

## ONE

### *Paradiso*

They left Alexandria just as the masses arrived to escape the heat of Cairo. “We always seem to be going in the wrong direction,” Schuyler said, watching the traffic crawl, inch by inch, on the opposing freeway. It was the middle of July, and the sun was high in the sky. The air-conditioning in their rented sedan barely worked, and she had to place her palms right in front of the passenger-side vents just to cool down.

“Maybe it’s the opposite. Maybe we’re actually going in the right direction this time.” Jack smiled and put a little more gas on the pedal. In comparison to the hordes descending upon the beach city, the traffic leading into the capital was light, and for Egypt, they were practically cruising, if that was the correct way to describe the chaotic scene on the highway. The Alexandria desert road was notorious for fearsome bus crashes and fatal accidents, and it was easy to see

why: cars sped wildly, bobbing in and out of lanes at whim, while massive trucks looked as if they would pitch and roll every time they swerved to attain the slightest advantage. Once in a while someone would hit a random speed bump—either a huge unmarked crater or debris that had never been cleared—and traffic would screech to a halt without warning, causing a massive pileup. Schuyler was thankful Jack was a good driver; he seemed to know instinctively when to speed up or slow down, and they weaved through the careening vehicles without a scratch or near miss.

At least they weren't driving at night, when cars didn't even have their headlights on, since Egyptian drivers believed headlights burned through gas too quickly, and so made do without them. It was fine for vampires, of course, but Schuyler always worried for the poor humans who were barreling through in the dark—driving blind, like bats fluttering in a cave.

For seven months, she and Jack had lived in Alexandria, wandering through the picturesque cafés and airy museums. The city had been designed to rival Rome and Athens at their height. Cleopatra had made it the seat of her throne, and while there were a few traces of the ancient outpost still visible—a scattering of sphinxes, statues, and obelisks—there was actually very little that remained of the ancient world in the bustling metropolis.

When they'd first arrived, Schuyler had been filled with hope, and heartened by Jack's faith and presence, she was

certain they would soon find what they sought. Florence had been a decoy, and Alexandria was the only other possibility regarding the true location of the Gate of Promise according to her grandfather's files, which had documented Catherine of Siena's travels from Rome to the Red Sea. Schuyler's mother had trusted her with the family legacy: to find and protect the remaining Gates of Hell, which kept the world safe from the demons of the underworld.

They had checked in to the Cecil Hotel, a favorite of Somerset Maugham's and one that had been popular during the British Colonial era. Schuyler had been charmed by the 1930s-style caged elevator and its splendid marble lobby, which oozed old Hollywood grandeur. She could imagine Marlene Dietrich arriving with a dozen trunks, a footman to carry her feather-trimmed hats alone.

Schuyler began her search at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, an attempt to recreate the great library that had been lost over two thousand years ago (or so the Red Bloods thought, as the library still existed in the New York Coven's Repository of History). Like the original institution, the grounds of the Bibliotheca sprawled to include acres of gardens, as well as a planetarium and a conference center. A wealthy and secretive local matron had been instrumental in its foundation, and Schuyler had been certain she had found Catherine at last. But when they visited the grand patroness in her elegant salon overlooking the Eastern Harbor, it was obvious from the beginning that she was human, and no Enmortal,

as she was sick and dying, lying in a bed, attached to a series of tubes.

As she and Jack had walked out of the elderly woman's room, Schuyler felt the first flicker of anxiety that she was letting down not only her beloved grandfather and her enigmatic mother, but also the boy she so dearly loved. So far, finding the gatekeeper was turning out to be a difficult—if not impossible—task. Jack did not say anything that day, nor had he ever voiced any regret at his decision. Back in Florence, at the airport, he had escaped from the Venators and accepted her challenge, agreeing to her plan. She did not want to fail him. She'd promised she would find a way out of the blood trial, a way for them to be together, and she would. The gatekeeper, Catherine of Siena, would help them, if only Schuyler could find her.

Their life in Egypt had settled into a comfortable routine. Tired of hotel living, they'd rented a small house near the beach and concentrated on blending in as best they could. Most of their neighbors left the young good-looking foreigners alone. Perhaps they sensed the vampire strength behind their friendly smiles.

In the mornings, Schuyler would comb the library, reading books on the Roman era, when Catherine was first tasked with the charge of keeper, and matching it to the files from Lawrence's journal. Jack took on the footwork, using his Venator training to zero in on any clues as to her

whereabouts, walking the city, talking to the locals. Enmortals were charismatic and unforgettable beings—Lawrence Van Alen had been very popular during his exile in Venice, and Schuyler was betting that Catherine, or whatever she called herself these days, was the same: a magnetic personality whom no one could easily forget. In the late afternoons, Jack would stop by the library, and they would head to a café for lunch, sharing plates of *mulukhiya* stew over rice or spicy *khoshary*, and then return to their duties. They lived like locals, having dinner at midnight, sipping fragrant anise tea until the wee hours of the morning.

Alex, as everyone calls the city, is a resort town, and as spring arrived and a breeze blew in from the Mediterranean, buses and boatloads of tourists arrived to fill the hotels and beaches. Their seven months together was sort of a honeymoon, Schuyler would realize later. A small slice of heaven, a brief and bright delay of the dark days that lay ahead. Their marriage was still young enough that they celebrated every month they were together, marking the time with little gestures, little gifts to each other: a small bracelet made of shells for her, a first edition of Hemingway for him. If Schuyler could keep Jack at her side, she believed she could keep him safe. Her love for him was a shield that would keep him whole.

Even as their relationship grew stronger and deeper, and they began to ease into the comfort of daily bonded life, Schuyler's heart still skipped a beat every time she saw him

lying next to her. She would admire the silhouette of his back, the fine sculpture of his shoulder blades. Later, reflecting on their time in the city, she would wonder if somehow she had known what would happen, how it would end; as if no matter what happened in Egypt, whether she found Catherine or not, whether they were successful or not, she had known from the beginning that their time together would not last; that it *could* not last, and they were only lying to themselves and each other.

So she tucked her memories away for safekeeping: the way he looked at her when he undressed her, as he slowly pulled down a silk camisole strap. His stare was voracious, and she would be sickened with desire, she wanted him so much. The bright fire she felt was matched by the intensity of his gaze—just like the first time he had flirted with her in front of that nightclub in New York, and the dizzying rush of infatuation she'd experienced the first time they'd danced together, the first time they'd kissed, the first time they'd met for a covert tryst in his Perry Street apartment. The strong yet gentle way he held her when he performed the *Caerimonia Osculor*. In the days that would come, she would replay these moments in her mind, like photographs she would remove from her wallet and look at again and again. But in the present, at night when they lay together, his body warm next to hers, when she pressed her lips against his skin, it felt as if they would never be apart, that what she feared would never come to be.

Maybe she was crazy to think it would last, that any of it—their love, their joy together—would hold, given the darkness that had been part of their union from the beginning. And later she would wish she had enjoyed it more, that she had spent less time poring through books, spending hours in the library alone, less time removing his arms from her waist, telling him to wait, or missing dinner so that she could go over the papers again and again. She would wish for one more night spent in a roadside café, holding hands under the table; one more morning sharing the newspaper. She would cherish the small moments of togetherness, the two of them sitting side by side in bed, just the simple touch of his hand on her knee sending shivers up her spine. She would remember Jack reading his books, lifting his eyeglasses—his vision had been bothering him lately, the sand and the pollution causing his eyes to water.

If only they could have stayed in Alex forever—walking the gardens full of flowers, watching the hip crowds at San Stefano. Schuyler, who had been hopeless in the kitchen, enjoyed the ease with which a meal could be prepared. She had learned to put together a proper feast, buying premade platters of *kobeba* and *sambousek*, accompanied by *tahini* and *tamiya*, chopped salads and a roasted leg of lamb or veal, stuffed pigeon and fish *sayadeya* and chicken *pane* from the local market. Their life reminded her a little of her year with Oliver, and she felt a small pang at that. Her dearest, sweetest friend. She wished there was a way to still retain

their friendship—he had been so gallant at her bonding—but they had not exchanged a word since he'd returned to New York. Oliver had told her a little of what was happening back home, and she worried about him, and hoped he was keeping himself safe now that she was not there to make sure he was doing so. She missed Bliss as well, and hoped her friend—her *sister*—would find a way to fulfill her part of their mother's destiny somehow.

As the months passed, Schuyler worked every angle, made more wrong guesses, and met more women who did not turn out to be Catherine. She and Jack didn't talk about what would happen if they failed. And so the days slipped by, like sand through her fingers, grit in the air, and then it was summer. News trickled in slowly of the world they had left behind—that the Covens were in chaos—reports of burnings and mysterious attacks. And with Charles still missing and Allegra disappeared, there was no one to lead the fight. No one knew what was to become of the vampires, and still Schuyler and Jack were no closer to finding the keeper.

Before they left Florence, they had ordered the Petruvian priests to keep MariElena safe, to let the young girl who had been taken by the Croatan carry her pregnancy to term. Ghedi had given them his word that the girl would not come to any harm under their care. Schuyler still did not believe what the Petruvians swore was true, that the Blue Bloods had ordered the slaughter of innocent women and children

in order to keep the bloodline pure. There had to be another reason for it—something had gone wrong in the history of the world—and once they found Catherine, the gatekeeper who had founded the Petruvian Order, she would tell them the truth.

But as the days dragged on and still they did not find the keeper or the gate, Schuyler began to feel discouraged and lethargic. It did not help that it had been a long time since she had used her fangs. She had not taken a familiar since Oliver, and every day she felt less of her vampire self and more human, more vulnerable.

Meanwhile, Jack was growing thin, and dark circles had formed under his eyes. She knew he was having trouble sleeping at night. He would toss and turn, murmuring under his breath. She began to worry that he thought she was a coward for asking him to stay.

“No, you are wrong. It is a brave thing that you did, to stand up to your beloved,” he’d said, reading her mind as usual. “You will find Catherine. I have faith in you.”

But finally Schuyler had to admit defeat—that she had read her grandfather’s documents incorrectly. She had to accept that Alexandria was another decoy, another red herring. They had walked the city’s dark alleys and haunted its bright new megamalls, but had found nothing, and the trail was cold. They were as stumped as they had been in the beginning, when they first left New York.

Their last night in the city, Schuyler had studied the

documents again, re-reading the section that had made her believe the elusive gate was located in Alexandria.

““On the shore of the river of gold, the victor’s city shall once again rise on the threshold of the Gate of Promise.” Schuyler looked at Jack. “Hold on. I think I’m on to something.” When she’d first read the passage she had immediately thought of Alexander the Great, the conqueror of the ancient world, and she’d been certain that the gate was located in the city to which he had given his name. But during her seven months in Egypt, she had learned a little Arabic, and the answer was so clear she immediately berated herself for wasting so much time.

“Cairo—Al-Qahira—literally translates to mean *victorious*.” The victorious city. The victor’s city. She told Jack as her heart beat in excitement, “The gate is in Cairo.”

They left in the morning.