city. Minneapolis. My city. I knew those streets, the high-rises, the corporate offices reaching skyward. There was heat at my back, but no light. In a city of nearly four hundred thousand people, the silence felt heavy. Dead. The towering buildings sat dark around me. Empty streets trailed off into ramps and freeways, touching the edge of the horizon. The sky was starless, blank and bare. I stood and breathed and all around me the silence gathered. The darkness gathered.

Then.

A band of light. A circle spreading outward, touching the buildings, the sidewalks, the idle buses and taxis scattered in the streets. A flash, and gone. Dark again.

Then noise. Noise that broke through my body, through the night, through the darkness and the stillness and the heat at my back. Like an explosion far below, beneath the roots of the trees that lined the parks, beneath the streets and the sewers and beneath the oldest secrets the city held. Beneath.

One by one, the buildings crumbled. Not like dominoes, or a line of cards—nothing so innocent as that. Glass shattered. Bricks fell. I heard the creak and groan of metal and concrete as skyscrapers toppled. Then the hotels collapsed, and the apartment complexes, the bars and restaurants and shops. Tree branches splintered. Streetlights bowed. The river went dark and dry, and the air filled with the scent of blood. Only I remained. And I knew. I had done this.

I looked down.

Fire.

Fire in my hands.

If Gram had been alive, she'd have reminded me that most dreams aren't prophetic, even if you have a Knowing. She'd have reminded me of nightmares I'd had as a child, dreams of monsters that crept out from shadows with cold, unblinking eyes—and, as it

turned out, Gram said, those dreams never came true. She'd have reminded me that having a Knowing didn't mean it was always right.

But it wasn't every night I dreamed I'd destroyed an entire city. I woke shaking, a chill of dread filling my lungs. It was still dark—barely. Outside, the first gray of morning pushed back the darkness, and I heard the chatter of birds in the trees. I rose from my bed and moved to the window, placing my hands on the blinds.

I heard a voice and spun around, searching the half-light of my room. Someone had spoken. Someone had spoken my name, and then—

A whisper.

"I'm going to tell you a secret, Audrey. Don't forget."

"Gram?" I asked, seeking, not seeing.

"Look for the light."

I was still dreaming.

Then, as the dream moved on: "What do you remember?"

What I remember best about Gram is walking.

Summer mornings, we walked down sleepy streets where traffic wasn't heavy. We followed trails that led into parks, looping around lakes, feeling the early sun on our skin. We went just after dawn, the time of morning when the sky is the color of lilacs and the light is just beginning to crest. Every summer, from the time I was eight until the year she died, we walked.

And as we walked, she told me secrets.

“Audrey,” she would say, smiling. “Listen. I’m going to tell you a secret.”

I’d lean toward her, feeling the difference in the air, as though her words cast a spell around us. Secrets had a kind of magic, she often said—but only when kept. “Don’t tell,” she’d say, even if it was simply a memory, or a thought she didn’t want repeated. And I would nod. I understood about secrets. How to hold them close. How to keep them. It was one of those things I’d grown up knowing.

Some of the secrets were real.

“I’m going to tell you something very special,” Gram said, one morning when I was eleven. “I’m going to tell you who you are.”

“I’m Audrey,” I said.

She smiled, pausing in our walk to cup my face with her hands. “Yes. But that’s not the name you were born with.”

I was young, but not too young to understand the implications of this. I fixed a little frown on my face and looked up at her. “I was adopted?” I asked. My best friend, Gideon, was adopted, but it had never occurred to me that I might be, as well.

Her laughter was soft and musical. “No. You’re not adopted. But you are hidden.” And then, to put me at ease, she took me home and showed me my birth certificate.

Esther Audrey Whitticomb.

I looked up at her, still frowning.

“That’s you, of course,” she said. “I thought it was time you knew your own name.”

Panic formed, a lump in my throat. She’d said I was hidden, but she hadn’t said *why*.

“Gram,” I said. “Was I a mistake?”

She pressed her hands over mine, those smooth hands just beginning to wrinkle. Gram was never old the way grandmothers in movies are, but she was beginning to look stretched, a little worn out. Her hair was still blond, with only a hint of gray, and she wore it long, in a braid that fell down her back. But some part of me—my Knowing, maybe—told me that our moments were being counted off, a tally run through. I knew I should remember every detail, everything she told me. And when I asked her if I was a mistake, she smiled and held my hands when she answered.

“No, sweeting, you weren’t a mistake. But you *are* a secret. The very best kind.”

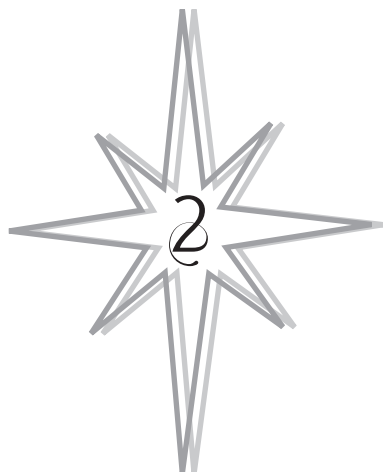
She never would explain what she meant by that.

“What do you remember?”

Everything, Gram, I wanted to tell her. *Everything you’ve told me*. I remember it all. Walking. The ground beneath my feet. The swell of a storm. The red summer sky. Secrets and mistakes.

But the dream was fading. And the light warming my eyes wasn’t the light she wanted me to find, but the sun.

I’d overslept. Again.



The truth is? Even without things like hidden names and Gram’s whispered secrets, my life wouldn’t have been normal.

You can’t be normal when your mom leaves the house every night as soon as dusk falls and returns with the first blue of dawn, like some kind of vampire, or when she’s strong enough to bend the barrel of a shotgun with barely a flick of her wrist. When your mom’s a superhero, normal isn’t even in your vocabulary.

Of course, Mom never liked the term *superhero*, but I’ve seen enough cartoons and read enough comics to know it’s an apt description. And she’d strictly forbidden me from calling Leon her sidekick. They were Guardians, she explained. Guardians of the Twin Cities—even though she has trouble remembering things like dental appointments, and Leon’s just some skinny college kid who works at a bakery.

Guardian. Superhero. I'd long ago decided they were basically the same thing. Guardian was simply the preferred term. I mean, Mom even had an alter ego. The Cities didn't know her true name, so they gave her another one. They called her Morning Star.

That was Mom's other face: a hooded figure moving in darkness. She was called vigilante, hero, menace, myth. Most adults I knew claimed not to believe in her, but at school I heard talk. Whispers and exaggerations, mostly, things Mom couldn't have possibly done—like stopping a train with her bare hands, or saving entire neighborhoods from the spring floods. Morning Star was a fantasy, a story told to children. Like Santa or the Tooth Fairy. When pressed, I claimed to be a disbeliever.

Officially, Mom worked for a private security firm in downtown Minneapolis, H&H Security. Unofficially, she did the whole Guardian thing, and we lived off of her inheritance and investments. When I was eight, we'd moved into this monster of a house that was left to Gram, so Mom didn't have to worry about snooping neighbors. To most of the world, we've always just been Lucy and Audrey Whitticomb, normal mother and daughter.

Which just means we have to work even harder to keep the secret.

We aren't always successful. My friend Gideon found out about Mom when I was in third grade. Mom had been driving us home from martial arts when a truck ran a red light. It didn't hit us hard, but it was enough to toss me forward against the seat in

front of me. As soon as we were through the intersection, Mom pulled over and scrambled to get us out. She opened the door next to Gideon by yanking it right off the car.

After that, we kind of had to tell him.

Mom worried over that for weeks. She wasn't certain Gideon would be able to keep the secret. But Gideon hadn't gone through a comic book phase like I had, and even though he'd liked cartoon superheroes as much as any little boy, he was smart enough to know that some secrets are better when kept. He never said a word to anyone.

I'd known all along it would be all right. Ever since Gideon and I met, I could tell he was special. He was the person who first made me aware of my Knowing. In second grade, when my family moved back to Minneapolis, Gideon was in my class at the elementary school. I walked in, and there he was, sitting in the front row, smiling—a boy like most little boys I'd known, with a mop of dark hair, face full of mischief, and legs covered in scabs. But all around him was light. A brilliant, shining light that radiated out of him, like a sun caught in a snow globe.

Gram told me later I was reading him, that I had a Knowing. Gram had it, and Mom had it a little, and I had it too. Certain people, Gram told me, I would look at and *Know*. Others I might be drawn to or repelled by. And I knew then, immediately, before the universe had spent another fraction of a second, that Gideon and I would be friends. No other Knowing before or since had

ever been so strong. I'd never seen his aura again, but I knew it was there—just as I knew he would never reveal our secret.

I'm not sure why Mom worried. Even people who have no Knowing at all seem to understand about Gideon. When we were little, no one ever teased him. He never got bullied or had his head dunked in a toilet or whatever else the little cannibals in elementary school come up with when they decide to eat their own. And year after year, Gideon was invariably teacher's pet.

You'd think this would have made everyone hate him. But no; he lived with the curse of being almost universally adored.

I didn't even hate him for being wide awake and cheerful on a Monday morning, eating pancakes in my kitchen when I walked downstairs still tired and shaken from my dream.

And I didn't hate him for looking at me, sighing, and then saying, "I see you're continuing this trend of rolling out of bed and into yesterday's clothes. Also, we're late."

I poured myself a glass of orange juice and sat down beside him, rubbing my face with my hands. Even on good days, mornings do not contain my most shining hours. That morning, I'd done pretty much what Gideon accused me of: climbed out of bed, pulled on the pair of jeans I'd left on the floor, tossed my hair into a ponytail, and then grabbed the first clean shirt I'd groped my way to in the closet.

"You could've woken me up," I said, grabbing a fork to steal his pancakes.

“And risked another black eye? Not a chance.”

“Even I’m not that brave,” my mother said, glancing up at me. She and I looked alike, with the same brown eyes and small, straight noses; but while my hair was a mess of brown curls, hers was straight and blond and very nicely drawn into a bun. She also appeared far more alert than I felt, even though she’d been awake all night.

I gave her a little wave. She was seated across the table, flipping through a magazine and dousing her pancakes in syrup. Since she slept afternoons and was gone most evenings, breakfast was our main meal together. She leaned forward and poked my shoulder, asking, “Everything all right?”

“I had a dream about Gram,” I said, shivering. I thought of brick and cement, tall buildings crumbling. But it was Monday morning, and the kitchen was bright with the early sun. I didn’t want to think about dark dreams. I took a sip of my juice and said, “She thinks you should let us go to the cabin this weekend.”

I’d long ago discovered it was impossible to convince a Guardian to take a vacation, even for a weekend. Because Mom spent her nights prowling dark alleys and dirty streets, she was pretty much convinced the world was evil, but I had persuaded her that Gideon and I should be allowed to go to the family cabin up north—preferably before winter set in and the whole place got buried in ten feet of snow. Since it was already the middle of October, we didn’t have much time left.

Two days ago, she'd changed her mind.

Now she didn't even look up from her magazine. "My teenage daughter alone for three days with a boy. In a cabin on a lake. I am thinking . . . no. Thanks for playing."

"I'm sixteen, not twelve. Anyway, Gideon doesn't count as a boy."

"Hey." He stabbed my hand with his fork. Syrup ran over my fingers.

I ignored him. "And even if he did, you're gone all night anyway. We could be having just as much sex as we wanted to right here."

Mom glanced up at that and gave me one of her looks. One of those looks that meant my comment had gone over about as well as my suggestion that she try wearing something a little less obvious than a black hoodie with a bright white star on the back. (Rule #47 of living with a superhero: *Don't* mess with her costume.)

"Mom," I said. "You know Gideon and I are just friends."

She returned her attention to her magazine. "Mmhmm. Still not happening."

"Well, the thing is—it hasn't really been my place to say it, but the truth is, Gideon's gay."

That led to more fork stabbing.

Mom smiled. "I've spent too many years hearing him moon over that Brooke girl to believe that one. But good effort."

"It's a new development," I said, moving my hand safely away

from Gideon and scooting to the other side of the table. “But if you’re not worried about us, why can’t we have the cabin? You’re not planning to use it, are you? Don’t you have nefarious schemes to thwart and evildoers to punish?”

“You’re late for school,” Mom said.

“You’re dodging the question.”

She closed her magazine and slapped it against the table. “Because I’m your mother, and I said so. Does that still work? How about—because I’m stronger than you and can lock you in a cage if I want to?”

“Child Services might have something to say about that,” Gideon said, apparently forgiving my earlier remarks. That went along with my inability to hate him: he never held a grudge.

“It’s not a good time, Audrey,” Mom continued. A slight frown had worked its way across her brow. I could tell from her tone that she was about three seconds away from another of her “the world is full of death and danger” speeches, so I decided to strike first.

“I’d be safer at the cabin than in Minneapolis. Nevis has a population of eighty-six, and I’m pretty sure the last time someone was murdered there was *never*.” Actually, I had no idea what its population was, but that sounded close enough.

“We could always be eaten by bears,” the ever-useful Gideon suggested.

I smacked him on the back of the head. “You’re really not helping.”

“And you’re really not winning this argument,” Mom said. “I don’t want you away from the Cities right now. I need you close to home.”

That caught my attention. “Why? Is something going on?”

“Nothing you need to worry about,” Mom said, which was her standard answer whenever I asked about her work. Before I could press the issue, she rose from the table and headed out of the kitchen, pausing at the doorway to call back over her shoulder. “I’ve got a meeting this afternoon, but stick around after school. We need to have a talk.”

“That doesn’t bode well,” I told Gideon as I got into his car.

The early air was cool, but I felt the humidity in it, the threat of heat to come. The end of summer was dragging its heels, even though the trees had all gone orange and brown and the streets were littered with leaves.

“What?”

“A Talk,” I said. “Capital *A*, capital *T*.”

“Sounds like someone’s in trouble.”

I sighed. I had an idea what it was about. Mom’s partner-in-crime-stopping, Leon, thought I shouldn’t be telling fortunes at school. And he’d been rather vocal about it recently. “Leon’s trying to get me to stop bringing my Nav cards to school. He says people will ask questions.”

Gideon shrugged. “It’s not like you’re telling the future,” he

said, pulling onto the highway that ran past our houses, toward Whitman High. It was after eight. We'd be twenty minutes late even if he sped, which Gideon never did.

Starting the week with a tardy notice and yesterday's jeans: another thing that did not bode well.

As for telling the future . . .

"I'm not," I agreed.

"You can't do that, can you?"

"I predict this will not be the last tardy notice we receive from Whitman," I said. I didn't tell him about my dream, the void that pressed in on me, a night without moon or stars. That had felt like some sort of future, sitting out on the horizon, waiting.

"What's Leon's problem, then?" Gideon asked.

"He says I'm using my powers too blatantly."

Powers. That was what Leon called my Knowing. What he called my mother's strength, and his own bizarre ability to transport himself various places. Lately I'd been wishing he would accidentally teleport himself somewhere very far away. Like maybe the sun.

"You're not selling fortunes for lunch money or anything," Gideon said. "Besides, no one takes it seriously."

"And even if they did believe it, they'd think it was the cards, not me."

Gram had given me my Nav cards five years ago. There were only a few dozen sets of the cards in the world, she told me, and

half of them had been lost. She owned one of two sets located near the Astral Circle—and she had given me hers.

Gram always told me our abilities were gifts. She thought they should be encouraged, treated with reverence. The Nav cards were a way to enhance my Knowing: a deck of fifty-one cards that allowed me to focus my thoughts and energy into a particular task. I liked to see into people, and I doubted anyone would start asking questions. Except for Gideon, I hadn't told any of my friends about my Knowing—and most of the other students at Whitman High *already* thought I was weird.

Which was actually becoming more depressing by the day. Aside from a brief stint of popularity in middle school, I was once again known only as Gideon Belmonte's Best Friend.

Not that Gideon's likability had done him much good. The girl he was convinced was his soul mate was the one girl who barely knew he existed: Brooke Oliver, a beautiful blond Barbie doll. I'd thought they were supposed to start making them look like real people, but apparently Brooke hadn't gotten the memo.

"Are you even paying attention?"

I looked up. We'd pulled into the parking lot at Whitman, and Gideon was frowning my way. The lot was empty except for a few stragglers and two boys sneaking cigarettes behind the cars. Coils of smoke drifted up in the early light. "What? Sorry."

"Zombie Audrey rises again."

I touched my hair. The ponytail had it somewhat contained,

but the clinging heat made its curl turn to frizz. “I’m not that bad. What were you saying?”

“Friday? Drought and Deluge? Tink said you weren’t sure, since you were trying to get the cabin.”

“Oh. Yeah, I can be there. It doesn’t seem like Mom is going to change her mind.” The Drought and Deluge was a club downtown that allowed minors every Friday, served watered-down soda, decent appetizers, and less-than-decent music. I wasn’t a great dancer, but when it was dark and crowded enough, it didn’t really matter.

“And she said something about wanting to talk to you in Homeroom.”

“Which we’ve already missed,” I pointed out as Gideon pulled into a parking space. “You should really let me drive.”

“I will. Once you get a car. Or, you know, *a license*.”

“Corner backing is a completely made-up skill,” I countered. “It shouldn’t even be on the test.”

“Don’t feel bad. Not everyone can fail a driver’s test three times. That takes real talent.” Gideon put his car into park. The engine made a long, rattling gurgle, and he patted the dashboard fondly.

“At least I don’t drive like I’m ninety,” I shot back, hopping out of the car before he had a chance to respond.

I looked at my watch as we hurried toward the office. It was the beginning of first period—precalculus with Mr. Alvarez. I sighed.

Mr. Alvarez wasn't known for being overly charitable, and he tended to smell like chalk, two things that put him low on my list of favorite people. And even though he was only in his mid-twenties—the youngest teacher on staff—he didn't seem to remember anything about attending high school. He delighted in destroying egos and piling on homework.

So I wasn't surprised that when I entered the room, trying to slip quietly to my seat in the back, he looked at me and said, "Nice of you to join us, Whitticomb. Oblige us, if you will, by solving the problems on the board."

I grimaced and walked to the blackboard. I still felt rattled from my dream, and the numbers before me were a blur, just a series of slashes and curves, nothing that formed any sort of pattern. It might not be fire and destruction, but this was enough like a nightmare that I glanced down to make sure I was still fully clothed.

"Whitticomb?"

"Just checking," I mumbled.

I couldn't even delight in the fact that Mr. Alvarez had already ruined his dark pants with chalk.



Whitman High was a large school, and growing. The dark brick building had been constructed back when my grandmother was still a young girl; by the beginning of my junior year, it seemed the school wouldn't be able to hold all of its students much longer. As a result, the lunch area was usually overrun, and the inner terrace crowded. Trying to weave through the obstacle course of chairs and unruly jocks meant keeping a tight grip on your tray and praying to keep your balance. I picked my way carefully through the throng, because dropping a hamburger on my shoes was exactly what this day didn't need.

The horror of precalc had been followed by eleventh grade English. Ms. Vincetti had forced us to read our essays aloud in small groups, and I was stuck with the most boring girl on the planet and a boy whose cute-but-befuddled head never managed to absorb even the most basic rules of grammar. Surviving till lunch

had seemed an impossible task. Reaching our table unharmed was nothing short of a miracle.

I set my tray down and sat beside Gideon, pressing my head to the table. Probably not my smartest idea: the tables were always sticky. Across from us, Tink had already abandoned her food and was busy reading a gossip magazine.

Gideon tugged on my ponytail. "What's wrong?"

"Math teachers are evil," I groaned. "And inhuman."

"Well, *that* one is," Tink agreed.

"If there's any justice in the world, he'll spend his next life as a toothbrush." Or a gym shoe. Or a stick of gum. Or maybe really old lettuce.

"I keep telling you to switch into my class," Tink said. She was basically a genius when it came to math, but she'd had an infamous altercation with Mr. Alvarez late last year and transferred into a section she liked to call Addition for Idiots. Now she spent her class time playing games on her calculator and writing lurid romances in the margins of her notebook.

"This is why I stopped after trig," Gideon said. He tugged at my ponytail again. "Come on, sit up. You're gonna get ketchup on your face, and you're already a disaster area."

I stayed where I was. "Maybe someone will mistake it for blood and they'll send me home."

"Or they'll assume you've been feasting on brains."

That made me lift my head. "What is with your zombie fixation today?"

Before Gideon could answer, Tink pulled my tray away and thumped her fist on the table. “I know what will cheer you up! Do a reading for me. I want to know if I should ask out Greg.”

“I don’t know why you want my input,” I said. “Even if I tell you no, you’ll do it anyway.”

“Sure, but this way I’m prepared.”

Tink was notorious for going through boyfriends. She had more of them in a year than most girls do throughout all of high school. I could predict without needing any sort of Knowing exactly how this next relationship of Tink’s would go: a month of delirious giggling and nonstop chatter, followed by a shiftiness in her eyes, a tendency to pull her hand from his, a week of unreturned phone calls—and three days of me trying to assure the victim that it wasn’t his fault and Tink still liked him as a friend.

But I did want to do a reading. I pulled out my cards and began to shuffle while Tink closed her eyes and leaned forward in her chair, drumming her fingers on the table. As I shuffled, I focused, studying her. Her fingernails were painted pearl, all except the pinkie finger on her left hand, which she had a habit of gnawing on. There was a smear of shimmer powder across her eyelids.

Once upon a time, Tink had been named Tina. Or, to be more accurate, Christina. But somewhere along the way, she had become Tink. The fact that she was blond, barely over five feet, pencil-thin, and pixie-haired made it seem as though her mother had given her the wrong name at birth, and Tink had simply been

waiting for people to realize it. The sprinkling of glitter she always wore was just icing.

“I’m waiting,” she said, opening one eye to peek at me.

“Quiet. The mysteries of the universe must not be rushed,” I told her, but I finished my shuffling and began to deal.

The first card I dealt was number fifty. The Inverted Crescent. My readings always began with this card; it represented me and helped me to orient myself. I placed it in the center and drew the next card. Fourteen. The Mapmaker. In readings for Tink, this one represented her.

The rest of the reading was a jumble.

No reading was ever perfect. My Knowings weren’t consistent, even with the cards. Proximity was a factor, as was my relationship to the subject; the bond of family was strongest, but friendship helped. Even then, Knowings came to me differently. Sometimes they came as images or impressions, sometimes in fragments and words—or just a sense, distant and indefinable. Gram told me consistency would come with experience, but so far, all I’d learned how to do was focus on a single subject, and I couldn’t always do that. The cards helped. It wasn’t like envisioning the future, or listening to thoughts. It was about becoming attuned to everything around me: motion, silence, the curve of a hand, scents in the air. My Nav cards adjusted my frequencies. And this reading was coming up static.

I bit my lip, frowning over the cards. This happened on occasion with Tink’s readings—noise I couldn’t sift through, little

flashes in the dark, hints of almost-something that slid out of reach. Something secret. Something hidden. For someone so open and friendly, she could be annoyingly difficult to read.

This time, however, the problem wasn't Tink. The problem was around us.

It wasn't any specific person. There was no location I could pinpoint, no emotion I could name. It was broader than that. Friction in the air, tension I'd been too preoccupied to notice. For a second, my dream flashed before me—the city, a rush of color, the scent of blood—and then darkness. I shivered. I let my hands idle on my cards. I'd lost my concentration and couldn't get anything at all from Tink.

"That bad?" she asked, wrinkling her nose. "What, does he have too many toes?"

Gideon paused in the middle of chewing his hamburger. "Is that a deal breaker?"

"Depends on how many." She took a moment to consider this, then turned to me. "How many?"

I was no longer in the mood for the reading, but Tink was expecting *something*. I tucked my cards into my bag and shrugged. "Just the ten," I answered. "Unless some have fallen off. That's the problem—he's undead."

"That does seem to be going around," Gideon remarked.

Tink threw a fry at me. "You're hilarious."

"Even worse? He has a summer job as a rodeo clown."

Tink had a horror of rodeos. She refused to discuss it. She crossed her arms and glared at me. “Your cards told you he’s an undead rodeo clown.”

“With an unspecified number of toes,” Gideon added, grinning.

“I need better friends,” said Tink.

“You love us,” I countered.

Tink responded by giving me the finger. “I’m still asking him out,” she said. Then, with an exaggerated sigh, she went back to her magazine.

I turned away. My senses were still on alert. Taking a long breath, I tried to filter the chaos around me. The lunch room was loud, but the friction I’d felt was still there, beneath the noises. Here and there, I caught hints of it: murmurs, furtive glances. I twisted in my chair, scanning the room. There was definitely something going on. It was more than just the anxious, expectant air. Nearby, several students leaned in close across tables, speaking in hushed, excited voices. And—there. Clustered by the door, a group of freshman girls stood crying.

“Did something happen?” I asked, nudging Gideon with my elbow.

“Like what?” Tink looked up from her magazine, tilting her head as she surveyed the room. The chatter around us had increased in volume, and a small crowd was forming near the crying freshmen.

“If I knew, I wouldn’t have asked.”

“Hmm,” Tink said, leaning forward on her elbow and staring directly at the throng.

I shook my head at her. “You’re so subtle.”

Tink was never one to be out of the loop. After a moment, she jumped up and announced, “I’ll go find out.” With remarkable ease, she pushed her way into the crowd, where a few of our friends stood whispering.

Once she left, Gideon asked quietly, “You all right?”

“I just have this uneasy feeling,” I said. Though I told him about my Knowings on occasion, this wasn’t one I could easily articulate.

“Something in your reading?”

“More like outside of it.”

Gideon didn’t press the issue. I picked at my food, waiting for Tink to return, but I didn’t have much appetite. The disquiet wouldn’t leave me. That was a problem with Knowing: sometimes I couldn’t turn it off even when I wanted to.

By the time she returned to our table, Tink had lost her usual cheer. If I hadn’t been alarmed before, I was now: she’d gone from sunny to somber in the space of a few moments. Her face was pale, her eyes lowered. She slid back into her seat, not speaking, and began fidgeting with her book bag.

Gideon and I exchanged a look.

“Tink?” I asked.

What happened then wasn’t like Knowing. My senses didn’t

clear; the fragments didn't align; the friction remained just at the edge of my focus, like sounds heard underwater. Instead, I felt a pinch of dread in my stomach at the look on Tink's face, the way her eyes wouldn't meet mine. She spoke softly, but her words sliced through me. I knew what she was about to say.

"It's Kelly Stevens. They found her."

Her body, Tink meant. They'd found her body.

Kelly had been in the grade behind us. I hadn't known her well—I'd spoken to her maybe twice, and for the life of me I couldn't recall what our conversations had entailed. But she'd been pretty and popular, and when she'd gone missing in July, all of the local news networks covered the story. She had disappeared somewhere in the stretch of half-light between seven and ten p.m. one hot summer night. A slender silver sandal was found near a park bench, straps twisted, scuffed with dirt. Nothing else.

They'd searched the entire metro area and the woods north of her home, checked nearby lakes and the river. The Cities united, holding candlelight vigils in the steamy blue twilights that lingered in late July; there'd been nothing like it since the string of murders the year before I was born. No trace had been found of Kelly. Rumors but no suspects. She had simply vanished, fallen into the blank haze of the relentless summer heat.

And now she'd been found.

"Where was she? Do they know what happened?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know, but something—some morbid curiosity, maybe—pressed me to ask. None of us had really believed they'd

find her alive, not after all this time, but it was unsettling to have suspicion become fact.

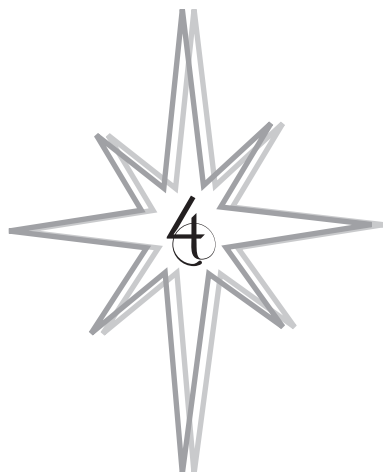
Before Tink could answer, something else caught my attention. Another twinge of Knowing, brief but potent. A girl had paused by our table. I turned, and for a moment she met my gaze. She looked as though she might speak, and then her eyes flicked past me. She hurried away.

Iris St. Croix, the new girl in school. I wondered, briefly, if she'd known Kelly. I didn't think so. She'd only transferred to Whitman at the beginning of the year. But then again, maybe she had: the sense I'd gotten from her was vague, confused, but strikingly sad.

I watched her go. She was short, and her dark hair was so long it reached her hips, though not in a messy way. The sweater she wore was at odds with the unseasonable heat. But there was something else that made her stand out.

At her throat, she wore a necklace I hadn't seen before, but with a symbol I knew. A pendant with the triple knot. It was the sign of the Astral Circle, Gram had told me. I knew it for another reason.

It was the symbol printed on the back of each of my Nav cards.



A cop was standing at my front door when I got home from school.

I'd seen Detective Wyle before, and I recognized him even before he flashed his badge at me. He stood half hidden in the shadow of ivy that hung over the lattice, tapping his foot against the stone walkway. I studied him as I approached. His face was carefully blank, but there was a certain tension in his stance. Other details I'd noted before: the fading sunburn on his forehead, the worry lines around his eyes. He was maybe forty-five, a few years older than my mother; good-looking for an older guy. He had that dark and mysterious tortured-soul thing going for him, which normally would've made me think he might be a good match for my mom. She tended to date men who were terminally boring and thus unlikely to think her anything but quirky. It always ended

badly. But Detective Wyle also wore a wedding band, so that was out.

Plus, the last time we'd seen him, he'd threatened to arrest her, which was probably a better indicator that they simply were not meant to be. Mom might not have the best taste in men, but she had a healthy sense of self-preservation.

"Hey, kid," he said when I reached him. "You live here, right?"

Since I'd dumped lemonade in his lap the last time he'd interrogated my mother, it seemed unlikely he'd forgotten me. I rolled my eyes, stepping past him to unlock the door.

"You gonna invite me in?"

I shrugged, turning on the light in the entryway. "You have a warrant?" Inside, the hall smelled like orange peels and socks, a sad case for a house built with the grand, imposing feel of a Victorian mansion. Mom must have been gone most of the day, and the house had been closed up, hot air thickening.

"It's not that kind of visit. I just need to speak with your mother."

"With or without handcuffs?" I turned back toward him. He'd gripped the side of the door, holding it open.

He gave me a bland, unamused smile.

I smiled back. "She's not here right now."

"When do you think she might be home?"

"Late," I said. Although, since she'd told me not to leave after school, there was every chance she'd pull into the driveway and prove me a liar at any moment.

“I can wait,” Detective Wyle said.

I hesitated, wondering how difficult it would be to annoy him into leaving. I looked at him again. Wedding band—on. But he’d twisted it at least twice since we’d been standing there. He looked as though he’d skipped shaving this morning. His clothing was somewhat wrinkled, too, and he seemed tired, a little worn out.

“Don’t want to go home, huh? What, did your wife kick you out?”

“You’re a detective, too?” He scratched the stubble on his chin and gave me a hard glare, but I figured he was just trying to intimidate me.

I shrugged again. “Fortune-teller,” I said. “I’ll make you a deal. You can come in if you let me give you a reading.”

I expected that to send him running for the hills, but I must have underestimated either his need to talk to my mother or his desire not to go home, because I found myself leading him into the house, past the stairway, and into the sitting room. I told him to have a seat on the sofa while I found him something to drink. The air-conditioning was broken—again—and the heat was heavy around us. That orange-peels-and-socks smell lingered.

Detective Wyle watched me suspiciously. “That’s staying in the glass this time, right?”

I set the lemonade in front of him. “Only if you use a coaster. I’ll get cranky if you ruin Gram’s table.” I dropped my book bag to the floor and knelt on the carpet across from him, reaching for my Nav cards. The news about Kelly had rattled me, and I

worried that I wouldn't be able to focus; but the motion of shuffling soothed me. I took slow breaths, feeling the texture of the cards, the edges worn by long years of use. I glanced up at Detective Wyle. I wasn't sure what exactly I hoped to see, but if he was planning to harass my mother, I wanted whatever advantage I could get. Inconsistent though my Knowings were, a reading might give me *something*.

Or fail miserably, as my reading for Tink had. I couldn't be certain.

"How does this work?" Detective Wyle asked. "Is that a tarot deck?"

"Nope. My own cards. Gram gave them to me. You just sit there and daydream about sending bad guys to jail or something. Or you can think of a question if you want."

He grunted.

"What's your first name, Detective? It helps."

He hesitated, his fingers tapping the table. He was a big man—tall, broad-shouldered, fit—and he seemed out of place on the dainty floral sofa. Like an action figure in a dollhouse.

"Mickey," he said.

I laughed. "Mickey. Really? Never mind—we're sticking with Wyle."

He smiled, but he hadn't touched his drink. He probably thought I'd poisoned him, or that drinking pink lemonade in a room decorated with pastels and paintings of fruit might ruin his tough-guy image.

“You gonna open a window?”

“This works better if you don’t talk,” I said, but I stopped shuffling to oblige him. I rose and tugged both of the far windows open, pausing at the sill to breathe. A cool wind pushed in, the sound of traffic, the rustle of birds taking flight.

Detective Wyle shifted slightly when I turned, though his expression didn’t change. He’d been scanning the room, I realized. Working his way across the walls, the bookshelves. Nothing was wrong or out of place—no black pants or dark hoodies lying around, nothing that might hint of mysteries tucked behind the doors. But I shivered. He was searching.

I returned to my cards. “Okay, Wyle. I’m going to lay out ten cards, and they’ll tell me all your secrets.”

“I must not have many secrets,” he said.

“I’m just that good.”

I knelt, finished shuffling, and set down the first card. Fifty. Inverted Crescent. Good. I placed it in the center and laid out the rest of the cards.

I began at the top, taking another long breath and focusing. Card one, Compass. Card eight, The Witch. Card sixteen, The Beggar.

I frowned. In readings, the Compass card was always my mother. And this I got a sense of: the cooling twilight; a woman in black; a face in profile, the slope of her nose; light refracting off water. A single star shining. The Witch and The Beggar. Someone searched for and unseen.

Detective Wyle was after my mother, all right. He might not have proof of who she was—but he had his suspicions.

Still, I wasn't about to tell him that.

"You're getting a divorce," I said.

"I thought you'd already figured that one out. Not really fortune-telling."

"I'm getting there," I said. "Here. Card forty-nine. Inverted Anchor. You're feeling lost. You're probably one of those people who mostly has couple friends, and they've all taken her side. And she's getting the house, too, huh?"

He crossed his arms. "You didn't get that from the cards. You got that from looking at me. Are you planning a career in law enforcement?"

"Here, the cross cards. Forty-five, Sign of Brothers. Crossed by The Warrior and The Prisoner."

He leaned forward. "Meaning what?"

This part was easy, a Knowing so clear I didn't even need the cards. "You didn't start out wanting to be a cop. You followed in your father's footsteps. You probably wanted to be something totally ridiculous, like a football player. Or a rock star."

"Baseball player." His lips twitched.

"Another score for the fortune-teller."

"You've got good intuition, kid," he said. But he was giving me a look. A look that meant I was playing it a little too straight, and he was already suspicious of my mother, and he was well-armed

with brains and his own common sense. It was probably not a good idea to give him more ammunition.

“Now the terminal cards,” I said. “Sign of Lovers. Sign of Swords.”

I bit my lip. That meant—

Well. I didn’t really know what that meant.

The cards had been helping, up to this point. Sense and feeling coming into alignment, thoughts taking shape within me. My Knowing had formed an image of this man, Detective Mickey Wyle, who had spent his boyhood summers fly-fishing in Canada, whose eyes still saw past the dirt of city streets into the northern half-light of autumn, who went to bars with his cop buddies but rarely drank. But these two cards felt strange when I pressed my fingertips to them, and abruptly the world around us came into close focus. Details sharpened. I noticed the touch of gray at his temples. I saw the dust that floated in the light pushing in through the blinds. I breathed the deep, earthworm scent of soil that dwelled beneath the smell of the house—the smell of alleys at night, the smell of graveyards.

I wouldn’t tell him that. I couldn’t tell him there was something chasing him, something like a voice in the dark, or that I could see that he hadn’t slept in three days and it had nothing to do with the wife he didn’t want to go home to. That it was possible he wouldn’t live very long.

I didn’t know what it meant. I didn’t know why he was really

here, in this room, with his rumpled clothing and quiet stare. And suddenly I was a little frightened. I didn't know what it meant, but—

He *knew*.

About Mom. About us.

Some part of him knew.

I couldn't say that. So I went for the obvious answer. Lovers and Swords. Not a difficult leap, though an incorrect one. "You caught her cheating," I told him.

"Way off the mark," he said, but he was smiling a little. He ran a hand through his hair, leaning back against the cushions of the sofa.

"She was too successful. You're threatened by strong women."

He grinned at me. "Now you're just stabbing in the dark. But nice try, kid."

I was flustered, so I didn't say anything, just picked up my cards and began shuffling them idly.

"My turn," he said. "And I won't use any cards or fortune-telling."

"Somewhere you've got a file on my mom. It probably tells you everything you need to know about me."

"I don't need a file. You're easy to read."

I frowned, watching him warily, but kept my silence.

"You're close with your mom," he began.

"Wow. Impressive."

He ignored me. “Protective of her. It’s just the two of you, so you think you need to look out for her. You worry that I mean her harm—but I don’t. And I think you know exactly what I’m talking about when I say I believe your mother is a very gifted individual.”

The front door eased open.

“Mom!” I called, jumping up and running to meet her, to warn her, before Detective Wyle caught her off guard. She tilted her head at me when she entered, frowning slightly. Mom was in the habit of dressing brightly during the day to contrast with her nightly attire, and today she wore old blue jeans with a rose-colored belt and a vivid pink tank top—but over it she wore her dark H&H Security coat. Very official looking. She yawned into her free hand as she glanced at me.

“We, uh, have a visitor,” I said.

He was already at my side, leaning against the door frame and giving my mother a lazy smile.

“Entertaining kid you’ve got here, Mrs. Whitticomb. I’m thinking of recruiting her.”

I could see the storm brewing behind Mom’s eyes, and took a step backward.

“Miss. I never married,” she corrected. “As I’m sure you know.” She clenched a fist. “Audrey, how exactly have you been entertaining?”

“Um . . . I gave Mickey a reading.”

“I thought we were sticking with Wyle,” he said.

“Mickey is less threatening,” I told him. “My mom’s a little vulnerable right now. She turns forty next month.”

She sounded strangled. “Audrey. Room. Now.”

Oh well. I already had a talk in store. I gave her a quick salute, then leaned in close to whisper. “Be careful, Mom. He’s totally on to you.”



Over the years, Mom had been interrogated by the police on a number of occasions. It was sort of inevitable, given her choice of careers. In the past, she'd always managed to explain away her activities with her connection to H&H Security. She even had a couple of friends on the force—or acquaintances, at any rate; Mom wasn't very big on friends. She tended to laugh off the idea that she'd be caught. Cops were far too pragmatic to believe in Morning Star, she told me. And maybe she was right. She'd never been arrested. She'd never been charged. Detective Wyle had been the first to even truly suspect her of anything.

“He's a pain in the ass,” she'd told me, after the first time he'd questioned her. “But I can handle him.”

Personally, I'd always thought that Mom rather liked being able to fool everyone. She didn't *have* to wear a costume, I'd argued once. It would be easier if she just saved the city in obscurity. Her

response had been to tell me that Morning Star wasn't a costume, it was an identity. Part of who she was.

It hadn't begun that way. Not intentionally. It hadn't even been an outfit at first; it was just a bulky sweater with a star on it that some great-aunt had knitted for her one Christmas.

"I wore it ironically," Mom had told me. "And because I didn't care if I ruined it." She *had* ruined it, too. She'd thrown it away after it had become nothing more than a tattered, bloodstained rag; but by then, more than a few witnesses had seen a teenage vigilante running around wearing an eight-pointed star.

"And thus a legend was born," I'd joked.

That, apparently, had been the wrong thing to say. Mom had gone quiet and had never finished the story.

But that didn't mean she didn't enjoy playing with fire. I'd seen her snickering over newspaper articles that mentioned her alter ego a few too many times to think otherwise. I just hoped she was right and she could handle Detective Wyle. I felt a touch of apprehension. There had been no malice in him, but that didn't make him harmless.

An hour passed before he left. I slogged halfheartedly through my homework and watched the green numbers of my clock blink upward. Tink called to inform me that Greg, although not undead, was a terrible kisser, and she was gravely disappointed my reading had failed to reveal that.

I laughed, momentarily distracted. "Rejected him already? You work fast."

“What can I say? I know what I want.”

“Too bad what you want changes by the hour.”

“We can’t all be Gideon, pining stupidly for the same girl for three years. That boy needs a good kick—”

I shushed her, listening to the movement below me. Downstairs, the hall door opened. Footsteps sounded in the entryway. I crossed to my window and shifted the blinds with my fingers. Outside, on the sidewalk, Detective Wyle shuffled toward the street. He turned, once, looking back at the house. Then he was gone.

Which meant—

“Audrey!” When my mother wanted to, she could really bellow. I supposed the superstrength extended to her lungs. “Down here, now!”

“Uh, I’ll call you back. I have to go get yelled at,” I told Tink, then hurried downstairs. Mom was in the sitting room, curled up on the sofa, drinking cocoa and appearing for all the world as though she couldn’t actually rip both my arms off or dangle me upside down.

“You forgot a coaster,” I said, when she set her mug on the table.

She rolled her eyes at me but dutifully slid one of the ceramic coasters beneath her cup. “We really should examine your priorities.”

“Gram loved that table.”

“Gram bought it at a garage sale for two dollars. Nice try distracting me, though. Since it didn’t work, why don’t you explain

to me why I just spent several minutes talking to Detective Wyle about my ‘deeply intuitive’ daughter.”

“Deeply intuitive—without an ounce of common sense.”

That was Leon.

I turned. I hadn’t noticed him in the room—but then, it was possible he hadn’t been there. He had this annoying habit of simply appearing, without bothering with nuisances like doors or asking permission. And though he was only three years older than me, he seemed to think being a Guardian meant he knew more about the world in general than I ever would.

I shot him a glare. He stood near the window, arms crossed, leaning back against the wall. Like Mom, Leon gave the illusion of being totally harmless. He was tall and broad-shouldered, but he was so skinny that most of his clothes just sort of hung on him. And he was tidy, clean-cut, the kind of guy you’d expect to see at some Ivy League college, taking eight classes a week and sucking up to professors, not smiting evildoers. He didn’t like to go anywhere without a tie, and his white button-down shirts were always ironed. (I’d actually seen him iron them.) Sure, he looked good—I could admit that, just not to his face—but he didn’t exactly look *dangerous*.

Of course, even if he’d wanted to appear moody and mysterious, the effect would’ve been ruined by the dusting of flour in his dark hair. Not to mention that he usually smelled like cake and frosting, and often appeared with cookies. You’d think that someone who had shown up in Minneapolis on a motorcycle with

nothing but a backpack and half a cheese sandwich to his name might not want to criticize anyone else's life choices—but no. Leon was convinced he knew how to fix the world, starting with me. He didn't think I had any sense, common or otherwise. And since he appeared to be cookieless tonight, I wasn't feeling very forgiving.

I stepped toward him and gave him the sweetest smile I could manage. “We can't all be as perfect as you, Leon.”

It took him a second. A little furrow appeared on his forehead—there was flour there, too—then he shrugged. “True. But that's no reason not to try.”

“I hate doing things I'm not good at,” I said. “Perfection will have to remain beyond my grasp. But, hey, lucky me, I've got you here to show me the error of my ways.”

That actually seemed to annoy him. His frown settled into a glower. “You must have a brain in there somewhere. It's a shame you don't use it.”

“God forbid I disagree with Almighty Leon.”

Mom banged her mug on the table like a gavel. “As entertaining as it is listening to you two bicker, I'm still waiting on that explanation, Audrey.”

I shrugged and turned back toward her. She'd forgotten the coaster again, but I decided to let it go, just this once. “That cop knows something,” I said. “I wanted to see what I could find out.”

“Did you get anything?”

“Um... he likes fly-fishing, and his favorite band is the Grateful Dead.”

Mom sighed.

“And he knows about you. I’m not sure what he knows, or how—but I think he has some idea of your abilities.”

“Another reason it was irresponsible of you to give him a reading,” Leon interjected.

“I said he knows about *Mom*,” I retorted. “You really think he’s going to take a teenager telling fortunes seriously? How about this: if he calls asking for lottery numbers, I’ll let you know.”

“I’m more concerned about *you* not taking it seriously,” Leon shot back. His eyes were fixed on me, and that disapproving slant to his mouth meant he wasn’t done with whatever scolding he had in store. I decided to cut him off before he got the chance.

“How is this even any of your business? I hate to break it to you, Leon, but tagging along after Mom doesn’t actually make you part of the family.”

He went quiet for a moment. “I don’t tag along.”

I ought to have felt bad.

When it came down to it, we *were* pretty much the only family Leon had. He didn’t talk much about his life before Minneapolis, but I knew his parents were dead, and so was the grandfather who had raised him. He didn’t seem to have ties to anyone else in the Cities. Though he went to college, I don’t think he had any friends. He took his life as Guardian so seriously, I doubted he had time for them.

He’d arrived three years ago, showing up at the house one summer evening in the blank heat of twilight. I remembered that

clearly; it was only a few weeks after Gram had died. Mom and I had been sitting outside, eating Popsicles in the grass because the air-conditioning was broken and it was too hot to stay inside. And then Leon had appeared at the end of the drive, all puppy-eyed and starved-looking and earnest; and instead of returning him to whatever pound he'd surely escaped from, Mom had let him stay and be her sidekick. Or fellow Guardian. Or whatever.

At the time, I'd found it exciting—the way he'd appeared out of nowhere, on that night when the heat was so thick the moon was nothing but a smear in the sky above us. The way he'd walked slowly toward us, seeming nervous and confused and somehow vulnerable. How he'd introduced himself to my mother, his voice steady and strong, a confidence at odds with the wariness in his blue eyes. How he'd turned, then, and looked at me. He'd looked at me a long time, and there was a puzzled little smile on his face, an expression I didn't understand, but wanted to. And then he'd told us he knew our secrets. That he had secrets, too.

For the first few weeks, I'd idolized him. I'd followed him around, wanting to know everything about him—where he'd come from, why he'd come, how he'd known to find us. Back then, I actually thought he *was* perfect, with his dark hair that curled just slightly, that effortless way he moved. The gravity that never quite left his voice made everything seem important, even me. But before the month was out, he'd made it clear that he thought me nothing more than some bratty, clueless kid—and he'd been bossing his way around my life ever since.

So I didn't feel bad. Instead, I scowled and copied his stance.

Then my mother said, "Actually, Audrey, that's what I was meaning to talk to you about."

I was busy trying to outstare Leon, so it took a moment for that to sink in. I turned, giving her a blank look. "Huh?"

"We've been discussing it for some time now, and it really makes more sense for Leon to live here. With us."

"Funny," I said.

"I'm not joking. We have the room. And with everything going on—it's just safer this way." She broke off, turning toward the window. Leon straightened and lost his scowl. Outside, the drone of traffic and chatter of birds died away. The late sun flared through the panes, coloring the floor around us orange and red.

A sudden sharp awareness settled around me, not quite a Knowing. I glanced at them: my mother facing away, Leon silent and unreadable. Something unspoken had passed between them—one of those secret Guardian exchanges that never signaled anything good.

It's just safer this way.

I rubbed at my arms, feeling a sudden chill. "You two could not possibly be more ominous. What's going on?"

Mom gave me her standard answer: "Nothing you need to worry about."

An unsettling thought struck me. Strange that they'd brought this up today. It could be pure coincidence, but—"Does this have something to do with Kelly Stevens?"

Leon's gaze snapped toward me. "What do you know about that?"

"I know she's dead," I answered.

"This is about practicality," Mom cut in, giving Leon one of those quelling glances she usually reserved for me. "It just makes sense for Leon to be here when I'm out, so I don't have to worry about you being alone."

I didn't believe her for a second, but it was useless trying to pry information out of Mom when she was determined not to give it. She seemed to think that if she didn't tell me about the dangers she faced, I wouldn't notice the occasional bruise, or the dried blood on her clothing. She probably didn't realize I'd stocked every room in the house with first-aid kits.

Since she wasn't going to tell me anything, I tried a different tactic. "I'm a little past the age of needing a babysitter."

"As your conduct today clearly proves," Leon said.

I ignored him. "It'll be weird, Mom. As you two go to such pains to point out, keeping the secret is difficult enough without having a sidekick to explain away."

"A lot of people rent out rooms to college kids," Mom argued.

"But—"

She turned her quelling glance my way. "It's my decision, and I've made it."

My mind raced. Leon—*living with us*. How was I supposed to react to that? I didn't know. My thoughts wouldn't settle themselves, and I felt a strange, inexplicable surge of panic. Leon had

turned away again, and I couldn't see his expression. He was one of the few people I'd never been able to read at all, not even with my Nav cards, and now I wondered what he was thinking.

I sighed. I felt scattered, out of sorts, but there didn't seem to be anything I could do. "When's he moving in?" I asked finally, trying to find out how much time I'd have to hide the really embarrassing things I'd left lying around the house, like romance novels and dirty laundry.

They exchanged a look.

"Pretty much now," Mom said.

I took a breath. "Right. How long did you say you were planning this?"

Another look.

"A while," Mom answered.

"And you waited until now to tell me."

"You won't even know I'm here," Leon said.

I almost laughed. "Right," I said. As though there was any possibility of *that* being true.

Mom and Leon took the early evening to move his belongings. Since Mom could probably carry everything in his apartment by herself, I didn't feel my presence was necessary. I went for a run.

I needed to clear my head. I kept thinking about Mom's words—*it's just safer this way*—and about what she wasn't telling me. Secrets. That hint of worry on her face that she struggled to hide. I thought back to my dream: the darkness of the city, the silence.

I thought about Kelly. Her twisted silver sandal. Her eyes closed, her face blue and marbled and dead.

And then I found myself at Gideon's.

It wasn't a surprise, really. Gideon only lived a mile or so away, and my legs were accustomed to taking me there. He opened the door before I could knock, giving me that lopsided grin of his.

"I had a feeling you'd show up," he said.

"What, now you're psychic too?"

"Say that a little louder."

I shrugged and followed him down the stairs to his room, then flopped onto his bed while he turned off his computer game. The two cats lounging on his pillows looked up at me irritably.

"How was your talk?" Gideon asked. A third cat began to slink out from under the bed, and he bent to catch it.

I groaned. "Sidekick Extraordinaire is moving in with us."

"Leon?"

"No, her other sidekick." I flipped over onto my stomach.

"And you're upset."

"Not . . . upset, exactly. Unnerved." It still wasn't anything I could put into words.

"Worried about having a man in the house?"

I rolled my eyes at that. "I wouldn't call Leon a man."

He grinned. "You are harsh on my gender today."

"So this is a male solidarity thing?"

"It won't be such a big deal," Gideon said. "Aren't you always complaining that he's there all the time anyway?"

“Exactly. He already treats me like the younger sister he never wanted—and if I wanted a brother, I’d hire you.”

“What, do you really think he’s going to tie your shoelaces together and put grasshoppers in your bed?”

“Okay, maybe I *wouldn’t* hire you,” I said, laughing. Gideon certainly had big-brother experience, though. His parents had been one of those couples that try for years to have a child, finally decide to adopt, and then promptly have three more children. As far as I could tell, all of his sisters worshipped him. I figured he was kidding about the grasshoppers. “But that doesn’t make me any happier about this.”

“Leon’s not so bad.”

Easy for him to say. For some reason I truly could not fathom, Gideon and Leon actually got along. “You just think he’s cool because he can teleport.”

“How is that *not* cool?”

Well, I had to give him that one. It wasn’t as spectacular as, say, flying—but it did have a certain appeal.

I sighed. “At least he knows how to bake.”

“What’s really bothering you?”

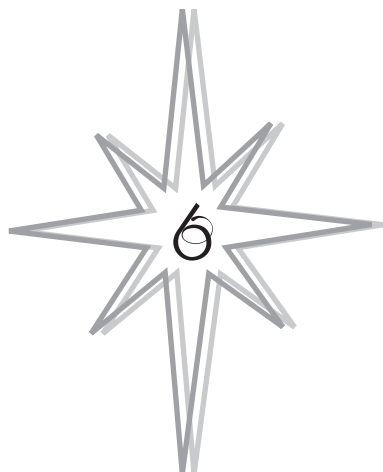
“I don’t know.” I rolled to my side, dislodging one of the cats. Gideon’s room was below ground level, but he had a window well, and the blue of twilight drifted in. “There’s something going on,” I said. “Mom won’t talk about it, of course—but I think something’s happening. I’m worried about her.”

“Your mom knows how to take care of herself.”

I knew that. She didn't need protecting. She was strong, and not just physically. She'd had to be strong.

But something was out there. Something I felt in more ways than just Knowing.

And it seemed, for just a moment, in the thready blue light that moved across the floor, that it was calling to me.



The night Gram had given me my Nav cards, she came into my room and sat on the floor, spreading the cards face up before her. The memory was always clear in my mind: it had been one of those dark midwinter nights when the frost on my window was so thick I couldn't see out and the wind was so loud it didn't rattle so much as roar. Gram loved nights like that. The best time for stories, she always said, and she lived to tell stories.

“Audrey, sweeting,” she'd said, beckoning me toward her. “I have something for you.”

I knew the cards. We'd used them before, when I was first learning about my Knowing. I hesitated, touching them lightly, feeling the smooth surfaces against my fingertips.

Gram smiled. “These are yours. They were given to me when I was a young girl, and now I'm giving them to you.”

“You don't need them?”

“Not anymore. Not for many years. Someday, you won’t, either. For now, they’ll teach you. Your mother has no real talent for Knowing, and my gift isn’t as strong as yours—they’re meant for you. Now, listen. I’m going to tell you a secret.” She gestured toward the cards. As I watched, she slowly flipped each of them over, so that only their backs were showing. All except one.

Card twenty-six. The Triple Knot. The knot image was larger on the front than the back, but otherwise the card might have simply been double-sided.

She lifted the card and placed it in my hands, closing her fingers over mine. “Remember this one,” she said. “This is the Astral Circle.”

I’d known about the Circle already. It was another one of Gram’s stories, something she told me when we first moved to Minneapolis. She’d spoken to me of a power that dwelled unseen within the heart of the city. You will know it, she’d told me. You will feel it. It will call to you.

She was right.

I’d never been to Minneapolis before. Gram and Mom had lived here most of their lives, but they’d headed north before I was born, choosing a small, sleepy town dotted with lakes and evergreens. Until we moved, I’d never been farther south than St. Cloud—but I felt the difference as soon as we approached the Cities, even before the skyline appeared and the highways widened around us. A sudden warmth filled me—vibrant, pulsing, a sense so strong and sharp that for a moment, I couldn’t draw breath.

But when we arrived in Minneapolis, I was disappointed.

“I don’t see any circles,” I’d complained.

Gram patted my hand gently. “That doesn’t mean it’s not here.”

As Gram told it, the Astral Circle wasn’t physical; it wasn’t something we could hold or touch. It was visible only on rare occasions, appearing as a faint glow near the skyline, like the gleam of the northern lights. It couldn’t be seen by everyone, she said—and for the past eight years, it hadn’t been seen by *anyone*. Its light had gone out.

“There is energy within the Circle,” Gram had explained. Not the type used to heat houses or turn on appliances, but energy all the same, urgent and wild. “But its power has diminished. It’s been years now since the Circle went dark. Some even believe it to be dead.”

It didn’t feel dead to me. I sensed it like a hum against my skin, something whispered just out of hearing. “So, it’s broken?”

“You might say that. Or sleeping, maybe.” For a moment, she’d looked a little sad—but she continued her explanation. “The Circles are ancient and powerful, but very rare. There are only a few of them now, scattered across the world. One of them is here.”

“Is that why we moved?” I’d asked. “The Circle?”

“Yes. Because it is a part of us. A part of you. And we have been away from it far too long.”

So when she handed me the card, I didn’t ask about the Circle. I knew. But I didn’t understand what any of this had to do with the Triple Knot—and told her as much.

She gave a wheezy sort of laugh. “This is its symbol. It’s about connection. Power woven around us. The same power that lives in you, that lives in your mother and all Guardians.”

“There are other Guardians?” That was the first I’d heard of it. To hear Mom talk, the superhero club was extremely exclusive. She wouldn’t even entertain thought of my following in her footsteps.

“Well, of course,” Gram had answered. “But none quite like your mother.”

Since that time, the only other Guardian I’d met was Leon, but I often wondered. I wondered where these other Guardians were—*who* they were. I wondered if they spent long nights and empty dark hours moving in silence through the streets, keeping the city safe. I wondered if they knew about us.

And I wondered about the triple knot worn by Iris St. Croix.

It could have been a coincidence. It probably was; that’s what I told myself during school the rest of the week as I watched for her in the halls, trying to get another glimpse of the necklace at her throat. It likely meant nothing. It was just a symbol, after all, and not an uncommon one. She could’ve picked it up for five dollars at some junk-jewelry store. Except for that shiver of Knowing I’d had, I wouldn’t have noticed it at all. And though I kept looking, I didn’t catch sight of her.

The school was still reeling from the news of Kelly’s death. It was all anyone wanted to talk about. We’d seen the television reports: the statement made by her parents, the pain haunting their eyes; the mayor offering his sympathies; promises that an

investigation was ongoing, but no suspects could be named. Speculation was rampant. The police hadn't released the exact manner of her death, and the more ghoulish members of the student body spread rumors that Kelly had been mutilated in some terrible way. Teachers relaxed homework assignments for the week. The school set up counseling and memorials. A sheet was placed on the cafeteria wall for students to write out their condolences and sign their names. All of it took on an eerie familiarity. Kelly hadn't been the first student to die this year: a sophomore girl had been killed in a car crash the first week of school.

"It's a bad year for Whitman," Gideon remarked after we added our signatures to the wall.

"This is way too depressing," Tink said. "Let's talk about something else." That was Tink's style. According to her, the best way to deal with anything upsetting was to pretend it didn't exist. By the end of school on Friday, all she would talk about was our plan to meet at the Drought and Deluge. "Eight thirty," she told us. "Don't forget!"

At home that night, I ate leftover lasagna and sat on the couch watching the news. The anchor said our heat wave was nearly over, that repairs on some building were under way, and there was no progress in the Stevens case. Mom frowned at the television before she left for the evening, then told me not to stay out too late.

"Ditto," I called after her. "Superheroes need sleep too." She'd been busier than usual the past week, and she looked weary—but her only response was an exasperated sigh and a shake of the head.

I listened to the door shut, then headed to the kitchen to rinse my plate. Around me, the house sat silent and empty.

Despite his assertions to the contrary, I'd noticed Leon's presence in my home. Although he went out nights like my mother, he tended to leave later and come home earlier. He had an actual job and school to deal with, so he couldn't keep her hours. That meant he was around for dinner, and around for breakfast, and generally just *around*.

But that night I hadn't seen him.

I looked at the time. It was past seven thirty. Gideon was my ride, and I'd told him I'd be at his house at eight, which meant I should probably hurry.

I walked upstairs to my room and changed shirts. My hair—unruly even on the best of days—had begun to work loose from its ponytail and needed to be fixed. Whatever I did with my face, Tink was sure to change by pulling me into the bathroom and dragging out her makeup bag, so I didn't bother with anything more than a thin layer of lipstick. I looked pale. My summer tan had faded, leaving only a light dusting of freckles on the bridge of my nose. It couldn't be helped, I supposed. I tossed my phone into my bag and headed back downstairs.

I was almost out the door when, without warning, Leon appeared in front of me.

I dropped my bag. A startled scream lodged itself somewhere in my lungs and emerged as a gurgle. I clapped a hand to my chest, trying to gasp in breath.

“*God*, Leon! If you’re going to do that in the house, could you at least say *BAMF!* or something? I’m too young for a heart attack.”

My comic book reference was clearly lost on him. He just stood there, looking all innocent and confused. “Did I scare you?”

“Like you didn’t do that on purpose.” I resisted the urge to hit him. I’d tried that once; it hurt. He was a lot more solid than he looked. “And you say *I’m* immature.”

His arm slid out in front of me as I tried to push past him, blocking my path to the door. He stood looking down, giving me his best surly-sidekick glower.

I wondered where he’d come from. Since he didn’t feel the need to enter the house in a conventional manner, he could’ve returned without my knowing. He was dressed as he normally was: white shirt, dark slacks, tie, and he smelled like soap, not frosting, which meant he was once again lacking in baked goods. I glowered back up at him. “Did you need something?”

He didn’t move. “Where are you going?”

“To plot your downfall,” I snapped. I bent to retrieve my bag and ducked beneath his arm. It wasn’t the most dignified exit, but it worked. I turned to face him once I reached the door. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m meeting my friends at the Drought and Deluge. Mom knows.”

“The Drought and Deluge,” he repeated, frowning. “Lucy knows about this?”

Well. Sort of. She knew I was going out, at least. “Didn’t I

just say that?" When he didn't answer, I added, "I've been there before. They serve ginger ale and greasy mozzarella sticks. It's not exactly a den of sin." He went right on frowning. I might not have been able to get a sense of him with my Knowing, but that was easy to read: he was worried about *something*. "All right, now you're freaking me out. What's going on?"

"I just don't think you should go alone," he hedged.

"I'm not going alone," I said, turning as I reached for the door-knob. "I'm going with my friends. Problem solved."

"I think I should accompany you."

My mouth actually dropped open at that. I spun back around. "Shouldn't you be out with Mom? Patrolling or whatever it is you Guardians do?"

"Not tonight."

"Studying, maybe?" Not that I'd ever seen him open a textbook. He was probably one of those obnoxious people who just remembers everything. "Seriously, exciting as the prospect of having my very own sidekick is, don't you have some crime to fight? Homework to do? Pastries to bake?"

That annoyed him enough that he scowled at me. "This may astonish you, but, yes, I can think of any number of things I'd rather do than spend the night watching you and your friends grind to embarrassing music."

"Great," I gritted out. "Then go do them."

It was no use. Leon had gotten a particularly stubborn look on his face. Mom must have instructed him to play babysitter,

and he was nothing if not dutiful. He took a step toward me and said, "I'll drive you."

I'd been on Leon's motorcycle before and had spent every moment of it fearing for my life, so I wasn't sure why he thought that was an incentive. "I'm not taking a ride on your deathmobile. That thing is beyond its last legs. Or wheels. Or whatever."

"I wouldn't let you ride with me if it wasn't safe," he said, looking a little wounded.

Well, that was probably true. He did have a safety fixation.

I stuck a hand on my hip. "Am I being punished for something?" I asked. Unfortunately, that only made him look *more* wounded. I sighed. He was going to use his Hungry Puppy eyes on me, I could tell. And that was definitely a losing battle. "Okay, you can come with me—but not dressed like that." I leaned forward, flipped up his collar, and loosened his tie. "This? This goes. And you are not wearing . . . any of this, actually. Go change." I paused, considering. "You do have other clothing, right?"

He furrowed his brow. "It's not a crime to dress well."

"It is at the Drought and Deluge," I replied. "You realize that you'll be hanging out with a bunch of high school students, right?"

"I'm not going to be *hanging out*."

"What are you going to do, lurk in a corner and scowl?" Actually, it was probably best not to give him any ideas. Before he could respond, I said, "Whatever you're doing, you're still not doing it dressed like that. Go change while I text Gideon. I promise not to run off before you get back."

* * *

Leon and I arrived late.

Friday evening traffic was a nightmare, and Leon appeared to have taken a page from the Book of Gideon and refused to drive any faster than five miles below the speed limit. Which was probably a good thing, considering his motorcycle had made several discouraging noises before he finally got it to start.

To my surprise, I enjoyed the ride. Leon was much easier to deal with when he wasn't talking. And I knew he was right: I could trust that he wouldn't let anything happen to me. After a while, I was able to just lean against him and watch the lights of the skyline rise above us. I breathed in, listening to the churn of the engine, the surge of traffic, the rush of cool air that billowed around me.

I just hoped Leon wouldn't mention how tightly I'd clung to him every time we turned a corner.

Once we parked, I slid off and handed him my helmet. "You could've just teleported us," I said, before he could get a word in. I took a cautious step forward; motorcycles made me a little wobbly.

"Into a parking ramp full of cars and cameras." He placed his hand on my shoulder, steadying me.

"To the Drought and Deluge," I suggested.

"A building full of people."

"Some place out of the way. Like . . . I don't know, the janitor closet."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Okay. Stupid idea. But you're paying for parking."

Gideon saw us as soon as we entered the club, and stood waving us toward the table where he sat with Tink. Tink was difficult to miss: she wore a bright red dress and appeared to have sprayed something sparkly over her entire body. Either that or she'd rolled in glitter. She glanced toward me, saw Leon, and even across the room I could see her eyebrows just about shoot up into her hair.

"You actually enjoy this place?" Leon asked. He'd clamped a hand on my shoulder again, which meant the odds of losing him in the throng weren't good.

"Not really your style?" I asked. Or rather shouted. We had to push our way through crowding bodies, and it was not a place for inside voices. "You could've stayed home."

"And missed this sweaty, hormone-infested experience?"

The Drought and Deluge was usually filled with groping teenage boys, and more often than not I had to be dragged to it by Tink's pestering—but I felt protective of it nonetheless. I made a face at Leon.

"What?" he asked.

I didn't answer. By that time, we'd reached the table, and Tink was giving me a displeased little frown. "Hello, Audrey... plus one," she said.

Officially, Leon was a *friend of the family*—at least, that was how we explained him whenever he encountered one of my friends. Unlike Gideon, Tink wasn't much of a fan. That surprised me, since Leon was reasonably attractive and male; but as far as I

knew, she'd never even tried to make a conquest of him. Maybe it was those disapproving glares he liked to give.

"Leon's doing a study on high schoolers in social settings for one of his college classes," I said. "He's here to observe. Just ignore him. That's my plan."

Gideon, of course, gave another cheery wave and said, "Hey, Leon."

Leon didn't seem pleased by my explanation. He mumbled an excuse about how he'd actually planned to meet someone here, and disappeared into the crowd.

I turned my attention back to my friends. "It's just us?" Tink had invited a few others, but she'd really only perfected the art of bending Gideon and me to her will.

"Kit had plans and Erica ditched," Tink said, standing and tugging at my hand. "Okay, time to fix you up. Hold down the fort, Gideon, this may take a while."

And, predictably, I was hauled off to the ladies' room.

"This room is nasty tonight," Tink said, wetting a paper towel and wiping the counter before setting her bag down.

"It's always nasty."

"Nastier, then."

"You're in a strange mood," I remarked. "If you're angry about Leon, it's really not my fault."

"I'm not angry. I just don't like the crowd tonight."

The crowd didn't seem any different to me, but I shrugged.

Tink grabbed my chin, turning my face from side to side. When she was through with me, I supposed I'd have enough glitter on me that they'd be able to cut half the lights to save on electricity.

"Close your eyes. And quit moving around so much," she commanded. "What happened to your hair?"

"I had a helmet on," I responded, lifting a hand to tuck away a few stray curls. "It's not that bad. Are you almost done? If you make me look like a handmade Christmas ornament, I swear I'm never speaking to you again."

"Shush. I am making the world a better place—one pale, freckly girl at a time. Although I really should be teaching you. Give a man a fish, and all that." After a few minutes, she paused, turned me toward the mirror, and made a *ta-da* sort of noise. "All done!"

"I am transformed," I said. "I sparkle like a fairy princess."

In truth, it wasn't that bad. Tink knew what she was doing, even if she had a tendency to go overboard. Thankfully, the only dousing of shimmer powder had occurred on my neck and hair.

"A pretty, pretty princess," Tink agreed. "With helmet hair. That, alas, you will have to live with, for my talents lie elsewhere. And I do believe you're going to have to dance with me. Be my date, pretty princess?"

"You're such a romantic, Tink. I always wanted to get asked out in a bathroom."

She rolled her eyes at me, putting her fairy instruments back in their bag. “I’m serious. Two girls dancing. It’s hot. Guys look.”

“Which is clearly the main objective of our lives.”

A wicked glint came into her eyes. “Easy for you to say. You brought your own.”

It took me a second to catch her meaning. Then I snorted. “That’s right. My very own tall, dark, and uptight babysitter.”

“Still a guy.”

Well, that part was undeniable. “But I didn’t *bring* him—”

She grinned, grabbing my wrist and dragging me toward the door. “Perfect. So you’re free to be my date, then!”

“That was sneaky,” I complained, laughing. I didn’t know what sort of guy Tink planned to meet here, since most of them just wanted to rub up against you on the dance floor, but her enthusiasm was difficult to resist. “All right, I’ll dance with you. But you try to feel me up, and we’re having a talk.”

She paused, tapping a finger against her mouth. “I *think* I can restrain myself.”

“Come on, then,” I said, grinning back at her. “Let’s go grind to embarrassing music.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

I looped my arm in hers and we headed out the door.



On the dance floor, I did my best not to bump into anyone. The room was dim and crowded, a haze of blurred faces and flickering lights. Briefly, I caught Leon's gaze from the edge of the floor, but I turned away before I could see the critical stare he was certain to have fixed on me. Instead, I focused on the motion around me. Music and murmurs pulsed. Tink was so busy lifting her arms and tossing her head, I was afraid she'd get whiplash.

I might have felt bad about abandoning Gideon to his own devices, but as soon as Tink and I left the table, he'd found some girl eager to gain his attention. He was dancing with her not far from us—a tall girl in a dark blue dress. I felt sorry for her, and not just because Gideon was an even worse dancer than I was. Whoever she was, she'd be smiled at and maybe flirted with, then forgotten an hour later when his mind wandered back to Brooke Oliver.

"Can we be done yet?" I asked Tink, shouting to be heard

above the crowd. I was beginning to feel a little claustrophobic. My abilities weren't always a gift: with so many bodies around us, Knowing had begun to creep into my consciousness, and I was once again having difficulty blocking it. I felt off balance. My senses were skewed, my frequencies scrambled. I inched toward the back of the room, dropping a hand on Tink's shoulder to drag her with me. She shook her head, tossed me a grin, and turned toward the flow of the crowd. The light sparked along the glitter in her hair.

When the music slowed, I stepped away, pushing through the throng toward our table. Gideon had already retreated there. I took a sip of his ginger ale and sat, peering past the dance floor to the shadow of tables and bar. In corners, the light was thin and dusty. I wondered where Leon had disappeared to.

The girl Gideon had danced with was sitting at a table not far from us. Away from the whirl of the dance floor, I could see her clearly. Her hair was black and thick, and tumbled toward her slim hips. When she turned toward us, I saw her huge dark eyes pinned on Gideon. She looked like she'd stepped out of a movie.

I nodded to Gideon. "She's really pretty," I said.

He grinned, quirking an eyebrow. "Jealous?"

"*Desperately.*" I leaned forward to drape myself across him. "You know how I yearn for you. I bet I could take her, though. That's the real reason I'm in martial arts—to scare away your potential girlfriends."

He laughed, prying himself loose, and nudged me back to

my seat. Then he tucked his hands behind his head and said, “I’ve always wanted girls fighting over me.”

“Hey, I already fought Hannah Starkey for you. Remember? Second grade?” I remembered. Hannah had developed a crush on Gideon and had apparently never learned about boundaries. She’d pulled down his pants at recess.

I’d pushed her off the slide.

“Ah, yes. Your early life of crime. How could I forget?”

It had been something of an ordeal. The school had wanted to put me in counseling. Mom put me in martial arts, instead. To learn discipline and self-control, she said. I’d been in the classes—a mixture of judo, jujitsu, and kung fu—ever since, but though Gideon’s parents had signed him up as well, he hadn’t stuck with it.

Gram, of course, had found the Hannah incident hilarious.

“It worked, didn’t it?” A little too well, even. Not only had Hannah never bothered Gideon again, for years she’d taken to running at the sight of us.

“Too bad you didn’t get to her *before* she kissed me at the water fountain.”

“Some battles, you have to fight yourself.”

Gideon looked pained. “You wouldn’t say that if you’d had to kiss her. She had terrible breath.”

I laughed. Around us, the music picked up again, and we settled in to people-watch—which we were both much better at than dancing. Gideon’s girl sent one final, longing look in his direction,

then turned and got up to dance with someone else. Her dark hair made a glossy wave down her back. I decided not to pester him about it. Leave it to Gideon to find the most impossibly gorgeous girl in the room and then shrug her aside. I hoped he'd find the courage to ask Brooke out some time this century, but it seemed unlikely. Tink had once threatened to do it for him, and he'd stopped speaking to her for a week.

I leaned back in my chair, gazing out into the crowd. I didn't recognize most of the people around us, but a blond girl we'd met during our last visit to the Drought and Deluge stopped by the table to chat. Since I couldn't remember her name, I nodded along to her conversation and let Gideon occupy her. After a while, I began to tune them out, letting my eyes wander. On the dance floor, the low lights skimmed across faces and the movement of bodies, catching at colors, here and there a slight shimmer—

A sudden awareness rippled through me, an internal alarm that made my body snap. Something was wrong, in a way I hadn't felt since that foggy, unforgotten morning when I'd realized Gram had died.

Gideon and the nameless girl stopped talking and stared at me.
“Audrey?”

My Knowings didn't often happen like this, but when they did, I paid attention. I paused. Focused. Listened. For just a second, the room around me went very still. I heard nothing, not even my own breath. Then, as the motion and noise and light rushed back, my frequencies abruptly cleared.

The knowledge was intense, visceral. Something about the way the light flickered. Something about that flash of color, that glimmer. I looked around the room dizzily. And then it struck me: where was Tink?

I knew it then. I should—

Go to her.

Find her.

Help her.

“Gideon—have you seen Tink?”

He shook his head. I heard him say my name, a question on his lips. I didn’t answer. I hadn’t noticed myself rise, but suddenly I was pushing through the crowd, searching. She couldn’t be that difficult to find. Short or not, a blond pixie in a bright red dress would stand out.

Suddenly, everything was sharp and clear: the bar, where a waitress in a tight T-shirt was snapping her gum; bouncers looking bored and scowling; the dark corners where smuggled-in beer was being drunk from plastic cups. All of this registered, settling into my senses.

And there, through the crowd: a flash of red departing.

“Tink!”

She rounded a corner. I saw the edge of her dress, a glimpse of blond hair, the light catching—and she was gone.

“Tink!”

I pushed forward. She’d vanished at the other end of the building, and the jostling, laughing throng stood between us. I moved

through an obstacle course of limbs and tables and chairs. The music pulsed, a song that kept a frantic beat with my unsteady nerves. Urgency hummed in my veins. I had to reach her.

I heard a voice calling my name, but I didn't stop. I stumbled against someone, muttered an apology, hurried onward. Dread clawed at me.

I rounded the corner where Tink had gone, and found nothing. Sudden stillness. An empty hallway arcing to the left. A light flickered overhead, across scuffed linoleum and faded green paint. Nearby, a janitor cart had been left unattended, mop handle jutting outward. There was a door marked `EMPLOYEES ONLY`, but I dismissed that. Beyond, a neon sign with an arrow said `EXIT`. Tink had gone into the alley.

I ran.

This part of the Drought and Deluge was new to me, darker and dirtier. It was colored differently, like I'd crossed a threshold into a separate world. My footsteps sounded unnaturally loud, and there was a faint smell of bleach in the air. I pressed my hands to the exit door and stepped out into the alley.

Cool air rushed toward me.

The world was blue, shadowed and dim with the fall of night. At first there were only walls and pavement, the dark brick of the buildings adjacent to the club, and, somewhere nearby, the clamor of downtown traffic.

Then I saw them.

A man bent toward the ground, crouching, half-turned from

me. I couldn't see his face. But I saw the object his hands moved over: one small, slender foot, the knot of an ankle, the curve of a leg. Red fabric in his hands. Tink.

He stood, pulling Tink up with him. Her legs dangled over his arm. In the light spilling out from the open door, I could see the blood that rolled down over her feet, dripping to the ground beneath her. It wasn't a lot of blood, but the sight of it sent a shock through me. I couldn't tell how badly she was hurt. With her face tucked against his shoulder, I couldn't see if she was conscious.

The man turned. I didn't recognize him. In my panicked state, I registered only disconnected features: tall frame, sandy hair, greenish eyes. I couldn't guess his age—maybe somewhere past twenty. His shirt bore the logo of the Drought and Deluge. A troubled frown creased his brow, but smoothed as he looked at me.

“Friend of yours?” he asked, with just the slightest trace of an accent. His voice was calm, easy, but I didn't trust it. Though a smile tugged at his lips, his eyes felt distant. “Or did the sweet night air draw you out here, as well?”

There was an edge to his words, a strange emphasis that I didn't understand. Warily, I glanced beyond him. Save for the three of us, the alley was deserted. I wondered if anyone would hear me if I screamed.

Somehow, I found my voice. It trembled, but it was loud, echoing out into the darkness. “Let her go.”

He chuckled—a rich, low sound in the stillness around us.

“I’m afraid you’ve got the wrong idea.” His arms twitched, drawing Tink closer to him. Her head rested loosely against his shoulder, but now I saw her face. Her eyes were closed, her lips slightly parted, her face ashen. Worry gnawed at me. She seemed so small there, thin and fragile, and the night was very dark.

“What did you do to her?” I gripped the edge of the door, trying to ignore the way my hands shook.

“I came out for a smoke,” the man said. “She’s terribly lucky I did.”

Then Leon was at my side. “Audrey,” he said, and touched my shoulder.

I’d never been so glad to hear his voice. “It’s Tink,” I whispered.

“Hey, I’m just here to help,” the man said, shifting back as Leon took a step toward him. For a moment, they looked at each other without speaking. My lungs felt heavy, my breathing labored. Everything around me was gritty, but clear. I smelled garbage and blood and something acrid like burned plastic.

The man moved forward and transferred Tink into Leon’s arms. I watched her slide between them as though she were weightless, her blood inking both of their shirts. Her head rolled back, but she was only unconscious. In the light from the Drought and Deluge, I saw the untroubled rise and fall of her chest.

“Is she all right?” I asked. I hadn’t moved. Something about the alley felt off: a quality to the darkness, as though the night had grown edges.

The man gave me a long, measuring look, and a slow smile spread across his face. “Don’t fret, angel,” he said as he strode past me. “She seems . . . mostly intact.”

“Get out of here,” Leon growled.

With a shrug, the man vanished into the corridor behind us.

Leon turned toward me, Tink cradled in his arms. I rushed forward, trying to remember what I’d been taught in martial arts about first aid. Airway, I thought. Airway came first. But she seemed to be breathing easily enough.

“I’ll take care of her,” Leon was saying. “Go back inside. Find Gideon. Have him take you directly home. Are you listening? Directly home.”

I shook my head, hardly hearing him. “I’m staying. Or—should we go to the ER?”

“You’re going home,” he repeated, his voice quiet but unyielding. “Don’t fight me on this.”

Incredulous, I stared up at him. “Don’t *fight* you? My friend is unconscious, bleeding in an alley, and you expect me to just abandon her?”

“Do you want to stand here arguing, or do you want me to help her?”

I balled my hands into fists. “I . . .”

“She’s going to be fine. I’m going to take care of her. But I need you to go. Home.”

Anger warred with concern. I hated the idea of leaving her—but I didn’t know how to help; I didn’t know what to do. I felt

shaken, dazed. My Knowing had faded. The urgency and alarm that had drawn me outside was now only an echo, but the apprehension remained, a touch of fear crawling up and down my skin, a quiet terror that Tink *wasn't* all right, that something horrible had happened to her—was *still* happening. I hesitated, looking down at the darkness that gathered beneath my feet.

“Go,” Leon said.

My resolve broke. With a final glance at Tink, I turned away and headed back into the club.

Gideon offered to stay with me until Leon arrived with news, but I wanted to be alone. I wanted to think. I'd tried to explain what had happened—my Knowing, the alley, the blood on Tink's ankles—but I wasn't even certain myself.

“You think someone hurt her?” Gideon asked, as his car idled in my driveway.

“I don't know,” I admitted, remembering the strange man with the Drought and Deluge shirt. Something hadn't seemed quite right about him. “She wasn't gone very long.”

“And you're sure you don't want me to hang out?”

“I'm sure. I'll call you later.”

Inside, in the big emptiness of my house, I listened to the silence.

The experience had shaken me in a way I couldn't put into words. I still felt unease in my stomach, a flutter of nausea. I turned on the lights in the kitchen and stood in the yellow glare.

I didn't know what had happened.

Tink had been dancing with me, moving in the crowd, all energy and motion. And then she'd been gone.

Or rather: I'd left her.

I shook away the thought and sat, waiting for Leon. It was too early for my mother to come home, and I thought of her out there, in the blur of night and traffic and whatever lay beneath the swirl of city lights.

Once again, Leon didn't bother with the door. He just appeared in front of me in the kitchen, face somber, arms crossed. I blinked up at him. Though he assured me Tink was all right, my eyes drifted to the stain on his arm where her blood had dried on his shirt.

"Did she say what happened?" I asked, shifting my gaze. The sight of blood wasn't uncommon in my household, but that stain bothered me. Twin smears, small but vivid. I swallowed thickly.

Leon's words drew my attention back to him. "Nothing happened," he said. "She fainted." His tone was cool, clipped, and for a moment I simply looked at him, confused.

"She . . . fainted," I repeated.

"That's what she told me. She says she doesn't remember much."

"And what, she just spontaneously started bleeding?"

"There was broken glass in the alley. I think she cut herself when she fell."

Wounds on her ankles, I thought. A slash of red. A chill ran

through me. “No,” I answered, shaking my head. “Something happened out there. I felt—*something*.”

He snorted. “Felt the need to run out into an alley at night without telling anyone where you were going.”

Trust Leon to turn this around on me. “Tink was in trouble.”

“Then you should’ve found me.” He paused, and for the briefest of moments, something I couldn’t name crossed his face. It might have been concern, or doubt, or maybe just weariness; I wasn’t certain. Then it was gone. His eyes narrowed. “You don’t go there. Ever again.”

That got my hackles up. I knew I should just let it go. I should thank him for helping Tink, at the very least. I owed him that much. Instead, I met him glare for glare and demanded, “Don’t you ever get tired of issuing commands?”

He didn’t hesitate. “More than you know.”

“Then maybe you should stop.”

“And maybe you should start thinking. What if she *had* been in trouble? What could you have done?” I opened my mouth to protest, but he continued before I could speak. His expression was grim, his eyes dark and focused. “We don’t always get to choose what happens to us, Audrey. Life isn’t a game just because you treat it like one.”

His tone sent a shiver down me. There was definitely more going on here than he would admit. “You told me she fainted,” I pointed out. “You said nothing happened.”

“That doesn’t mean it couldn’t have.”

And with that, he vanished, leaving behind nothing but empty air.

I stared into the space where he'd been. When he didn't reappear, I let out a little growl of frustration and stalked out of the kitchen.

I considered hunting him down. He lived in our house now; he couldn't avoid me for long. But I didn't think he'd be any more forthcoming if I pressed the issue. Instead, I went up to my room and sat on my bed, my legs drawn up against me. I closed my eyes, going back over the evening in my mind, detail by detail. Tink pulling me into the ladies' restroom. The smell of the makeup she'd applied, the touch of the brush on my cheek. Laughing our way to the dance floor. And then the alley: her red dress and the cuts on her ankles.

I don't know when I fell asleep, but when I dreamed, I dreamed of Tink.

She stood on the dance floor, alone. It was hot, everything close and confining. She needed space, needed to clear her head. She would go, she told herself; just step outside. She would taste the sweet night air. She would only leave for a moment—

Someone in the darkness. Watching.

A sharp rush of wind. The flash of her dress as she turned. The curve of her throat in the moonlight. It had brought her out here. It had been waiting. It had—

It.

I woke panting, staring out into the half-dark of my room,

where starlight pushed through the blinds. I pulled the blankets tight against me and listened to traffic moving outside. My breath felt sticky, incapable of leaving my lungs. Because it hadn't just been Tink. In the last flickering colors and flashes of the dream, I had seen something else.

The pale, bloodless face of Kelly Stevens.