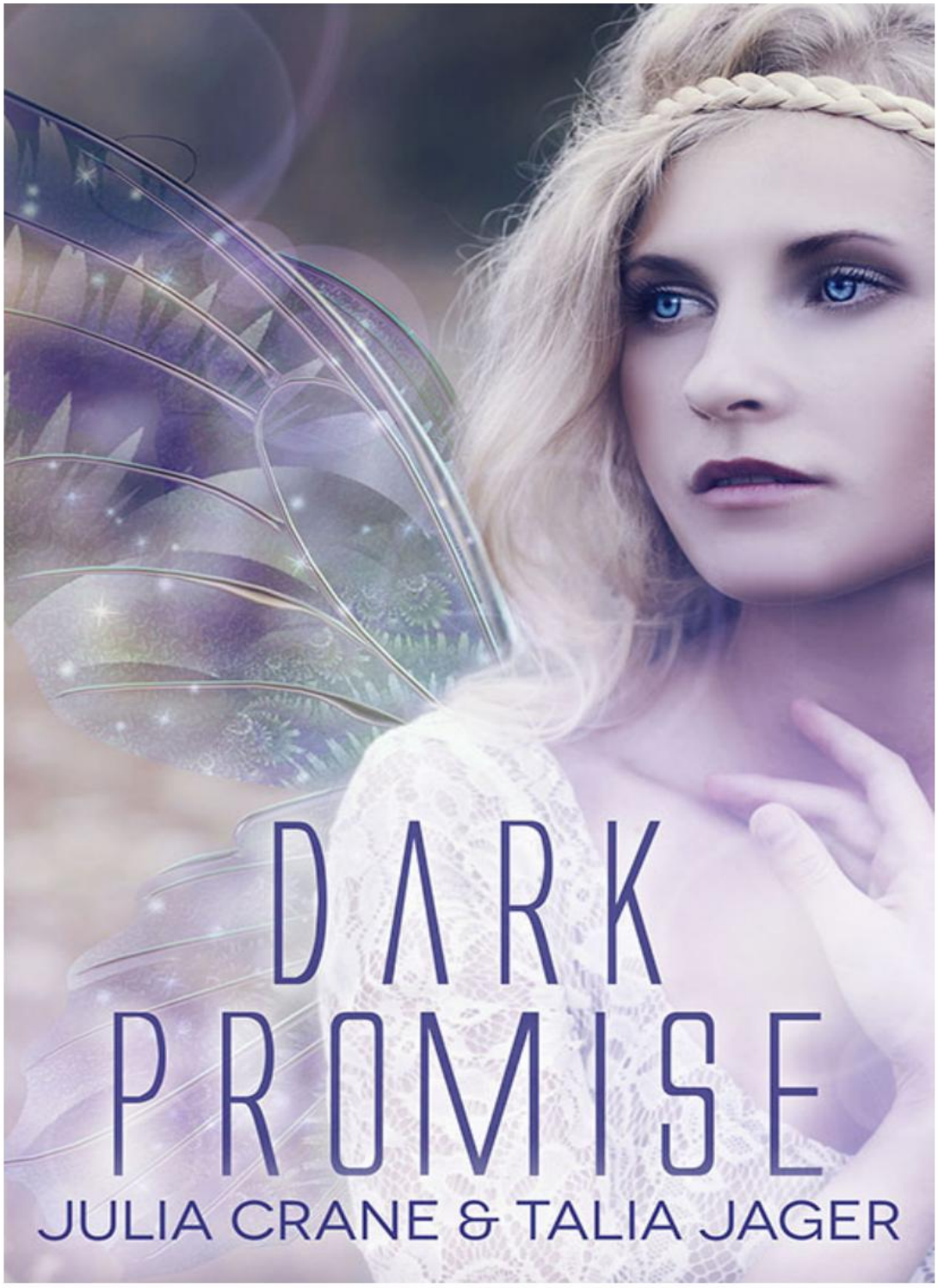
DARK
PROMISE
JULIA CRANE & TALIA JAGER

# Dark Promise

*A Between Worlds Novel*

JULIA CRANE & TALIA JAGER

*Dark Promise: A Between Worlds Novel*
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# Dedication

To our readers

# Prologue

Hidden in the trees, Azura stood watching her daughter from afar, as she had done so many times in the past. Her daughter's long blonde hair glistened in the sunlight, and her laughter danced on the breeze as she hurried down the sidewalk to the waiting car. Azura was too far away to see her child's bright blue eyes, but she knew them well.

The humans had named her Rylie.

The humans who had become her parents, who had given Azura's child a beautiful home, love, and happiness, and raised her as their own—and they had no idea that Rylie wasn't theirs.

Tears sprang to Azura's eyes as she remembered the day she had given her baby away to protect her. So much pain remained from what had been the hardest decision of her life. Azura had never been the same.

And now it was almost sixteen years later and time for Rylie's transformation to begin. Soon, the girl would begin to change, and she wouldn't understand why. She needed guidance; she needed to know what was in store.

But, most importantly, Azura needed to get her to safety before the dark faeries found her.

After her baby had been born with the mark of the Aurorian on her face, Azura was delighted to have such a special child. An Aurorian faery was extremely rare. The last one had been born over two hundred years before Azura's child and had gone on to be a great, powerful faery. The mark meant that Rylie's ability would be stronger than a normal faery's power.

Azura had been awed by her precious new daughter, but even amidst the joy, she knew that the small star-shaped symbol on her infant's face would bring darkness to them.

Only a few hours after Rylie's birth, the dark faeries caught whispers of a marked child. Like bloodhounds, they showed up at Azura's door and convinced her weak-minded husband to trade the child in exchange for access to their dark magick. Her husband had always thirsted for a better ability; it hadn't taken much to sway him.

*Even at the expense of his newborn daughter*, Azura thought with disgust.

Azura knew she had to protect her child by switching her for a human one. In the human world, her daughter would have a chance. They knew nothing of faeries, much less the rare Aurorians, so prized for their power and revered for their ability to bring peace by force. Among humans, the child would have a chance at life.

While her husband discussed the terms of his agreement with the dark faery, Azura wrapped her child in a blanket and exited by way of the window. She went in search of a baby who was about to die.

If it weren't for the fey's ability to sense the passing of a life, things might have turned out for the worst, and her daughter could have been lost forever. But Azura thanked the gods for giving her not only the ability to sense the dying, but the power to disappear at will, so that nobody noticed Azura sneak into the hospital room, her child tucked against her body. Nobody saw as she took the dying human infant from its crib of wires and lamps to replace it with her own beloved daughter.

The human child didn't survive but moments beyond the switch, as Azura knew would happen. Azura returned home, where she marked the dead baby's face with the same birthmark—the birthmark that had been her daughter's death sentence.

It was the only way to keep her little girl safe.

Azura took the child to her husband and the dark faeries, who were still seated in her kitchen as if they weren't discussing the fate of a newborn. She had been relieved when the men believed the infant had died of natural causes.

She hadn't only lost her baby that day. Ashamed—of his own behavior as a father willing to sell his child or of being unable to suit the terms of the dark faery agreement—Azura's husband had disappeared. In one evening, she lost everything.

In the years to come, Azura had watched Rylie grow up from a distance. Although giving her up had been the hardest thing Azura had ever done, it only mattered that her daughter was safe.

Now, however, that was about to change. Once Rylie's transformation was complete, other faeries would be able to see that she was a faery, too. After they saw the birthmark, they'd know she wasn't just any faery, but an Aurorian faery—and that put her in danger.

Azura had to go to her daughter and warn her of what was to come…but how?

Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I dabbed more concealer on the star-like birthmark near the corner of my right eye. It was useless; cover-up seemed to melt away when I put it over the pale shape. Stupid birthmark.

I considered making it pop, like I sometimes did by drawing lines to make it look like a shooting star, or outlining it with bright eyeliner to make it stand out—not that it didn't already stand out next to the sapphire blue of my eye and my insanely pale skin. But if I tried to actually cover it, it rebelled—almost as if it had a life of its own.

With a sigh, I carefully placed the makeup back in the medicine cabinet, making sure everything was lined up perfectly. I switched a couple tubes around until they were color coordinated, and then arranged everything to face front to back. Things that were out of place drove me crazy.

I walked back to my room and stopped at the little white desk that my dad had made for me when I started middle school. An eerie feeling came over me, like I was being watched from beyond the window. Leaning over the desk, I pushed the turquoise curtains to the side and peered out, trying to find the source, but as usual, I saw nothing out of the ordinary. I shook it off and grabbed my iPhone and my early birthday present—a paisley Vera Bradley backpack. I had been bugging my mom to buy me one for months.

I hurried down the stairs and through the foyer into the kitchen. It was always bright and cheery, because the early morning sun shone right through the glass French doors and lit up the room. With the white and yellow walls, it was enough to make you feel better just by being there.

Mom stood at the dark granite island peeling an orange. She looked prettier than usual; she had her long chestnut hair pulled back with a red barrette to match the boat-neck blouse she was wearing and there was even eyeliner around her light brown eyes. She glanced up and smiled. "Good morning, Rylie."

"Morning, Mom." I tossed my bag on the table and walked over to the island, where I hopped up on the barstool, propping my elbows on the counter.

She handed me a wedge of the orange, and I popped it in my mouth. I took a moment to savor the juiciness, tart and sweet on my tongue. "Mmm, amazing."

"Take it." She pushed the plate holding the orange across the counter.

Picking up her mug, she took a sip of tea before peeling a banana, her hip propped on the counter. Even though we had a perfectly good kitchen table, my mother wasn't one to sit there for breakfast. She liked to stand at the island with the paper spread out before her and the TV on in the background. She was one of those people that was always on the go. Healthy eating and fitness were important to her.

Me…not so much. I'd take a doughnut any day.

My father's keys were gone from the "Home Sweet Home" hook by the door leading to the garage. He left for work earlier than I or my mom got out of bed, so most mornings we didn't see him. He was a detective for our local police department, which meant he worked long—and sometimes odd—hours. As much as I admired his work ethic, it still sucked that he missed out on so much while I was growing up. I'd lost count of the birthdays and recitals he wasn't there for when working on a case.

“What do you have going on today?” Mom looked up from her paper. Her eyes met mine and she gave me her full attention.

“Not much. Hanging out with Adam after school.” I swiveled off the stool and went to the stainless steel fridge, pulling out the milk. Grabbing a tall glass from the cabinet, I filled it. “We have a project to finish.”

“Oh, yeah? What kind?”

“Something for French class.” There was a loaf of bread half-sliced on the cutting board near the toaster. I dropped a couple pieces in the toaster and pushed the bar down.

“Why don’t you ask him to stay for dinner? You know we love having him.”

“Okay, I will.” It made me happy that my parents liked my boyfriend. Adam and I had been friends for a long time before he asked me to be his girlfriend only a few months before. We had always clicked, so saying yes was a no-brainer.

We were silent as I slathered butter and cinnamon on my toast and walked back to the island. I motioned to the paper with my toast before taking a bite and speaking through my mouthful. “Anything going on in the world?”

“It’s falling apart around us. Nothing new.” Mom glanced at the clock on the microwave and then shut the paper with a rustle. “I need to get going.” She slid the paper to me, put her mug in the sink, and grabbed her purse from the table.

“Have fun.” I smiled sardonically, thinking of the day my mom was about to have. She was a kindergarten teacher, and her class was a handful. Most days she came home with a headache.

“Always.” She winked and hustled out the side door into the garage. Peeking back into the kitchen one last time, she narrowed her eyes and said, “Behave.”

“Mm-hmm.” I rolled my eyes at her warning. I wasn’t exactly known for being a bad girl. In fact, I was mild compared to most of the kids I knew.

The door closed, and I was alone in the house. I finished my breakfast and rinsed the dishes before I put them in the dishwasher. A loud honk signaled my ride had arrived. I grabbed my favorite brown Converse shoes from the shoe rack, slipped them on, slung my backpack over my shoulder, and rushed out the front door.

It was going to be a gorgeous April day. We would probably get a shower later on, but for now, the sun was glorious and high, the air cool but with an expectation of warm to come. I could smell the honeysuckle vines from the backyard on the breeze.

Sierra waited in her black convertible in the driveway with the top down and the music blaring. She had the visor down and was applying lipstick, so she didn't notice me approaching.

Sierra was my best friend in the whole world. She had dark brown hair streaked with golden highlights that she usually left down to frame her oval face, and her personality matched her car—artsy and outgoing with a little bit of a wild in her. We had been friends for as long as I could remember.

I scanned the woods as I walked to the car, remembering the feeling of being watched from earlier. Nothing unusual stood out, but a chill went down my back as if there really were eyes on me. I brushed it aside. I often had the feeling that someone was watching me, and it seemed to be happening more often lately, but I was probably just imagining it. Having a father who was a cop made me a little paranoid. He spent most of my life drilling into me that I should be aware of my surroundings at all times. Between watching the news and hearing stories from him, I knew what kind of monsters were out there.

I opened the passenger door and slid into the low seat. It felt like sitting on the ground, especially compared to my boyfriend's big truck. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself." Sierra shut the mirror on her visor and turned toward me. Her green eyes were dancing in excitement. "Your birthday is this weekend!"

"I know. It's hard to believe," I said absently as I turned down my own visor and checked my hair in the mirror. If I secured it back, maybe it wouldn't be destroyed by the wind before we got to school.

"Aren't you excited? You'll finally be sixteen." Sierra had turned sixteen a few months before and liked to rub it in my face.

"I'm not sure it'll be much different than fifteen." I wrapped my hair up in a quick bun.

"Maybe your parents will get you a car? Although that would suck. I like picking you up." Sierra put the convertible into gear and pulled out onto the street.

"I doubt I'll get a car. My parents aren't loaded like yours." I liked Sierra's car, but it was really kinda pretentious for a teenager, I guess. The soft leather interior had heated seats and a built-in satellite radio, while most of our classmates were driving hand-me-down Hondas with dented rear bumpers. I would be lucky to get even that.

I watched out the window as the houses disappeared and the businesses became thicker and closer together. Sierra chattered nonstop the entire five-minute drive to school. I tried to keep up, but it wasn't always easy with her.

We pulled into the school parking lot and Sierra took her usual spot near the front door. As she rechecked her makeup, I got out of the car and searched the area near the stairs leading to the heavy double doors, where Adam always waited for me. My heart did a little flip-flop when I saw him.

He was sitting against the brick building, drumming his fingers on his legs while listening to music. His light brown hair hung down in his eyes and covered the ear buds in his ears, but I could see the cords dangling down his white T-shirt.

I adjusted the straps on my backpack and Sierra joined me, then we climbed the hill to the front of the school. Adam's eyes were closed, his head leaning against the red brick building. He didn't notice our approach, so I kicked his foot.

His green eyes opened and he grinned. “Hey, beautiful.” His voice was deep and smooth. He took the ear buds out of his ears and stood up, unfolding his long, lanky body in a graceful move that should have been illegal in its beauty. He stood almost a foot taller than me. Cupping my face with his hands, he leaned in and kissed me, slow and gentle.

My heart raced, and I pressed my body to his as I slid my hands up his chest.

“Okay, enough, get a room,” Sierra interrupted, her voice one part disgust, two parts playful.

Adam ended the kiss, and I rested my head on his chest, breathing in his warm, musky scent.

“I have something for you,” he said, his voice rumbling through me.

I stepped back, and he reached down to pick up a handful of yellow daisies near his gym bag. They were my favorite flower, and had been since I was a little girl, even though I’d heard they were technically considered a weed.

I accepted the bouquet with a laugh. “They’re beautiful. But it’s not my birthday yet.”

“I know. I saw them near my mailbox, and I couldn’t resist picking them for you.” He traced a thumb over my cheek, his fingers at the edge of my jaw. “Remember how you would make me hold the flowers for you when we were younger? We spent hours collecting them. I was like your little flower slave.” He chuckled.

“I remember.” I tiptoed to kiss him. “Thank you. You’re the best boyfriend ever.”

He put his arm around me, and we all walked through the glass doors into the school. Before the first bell, the school was always chaotic and loud. There were students rushing to their first class, or hanging out with their friends in the hall, and still others were causing trouble. Our school was one of the better ones in town, so I couldn’t complain.

We walked down the large, open corridor to our gray lockers and stopped in front of them. I opened mine, shoved my backpack inside, and pulled out what I needed for first period—my biology book, a black spiral-bound notebook with a pen shoved into the spiral, and the beat-up paper folder that held almost an entire year's worth of homework.

I slammed the locker and spun around to wait for Adam, but he was ready for me. He grabbed my books out of my hands and stacked them on his own, giving me an adorable wink.

I took his warm hand and squeezed it. He was so sweet.

We had our first class together, which I thought was the perfect way to start the day. We said goodbye to Sierra and started working our way towards the classroom.

As we dodged the usual morning madness, I said, "My mom invited you over for dinner."

Adam raised an eyebrow. "Is she cooking?"

I bumped my hip against his. "She's not that bad of a cook. If it will make you feel better, we can order in Chinese and surprise her."

"You know I don't mind eating your mom's burnt cooking if it means I can spend more time with you." Adam stopped outside the science lab and tugged on my hand until I turned to face him. "I got you something special for your birthday. I hope you like it. Took me forever to pick it out."

"That's not fair!" I argued, pinching his arm for effect. "You know I hate surprises, and you just have to rub it in. Give me a hint."

"No hints. You'll have to wait and see." He kissed the top of my head. "And you love surprises."

"Just one small hint, and then I'll leave you alone," I begged.

"Forget it. We're going to be late." His grin was cocky as he turned to stroll into the classroom ahead of me.

Still sulking, I plopped down in the hard plastic seat. As the teacher started droning on about phylums and kingdoms, I tried to

ignore his gaze on me, but it was too hard. I rolled my eyes in his direction.

His crooked grin melted my heart. The annoyance I felt at him for holding out on me faded away. I could never stay upset at him. I couldn't wait for the day to be over. All I could think about was spending time with Adam.

After our first class was over, I had English with Sierra. Adam walked me to class and kissed me goodbye, then rushed off to the other end of school where he had gym. I took my usual desk behind Sierra and opened my notebook.

She turned to face me and crossed her eyes. "Wake me up if I start fading."

Mrs. Garrett surprised the class with a pop quiz over a book we were reading. I knew I wouldn't pass, because I hadn't even read the first page. My mom was going to kill me when she saw the grade.

After I failed miserably at five simple questions, the teacher started writing notes on the board. Already bored, I leaned over Sierra's shoulder to admire her artwork. She called it "doodling," but there was a lot of artistic talent to it. I'd always been envious—I could barely make a stick figure.

After a few minutes of craning my neck, I sat back and picked at the strings hanging off my jeans, trying to make figures out of the clouds outside the window. School was boring, and time seemed to drag so slow. I couldn't wait for summer break, which was still weeks away. The only good thing was having classes with my friends.

When the last bell of day went off, a collective sigh of relief could be heard throughout the school. I gathered my things and hurried to my locker, where I threw a couple of books into my backpack. I smiled when I felt Adam's presence behind me. He moved my hair and lightly kissed my neck.

"You're so mean." I groaned.

“It’s not my fault I can’t keep my hands off you,” Adam whispered in my ear, sending goose bumps across my skin.

I turned around and stared into his pale green eyes, and heat rose in my cheeks. “My parents won’t be home for a while. I told them we were going to be working on a project together.”

“What are we standing here for? Let’s go.” Adam draped his arm around my shoulder as we walked out of school, a comfortable, familiar feeling. I always felt so lucky to be his girlfriend. He could have anyone he wanted, but he had chosen me.

Adam drove a silver Chevy Silverado. He had an obsession with trucks, or anything with big tires for that matter. Always the gentleman, he opened the passenger door for me. I grabbed the handle and pulled myself into the front seat. He closed my door, and a minute later he was in the driver's seat starting the engine. Loud music blared from the speakers. His hand quickly sprang out and turned the knob to lower the volume.

Being able to sit right next to Adam was my favorite part about the truck. I slid over the bench seat and cuddled against his side. His strong leg was pressed against mine, and I grinned over at him, placing my hand on his thigh.

"What are you thinking?" Adam asked as he pulled onto the road, the engine roaring under the hood.

"That I love your truck."

"Uh-huh, sure you do. I thought you said it was a gas hog and too hard to get into."

"I like this part." I traced my fingers up his thigh and gave him a wicked grin.

"Is that so? You better watch it or you're gonna cause an accident," he said wryly.

"Well, it's a good thing I live so close by." I laid my head on his shoulder as he pulled onto my street. My house was on a dead end road and set back far enough that neighbors were never an issue. It was a little piece of rural in a suburban neighborhood.

Jumping down from the truck, I looked up at the familiar two-story colonial house. My family had lived there since I was born. The grass was in need of a cut and Mom's roses were in full bloom. That, coupled with the blindingly white siding and bright blue shutters, made it a charming picture.

I pulled the keys out of my bag and fumbled with the lock while Adam stood behind me, his fingertips trailing over my back. Once we got inside, I flicked on the lights, and we made our way to the kitchen table where I spread out our books.

"How long 'til your parents get home?" Adam asked, coming up behind me, his breath on my neck.

"At least a couple of hours."

He turned me around and grinned, pulling me close to him. "What do you want to do?"

"I can think of a few things." I reached for his hand with a sly smile and led him up the stairs to my bedroom.

We fell on the bed together, laughing. Our eyes met, and the laughing subsided. I glanced at his lush lips and licked my own. My heart pounded as I waited for him to make the first move.

I noticed his intense expression as I gazed into his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. You're just so beautiful. I can't believe how lucky I am." He pressed his lips to mine, ending any further conversation.

I ran my hands under his shirt and up his back, holding him close so that our bodies fit together. His hand drifted down my side and slowly traveled upwards, his fingers trailing across the skin under the hem of my shirt. He made his way from my lips down to my neck, then moved the collar of my shirt to feather kisses across my collarbone.

The feeling of his lips on my skin and his hand just below my breasts sent shivers through my body. I ran my hands through his soft hair, slipping in a kiss as he ran his tongue up my neck. His lips met mine again.

Adam and I had an agreement. We only went so far. Kissing and caressing was okay, but we hadn't had sex yet. We weren't ready, so we promised each other we'd wait. As he broke away and stared into my eyes, I smiled. He was a good guy and he'd never break his promise to me, no matter how much I sometimes wanted to.

He rolled off and propped himself up on his elbow next to me. Running a single finger in between my breasts, he said, "You're perfect."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, stop it. No one is perfect."

"You are. I'm serious. I don't know what you see in me. All I know is, I never want to lose you."

I sighed, knowing I couldn't win this argument. "You don't have to worry. I'm not going anywhere." I snuggled close to him, reveling in how safe I felt any time I was in his arms.

The first time I had seen Adam had been ten years before, when his family had moved here from the Midwest. He had been the new kid in school. He'd been painfully shy, which was nothing like my Adam. Anyone who met him now wouldn't take him for the shy boy. But he had been.

He had been assigned my reading partner, and we quickly became friends. Over the years, he grew into the best-looking boy I know.

"What are you smiling about?" He traced my birthmark with his finger.

"I was just thinking about when we first met." I patted his face dramatically. "You were so nerdy and cute."

Adam groaned. "Don't remind me. I was the smallest boy in our grade and had that huge gap between my teeth."

"Look at you now. Six feet tall with perfectly straight teeth."

"Thanks to braces and genetics." Adam pulled me closer. "You were just as beautiful then as you are now. I remember how nervous I was when you asked me to sit by you at lunch."

I flushed. "I can't believe you remember that."

“I remember everything about you. I think I loved you from the first moment I laid eyes on you.” He kissed me softly and for a while, I got lost in his kiss.

I finally pulled away, rested my head on his chest, and listened to his heartbeat. I wished we could stay that way forever.

After I almost fell asleep in his arms, we decided it was time to get downstairs to our project. My parents would have freaked if they came home and found him in my room. As Adam opened a notebook on the table, I grabbed some chips and drinks.

“What do we have to do?” Adam popped open the soda can, and it made a loud fizzing sound.

I stared at my boyfriend, amused. “You didn’t listen to the assignment?”

He shrugged and took a chug. I had to look away from his full lips, reminded that only moments ago they had been on my body. I wanted to leave the project behind and go back to bed with him.

“We have to make a menu for French class.” I shook my head. I had no idea how he managed to get passing grades. I think the teachers went easy on him because he was the best pitcher our school had ever seen. And he was a charmer. He had the teachers wrapped around his finger.

“Oh, right.” He leaned forward and swiped a handful of chips, then sat back in his seat.

I shoved a library book across the table. “Why don’t you look through this cookbook, and I’ll try to make the front of the menu on the laptop?”

He nodded and flipped open the cookbook. “What am I looking for?”

“French dishes, I guess. Anything except escargot. I’m not eating snails.”

“We don’t actually eat the food on the menu,” he said, flipping another page. So he had been paying attention in class.

“I know. It’s just…ew!” I shuddered.

Adam laughed. “Okay. Okay. Got it—no snails.”

I opened my MacBook and navigated to my favorite program, Pages, where I could make the menu look pretty. I found a picture of the Eiffel Tower to embed into the page. As I was tweaking it, I heard the garage door open.

“Someone’s home,” I groaned.

“I can hear that,” Adam teased, still marking pages in the book with little scraps of paper.

My father walked through the garage door a minute later. There were circles under his brown eyes, and his dark hair was disheveled. His tie was hanging open around his collar, his suit jacket tossed lazily over an arm. He nodded, a weary smile on his lips. “Hey, guys.”

“Hi, Dad.” I smiled up at him.

“What’s for dinner?” He glanced around the kitchen, probably noting that it was looking a little barren.

“I thought we could order Chinese so Mom doesn’t have to cook,” I responded, turning back to my project.

“Great idea. Order me some sweet and sour chicken.” He crossed the kitchen, his boots heavy on the tile. “I’m going to the study. Call me when it’s time to eat.”

I watched his retreating back as he walked to his study and shut the door behind him. There was a sense of finality to the click of the door, and I exchanged a look with Adam. That was odd, because usually my father liked catching up on sports whenever he saw Adam.

“Problems at work, maybe?” I whispered across the table.

“Probably,” Adam answered with a shrug.

I hopped up and crossed to where the cordless was mounted above the kitchen counter. I called our favorite Chinese delivery place and ordered our food—I knew everyone’s usual orders already. When I hung up, Adam and I got back to working on our project.

Not long after, Mom walked in the door just as the front doorbell rang. She raised an eyebrow as she said, "Are you expecting someone?"

"Dad! Door!" I yelled.

He came out of his office, already pulling his wallet from his back pocket. His shirt was untucked, and he seemed distracted. Adam followed him to the front of the house.

My mom eyed me. "What's going on?"

I just smiled innocently.

Adam and Dad returned with bags of Chinese goodness. They started unpacking the bags on the counter as the salty smell filled the room.

"Chinese? I thought I was cooking." Mom furrowed her brow.

"Surprise!" Dad said, not sounding very enthusiastic.

Mom shot us all a look. "Does my cooking suck that much?"

"Don't be ridiculous. We just wanted you to have a night off," Dad responded, saving us all.

I glanced at Adam. He was having a hard time not laughing. I kicked him under the table, and his eyes widened like he was in pain.

Mom looked at all of us again, and then washed her hands before sitting down at the table. She eyed Adam like maybe he'd tell her the truth about dinner. I quickly cleaned up our project and got out some paper plates from the pantry.

"How have you been, Adam?" Mom asked as she opened up the fried rice.

He cleared his throat. "Good, Mrs. McCallister, staying busy with school and baseball. You?"

"Just fine, thanks. The kids are driving me crazy, but I love them to pieces." She paused and scooped a little more rice on her plate. "How's the project coming along?"

"Slow, but good," he answered.

“Kinda dumb, if you ask me,” I said, setting the two-liter of soda in the middle of the table.

“Rylie, I’m sure your project isn’t dumb. The teachers just want you to be creative.”

I rolled my eyes. “Making a French menu is boring.”

Dad grabbed a plate and scooped a heaping portion of chicken and rice onto his plate and started eating. He spoke between mouthfuls. “How’s the team doing, Adam?”

Adam’s face lit up. It always did when he talked about baseball. “We demolished the Jaguars last week. This week we have to play Creeksdale. They’re going to be tough to beat. Maybe you can make it to the game?”

“I can try. Been a little hectic at work. But if I can swing it, I’ll be there.” He shoveled another huge bite.

“That’d be great,” Adam said with a big grin.

“Baseball relaxes me.” There was a brief silence as Dad finished devouring everything on his plate in record time, and then he pushed his seat back, rising to his feet. “I’ll be in the study if anyone needs me. Good to see you, Adam.”

Dad’s abrupt departure from the table surprised me. I glanced over at my mother. “Is he okay?”

“I hope so.” She ate the last bite of her food, the worry lines prominent on her forehead. “I’ll talk to him later.”

One of the best things about takeout was not having too much to clean afterwards. Adam helped us throw away the trash and put the leftovers in the refrigerator, and as Mom wiped down the table, I walked him to the door.

“I should get home,” Adam said. He lived with his dad. His mom had walked out on them years ago, and his older brother had started college last year. So, it was just the two of them.

“Do you have to?” I wrapped my arms around his waist.

He gazed into my eyes, brushing my hair away from my face. “I wish I could stay here with you.”

"Me, too. I don't want you to leave. I'll miss you."

Our lips met, and we kissed. Adam pulled away first. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"'Kay." I watched him walk slowly to his truck. I loved his long, lazy gait. As I walked back inside, I heard the roar of the truck as it came to life and then listened to it fade as he drove away.

Out of habit, I straightened the pillows on the couch and went to check on the kitchen. It was pretty clean, but I went over the counters again with Lysol wipes. After rearranging the spices, I headed to my room, tired and ready to lie down. I grabbed the TV remote off my desk and flopped down on my bed.

After flipping through the hundreds of channels our satellite received, I found nothing to watch. I settled on an old episode of a crime-solving show.

My phone vibrated on my nightstand. My heart leapt. I knew it was Adam.

*I miss u already*, Adam texted.

With a smile, I shook my head and texted back, *Miss u 2. Wish u were here.*

*Love u beautiful. Sleep well.*

*Love u 2.*

I set the phone down and glanced over at the picture of Adam and me on my dresser. It had been taken a few months ago at Homecoming. He looked so handsome, all dressed up in his suit. His blue tie matched the dress I wore. Memories of the dance came flooding back to me. It was our first dance together as a couple. He picked me up in a limo and danced with me all night long, never letting go. That was the night I knew without a doubt that I was in love with him and probably had been for years.

I must have fallen asleep watching TV, because the next thing I knew I was sitting up in bed, gasping for air. Nightmare. Just a nightmare.

*Deep breaths*, I told myself, trying to get my heart rate back down. The dream had felt so real. I was running for my life being chased by some kind of ugly creature. The creature was purple and had huge pointed ears, emerald-green eyes, and long, bony legs. I woke up right as it had grabbed me by the leg and pulled me down.

I stood up, and my knees wobbled just a little bit. I reached out and balanced myself on my dresser, waiting for the vertigo to pass.

My curtain fluttered, and a cool breeze entered my room. *Did I leave that open?* I usually didn't leave the window ajar because my father insisted we lock them at night. I hesitated momentarily, then walked over to it, slamming it shut and latching the lock. I peered out into the woods. *Oh, don't be ridiculous. There is nothing out there.* I closed the curtains and went back to bed.

My obnoxious alarm went off way too early for my liking. If I ignored it, the beeps would get louder and louder, so I slapped the snooze button and lay in bed a little longer, trying to forget the nightmare that had awoken me in the night.

It wasn't uncommon for me to have nightmares, so I didn't know why this one had scared me so much. I rolled over onto my back and stared at the ceiling. The branches of an old oak in the front yard cast waving patterns on the ceiling beneath the bright sunlight.

I swung my feet around and sat on the edge of the bed. "It was just a nightmare, nothing more," I told myself.

I stood up and made my bed, tucking the teal plaid sheets in snugly. I ran my hands across to make sure it was smooth, and then brought the comforter all the way up. Fluffing the smaller pillow, I placed it carefully on top, and made sure it was exactly in the middle of the two larger pillows. Satisfied that my bed was in order, I spun around and made my way to the closet.

Rubbing my eyes, I pushed aside the purple beads that covered my closet opening. They were cold on my arm. Jeans hung all the way to the right, followed by khaki pants and cotton pants. Then came the shirts, all arranged by color. My skirts and dresses hung all the way to the left.

I grabbed my favorite pair of faded jeans and a pale blue off-the-shoulder blouse and headed to the bathroom to shower. Since I

had taken my time getting out of bed, I had to hurry or I would be late for school. I was out and dressed in record time.

I pulled my hair back in a ponytail and snatched my makeup bag from the counter—I didn't have time to do it now, so I'd have to put it on in the car.

As I made my way down the stairs, my stomach growled, reminding me I needed to eat. I found a note on the kitchen counter: *Have a good day! XOXO, Mom.* She had already left for work.

I only had a few minutes before my ride would arrive, so I grabbed a granola bar and downed a glass of OJ standing at the counter.

My mind drifted back to the nightmare as I took a bite of my bar. Those creatures were so creepy. They weren't like anything I had ever seen before, and I definitely hoped to never see them again. Thank goodness it was just a dream.

When I was finished, I rinsed my cup and placed it in the dishwasher. I tossed the granola wrapper in the trash just as Sierra's horn brought me out of the memory of my nightmare.

"What's wrong?" Sierra asked when I got in the car. "I can always tell when something is bothering you. Your face is like an open book. You should do something about that, you know."

I shrugged and glanced over at the woods, relieved that I couldn't feel eyes on me today. "Nothing really. I had a nightmare last night, that's all."

"And you're still upset about it?" She looked at me strangely as she put the car in reverse and backed out of my driveway.

"It was unnerving."

Her face softened. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I shook my head. "No, it's not a big deal."

"Okay…if you do…"

"Thanks." What I wanted to do was talk about something else—anything else. I always had trouble talking about my feelings.

"How's your sister?"

Sierra raised an eyebrow in my direction. "Um…okay, I guess. Her baby is due any day. She's as big as a house."

"How are your parents doing with that?" Flipping down the visor, I started to apply my mascara. Sierra's sister was a senior, and she was having a baby. She had been the talk of the school for a couple of months, but the talk had eventually dwindled down. She was being tutored at home until she was ready to return to school.

"Ya know, the usual." Sierra shrugged. "Dad won't talk about it. Mom buys every cute outfit she sees."

When Sierra didn't say anything more, I decided to change the subject again. I glanced over at her, smiling as I applied my lip gloss. "We really need to find you a new boyfriend."

"Have anyone in mind?" Sierra raised an eyebrow.

"Max is pretty hot."

"Seriously? Max? I don't want to date a jock. That's your thing, not mine." Sierra reached out and changed the radio station. "I think Ian is pretty cute."

Ian? We really did have different tastes. He was a goth kid, totally not my type. I hesitated before responding. "Yeah, he does have a certain look to him. Have you talked to him? He seems like a bit of a loner."

"We're in art class together, and Ry, he is an incredible artist. I wish you could see his drawings."

Ah. Now it made sense. "Well, that's something you have in common. I think you should go for it."

She was silent for a moment, her fingers tapping on the steering wheel and her eyes on more than just the road. "I think I will." Decision made, she turned up the music and sang along the rest of the way to school.

I wished everything was as simple as my best friend made it seem.

I had a slight headache and my back felt tight, so the last thing I felt like doing was sitting in school all day. The first four periods passed slowly, but I barely noticed through my fog of pain.

My mood brightened by lunchtime since it was my favorite part of the day. I hurried into the cafeteria, my eyes seeking Adam's—he was already at our table with our usual gang. He winked at me, and I glowed in return.

I grabbed a tray and slid it down the railing. I skipped the mystery meat and went for my favorite standby, pizza and fries. After grabbing a milk carton and paying with my school account, I crossed the room to our spot.

"It's about time." Adam grinned and grabbed a fry from my tray. I loved the way his eyes lit up when he saw me, as if I were the only girl in the world.

"Mrs. Johnson stopped me in the hall," I explained as I opened my milk, and then glanced around at my friends. "What'd I miss?"

Sierra's face brightened and she opened her mouth to gush, until she looked over at Emma. She sat back in her seat and held her hands up in surrender. "I'll let Emma tell you."

Emma was known for being a gossip. She knew everything about everyone before it even happened. At least that's how it seemed. She pushed a strand of her curly black hair behind her ear and leaned forward. "Well, apparently Amanda and Colin got caught doing the deed in his car. A cop came up and flashed his flashlight at them, and then he followed them home and told their parents."

"What!? I didn't even know they liked each other." I appealed to Adam. Colin was on the baseball team and a pretty good friend of his, but he just shrugged.

"That's not all," Emma went on, her round face animated. "Jason broke up with Liz—"

I tried to pay attention, but Adam had his hand on my thigh and everyone else seemed to fade out. His touch gave me tunnel vision, so much so that I had a hard time finishing my lunch.

When the bell rang, I dumped my trash into the garbage can and tossed the tray on the pile to be cleaned. Adam put his hand on my waist and spun me around, pulling me close so he could press his lips against mine. Closing my eyes, I enjoyed every second of our kiss.

With one last peck, he pulled away and said, "See you later."

I watched as he walked away, my lips still tingling.

Sierra walked up and came to a stop next to me. "You two really are sickening. You do realize that, don't you?"

I nodded, heat rising to my cheeks. We couldn't help it; being together just came so naturally.

On the way to our next class, I spotted Ian hanging out by his locker. I nudged Sierra with my elbow. "Go say hi," I murmured.

She blushed and looked down at her sandals, her hands knitting together in front of her.

"Oh, don't play shy with me. We both know you are anything but." I gave her a little shove towards him.

She stumbled and dropped one of the books she was holding. It was a heavy textbook that hit the ground with a thud. "Ry!" she hissed between her teeth.

Ian looked up at us from where he was crouched over his backpack. His hair was such a dark black, it made his face look extremely white and his lips red. He had one earring in his left ear and another in his bottom lip. He hadn't always looked that way. I remembered him from elementary school when he was blond and all-American.

Sierra held up a hand and waved timidly. "Hi, Ian."

The corners of his mouth turned up just a little. "Hey."

Sierra went to lean against the lockers beside him, and he stood. Leaving them alone to talk, I continued on towards history class. I really wasn't a fan of history because I thought it was so annoyingly boring. Who cared about what happened in the past?

I plopped down in my assigned seat and waited for Sierra.

She showed up a couple of minutes later, right before the bell rang, wearing a huge grin on her face.

"I take it things went well?" I prompted.

She took the seat in front of me and whipped around with a nod. "He asked if I wanted to grab a bite to eat and go to the movies this weekend."

The bell sounded, and our teacher stood up behind his desk. "Please take out your books and turn to page two hundred thirty."

"And you said yes, right?" I whispered as I flipped open my book and searched for the correct page.

"Of course," she whispered over her shoulder.

I grinned. "When?"

"Rylie? Sierra? Stop talking or be sent to the principal." Mr. Jackson looked down at us over glasses that always slid down his nose.

Sierra rolled her eyes and turned to face the teacher. "Sorry."

I knew it was selfish, but all I could think about was how her date better not be on my birthday. After class was over, I pulled Sierra aside in the hallway. "When are you going?"

She rolled her eyes. "Calm down. I know exactly what you're thinking. I told him Friday night." Gripping my shoulders, she gave them a little shake. "Did you really think I'd leave you on your birthday?"

I shrugged, feeling a little guilty.

She shoved me to the side. "Really? You know me better than that. You're my best friend. There's nowhere else I'd rather be. Besides, you know I can't pass up cake and ice cream."

That was true. Sierra was petite, but she could eat like a linebacker.

Two more classes, and the day would be over. I had choir practice after school, but I really didn't feel up to going. I was tired and achy again. Turning to Sierra, I rubbed my temples and told her, "I'm going to go take a Tylenol in the bathroom."

A concerned look crossed her face. “Still got that headache?”

“Yeah. It goes away for a bit, and then comes right back. My mom said it could be allergies or something.”

She walked with me to the bathroom. The moment we pushed through the swinging door, the stench of body spray plugged up my nose and made me cough. The bathroom’s bright fluorescent lights made the sunshine-yellow walls glow. There were four stalls, all empty at the moment. I put my backpack down and yanked out a bottle of water and the Tylenol. I threw a couple in my mouth and washed them down.

Sierra handed me her lipstick. “Need a touch-up?”

“Yeah.” I took the lipstick from her and applied it to my lips. It made my mouth a deep burgundy. “Thanks.”

“What are friends for? That color looks great on you, by the way.”

I smiled. Sierra always made me feel better.

Two hours later, the medicine still hadn’t kicked in. My head continued to throb, but I had to go to choir.

Choir was in the small auditorium, in a domed building adjacent to the main body of the school. It had been replaced by the large auditorium sometime in the nineties, and the old was given to the arts program. It was dark and dreary, and the seats were hard wood instead of the plush cushions of the new auditorium, but the choir students liked it for its character.

I walked down the aisle, and Mrs. Lopez looked up from behind the podium. Her black hair was pulled up in a severe bun. It looked a little strange since her long locks were usually down in loose waves. “You feeling okay, Rylie? You don’t look well.”

“I’ve had an awful headache today,” I said truthfully.

“Do you want to just go home? You should rest your voice if you’re not feeling well.”

“No. Adam is my ride, and he’s at baseball practice anyway.”

"Well, if you want to just sit in the chairs and watch, that's fine with me."

"Thanks, but I think I want to try and sing." I didn't like letting Mrs. Lopez down. She was my favorite teacher.

"I like that attitude, Rylie." Mrs. Lopez smiled broadly. As the final trickle of students came in, she asked, "Do you want to do your solo first? Get it out of the way?"

I nodded. "Sure. Thanks, Mrs. Lopez."

I walked up the stairs to the stage and gripped the microphone stand, adjusting it to the perfect height. Mrs. Lopez took a seat at the baby grand, her fingers splayed across the keys, and nodded at me as she began playing "Someone Like You" by Adele.

I sang through the song twice, hitting every note with ease. Singing is my passion. When I sing, I feel free, and everything else seems to fade away. Even my headache and the nightmare were forgotten.

"Excellent," she praised. Concern marred her brow. "Now, go sit down and watch. You look so pale."

I knew she was probably worried about me coming down with something. Our end-of-year concert was quickly approaching, and my solo was one of the main acts.

"Thanks," I said, relieved. I walked to the back of the auditorium. Every step felt like someone was banging something hard against my head. I sank down into one of the chairs and let my head fall to rest on the back of the seat. It was dark and cool. Closing my eyes, I listened to the choir sing.

"Hey, beautiful," Adam's voice whispered in my ear a while later.

Opening my eyes, I saw his handsome face in front of me. "I'm so glad you're here."

"You okay? You don't look so good."

"Headache." I groaned, annoyed that it was still there.

"I wish I could take it away for you. Are you ready to go home? You look like you could use a nap."

"A nap sounds wonderful."

He held out his hands. I took them, and he pulled me to my feet. My head swam, and I leaned into him, waiting for the sensation to pass.

"Rylie?" His voice was low, worried.

I waved him away. "I'm fine. Stood up too fast."

As we walked to his truck, he rubbed the back of my neck with the fingers of one strong hand.

"That feels good," I murmured, stretching my neck side to side as he worked the muscles.

"Probably a tension headache. Anything bothering you?" He opened the passenger door and helped me climb in.

"Not really. I mean nothing major is going on."

He shut my door and circled the truck to get in on the driver's seat. As soon as he was settled, I slid over to sit in the middle so I could rest my head on his shoulder. My eyes fluttered shut.

"Ry?"

I opened my eyes. It felt like it had only been seconds, but I realized we were already in my driveway.

"Do you want me to come in?" he asked.

Oh, how I wanted him to. I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing the pain away. When it didn't magically disappear, I gave him a sad smile. "Yes…but no. I think I need to go lie down."

"Okay." He slid from the truck and came to help me out of the seat. "I'll walk you to the door."

There were starbursts in my vision by the time we made it to the front porch. I couldn't grasp my keys; my fingers felt numb from the migraine. Adam took them gently from my hands and opened the door.

I let my backpack fall to the floor just inside the door. I'd get it later, when my head felt better. Adam rested an arm around my waist, and we trudged slowly to up the stairs.

“Have you taken anything?” he asked as he helped me pull off my shoes. “Ibuprofen?”

“A couple hours ago,” I mumbled. “I just need to close my eyes.” I fell to the cool pillow, barely registering as he settled the covers over me. My upper back was killing me, and I didn’t know why. I couldn’t remember doing anything to hurt it. Maybe I slept on it wrong or something?

His warmth disappeared momentarily, and he came back with more Tylenol and a glass of cool water. “Take it.”

The ones from earlier certainly hadn’t worked. I tossed back the pills, and then handed him the glass.

Adam kissed me on the forehead, brushing his fingers across my face as he said, “Call me if you need anything.”

“I will.” I smiled. I was such a lucky girl.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

I opened my eyes long enough to watch him leave, and then curled up on the mattress, hoping the pain would go away.

"Rylie?"

I stirred and rubbed my eyes. It was darker, but I could tell my mom was sitting next to me on the bed. I propped myself up on my elbows and asked, "What time is it?"

"Almost seven." Her voice was disembodied in the dark.

"Oh wow. I didn't mean to fall asleep for so long." I sat up and leaned back against the pillows.

"Are you feeling okay?" She placed her hand on my forehead. "You don't feel warm."

"I had a headache and backache earlier, but they're better now," I lied. My back still hurt, but it was much duller than earlier. There was no sense in worrying her over a little pain.

"Do you want something to eat? I made your favorite. Pork chops and mashed potatoes."

"Yeah. I'm hungry. Did you make gravy and biscuits?" At least that wasn't a lie. I really was hungry. My mom may not have been the best cook, but there was still something comforting in a home-cooked meal.

"Yes, I made biscuits, gravy, and corn on the cob. You wouldn't let me live it down if I didn't. Come and eat, then." Mom stood up and left my room, shutting the door quietly behind her.

I stared at the pale violet walls for a few minutes, waiting for my body to catch up with my mind. A few months ago, I changed the posters on my walls for more sophisticated artwork. I also had

Sierra draw me a landscape picture of a waterfall, which hung above my dresser. Across the room, my MacBook was on my desk, still open to Facebook. Above it, deep teal curtains framed the single window.

Everything *looked* normal, but I felt like something was off. I was starting to think maybe I needed to see a shrink.

It took me a minute to gather the energy to push myself out of bed. I stretched, and then went to the bathroom to splash cool water on my face. I patted my face down with a towel and stared at myself for a couple of minutes. Something seemed different, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was…

I shook my head. What was I thinking? How could I look any different? I yanked my blonde hair back in a ponytail and hurried downstairs.

My father was sitting at the table, still in his work clothes. His suit was rumpled, and if I didn't believe it impossible, it looked *exactly* like the suit he wore yesterday. The weight of the world seemed to rest on his shoulders.

"Catch any bad guys today?" I asked as I took the seat across from him.

"You know I don't like to talk about work." A muscle clenched in his jaw, and he ran a hand through his dark hair. "Tell me about your day. When is your next concert?"

"At the end of the month we have a Spring Fling concert." I reached over and scooped potatoes onto my plate. "I hope you can make it this time."

"She has a solo," Mom said proudly.

"I'll be there. As soon as you have the information, I'll put in for the day off." He paused, and then met my eyes. "I've missed too much. Before we know it, you'll be out of the house and on your way to college. I don't know how you grew up so fast."

I'd never heard my dad's voice so sober. He was usually jovial, so it was obvious something was bothering him.

"You're stuck with me for a couple more years." I took a bite of tough pork chop; it was like chewing on leather. "It's delicious, Mom."

After we ate, I gathered the dishes and followed my mother to the sink. My head had finally stopped throbbing, but my back was still bothering me a little bit. I stacked the plates on the counter and asked, "What's up with Dad?"

My mom turned on the water and lowered her voice. "They found the body of the little boy they've been searching for."

I glanced through the archway that led from the kitchen to the living room. My father sat on the couch, staring at a dark television screen without really seeing it.

"That sucks," I murmured, pulling a dishtowel from the drawer.

"Yeah." Mom ran the plate under the hot water and then handed it to me. "He always blames himself if they don't find them in time."

I bent to put the plate in the bottom rack of the dishwasher. "It's not his fault."

"He'll get a new case and move on. It just takes him a little while." She handed me another plate, still warm from the faucet.

Many of my friends hated their parents, or at least didn't get along with them, but my parents were okay. Sure, we had our disagreements, but they were always there for me. My dad was a good man. He really cared about his job, and especially the cases that involved kids—they really got to him. I admired that about my dad. Other officers would tell him not to let it get personal, but he seemed to do a better job when he did.

Once the kitchen was clean, Mom slung an arm around my shoulders and asked, "Want to go watch *Grey's Anatomy*?"

"Yes!"

"I'll make the popcorn." She shooed me out of the kitchen.

Mom and I shared a passion for that show. Every week, we would sit down together and watch it. I grabbed my favorite spot on the couch, which was the built-in chaise on the left end. I clutched

one of the soft brown pillows to my chest and waited for Mom to get back so I could hit play on the DVR.

Mom sat next to me. She tucked her legs under her and offered me the extra-buttered popcorn as I turned on the show.

"He's so hot," Mom swooned over her favorite doctor on the show. Dad shook his head and went into the other room.

I rolled my eyes. "I guess they're okay for old men."

She laughed and elbowed me. "Not old. Distinguished."

"Whatever." I shoved another handful of popcorn in my mouth.

When the show ended, Mom hit the power button on the remote and asked, "How's school?"

"Fine." She always wanted to know what was going on with school. School was boring. I didn't know why she bothered to ask; my answer was always the same.

"Understanding all your classes?"

"My grades are fine, Mom. Although I don't think I did very well on a pop quiz this week." I didn't like keeping stuff from my parents. It was pointless: they'd find out anyway.

"Did you read what you were supposed to?"

"No."

"Why not?" she asked. Just like always, there was no judgment in my mother's voice, only a need to understand and help.

"It's Shakespeare. It makes no sense."

She nodded thoughtfully, then brushed a lock of hair away from my eyes. "I never liked reading those books either, but they are important, Rylie. You need to do your assignments."

"I know. Sorry," I told her, my eyes on the southwestern-patterned blanket over my knees.

"I'll help you if you want."

"I might take you up on that." I breathed a sigh of relief. I was lucky that my parents were understanding and willing to help me. But I also knew that if I didn't do my schoolwork and started getting bad grades, I would be in trouble.

"Good." She switched gears. "What about Sierra? How is she doing these days? It seems like I haven't seen her around much lately."

"Better. She's going on her first date since Trent."

"That's good. And Adam?"

"No different than yesterday." I laughed.

My mom grinned. "I'm just making sure nothing is new. Now that you're a teen, we don't spend as much time together as we used to. I need to feel like I'm up to speed on your life."

"Nothing new, Mom. Same old stuff." I yawned. "I think I'll go up to my room. I have one more chapter to read before bed."

"Okay." She kissed my cheek. "Have a good night."

I climbed the stairs slowly, dreading having to open that Shakespeare play again. It wasn't that I couldn't appreciate him—I knew he was "one of the greatest playwrights" ever. But I just couldn't get into it. All "wither thou goest" and "prithy thee," it was like a completely different language.

I grabbed the book out of my backpack, because it wasn't worth being surprised by another pop quiz to fail. Falling on the bed, I opened it and started reading. It was a pain, but I finally finished the chapter. Problem was, I forgot what I read as soon as I closed the book.

Ten minutes later, I found myself standing in front of the mirror in my bathroom again. I looked…slimmer? I wasn't overweight to begin with, but I felt—and looked—like I was thinning out a little. My cheekbones looked more prominent. Maybe I was getting taller? I leaned closer and rubbed my birthmark; it almost looked darker than usual, which was so not cool. I wondered if a plastic surgeon could cover it up. Maybe I'd look into that someday.

I straightened the things on my dresser, thinking about what my parents would say if I actually had it removed. They had always thought it was neat, and they claimed it made me unique. It might be neat and unique if I could cover it up once in a while. I collapsed

to my comforter and considered turning on my iPod for some music before bed.

There was a knock on my door, and my father called, "Rylie?"

I stared at the door, aghast. He rarely came in my room. This case obviously hit him even harder than most.

"Come in."

He shuffled across the room and stopped beside my bed, his hands dangling at his sides. "Just wanted to say good night."

I felt a rush of sympathy. He gave so much to the police department—so much time, energy, and emotion, and I rarely saw it give him anything back. I jumped to my feet and gave him a big hug. "You okay, Dad?"

"Yes," he said, his voice muffled against my hair. He dropped a brief kiss to my hairline and pulled away to smile at me. "Just a long week. I'll be okay."

"Mom told me."

Dad sighed. "I wish she hadn't. I don't like to bring my work home."

"I'm not a little girl anymore," I reminded him.

"No, you're not," he agreed, tapping my chin gently. "You'll be going off to college soon. But I still want to protect you as long as I can."

"You've done a good job so far." I grinned, trying to ease the mood. It made me a little uncomfortable seeing my dad upset. He was always the strong one.

"I can't imagine what that boy's family is going through right now." He rubbed his face and looked away. There was so much emotion in his eyes.

I didn't know how to respond. "It's not your fault, Dad."

"I know. I just wish there had been a better outcome. Have you thought more about college?" Smooth subject change, if a bit abrupt.

“A little,” I answered, sitting back down on my bed and tugging a pillow into my lap. “I have a couple of years to make up my mind. I still like the idea of joining the police department.”

He scoffed. “Not too much fun most days. Definitely not as glamorous as it appears on TV.” His eyes settled on mine, and he said softly, “I support whatever you want, but I’ll always worry if you join the force.”

“But what you do is important. You help a lot of people.”

Dad just nodded. “I’ll be proud no matter what you decide to do. With that voice of yours you might be the next—what’s her name? Your favorite singer?”

“Adele? Hardly, Dad, she’s one of a kind.”

“So are you, sweetie.” He ruffled my hair like he used to when I was little. “Good night.”

“Night, Dad.” I watched him trudge from the room, his shoulders hunched and weary, and for the first time, I was really worried about my dad.

I woke up feeling strange: lightheaded and foggy. I really didn't want to get up, but I kicked the blankets off and stood. The room spun, and I put my hands on the wall to steady myself. What the hell was going on? Just my luck. My birthday was tomorrow, and I was going to be sick for it.

I carefully crossed the room, my sights set on simply making it to the closet, but something in the mirror over my dresser caught my attention. I stopped and stared.

My skin looked different—smoother. Confused, I moved closer to the mirror and leaned forward to study myself. Usually my face was a little red and blotchy when I first woke up. Today, it was pale and had no imperfections—not even the little whitehead that had been coming up on my nose.

My eyes drifted to my ears, and my breath caught in my throat. I took a step closer to the mirror. They looked different, too, as if they were pointed. *Oh, c'mon!* I rubbed my eyes and looked again, and then let out a deep breath. I looked perfectly normal.

I told myself either I was still dreaming, or I could be going crazy.

After a hot shower, I dressed in a pair of my favorite jeans and a white cami with a floral blouse over it. I leaned over the sink in the bathroom, wielding my concealer stick. Staring at my birthmark, I pursed my lips and asked it, "What should I do with you today?"

Strangely enough, it looked like it was pulsing.

I blinked and stared, sure I had imagined it. It looked normal. Maybe I really was coming down with something.

Sierra picked me up as usual and talked about Ian the whole way to school. I smiled as I listened to her, and when the excitement drew to a close, I said, "It's good to see you so excited about someone. Been a long time."

She glanced over at me, frowning. "I don't want to talk about Trent. We are never to mention his name again? Understand?"

"Umm, sure, but I didn't even say his name." Trent and Sierra had dated for almost all of ninth grade. Over the summer, she found out that he had cheated on her, and she dumped him. Even now, nine months later, she was still hurt and didn't like talking about him. I was just glad she was moving on, and steered the conversation into safer territory. "What movie are you and Ian going to see?"

"I don't know yet. We'll decide when we get there." She shifted in her seat and flicked the air conditioning on. She didn't have the top down like she usually did. "You feeling better today?"

*Not really*, I thought, but said, "A little." Seemed like I was doing a lot of lying lately.

"Good. You can't be sick for your birthday. That would really suck."

"My thoughts exactly."

"Did your mom get everything for your party?" she asked as we turned onto our school's street.

"I don't know." I shrugged. "You know how she is. I'm sure she'll have every detail covered. She loves birthdays. She's probably been planning my sixteenth birthday since I was a baby."

Sierra laughed and whipped into her parking spot. "I'll be there early to help set up."

"I know. You always are." She had spent the past seven birthdays with me, and vice versa. I didn't even know if a birthday could ever be complete without her.

“Maybe by then, you’ll have a new boyfriend,” I teased. I gripped the strap of my backpack and pushed open the car door.

“We haven’t even gone on our date yet. Maybe he’s a jerk,” she said with a laugh, exiting the car on her side. She slammed her door and met me at the front of the car. “You going to Adam’s game later?”

“Yup, wouldn’t miss it.”

We met Adam in our usual area out front, where he was talking with Colin. Colin was a long, lanky guy with dark hair that swiped across his forehead, and a freckled face that always seemed to be smiling. I gave him a wave as I slid in next to Adam, bumping him with an elbow.

He put his arm around me. “Hey, babe.”

I chuckled. He only called me “babe” when he was around his baseball buddies. He also developed a ridiculous jock swagger and deepened his voice. It was silly, but it tickled me.

“Hey, slugger,” I teased back and punched him on the side of his arm.

He rolled his eyes and planted his lips on mine. “Mmm. Cinnamon?”

I blushed. “I had cinnamon toast for breakfast.”

The bell rang, signaling the start of our school day.

“I’ve gotta get goin’,” Colin said in his deep, southern twang. “Catch y’all later.”

“Bye, Colin,” I told him, and Sierra waved, even though her face was pointed down at her cell phone. That girl was always on Facebook.

We walked inside hand in hand, and Sierra split to go to her locker at the other end of the main hall.

“So, Sierra and Ian? That’s kinda strange, isn’t it?” Adam asked, yanking open his locker. It always seemed to get stuck.

“I guess. She seems to really be into him.” I was jostled from behind as a crowd of football players in orange and white letterman

jackets rushed past, their raucous yells echoing off the ceiling. I rolled my eyes at Adam, and he chuckled.

"Interesting, though," he went on. "Ian's a strange one."

"As long as he's good to her, I don't care how he looks or what he wears," I responded with a shrug, locating my books in my locker. I'd forgotten to take my biology notes home, but luckily, I didn't think we had any homework last night.

Adam nodded like he agreed, but he didn't say anything.

"You be nice to him," I warned. Not that Adam was the kind of guy to be mean to anyone.

"Of course." He slammed his door and gave me a wicked grin, turning to press me against my own locker. His body leaned into mine, hard and muscular, and his eyes drifted to my lips and back again. His kiss, when it came, took my breath away.

"Mr. Garner, Miss McCallister, break it up and get to your classes." The teachers always posted up in the hallway during breaks, watching for misbehaving students. We'd just been caught.

I felt the heat rush to my face, and we broke apart guiltily. Adam relieved me of my books, and we took off towards our first-period class.

It turned out to be a long day. My headache came and went a few times, and I spent all of sixth period arguing with myself whether or not I should ask my mom to take me to the doctor.

Thankfully, my head stopped pounding by game time. If it hadn't, the packed bleachers and the loud, discombobulated sound of the announcer would have killed me. Plus, I wouldn't have been able to cheer as loudly for Adam—tonight was an important game for the playoffs.

Adam glanced up from the pitcher's mound and waved, looking so cute and sexy in his uniform. There was something about the tight white pants that gave me shivers. He struck the next batter out, and the crowd screamed and stomped on the bleachers, the thuds reverberating through me. I felt like jumping up and yelling,

*He's my boyfriend!* but figured that might be a bit much, and Sierra would never let me live it down.

We huddled together on the bleachers, my legs squeezed between Sierra's and the girl next to me. Jack pushed his way through the stands, carrying a large tray of nachos and sodas. I reached over to grab a chip as he took his seat on the other side of Emma, and she slapped my hand. "Get your own. Jack got those for me."

"Don't be greedy, Emma. It's not an appealing look on you," Sierra chimed in.

Emma threw a nacho at Sierra, and she picked it off her shirt and ate it. I giggled and shook my head. I loved these guys; it was never a dull moment.

"Pay attention. Adam's up next," Jack said, shushing us.

It was the top of the seventh inning, and the game was tied. Adam strolled over to the dugout and gulped down some water before taking his place as batter.

I bit my lip in anticipation as he let the first ball go by.

"Strike!" the umpire called.

"C'mon, Adam," I whispered.

Adam hit the second ball, and it flew high. He tossed the bat and started running. The crowd cheered as he rounded first base, then second, and third. We were on our feet as he slid into home.

"Woo-hoo, Adam!!!!!" I yelled, my voice lost in the roar.

After the game, we all went to the local high school hangout, Bob's Diner. They had the best burgers and milkshakes in town. Sierra and I jumped out of Adam's truck and made our way to the door. As soon as we walked inside, everyone started clapping and chanting, "Garner! Garner!"

Adam was bright red, but a smile spread across his face. He might have acted like he didn't, but he loved the attention. I looked around and found Jack and Emma sitting in the corner booth. They

waved us over. Emma scooted closer to Jack, and Sierra slid next to her. Adam and I took the other side.

Jack's face was animated and full of excitement. His hazel eyes lit up. "Man, we're going to the playoffs because of you. I couldn't believe it when you hit that home run. The game was in the bag after that."

Adam shrugged. "Wasn't just me. It's a team effort."

"Uh-huh, stop being humble. We all know you lead the team," Emma teased.

"We need to order. I'm starving," I griped, and waved the waitress over. I loved my boyfriend, but if I let them go on any longer, I wasn't going to get to eat.

As I listened to them banter after we ordered, I realized my headache had returned, and it was worse than before. Now I really was concerned.

The doorbell rang.

I glanced over at my clock. It was nine o'clock at night, kind of late for visitors. I made my way to the top of the stairs, curious as to who it was, and I heard the door open. "Mrs. McCallister?"

"Yes?" my mother answered. I could hear the question in her voice, indicating it wasn't someone she knew.

"I need to talk to you and your husband about your daughter. It's important."

*What?* I snuck further down the stairs. There was a beautiful lady with long light blonde hair standing at the door. She was young and lovely, and looked like she could be a runway model. I wondered why in the world she wanted to talk to my parents about me.

My father was at the door now. "What is this in reference to?" he asked, his voice all business.

"Please, may I come in? This isn't something I'd like to discuss outside." The woman glanced over her shoulder as if looking for someone.

My parents looked at each other, but I couldn't see their faces clearly, and then my father nodded. "Okay." They both stepped aside to let her in.

Although this lady seemed familiar, I didn't know her and didn't like the fact that she was here because of me. I continued down the rest of the stairs and followed behind them.

My mother led her into the living room. The lady's piercing green eyes rested on me, sending a chill down my back. My father followed her gaze. "Rylie, do you know this woman?" Dad asked.

"No." I shook my head slowly. "I've never seen her before."

"Rylie, maybe you should go to your room," Dad suggested, his gaze demanding I do as he said.

"No. If this has something to do with me, I want to hear it." I crossed my arms and sank against the back of the couch.

Mom and Dad exchanged a worried glance, but turned back to the lady on the couch. "Please, go on."

Without taking her eyes from me, the lady calmly stated, "My name is Azura, and I am Rylie's birth mother."

My father, who was always a level-headed man, was on his feet in seconds, his face hard. "What are you talking about?"

I felt like I had fallen into some kind of parallel universe. *Did this woman just say she was my birth mother?* How could she be my birth mother? That would mean I was adopted, but wouldn't my parents have told me something like that?

My mother shook her head. "Birth mother? Rylie isn't adopted." She reached over and took my hand. "Believe me, I'll never forget the eleven hours of labor."

The woman sat perfectly still in the blue armchair across from us, with her hands clasped on her lap. "I know it's hard to accept, but it's true. Your daughter died shortly after she was born. I switched the infants. Rylie is mine."

The wind left me as if I had been punched in the stomach. I couldn't breathe, and the room spun. I gripped the pillow next to me with my other hand as I clung to my mother.

Silence filled the room for a moment, and then my father exploded. "You need to leave now!" He pointed to the door. "Get out of this house and don't come back without a court order."

The lady smiled sincerely, her face still as calm as it had been when she walked in the door. "Please, hear me out. I realize this is a

lot to take in."

"No! This is preposterous! Nobody died. Rylie is ours." Dad's voice was like thunder.

I studied the lady. She seemed so honest and soft-spoken. Why would she pretend something like this? Why would she ruin our family if it weren't true? And if was true, why was she coming clean now? Something in me believed her even though I didn't want to. I swallowed hard and rubbed my sweaty palms on my shirt.

"Let her talk," I said hoarsely.

"Rylie, you can't believe her." Dad looked stricken.

"I'm curious as to why she thinks I'm her daughter. Let's hear her out." I crossed my arms and scooted closer to my mother, comforted when she wrapped an arm around me.

Dad turned back to the woman called Azura, and his frown deepened. "Fine." He sat back down in his seat and glared. "Talk."

"Thank you. I'm going to tell you something not many humans know, and I have to trust you to keep it secret for Rylie's sake." She addressed the statement to my parents.

*Humans? Who talks like that?*

Her eyes rested on me. "Sixteen years ago tomorrow, you were born. When you arrived with a birthmark, your father and I were overjoyed. To us, it meant you would have special abilities. But then temptation came, and your father, being weak, succumbed to it. I had to hide you. I had to keep you safe. So, I went to the hospital in search of a baby who was dying. There is a special aura around people who are about to die, and I found a baby with that aura. I switched babies, leaving you and taking the dead baby girl with me. After duplicating the birthmark, I passed her off as my own and buried her."

Mom's hand flew up to her mouth.

I was dumbstruck. "But why? Who was your child in danger from?"

"You were born with a powerful gift, one that many would like to

get their hands on."

I rubbed my temples, hoping the headache that had started earlier would go away soon. This was insane. This lady must be crazy. In danger? A baby? I took a few deep breaths. "I still don't understand. I can assure you that I do not have any special gifts. I'm boringly normal. I think you have the wrong person."

"Rylie, she's lying. This woman clearly has mental issues." Dad walked over to me and put his hand on my shoulder. "She's probably just seeking attention or money."

"I assure you, sir, I'm not seeking either one of those. You can get a DNA test to prove what I'm saying, but there are things you all need to know before tomorrow."

"What?" Mom's voice sounded weak.

"Rylie and I…we're not human." She looked directly into my eyes.

What the hell did that mean?

"Now I know you're insane!" Dad raised his voice again. "Get out of our house this minute." He strode to the door and flung it open. Cool night air rushed inside.

"We're faeries," Azura continued, "and tomorrow, Rylie will finish her transformation."

"What are you talking about?" Mom asked shakily. She glanced between me and the lady calling herself my mother, wiping tears from her eyes.

"You've been having headaches," Azura said simply, her gaze resting on me with a familiarity I didn't like. "Backaches. You've been tired and sleeping a lot. Maybe you noticed little changes in the mirror. You know something is happening to your body. Tell me, am I wrong?"

My mouth was dry. I couldn't answer her in words, but I nodded in agreement.

"Oh, c'mon. This is ridiculous!" Dad threw his hands up. "Get out of our house before I get my gun and make you."

"Rylie, you will look different. And unless you use glamour, everyone else will see the changes, too." Suddenly, the lady changed right before our eyes. She was the same person, yet different. Her ears were pointy, and her green eyes brighter. And then there were the wings. She actually had wings. Sparkly, beautiful wings a shade of light green I had never seen before.

That's when the room started spinning again, and I passed out.

"Rylie, wake up." My mom was shaking me. I opened my eyes and tried to focus on her. It all came crashing back. I pushed myself up to a sitting position and looked around. My mother and father were huddled around me, and the woman who claimed to be my birth mother was watching us intently. She looked human again.

"Did I imagine that?" I looked into my mother's eyes, hoping for an answer I knew I wasn't going to get.

She shook her head, her face pale, and softly brushed a strand of my hair behind my ear. "I'm afraid not. We all saw it."

"It has to be a trick. There are no such things as faeries." My father's eyes narrowed in Azura's direction, and his fists were clenched at his sides. He resembled some kind of vengeful god, towering over our unwanted guest as she sat demurely on the couch.

She smiled angelically and dropped her glamour once again, her wings flapping. It wasn't any easier to see the second time around.

"We're real," Azura said, her voice still eerily pleasant. "I've been watching Rylie grow up. You have done a wonderful job. I obviously picked a good family to raise my daughter." She turned to look at me. "I want you to know, giving you up was the hardest thing I've ever done. It eats me up every day, but I know it was the right thing to do."

"I'm not your daughter. These are my parents." I moved into the warmth of my mother's arms, and glanced up at my dad for support.

It hit me that I looked nothing like either of them, and panic rose in my chest. How could I have missed it all this time? I had fair skin and eyes, and my parents had dark hair and darker skin. They even both had dark eyes.

*This can't be happening.*

Without a word, I bolted up the stairs to my room. My parents' voices called for me, but I ignored them. I couldn't deal with it.

Rushing into my bedroom, I slammed the door.

I stood in front of my dresser and stared into the mirror; I'd been doing that a lot lately. I got as close as I could to my reflection, so close my nose almost touched the glass. Physical changes? I knew I had noticed some things recently, but would I really look like her? Her ears were pointed, not just a little pointy, completely pointed. And wings? Could that be the reason my back had been hurting? Wings? Oh my God! Would I really have wings sticking out of my back?

"Calm down, Ry," I told myself. I put both hands to the smooth, cool surface of my dresser and looked away from my own reflection. This woman had to be crazy. Right? Maybe she spiked our food, and now we were hallucinating? I took several deep breaths.

*Tomorrow, Rylie will finish her transformation.* The woman's words echoed in my head. What did she mean? What else would happen? There was no way I was going to sleep tonight. Maybe if I stayed awake, none of it would happen.

There was a knock at the door. I didn't want to answer it. I didn't want to talk to my parents or that woman. She said we could take a DNA test, but that would take time, and if she was telling the truth, I didn't have that kind of time. I'd be a…*faery*…tomorrow! My stomach turned.

Another knock was followed by my mom's voice. "Rylie, can I come in?"

"Go away!"

"Rylie…please."

I stomped over to the door and threw it open. "Is that even my name? Or is that your baby's name?"

Tears welled in Mom's brown eyes, and I immediately felt guilty. "Your name is Rylie. We didn't settle on a name until minutes before we left the hospital to come home. And it was only after looking at you for a couple of days that we decided. So don't you ever wonder about that."

I looked down and muttered, "Sorry."

Mom wrapped her arms around me. "You are our daughter. Nothing will change that. Even if what this crazy woman is saying *is* true, you will always be our little girl."

She sounded so sincere, but I wondered if that would be true even after I "transformed." "I don't want to be Tinkerbell, Mom."

A musical laugh came from out in the hall, and I realized Dad and Azura were standing there just beyond my line of sight.

"You will not be anything like Tinkerbell," the lady assured me, her hands clasped in front of her as she came closer. My dad stood behind her with his cop face on.

"Am I going to shrink?" I asked, my voice shrill.

"No. We're not tiny. You're thinking of piskies."

"Piskies? I thought it was pixies?"

Azura nodded. "Depends on what area they come from. The pronunciation can differ."

"Interesting," my mother said, much more calmly than I expected.

It was surprising. I could barely believe anything of what was happening, but my mom seemed to be taking it as it came.

I swallowed hard. "What else is going to happen to me?"

"Well, one thing the folklore has correct is that you won't be able to tell a lie. Ever. You will use glamour so humans cannot see your true form. I can teach you how. It's pretty easy once you get the hang of it." Azura paused, eyeing me. "Every faery has their own

special ability. I'm not sure what yours is, but you'll soon find out. And because you're an Aurorian faery, your ability will be much stronger than most."

"What do you mean ability?" I wrinkled up my nose and stared at the stranger standing in the hallway outside my bedroom. It was too close for comfort to my safe zone.

"My ability is air manipulation." Her gaze never faltered, but a low whistling sound filled the house, and suddenly the papers on my desk flew into the air like a little mini tornado. It only lasted a few seconds, but it seemed longer.

I watched the papers fall back onto my desk in a messy pile. "Whoa."

There was a beat of dead silence.

"You…did that?" my dad finally said.

Mom and I turned as one back to Azura. The faery just nodded.

"You said I was in danger. From what?" I left the doorway to fall onto my bed. My knees couldn't hold me anymore. I just wished everyone would leave me alone, and we could act like this day never happened, because I wasn't sure what to believe anymore.

"Yes, what exactly is the danger?" my father agreed.

The three of them entered my bedroom—even Azura. I wasn't sure how I felt about that, but it wasn't a comfortable feeling.

My mother joined me on the bed, and my father stood beside us, while Azura stayed by the doorway. Her stance was relaxed but somehow light-footed, as if she could run if need be. "The fey are divided into two groups, if you will. Light faeries and dark faeries. The name comes from their source of magick. We are light faeries and get our magick from the sun. The dark faeries get their magick from the moon. They offered my husband access to their magick in exchange for our daughter."

"What did they want with Rylie?" my mother asked.

"Her ability. They want her on their side."

I barely paid attention to Mom's question or Azura's answer, because I couldn't believe what I had just heard. "My father was going to trade me?"

"I'm sorry, I have no excuses. I was foolish and in love. I didn't realize he was such a—" She stopped herself. Clearing her throat, she said, "He always felt inferior because of his ability."

"Which was?" I probed.

"Making fragrances. It's a wonderful ability to be able to decide what something is going to smell like, but he was constantly teased about it. He often talked about getting access to moon magick, which is what the dark faeries have. He thought that maybe he'd get a better ability from the moon. So when the dark faeries offered a trade, he jumped at the chance."

I let my head fall into my hands for a moment while I processed the information. When I looked back up, I asked, "Where is he now? Does he know I'm alive? Is that why I'm in danger?"

"No, baby, he doesn't know. He thinks you died. He disappeared that day and I haven't seen him since. Nobody knows where he is." For the first time since she walked into our house, I heard true emotion in Azura's voice. Despair.

I didn't know what to say.

"I know this is a lot to take in," Azura said softly.

"Ya think?" I glanced up at my real parents, the people who raised me and loved me. My father had his hand on my mother's shoulder. I felt a sudden pang of sadness for them. I couldn't imagine what they were feeling.

"I'm not leaving my parents." Or Adam. My heart raced at the thought of him. What would he do if he found out I wasn't human? Would he love me anymore? Oh my God! I couldn't lose him.

"Honey, you're not going anywhere. I don't care who this woman says she is. She's not taking you from us." My father moved to put an arm around my shoulders. I felt a little better, because my dad was a man of his word. I always felt safer when he was around.

"You might not have a choice, I'm afraid," the faery said softly.

“The hell we don’t,” my mother practically yelled. Her calm demeanor had left her, and now she was visibly shaking, her fingers digging into the comforter on my bed as if she’d rather it were Azura’s neck. “Even if what you’re saying is true, she’s been fine with us. There has been no danger. We can keep her safe from whatever it is you say could hurt her. Which, by the way, you have completely avoided giving us a straight answer. So tell us, Mrs.-I-can-tell-no-lies, what does my daughter have to be afraid of?”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t ask me directly. The deal Oleander’s father made—”

“Oleander?” I balked.

Azura blushed. “I’m sorry. It just slipped out. Your faery name is Oleander.”

“What? *Oleander?* Are you *kidding* me?” It took everything in me not to burst out laughing.

“We’ll talk more about that later. The dark faery that your father made the deal with is not a nice man. Varwik is a very evil faery of our kingdom. He controls the dark land. Everyone fears him. I cannot allow him to get his hands on you. The danger lies in your transition. Once your transformation is complete, other faeries will be able to spot you. Other faeries will be able to see your faery self even when you use glamour. Once Varwik knows you are alive, he will expect us to give you to them.”

“It’s unlikely this Varwik will ever know she’s alive,” my mother remarked dismissively. “We’re quite safe here in a small town.”

“The mark of the Aurorian faery is well known.” Azura turned her penetrating gaze to me and touched the side of her eye.

My own hand shot to my birthmark. *Oh. My. God.* It wasn’t just a birthmark. No wonder it acted funny, changing colors and refusing to be concealed. Of all the nonsense Azura had spouted, that I could believe. For all the “unique” talk from my parents, here was proof.

“Are you honestly going to sit here and tell us that our daughter is in danger of being seen by other faeries because of her

birthmark? As if faeries live around us on a daily basis?" My father looked at her like she had grown two heads, which was kind of funny since he'd already seen her wings.

"Yes. That is exactly what I am saying." Azura sighed. "I know it's hard for you to believe, but she is in grave danger." The woman addressed her next statement to me. "I want you to leave with me tonight. It's for your safety. I fear for your life if you are caught."

"I'm not leaving. I don't even know you. If I'm in danger, my father can protect me." I crossed my arms over my chest and planted my feet firmly on the ground. They would have to drag me out of there kicking and screaming.

"You heard her. Now get out of our house," my father said, voice low.

"Please, reconsider. I understand you need to talk about this amongst yourselves. I'll come back tomorrow, and I hope you are ready to leave. Oleander, I only want what is best for you." She turned and left my room. A minute later, I heard the front door open and shut.

I sank to the floor, tears coming swiftly. Mom sat next to me and gathered me in her arms. "It's okay," she whispered, rocking me gently.

"No…it's not," I wailed through my sobs.

"That lady is insane," Dad muttered. "You two can't possibly believe her."

I looked at my father through the tears in my eyes. "Why would she come here and make this stuff up? You saw her wings."

"I don't know, Rylie, but I'm going to go to the office for a couple hours."

My mother shot him an irritated look. "Why? Don't you think we need you here right now?"

He stopped in the doorway, one hand propped on the frame. "She touched that coffee mug downstairs. I want to run her fingerprints. Do a background check."

I nodded. Dad needed proof one way or another. I stood, my knees still a little wobbly, and crossed to my dresser. I grabbed my hairbrush and handed it to him. "Run a DNA test while you're there."

His face drained of color. "What? No, that's not necessary."

"It's okay, Dad. Get definite answers. I understand."

He hugged me, his face buried in my hair. "If I do and it comes out…that you're not…" He choked on the words. "It won't matter. You will always be my little girl."

"I know. But we all need to know the truth." I fought against the tears that were welling in my eyes.

Dad met Mom's broken stare and nodded firmly. "I'll be back soon."

A minute later, we heard the garage door open, the steady whir shaking the floor with its familiar vibration. I leaned my head on Mom's shoulder. "What happens when I wake up tomorrow?"

"I don't know." She draped her arm around my shoulder and gave it a light squeeze.

"You believe her, don't you?"

There was a long pause, and then she took a deep breath. "Yes."

I knew she was going to say that, but it still upset me. If she believed the story, there had to be something to it. "Why? Why do you believe her?"

"I'm not sure, honey. Something in me just says it's true."

"You've always believed in the supernatural," I whispered.

She was quiet again. "Yes. Never thought I'd be living it, though."

I looked up at her. "I don't want to be a faery, Mom. I don't want wings. I don't want someone after me. I don't want any of this. I just want to be a normal teenager."

"We won't let anyone hurt you. As far as the other stuff, we'll take it as it comes."

"What if what she says is true, and the only way to be safe is to go with her? I don't want to go with her." I sobbed once. "I want to

stay here, go to school, be with Adam and Sierra."

"I know." She ran her hand down my head, smoothing out my hair.

I wiped the tears off my face. "Can I call Adam? Have him come over?"

"Are you going to tell him?"

"No!" I was petrified at the thought. "I just want to see him in case…I wake up looking like a freak tomorrow."

Mom's face relaxed and she smiled. "You won't ever be a freak. Even with wings, I'm sure you'll be beautiful." She leaned down and kissed my forehead. "Of course you can have Adam come over."

"Thanks." I pushed myself up and grabbed my phone off the dresser. I paced the floor once, twice, trying to compose myself. Finally, I dialed. *Don't cry. Act normal.*

"Hey, you," he answered.

"Hey." My voice came out weak. I cleared my throat.

"You okay?" he asked, concern in his tone.

"Yeah. Can you come over for a few minutes?" *Please say yes.* I needed to see his face and feel like my world wasn't spinning out of control.

"Um…okay." He paused. "Are you sure everything is okay?"

I hesitated. "I just miss you."

"I'll be right over." Adam only lived a few minutes away, so I knew it wouldn't take him long to get to my house.

I put the phone down and glanced in the mirror. Other than my red eyes and blotchy face, I still looked normal. I went down the hall to the bathroom and splashed water on my face before I put on some cover-up and lip gloss. Thank goodness for makeup.

There was a knock at the front door. "I'll get it for you," Mom yelled.

"Hi, Mrs. McCallister." My boyfriend's voice drifted up to me, and I fought the urge to cry again.

"Come on in, Adam. Ry will be right down."

I heard the door shut as I descended the stairs.

"Is everything okay?" Adam quietly asked my mom.

"Yeah. Just a little emotional. Our little girl is turning sixteen tomorrow."

I turned the corner and smiled as soon as I saw Adam. He was my rock. I felt much better being near him. I couldn't help but run to him and throw my arms around his neck. I buried my face in his shoulder and inhaled his scent. I didn't want to let go. I wished I could hold onto the moment forever. My mom quietly slipped from the room.

"Hey." Adam pushed me back. "Rylie? What's going on?"

"Nothing. I just had to see you."

"Something is going on. I know you." He stared at me intently.

Adam wasn't stupid, but there was no way I could tell him about tonight's events. "No. Everything's fine. Can you please just hold me for a few minutes?"

He cupped my face. "Of course. Whatever it is, you know you can talk to me."

I stood on my tiptoes and planted my lips on his. My heart raced and my breathing sped up. I knotted my hands in his hair as I kissed him faster and harder. Deep passion rose inside of me. For all I knew, this would be the last time we'd be together…if Azura's story was true.

Adam pulled back, breathing hard, and held me at arm's length. "Whoa. Calm down. Your mom is here."

"I know." I led him to the couch and sat down, pulling him next to me. He put his arm around me, and I melted into him. His heartbeat beneath my ear was comforting. Closing my eyes, I imagined us going to prom together in a couple years. We'd graduate together after that and go to the same college. And then he'd ask me to marry him. We'd have a big wedding, a family, and grow old together. This was my dream.

What if it was only just that? A dream…and nothing more.

Adam rubbed my aching back. I had almost forgotten the pain that I had been dealing with for the past week. A pain which meant I was growing wings. Freaking wings! If I told Adam, would he still want to be with me? Would he still love me? I couldn't lose him. I loved him.

I sniffled and looked up into his eyes. "I love you," I told him.

He gave me the crooked grin that always turned me into mush. "I love you, too."

After Adam left, Mom sat with me until Dad got home. I could tell the news wasn't good the second he walked in the door. He sat down across from us, rubbing a temple with one hand. "I couldn't get a hit on her name or fingerprint. All that means is she's never been arrested."

"And the other thing?" I asked softly.

"DNA tests take longer. We won't know for quite some time, unfortunately."

"Oh." I looked down, hiding the tears in my eyes. I had a suspicion what was going to return in that test was going to wreck our world.

Dad got up and sat on the other side of me. "Rylie, if there is some evil man out there who wants to hurt you, I will find him and kill him if I have to."

I met his eyes and knew without a doubt that he meant it.

"I don't want to fall asleep." I leaned my head against my father's shoulder. "I never thought I would say this, but I wish tomorrow wasn't my birthday."

"No matter what happens when you wake up, you are my little girl. I've loved you since the minute I laid eyes on your tiny little face. Nothing will ever change that."

My mom made a noise of agreement, her hand rubbing my back.

"Thanks. That means a lot."

I took three soda cans to my room, hoping the caffeine would keep me awake. I fought sleep tooth and nail, but before dawn came, it eventually won over.

I woke up gasping for air. *No, no, no!*

I had fallen asleep at some point the night before. It was Saturday. My birthday. I was sixteen now. I squeezed my eyes shut. I did not want to open them. Maybe it was all a crazy nightmare. I felt normal. All the aches and pains were gone. Nothing hurt, nothing felt different. I let out a long breath. Just a nightmare.

I would get up like normal and look in the mirror and everything would be fine. Keeping my eyes closed, I rolled onto my side. *Okay. One. Two. Three.*

Slowly, I opened my eyes. My vision was hazy, like a film had been pulled down over my eyes. I rubbed them over and over, but the haze wouldn't go away. What was wrong with my eyes? Why couldn't I see clearly?

I started breathing fast as panic rose in my chest. Scanning the room, I realized there was something on my nightstand that wasn't normally there. I reached for it—a notebook. Skeptically, I opened it and found words on the first page. They were blurry and hard to read. I stared at them for a long time before I was finally able to focus:

"I had to leave you a note to tell you what to expect this morning since you don't want me with you. You will wake up unable to see clearly. This is normal. You are getting your faery sight. This will clear up about an hour after you wake."

It hadn't been a nightmare.

*"Once your sight clears, you will be able to see the faery world."*

Great.

"Your transformation will have completed overnight. You will look different until you use glamour. I suggest you don't open your door until you learn how."

I gulped. How was I supposed to know how to use glamour?

"If you cannot figure this out, just go to your window. I will come to you."

That meant she was watching the house, watching me. All this time I felt like someone was watching me, and it was my faery mother. Just the thought was so ridiculous I wanted to burst out laughing—or crying. I wasn't sure which.

I strained my eyes some more, trying to read what else was written. "Once you are glamoured, no human will be able to see your faery looks. But other faeries will. If you have already stood, you may have noticed your wings. If not, they will appear when you stand. They tuck in when you lie down. Don't be scared, my child. This is who you are. I will be there for you when you need me. But please be careful, for my warning is true."

I put the book down and closed my eyes again. Maybe if I stayed in bed, none of this would happen. No wings. No enemies. Just me. Unfortunately, that wasn't realistic. How long could I really stay in bed?

I blinked a few times, trying to make the haze go away faster, but it did nothing. I'd have to wait. I thought about Adam and our kiss the night before. I thought about how I felt in his arms. What was I supposed to tell him about this? As soon as he knew I was some kind of fairy tale creature, he might leave me.

On top of that, my parents were throwing me a birthday party today. All my friends were going to be here. How was I going to keep it together? I had looked forward to my sixteenth birthday for years, and now I just wanted to stay in bed. *Maybe I should cancel it.*

I ripped my pillow from under my head and squeezed it into my face, screaming at the top of my lungs. I wasn't just scared anymore. I was mad. Hot tears burned my eyes as I silently cried.

Eventually the tears subsided, and I peeked out from under the pillow. My vision had cleared. Everything in my room was crisp and bright. I stayed in bed, examining my surroundings like it was the first time I had seen it.

"Huh," I said into the room. I had no idea I'd have better than perfect eyesight.

Pushing the covers off, I noticed my palms were smoother than they were the day before. My hands started trembling. There was no denying it, my skin was definitely different. No blemishes or freckles.

Curiosity was getting the best of me. I had to stand up and find out what the rest of my body looked like. Shaking, I pushed myself out of bed. I took three steps to my dresser and very slowly looked up into the mirror.

I gasped and stood frozen in place as I stared at my reflection. I reached up and touched my pointed ears, running my fingertips along the tips. They felt like normal ears, just pointier. My eyes then rested on my birthmark, now glowing ever so slightly. My eyes looked wider and had a slight slant to them. I felt grateful that they were the same beautiful blue they had always been.

Suddenly, I felt a pop on my back and wings burst open behind me. I let out a small shriek, not from pain, but from surprise and shock. I stumbled backwards, fell onto the floor, and scooted as far away from the mirror as I could get.

"Rylie?" Mom's voice cried out on the other side of the door. "Are you okay?"

I scrambled quickly to my feet and stumbled across the room to lock my door. "You can't come in."

"Rylie! Open this door!" Mom pounded.

"No!" I hurried back to the notebook and read over the directions for glamour. I couldn't let my parents see me like this.

Azura had written something about telling myself who I was and visualizing myself human. "What's that supposed to mean?" I mumbled under my breath. She had said it would be simple.

"Rylie, let me in this instant! I'll break this door down if I have to," my father's voice boomed.

My shoulders drooped. I knew he would do it. I just really didn't want them to see me this way.

"I'm a freak," I screamed at the door.

"Please, let us in, honey. We love you no matter what." My mother's voice sounded strained.

"Fine." I slung the door open.

My mother covered her mouth, her eyes widening.

My dad just stared at me blankly, and then he surprised me by pulling me into a tight hug. "We'll figure this out."

"You look beautiful. I always knew you were special." My mom reached out to touch my wing, and I involuntarily pulled it back.

I couldn't stop myself. I started sobbing. "I don't want this."

Mom joined the embrace. "It will be okay, sweetie."

When I pulled away from their collective warmth, I said, "I need to be alone. I have to figure out how to use the glamour. I might need to let—*her* in to help."

My parents looked at each other, and then my father nodded. "We're going to need her to understand what exactly is going on."

"How can you reach Azura?" my mother asked.

"She told me to stand in the window, and she would come. It's so creepy that she's out there watching." I shuddered. "If you don't mind, can I have some privacy before I give her the signal?"

They nodded somberly, and my father said, "Of course."

I closed the door softly behind them. I could hear my mom sobbing, but I couldn't deal with that right now. This was my reality. I was a faery. It all seemed too surreal.

Reluctantly, I stood in front of the mirror again. I had to face these wings. I looked up and directly at them. They weren't small,

but they weren't huge. Extending about an arm's length from my body, they were actually quite gorgeous—a mixture of light pink, lavender, and shimmering white, almost translucent, each color fading into one another. I leaned closer and they fluttered. I sucked in a breath. I didn't even feel them flutter. It didn't hurt to move them. It actually felt…good. Like they had been cooped up for sixteen years and were finally free. I concentrated and willed them to move again, and they flapped. If it were on someone else, I would have thought it was the coolest thing ever.

I was curious as to what they felt like. I reached behind me and carefully touched my left wing. I was surprised at how fine it felt. They were almost sheer and bent slightly with my touch. I wondered how delicate they were; if they could get ripped, and if so, would it hurt?

I spent a few more minutes trying to get used to how I looked. I wasn't sure I'd ever feel comfortable looking like I did. How was I supposed to deal with such a huge change?

When I knew I couldn't put it off any longer, I went to the window and hesitantly pushed the curtain back. I stared into the misty, overcast morning that matched my mood. I waved a hand, and within moments, the front doorbell rang. I could hear the murmurs of voices and then a light knock on my door.

"Come in," I mumbled.

Azura came through the door in her true form. She stopped in her tracks and looked me up and down. "My goodness, you're even lovelier than I could have imagined."

If it were possible, I felt even more self-conscious having her stare at me so intensely. I fidgeted with my hands. "Can we just get this over with? I need to look normal. It's my birthday, and I have plans."

"Surely you are not going out after what I told you?"

Hot anger flushed my skin. "I'm not going to stop living my life because you think someone is after me. You already said they think

I'm dead. It's not like there are search parties scouring the earth for me."

She sighed. "I didn't think you would listen. You get your stubbornness from me."

"The only thing I got from you are these crazy wings," I snapped. "Please, just show me what to do."

Her lack of emotion was so weird to me. Azura sighed. "It's really quite simple. Just close your eyes and imagine yourself in your human form. Picture exactly how you want to appear, down to every line and freckle. You have to really believe it. Picture it in your mind."

I stared at her. "That's it? Why didn't you just tell me that in the note?" The way she had worded it made it seem much more complicated.

"I'm sorry. I was vague because I wanted you to need me," she said honestly. I guess they really didn't—or couldn't—lie. She continued, "I wanted to see you on the day of your transformation. In the fey world, it's a big celebration. We have a feast."

Well, the fey world wasn't my world.

I closed my eyes and clenched my fist, and following her instruction, I thought of myself as normal. I pictured my blonde hair, my blue eyes, and the way my nose was always kind of shiny if I didn't wear foundation makeup. When I had a firm image of myself, my eyes snapped open, and I turned towards the mirror.

"It didn't work! Great. I can't even do this right. What am I going to do?" I was close to having a panic attack.

"Oleander, calm down. It worked."

*I really wish she'd stop calling me that.*

She walked over so she was reflected in the mirror behind me. "To humans you look normal, but you will always see your reflection in your true form."

My mouth dropped open, and I snapped it closed. "You mean I'll never look human again? Please tell me that's not true."

“You only appear human to other humans. I realize it’s a shock at first, especially since you haven’t grown up around fey, but you will get used to it.”

“What about cameras?” I asked.

“In a picture, you will look human,” she said with a nod.

“Even to myself?”

“Yes.”

Relief spread through me. At least there was a way I could see what other people saw. I couldn’t imagine how I’d know if my makeup or hair was right if I couldn’t see myself the way others did.

“Your human looks have improved as well,” Azura said as if she could read my mind.

“But, if faeries can see each other’s true forms, then how can you tell my glamour worked?” I asked. I was so confused. No matter what she told me, it all just kept piling up.

“We don’t see the true form constantly,” she replied with a smile. “You will see what seems like a mask overlaying their true form. It will show through in brief flashes.”

My mother knocked tentatively on the door and walked in. “Everything okay?”

Completely forgetting for a moment that Azura couldn’t lie, I asked terrified, “What do you see?”

“What I’ve always seen,” my mother said with a smile. “You.”

“Normal me? Not freaky-looking me?”

She examined my face. “Normal you. You look beautiful. Your hair is vibrant and your skin looks flawless.”

“Told you,” Azura said with a hint of sarcasm. Another rare display of emotion.

“Your lips have more color to them, almost like you’re wearing the perfect amount of makeup.” My mom laughed. “I doubt you’ll ever have to put makeup on again. Can you make me into a faery, Azura?”

Great. Glad I got something good out of all this.

Azura looked over at my mother, dead serious as she replied, "No, I cannot make you into a faery. I'm sorry."

My mom rolled her eyes. "I was just joking."

I stifled a laugh.

"Does the glamour ever go away?" I asked quietly.

"No. Once you use it, you'll have to take it off," Azura answered.

"How do I take the glamour off?"

"You'll notice the glamour often feels like a cloak," Azura—my faery mother—said. That was going to take some getting used to.

"Well, okay, then. Thanks for helping. You can go now," I said curtly.

Azura's eyes widened, and she stared at me. "Excuse me?"

"You taught me how to use the glamour. That's all I needed."

"I don't think you understand. Not only are you in danger, you will need help figuring things out." There was a note of hysteria in her voice.

"I think I can handle it from here. It's my birthday, and I'm having a party that I need to get ready for. So please, just leave. Maybe we can talk…later."

Azura opened her mouth to speak, but my father interrupted, gripping her arm and steering her out my bedroom door. "This has been quite a shock to all of us. I certainly don't think you hovering over my daughter is going to help."

Mom and I followed as he led Azura down the stairs and into the front foyer.

"But the danger—"

"I'm a cop!" Dad barked. "I will take care of any danger."

Azura shook her head. "Humans never understand."

Dad released the faery and opened the front door, holding it open. "My daughter has asked you to leave. Please respect her wishes."

Azura eyed him, her face unreadable, and then she turned back to me. She reached out and touched my cheek. "You really are quite exquisite. If you would permit me, Oleander, I need to share something more with you and your family before I go. To help you understand the danger. I cannot leave here knowing I've not given you enough to fully protect yourself."

My father's hand fell from the door, but he didn't close it. "You can have ten minutes if you answer something for us first."

Even though I wanted to get ready for my party, a part of me wanted—needed—to hear what she had to say. I stood next to my mother, neither of us touching, but drawing comfort from one another.

"Very well." Azura nodded.

"What did you do with the baby?"

Azura's face softened. "I took very good care of her. She is buried close by."

"Maybe we should have her buried in our family plot?" Mom asked Dad.

Dad took my mother's hands. "Do you really want to disturb her grave?"

Mom's eyes glistened and she looked away. "No."

"I can take you there someday," Azura offered.

My parents nodded.

"Go on," my father told Azura.

Azura took a centering breath, and launched into her tale. "Long ago, both dark and light faeries lived in the same realm. I wouldn't say it was peaceful, but they made do. The dark faeries on the east liked to cause trouble. You might say they lived on the 'wrong side of the tracks.' Mostly, they kept to themselves, but sometimes they caused trouble on the west side—usually involving magick and practical jokes." She paused and took a deep breath. "Until Ealdun came along. He had an unquenchable thirst for power."

“What did this Ealdun do?” my father asked grimly. His eyes were calculating. I knew the part of him that was a detective was listening to every detail, cataloguing Azura’s information for future reference.

Azura glanced at me and continued with the story. “Ealdun’s gift was the ability to take power from a source. In the right hands, it’s an amazing gift. In the wrong hands, it’s terrifying. He started out small, taking the energy from trees and crystals. The stronger he became, the more power he wanted. He formed an army of sorts. They had it in mind to take over our side of the land. Ealdun destroyed the forest and took power from animals. He even took energy from other faeries, leaving those poor souls nothing but empty shells. Our land was all but destroyed.”

I was completely caught up in the story. “What happened?”

Azura gave me a sad smile. “An Aurorian faery—a faery like you, my daughter—stopped the madness. A boundary was put in place so the dark and light faeries lived in separate realms. Eventually, a neutral land was created, but that took several generations. There are still vast areas in our realm where plants can’t grow. One we call the Dead Forest. However, with a lot of time and magick, we were able to rebuild the majority of our kingdom.”

“Are they still at war?” my father asked quietly.

“No. A truce was signed when Ealdun passed from this life. But after so many generations, the hatred is still strong. We keep to ourselves.”

“I still don’t understand why they want me so badly.” I crossed my arms and leaned against the wall, trying to look tough but probably failing.

“Fear. Plain and simple. The last Aurorian faery had enough power to put up a boundary between realms. The Aurorian’s magick blocked the most powerful dark faery in existence. People fear what they can’t understand.”

Everything that had happened welled up inside me, and I couldn’t help the outburst that came. “Great. Because of a stupid

birthmark my life is ruined!”

I whirled on my heels and ran up the stairs, my footsteps heavy. I rushed into my bedroom, slammed my door, and threw myself down on my bed, crying. Again.

There was a tentative knock on my door. “Honey, can I come in?”

“Sure,” I grumbled. I didn’t care if she could hear me through my pillow or not, so I didn’t bother to lift my head.

The door clicked open, and I heard Mom’s soft steps crossing the room. When her weight sank onto the edge of my bed, I finally looked over at her. She held a dark purple box wrapped in a pink bow. I sat up to face her, wiping dried tear streaks from my face.

“I thought you might want this before your party,” she told me, holding the present out like a peace offering.

“Is she gone?” I asked numbly.

My mother nodded, her face drawn.

Even when I wasn’t in a festive mood, I still loved presents, so I reached for the gift and settled the light-weight box on my lap. I tore off the bow and opened the box. Inside was the most beautiful dress I’d ever seen. I drew it out and held in front of me. It was strapless and sea green, short with asymmetrical layers that gave it a wavelike appearance. It reminded me of the ocean.

“Oh my God, Mom! It’s incredible.” I ran into the bathroom to try it on, but stopped short as reality hit me in the face. Staring back at me was a faery. “Oh, hell no!” I spun around so I couldn’t see the mirror anymore, clutching the dress to my chest as I fought to breathe through more tears.

“Rylie! Language,” my mother called from outside the door.

I rolled my eyes. If there was a time to use bad language, this was it. What was I thinking? I couldn't have a party looking like this. *Supposedly* nobody else could see me like this, but I could, so I would know. How was I going to be able to act normal with wings? What if I somehow lost the glamour and everybody could see me?

"I can't have a party, Mom." Tears welled in my eyes, and I took a deep breath, trying to stop myself from shaking.

She appeared at the bathroom door, giving me a sympathetic smile. "Of course you can, sweetie. Nobody else can see what you see. When I look at you, I see Rylie, the same girl I've seen every morning for the last sixteen years."

"How am I supposed to enjoy myself when my world is crumbling around me?"

"Oh, honey." She pulled me into the circle of her arms and held me. "This is just a new adventure."

I didn't want an adventure. I wanted to be a normal sixteen-year-old. "Why are you so calm about this?" I asked her. "Your daughter is a faery. Not only that, I'm not even your biological daughter."

She was silent for a minute, her hands drifting lazily over my back, comforting. "I guess I feel that if I don't freak out, I can handle it better. I need to be here for you."

"Do you think about her…the other baby?"

"I haven't had a lot of time to process, but yes. It makes me sad she died, and I didn't even get to bury her."

At least she was honest.

"But, Rylie…" She cupped my face, looking me in the eye. "You *are* my little girl, even if you aren't made of my flesh and blood."

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"What do you have to be sorry for?"

"That Azura did this to you."

She stroked my hair. "Don't you dare be sorry. This isn't your fault. Besides, if she hadn't come into our lives I wouldn't have had

the pleasure of raising you. Now, c'mon and get ready for your party."

Taking a shower was the weirdest experience I had yet. If I left my wings expanded, they were too big to fit in the shower. I had to keep them directly behind my back. I wasn't sure if I could even get the wings wet, so I had no idea how to wash my hair. Sighing, I turned around, letting the water hit my head, back, and wings. Nobody was around to tell me otherwise, guess I had to learn on my own.

The water beat down on me, drops running down my wings. It was like someone was running a soft feather down my bare back. I closed my eyes, enjoying how it felt. The sensation was like a deep massage combined with Adam's soft fingertips trailing on my skin. *I could get used to this…*

I finally dragged myself out of the shower. As soon as I stepped out, my wings expanded showering the mirror and bathroom walls with water.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me!" I whined. Cleaning up would be fun. I grabbed a towel and started wiping down the walls.

When I was finished, I brushed out my hair and pulled the sides back into a clip. I didn't have to put on makeup, which was weird. Then I slipped on my dress, thankful the back was low enough I didn't have to worry about my wings.

Sierra showed up about an hour earlier than the rest of the invited guests.

"Ry?" She knocked loudly on my door.

Oh, God. How was I going to face her? She'd know something was wrong.

"Rylie?" She sounded impatient. "Let me in."

I unlocked the door and swung it open, bracing myself for the worst.

Her mouth dropped. “Oh, my! You look absolutely breathtaking! I love that dress!” She walked around me in a circle. “Love the makeup, too! You don’t need me here this early, you’ve transformed yourself. Bravo.”

*You have no idea.* “Thanks.”

I wanted to get the conversation off my own looks, so I gave Sierra a once-over. As usual, she looked fabulous in a short black miniskirt that showed off her long legs, and an off-the-shoulder red slouch top that emphasized her sleek frame.

“You’re one to talk,” I told her, grinning. “You look hot.”

“Why, thank you.” She giggled, and then pushed her way into the room to sit down on the edge of my bed.

“I can’t believe you didn’t call me last night!” I griped. “Tell me all about your date. I’ve been dying to know how it went.” Not that I had even thought about her date with the crazy twist of events the night before, but just talking about it would hopefully help me feel normal.

Sierra turned beet-red. “It was good. We had fun.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just good?”

“He’s really a gentleman. He opened the doors for me, paid for everything, and kissed me at the end of the night. I really like him.”

“Ah, a kiss.” I giggled. “Was there tongue?”

“Yeah.” She laughed. “It was great. He’s an incredible kisser, much better than Trent, who practically slobbered on me like a dog.”

“Gross!” We both laughed, and then I asked, “When are you going to see him again?”

“He called me earlier and asked me to dinner next weekend.” Sierra stood up and walked over to my dresser.

“Did you invite him tonight?” I asked curiously.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure he’ll show. He’s shy.” She leaned over my dresser and stared at herself in the mirror.

I wondered if Sierra believed in paranormal things. I think we might have talked about ghosts and vampires before, but not other

things. How would she feel knowing her best friend had wings? Could I tell her? I never kept secrets from her.

She looked at me in the mirror. "What's wrong?"

"Do you ever think there might be something more out there?"

"Something more?" She turned around to face me, her brow furrowed.

"Yeah. Like elves or faeries."

"I've never seen one. Doesn't mean they don't exist though." She turned back to the mirror, obviously more interested in her appearance than what I was struggling with.

I reminded myself that she didn't know I was struggling with it. "What if…what if you found out something *else* was out there?"

Before she could answer, my mother's voice came from the other side of the door. "Can I borrow Sierra for a minute, sweetie? I need help with the cake."

I sighed and opened the door. "Sure."

"Your guests will be here soon."

"I know." What I didn't know was how I was going to be able to face them.

Sierra blew me a kiss and hurried out of the room to help my mother.

The doorbell started ringing at six o'clock. I paced around my room trying not to look in the mirror. How could I go down there knowing I had pointed ears? And wings?

"Rylie!" Mom called my name impatiently.

I should have been downstairs greeting the first guests as they arrived, but I was a mass of nerves. I opened my bedroom door and called, "Coming."

A few deep breaths to prepare me, and then I slowly walked down the stairs. *I look like a human*, I repeated over and over in my

head, trying to supplement the image I held firmly in my mind. *I can do this.*

Adam was at the bottom of the stairs. He looked even more handsome than usual. His hair was still damp from the shower, and he had on a white button-down oxford and khaki pants. I watched as his eyes lit up and his smile grew. He put his hand out and I took it. "You look beautiful." He pressed a brief kiss to my fingertips, and then teased, "Took you long enough. Making a grand entrance?"

I felt heat rise to my cheeks. "Maybe I was. And, thanks. You don't look so bad yourself."

He leaned in and softly kissed me on the lips. His clean, masculine scent surrounded me. "Happy birthday."

I pulled back and grinned. "Where's my surprise?"

"Later." His grin was cocky.

I elbowed him. "I hate when you make me wait."

Emma and Jack waited behind Adam. I peered around him and smiled at them. "Hey, guys. I'm glad you're here."

"Happy birthday, Rylie," Emma said, taking a few steps towards me. "I love your dress."

"Thanks." I hugged her. She looked gorgeous, like always. Her long, curly hair was a wild mess and her makeup gave her eyes a catlike appearance, making her look even more exotic than usual.

The doorbell rang again and my mother continued to cheerfully answer it, letting in more and more of my friends from school. As each one entered, my paranoia increased. I gripped Adam's hand, trying to keep from shaking. If he noticed, he didn't mention it.

The party would be down in the game room, which was in the basement. Ages ago, it had been my doll room, where I kept dollhouses and boxes of lovingly tended Barbies. I used to disappear there for hours at a time. As I grew up, it went through several incarnations, and finally landed somewhere between college dorm and video game room. At that moment, I'd have given anything to be that little girl with Barbies again, instead of a winged faery.

Adam parted the metallic curtain of beads that covered the doorway to the basement and said, "Birthday girl first."

I giggled and took his hand. As we walked down the stairs, we passed by an old, circular mirror that had hung on our wall as long as I could remember. I caught a glimpse of sparkly, colorful wings. My heart started racing, and I couldn't breathe.

Dropping Adam's hand, I choked out, "I'll be right back."

I rushed to the basement bathroom, where I slammed the door and locked it behind me. Avoiding the mirror, I sat on the toilet, tucking my beautiful dress around my legs, and tried to calm down.

*I can't do this! Why is this happening to me? It's not fair!* Over and over, I screamed these things inside my head.

I don't know how much time passed as I stared around the tiny room. It was a half-bath with horrible blue floral wallpaper and white tiled floor, but it was safe and familiar. Even the toilet paper holder—shaped like a swan head and completely hideous—made me feel better.

There was a tap at the door.

"One minute," I yelled as I stood up. *Pull yourself together.*

Gripping the sides of the sink, I stared at my reflection. I couldn't imagine ever getting used to seeing myself this way. Everyone was waiting, so I'd just have to deal with it later. I pushed my shoulders back and stood a little straighter. I had to pretend for the evening that I was a normal human girl, and enjoy my birthday. I turned and pushed the door open. To my surprise, Ian was standing outside.

"Oh, hey, sorry. I was having a slight panic attack over… So I ran to the bathroom to compose myself," I started blabbering.

"No problem. Happy birthday, by the way." He paused, and then a shy smile touched his lips. "I hope you don't mind I showed up—Sierra invited me." He shoved his hands in his pockets and shifted back and forth.

"Of course I don't mind. I'm happy you were able to make it. I better get back to the party. They are probably wondering where I

ran off to. I'll see you in there."

I willed myself to remain calm. My mother had spent a lot of time on my party, and I didn't want to ruin it for her or anyone else. I smiled when I saw the huge banner that read: *Happy Sweet Sixteen, Rylie!*

The basement was filled with black and pink. Balloons, glitter hearts, and streamers hung from the ceiling. Kids were throwing confetti around so that it coated the concrete floor. It felt a little immature to me, but I would never tell my mother that.

The first person I saw was Sierra. I grabbed her arm and whispered in her ear, "I just saw Ian. He actually showed up. He must really be into you."

Her face lit up. "Really? I can't believe it. I didn't know if he would bother." She smoothed down the front of her skirt and looked towards the door. It was so cute to see Sierra into someone again. I was happy for her.

"There's the birthday girl." Adam encircled my waist with his arm. "Where did you go?"

"To the bathroom. You know crowds make me nervous." I turned and kissed him softly on the lips. "I'm so glad you're here."

He looked at me like I was crazy. Then he said jokingly, "Like you'd let me be anywhere else."

I wished the two of us could just disappear. Adam was the one who kept me together. This whole stupid faery thing…what if it shattered us? What if it was too much for him to handle? We could run away together, but that would put him in danger if there were any truth to this madness.

"You look so serious. What are you thinking about?"

"How lucky I am to have you. I don't ever want to lose you." I laid my hand on his arm and looked up, meeting his eyes.

He snickered. "Are you getting all mushy on me?"

"It appears so." I blinked my eyes a few times, forcing the tears back. I couldn't stop myself from asking, "If I wanted you to go

away with me, would you?"

His smile faded. "Is there something going on I should know about?"

*Yeah. I'm a freaking faery. Ugh!* I couldn't tell him that and yet I couldn't lie. "Just thinking." I laughed, feigning indifference as I avoided his eyes. "Sometimes I think it would be fun to pack it up and go somewhere new."

"I don't think your parents would approve, and all your friends would miss you," Adam pointed out.

"I know. You're right. I just like to daydream sometimes."

"Nothing wrong with that. We'll be out of high school before you know it, and we can go wherever you want." He played with a strand of my hair, and I shuddered as his hand moved over my shoulder and brushed my wings. He was oblivious to their existence.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. Jack and Emma were playing air hockey, Kevin and Griffin were playing pool, and a bunch of people were surrounding the snack table. The scene just looked so *normal*, like any other teen party. None of these people had any idea a magickal creature was in their midst.

Me.

"I should mingle," I told Adam, hoping he'd forget my crazy suggestion to run away. I had a feeling I was raising red flags with him, and should stop being an idiot.

"Sure, I'll go talk to the guys. Come get me when you need a break from being a social butterfly." He winked and strolled off in the direction of his teammates.

Before I had a chance to move forward, Stacey from choir cornered me. Her dark brown eyes sized me up. "There you are. The guest of honor is not supposed to keep herself holed away from everyone. You look amazing! I love the dress."

"Thanks. My mom got it for my birthday. You know I'm not good with being social."

Stacey laced her arm through mine. "I'll help you. Let's go say hello to the rest of the girls from choir, and then we'll make the

rounds to the rest of the guests." As we started walking, she commented, "The decorations are fabulous and the music amazing. I'm impressed."

I laughed. "All my mother's doing. She loves this stuff. I think she's been planning my sixteenth birthday for a very long time."

Stacey laughed, flipping her long wavy brown hair over her shoulder, and started jabbering about choir.

I went from place to place, talking to my friends, thanking them for coming, and getting lost in conversations that were thankfully inane and gossipy. For a little while, it was almost like I was normal again.

"Pizza will be here in a few minutes," Dad called from upstairs.

"Thanks," I yelled back up. Slipping away from Stacey, I crossed the room to Adam. "Wanna help bring the pizza down?"

"Of course, beautiful." He glanced around the room. "Party seems to be a hit."

"Yeah, not bad. Much better than I was expecting." We made our way up the stairs just as the doorbell rang for the pizza delivery. The poor kid looked like he was about to topple over—he had at least ten pizzas balanced precariously in his arms. When my dad relieved him of his burden, I thought I saw tears in his eyes.

Adam and I split the pizzas, leaving one upstairs for my parents. We took off back downstairs while my dad was paying. The bottom box was so hot, I practically threw them on the table.

When you bring pizzas to teens, it's like vultures are attacking. The boxes were decimated in a matter of minutes. I was hungrier than I thought I would be, my stomach growling as I ate.

After pizza, my mother came in carrying a white, three-tiered cake with sixteen candles. Thankfully, she had a local bakery make the cake early. Usually, she attempted and failed to make my cake on her own, and then she would have to rush to get one made at the last minute. As soon as she appeared in the doorway, everyone started singing "Happy Birthday". With everyone staring at me, I

was self-conscious. All I could think about were my wings and my ears. Surely they could see them.

*They can't see your faery body. Remember you look normal to them*, I reminded myself. Someone snapped a picture of me. I couldn't wait to see it—real me, me as a human, the way I was supposed to be. I never cared to have my picture taken before, but now I would be taking every opportunity.

When it came time to make a wish, I took a deep breath and thought, *Please, don't let me lose Adam.* Then I blew out every candle on that cake in one breath. Maybe, just maybe, my wish would come true.

I had told everyone not to bring presents, and they had listened, which was a huge relief. I didn't have to be the center of attention while opening them. That would have put me over the edge. Someone cranked up the music, and everyone started dancing. This was what being a teenager was supposed to be about. Not wings and dark faeries.

A slow song eventually came on, and I searched for Adam in the crowd. It was dim—someone had lowered the lights—but our eyes met through the gently shifting mass of bodies. We crossed the room and met in the middle. He took me in his arms, placing his hand on the small of my back—just below my wings. I put my arms around his neck and leaned my head against his chest, listening to the sound of his heart beating just underneath the bass thump of the music.

He made me feel safe, secure, normal. I held on even after the song ended. Finally, I released the strong grasp I had on him. He leaned down and softly brushed my lips with his. The kiss grew in passion until he pulled away, breathless. Licking his lips, he said with a smile, "You're intense tonight."

"Sorry." I blushed.

"It's okay. Just different. I like it."

*Different.* The word echoed in my head, but I kept it together.

“I think it’s time for your present.” Adam gave me his crooked grin. “It’s in the truck. Let’s sneak out.”

I bit my lip and glanced around. No one was paying attention to us. I grabbed his hand and we ran up the stairs. Even though I tell people I hate surprises, I secretly loved them. Adam had always been the best at picking presents, even when he was really young. I couldn’t wait to see what he got me this year.

It was a cool evening, and the air smelled of honeysuckle and pine. My high heels tapped along the front walk as we walked to where his truck was parked on the street, loud in the silent night.

“Close your eyes,” Adam told me when we reached the truck. I heard the door creak open. “No peeking.”

The suspense was killing me. I groaned and shut my eyes tight. He knew me so well.

Adam’s hand clasped mine, and he pulled me towards him. “Okay, you can open them now.”

I looked down. He held a small, square box in his hand. It was perfectly wrapped in white paper with a red bow. “Did you wrap it yourself?” I asked.

“I might have had a little help with that part,” he said sheepishly. “But I picked it out on my own.”

“Is it a watch?” I asked as I shook it.

He laughed. “Just open it.”

“Fine.” I pulled the ribbon slowly and carefully unwrapped the paper. The box was silver and shiny. “Earrings?”

“Open it.” Adam nudged me.

I opened the box and covered my mouth. A delicate, silver charm bracelet lay inside. I had wanted one forever. Carefully taking it out, I saw there were two charms dangling from it. One was a heart with a small diamond in the middle and the other a music note. “It’s perfect.” I held my hand out so he could clasp it on my wrist.

“Well, I figured you love music, and I love you, so I was hoping you’d like the charms I picked out.”

“Like it—I love it.” I threw my arms around his neck and the bracelet clinked as it slid down my wrist.

Adam ran his thumb down the side of my cheek. “I love you, Rylie McCallister.” He lifted my chin with his finger and, with our noses almost touching, he gently pressed his lips against mine. The noise of the party faded, and there was nothing but us for those few minutes.

I pulled away, dragging a little bit of his lip with me, and smiled as I caught him still with his eyes closed. “I guess we should get inside. They’re probably wondering where we snuck off to,” I said reluctantly.

“Yeah.” He sighed and slung an arm around my shoulder to walk back to the party.

The party lasted a couple more hours. I challenged Sierra to a game of air hockey, Adam and I danced more, and I let my worries slip away for a while. But eventually, the fun came to an end.

Adam and Sierra were the last of my friends to leave. The three of us stood on the front lawn, and Sierra gave me a giant hug. “No car, huh?”

“Not yet.” I forced a chuckle. Getting a car was the least of my worries right now.

Her green eyes sparkled. “Guess I’ll be picking you up Monday morning for school.”

“Yes! Even if I had gotten a car, I wouldn’t want to miss riding with you.” I spotted Ian standing by her car. “Ian’s waiting.”

She looked in his direction. “I know. I still can’t believe it. He’s so incredible.” She sighed. “Happy birthday, Ry. I love ya.” She squeezed me again.

“Love you, too.”

I watched as she practically skipped to the car. She looked so carefree and happy. I hoped Ian would treat her better than Trent

had. I didn't want to see her get hurt again.

Adam pulled me close to him and whispered into my ear, "Happy birthday."

"Not for much longer. It's almost midnight." I stared up at the full moon. It was mysterious, secretive. I wondered what else was out there that was kept from humans.

"Are you sure you're okay? You're acting off lately, as if something's bothering you." Adam's brow was knitted together, his eyes darting over my face as if searching for answers.

"I'm fine, just a lot on my mind lately. My parents are already bugging me about my future and college. I guess it's just starting to get to me. The unknown…you know what I mean?"

"Not really. That seems like light years away to me." He winked. "Enjoy the moment. I'll deal with that other stuff when it gets here. You need to relax, Ry, you get stressed out too easy."

"You're right. Let's enjoy a few more moments before my parents make you leave." I tilted my head, closed my eyes, and felt his lips on mine. Why couldn't everything be this perfect?

I turned to go inside after Adam drove away and came face-to-face with Azura.

Closing my eyes and sighing, I snapped, "I don't want to deal with this right now. We can talk tomorrow."

She started to speak, but I hurried inside and slammed the door before she could get a word out.

"Everything okay?" Dad asked. He was on the couch in the living room, a gun and ammo magazine open on his knee. "You look upset."

"Yeah. Just don't want to deal with the lady outside."

His jaw clenched. "She's still here?"

"Yup, she doesn't seem to take no for an answer."

"Maybe I should go speak to her again?" There was a note of

amusement in his voice. I bet he'd like to yell at her again.

"I told her I didn't want to talk tonight." I kissed Dad's cheek. "Thanks for the party. I'm going to go up to my room and think about things."

His face grew sympathetic. "You sure?"

"Yeah." I climbed the stairs to my room. After closing the door, I stood there trying to decide whether or not I wanted to look in the mirror. I couldn't avoid it forever. I reached the mirror and studied my reflection. If I covered my ears and didn't pay attention to the wings, I still looked like me. I didn't like the ears at all, but the wings were kind of neat.

I reached behind me and touched them again. A soft giggle escaped my lips. It tickled just a bit. It felt good to touch them, almost like an ache that needed to be rubbed. I concentrated on moving them and let them flutter a few times. I was amazed at how quiet they were. For the first time, I wondered what they were for… could I actually fly? Or were they just for show?

I made them flap as hard as I could and jumped, but my feet fell immediately back to the floor. "Hmmm. What good are wings if you can't fly? Maybe I need pixie dust," I said to myself, once again thinking of Tinkerbell.

I grabbed the brush off my dresser and ran it through my long blonde hair until all the knots were out. Yawning, I stepped into a nightgown, my wings popping out the top. At least they were flexible enough to wear clothes. As I crawled in bed, I noticed they did tuck in as I lay down.

*At least they don't get in the way*, I thought sleepily, and closed my eyes.

A loud knock woke me up the next day. I groaned and pulled the blankets over my head. The door creaked open, and my mother said softly, "Rylie?"

"What?" I peeked my head out from under the covers.

"It's almost lunch time. Why don't you get ready, and we can go out for lunch and do some shopping?"

My first thought was NO WAY! I didn't want to be out in public knowing what I really looked like. But then I thought how nice a normal day with my mom would be. I threw the blanket to the side. "Okay," I told her with a timid smile. "That sounds great."

"Come on down when you're ready," she told me with a smile, and then quietly slipped back out the door.

I took a few minutes more to lie in bed before I stood up and let my wings out. They fluttered a couple times, enjoying the space. I grinned as I remembered the lovely feeling of the shower beating down on them. I was looking forward to it again.

After my shower, I stood in front of the mirror. Without having to put on makeup, it took far less time for me to get ready. My hair seemed to fall into place on its own after I brushed it.

The first shirt I tried on made my wings ache, so I had to rummage through my closet to find a shirt with a low enough back for my wings to be free. It was a good thing we were going shopping, because those kinds of shirts in my wardrobe were few and far between.

I descended the stairs and found Mom in the kitchen, sitting at the table. Her face was partially covered by a vase filled with wild flowers. She looked up from the book she was reading.

"I'm ready," I announced.

"Well, that was quick." She placed a page holder in her book and put it on the counter. "Let's go."

"Where's Dad?" I looked into the den.

"He went into work for a couple of hours." My mother grabbed her sweater from the coat rack.

"It's Sunday."

She shrugged. "He said it was important. You know how he is."

We walked out to the car, a red sports coupe that my mom loved, and climbed in. Mom drove downtown to a café we visited often. It had the appearance of a cute French bistro—the walls were dark yellow, hung with classic French artwork, and the booths and tables were mahogany. The hostess seated us at a small table near the windows, where I ordered a house salad and club sandwich. It was odd—I could see my reflection in the glass beside me. I had to keep reminding myself that nobody else could see the real me.

"How are you holding up?" Mom asked, pushing her lettuce around her plate. She seemed subdued.

I blew out a long breath. "Still in shock, I think. Better than yesterday, though. I keep hoping I'm going to wake up and find that it was all just a bad dream."

"What do you think should happen now? Do you want to get to know Azura better?" My mother didn't look at me as she took a bite of her salad.

I glanced out the window; there was what was really bothering her. "I suppose I should talk to her at some point. Maybe tonight. I don't know what else there is that I need to know. But…" I paused. "I don't really want to talk to her either. I won't have to go live with her? Right?"

Mom's eyes widened. "No. You'll never have to do anything you don't want to. We're not letting you go that easy. We still have you for two more years before you're off on your own. If she thinks she can just waltz in and take you from us, she has another think coming."

"What if she calls the cops or something?" I suddenly lost my appetite. Just talking about it made me nauseated.

"And says what? That she's a faery? That we stole you? We have proof we had a baby. We would counter with that and say she switched babies. It would be a nasty battle. I don't think she'd want that. But I do think she should be part of your life. Maybe if you were…human, it would be different. You're not, though. And we need her to help you deal with this." Mom was always the voice of reason.

"I guess." I picked at my lunch silently, unsure of what else to say.

"What do you want to shop for?" Mom asked as we walked through the large glass doors into the mall. It was the weekend, so the mall was annoyingly crowded.

"Shirts," I said quickly, "and maybe a couple of spring dresses."

We headed towards my favorite clothing store. I loved our mall, even if it was pretty small compared to the malls in big cities, like DC. It had been renovated a few years ago, so the old, dim building had changed into an airy place with skylights and fresh paint.

We stopped at a café so Mom could grab a coffee, and then made our way to the end of the mall, to a trendy clothing store that was a favorite amongst teens. I found a few low-back shirts, but no luck with the dresses, so we walked down the hall to a large department store.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed something odd coming the other way. A fuzzy light of sorts. A person—no, a faery. I blinked a few times as she got closer. Pointy ears and wings, definitely a

faery. Her long blonde hair was almost white in color. Our eyes met as we passed each other, and she gave a small, almost imperceptible nod.

I gasped and grabbed my mother's arm. "Mom? Did you see her?"

"See who?" She turned to look.

I had forgotten that she couldn't see faeries. I couldn't believe there was another faery at the mall. I guess faeries really were everywhere. I had just never known because I didn't have my faery sight then, nor did I look like a faery. Now…I did.

"There was another faery," I told Mom.

"Oh?" She seemed a bit surprised. "Well, isn't that interesting. You'll have to keep your eyes out for more. I guess I thought Azura was exaggerating about faeries being everywhere."

"Me too," I muttered under my breath and glanced back, but the woman was out of sight.

I couldn't stop thinking about the other faery, even after we reached the department store and went inside.

"Dresses are in the back," Mom told me, and led the way.

I wasn't really into it as we browsed. Seeing that other faery had really kind of shaken me. Azura had said that other faeries would recognize me for what I was—and they would know what my birthmark meant. I touched the mark, wondering how such a small thing could bring so much danger.

"What about this one?" My mom's voice pulled me from my reverie, and she held out a floral-patterned maxi dress with spaghetti straps.

"That's pretty. Let me see the back," I responded, aware once more of my wings.

My mom raised an eyebrow and flipped it around. It looked like it might be just low enough.

"That will work—I think."

"Work for what? Are you going somewhere special?"

I lowered my voice. “It’s uncomfortable if my wings don’t have room.”

“Oh, goodness. I never would have thought of that.” She giggled, a sweet, light sound that made her look ten years younger. “I have so much to learn about all of this.”

“You’re not the only one.” Her mirth made me feel better.

We found a few more things before heading home, where we collected all my bags and Mom helped me carry them upstairs to my room. We deposited the bags on the floor by my closet—I’d take care of them tomorrow.

“Thanks, Mom, for a normal day. I needed it,” I told her softly.

She hugged me tightly. “You’re welcome. I’m glad we found some things you like.”

“Me too.”

She closed my door behind her, and I was alone. I sat at my desk beneath the window and opened my laptop to check Facebook. Suddenly, I felt like I was being watched. I rubbed the back of my neck and scanned the tree line outside my window, looking for Azura—assuming that’s who it was. But I didn’t see her—or anyone.

Facebook only held my attention for so long. I pulled on a sleeveless nightgown and began to climb in bed.

There was a note on my bedside stand. I unfolded the paper and read the words. “I am unable to see you tonight. I will come to you tomorrow. There are many things to discuss.”

Fine by me. I had no desire to deal with her. I tossed the note in the garbage next to my desk and crawled beneath the covers. My last thought before I fell asleep was, *If that hadn’t been Azura I felt watching…who was watching me?*

My alarm went off in the morning, waking me from a wonderful dream—a flying dream, my favorite kind. I hated waking from it. They were even more real now that I had wings and knew what they felt like.

After my shower, I dressed in one of my new dresses, happy to find it fit perfectly. I threw my binder in my backpack and hurried down the stairs.

Dad and Mom were both standing in the kitchen, which took me by surprise. "Is everything okay?" I asked. It was rare that Dad was home in the mornings.

"Everything is fine," Dad reassured me. "I figured I'd go in a little later today because I was there yesterday."

"Oh, okay." My shoulders relaxed, even though I wasn't quite sure I believed him. I poured a bowl of cereal and sat at the table to eat it.

"I'm going to go," Dad said, kissing Mom and walking over to me. "You look beautiful. Make sure to keep your phone on you at all times in case something happens." He kissed my forehead and vanished out the door.

Once I shoveled the last spoonful of cereal into my mouth, I looked at my mom where she was still perusing the newspaper at the counter. "You're gonna be late."

"I'm going." She smiled. "You okay? It's your first day at school since…" Her voice trailed off.

*Since I became a faery*. I wanted to lie and tried to say I was fine, but the words wouldn't come out. I really couldn't lie. Sighing, I finally answered, "I'm a wreck. But I'll be fine, Mom. I just have to keep telling myself that nobody else can see me like I do."

Standing up, I put my bowl in the sink and gave her a hug. There was tension in her, taut like a string. I wasn't sure which one of us was more worried.

"Have a good day." She squeezed me tighter. "If you're uncomfortable, call me."

"I will. Don't worry."

She gave me a last searching glance, her fingers resting on my shoulders. "Are you sure you don't want me to drive you to school? I have time."

"No, I want to pretend I'm normal. I always ride with Sierra. It would look odd if I didn't. And you don't have time, you're already running late." I looked pointedly at the clock.

"If you're sure…"

"I'll be fine, Mom. Just get to work."

She was out the door a minute later. Sierra would be there to pick me up in a few minutes, so I needed to hurry. I washed my bowl and picked up my bag, then looked around the house to make sure I wasn't forgetting anything. I realized I left my phone in my room and ran up the stairs to get it.

Once I was back downstairs, I decided to wait for her on the porch. It was a beautiful day, the sun already high and strong, casting light through the branches of the trees. I locked the door behind me and sat down on the stairs to enjoy the breeze.

Almost immediately, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I got the feeling that someone was watching me—yet again. I stood up and looked around, but still didn't see anything. When the feeling didn't go away, I wished Sierra would hurry up, because the sensation was starting to freak me out. I should have just gone with my mother.

*Oh, well. I'll wait inside.*

I turned and walked up the stairs, digging into my bag for my keys.

Suddenly, I was grabbed from behind, one strong arm wrapping around my chest and a palm slapping to my mouth. I tried to scream and spin around, but their grip was too strong and my yell was lost. This couldn't be happening. Where the hell was Azura when I needed her?

"Stop struggling," a harsh male voice ordered. He struggled to hang on as I bucked against him, but his hand slipped from my mouth.

"Let go of me!" I yelled and slammed my head back at my attacker. It felt as if I hit foam instead of a body. I wished I could see what the attacker looked like.

“Try that again, and I’ll break off your pretty little wings,” a raspy voice threatened. “Move it!”

If he could see my wings, he wasn’t human.

I went dead weight, letting my body droop towards the ground. If I could stall, maybe Sierra would show up in enough time to call the cops. But instead of letting go, my attacker only held tighter and began to drag me towards the woods near my house where another figure was waiting.

The gravel scraped across my legs and lower back, sending pain soaring through my body. I wanted to cry, but I was too scared. I tried to clear my mind and think. My father had spent countless hours teaching me how to escape a stranger abduction. The closer and closer I got to the woods, the harder I struggled, and the more I forgot everything he’d ever taught me.

Finally, he stopped and dropped me to the ground with a jarring thud. I rolled over and leapt to my feet, turning to face my abductors, but there wasn’t anybody there.

“What the—?” What was going on? I spun around a few more times, but couldn’t see anyone. I couldn’t fight something I couldn’t see, so getting the hell out of there sounded like a good plan. I took off in a full out sprint towards my house.

I didn’t get very far before I was grabbed again. I let out a scream before something covered my mouth.

“Shut up!” the voice said again. Someone—or something—had me by my hands and someone else grabbed my feet. For an instant, I was weightless, and then we were moving. They hurried back towards the woods. For the first time in my life, I wished we lived on a busy street or had closer neighbors.

As soon as we crossed into the woods, it was like everything changed. The trees were greener than I ever thought possible and they towered over us, much taller than they’d ever seemed from my bedroom window. The forest was lush and thriving, filled with bird song and the chirp of insects. It would have been beautiful if I hadn’t been scared for my life.

I was tossed on the ground again and two people materialized in front of me. No—not people—faeries. Their hair and eyes were dark, and their wings were thinner and pointier than mine. They were closely similar in looks, and they had a dark aura around them, unlike Azura with her aura of light.

Dark faeries. My breath hitched. How could they have found me so quickly? I'd only been a faery for a day and half.

"This is an Aurorian faery?" one of them snarled.

"Pathetic," the other agreed.

"Let's get her back to the palace."

They stepped towards me, and I let out a scream. I scooted backwards as I yelled, "Don't touch me!"

"Feisty," the shorter faery with beady eyes said.

"Pretty, too," the other one commented with an evil grin.

"I'm not sure who you are or who you think I am, but I am not going anywhere with you." My voice shook. I realized how ridiculous I sounded since they were clearly in control.

"I think you misunderstood." The first man cackled. "You don't have a choice."

They leaned over me, grabbed my arms, and lifted me up as if I weighed nothing. They carried me deeper into the woods.

As scared as I was, I couldn't help but be struck by the beauty of the forest. It was amazing how different things looked with my faery sight.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked through gritted teeth, my body bouncing between them.

"To your owner, where you rightfully belong." The taller faery sneered at me.

"That's absurd! I don't belong to anyone!" I thrashed again, causing them to pause and readjust my weight. When we were moving again, I said, "My father is going to kill you. I hope you know that."

Apparently, they thought that was hilarious. Their laughter echoed through the woods.

The reality of the situation crashed down on me. I had been kidnapped and was on my way to an evil faery. I might never see my family and friends again. Tears spilled down my face. "Please," I begged. "Just let me go."

"No. We're under strict orders to bring you in. If we don't, we're as good as dead." I don't know which man answered me; I was getting dizzy from being bounced around.

"They'll never know. I won't tell anyone, I promise."

"They already know and are expecting our arrival. It's not much further. Just do as you're told, and it won't be too bad."

"Put her down!" Azura's voice echoed through the forest.

My heart stuttered in my chest. Could she really save me?

The faeries stopped cold, and I struggled to turn my head and see my faery mother.

"Move out of the way," the shorter one ordered.

Azura laughed. "Not a chance."

A strong wind kicked up around us. Leaves were blown around, tangling into my hair as it flew around my head. I could hear the creak and groan of the trees bowing to Azura's power.

"Air manipulator—really?" Both men laughed. "Go ahead. Cause a storm. You'll only hurt the girl." They pushed me forward towards the mini twister, and I wondered if it had enough power to suck me in and kill me.

"Please help me!" I begged.

Azura narrowed her eyes and the twister grew larger. One of my captors sighed and held out his hand, allowing a surge of some sort to emerge from it and strike Azura. Her twister died out, debris sinking to the ground.

"Did you really think Varwik wouldn't see you coming? He didn't send someone with boring abilities. You'll have to whisk us away in your twister to stop us, and that means she goes too."

“They’re right. My gift could only hurt you,” my faery mother said through clenched teeth. “I’m going to go for help. I will do everything I can to make sure you are returned safely. I love you, my daughter.”

Then my only hope of escaping vanished.

The faeries came to an abrupt stop.

"Honey, we're home," one sneered, pushing me forward so that I fell to my knees.

My palms hit the ground hard, sticks and leaves digging into my skin, and pain shot up my legs. I breathed through the pain, my teeth gritted. I snapped my head to the right and left, but all I saw was forest, a pile of stones, and a bushy-tailed red fox disappearing into the underbrush. There wasn't another person or habitable structure in sight. What were they talking about?

The taller one stepped forward and started moving around the pile of rocks. The stones were huge and must have weighed a ton, but he tossed them around like they were baseballs. A large wooden door was revealed piece by piece—heavy, dark mahogany with black iron studs and an old-fashioned handle. The dark faery wrapped the hem of his black T-shirt around one hand and gave the black handle a good yank. The door creaked open.

The faery grabbed me by the arm and jerked me to my feet. "Down the stairs."

A creepy stone staircase wound into the bowels of the earth, twisting into darkness. The steps were worn and dirty, the rock walls smooth but covered in cobwebs. Fear coursed through my veins as the faeries forced me to go first.

The air became cooler the deeper we walked, and it smelled musty and old. We passed intermittent torches, lit but not brightly,

giving the narrow chamber an eerie glow. Each step felt like I was descending to my death.

At the end of the stairs was a long, confining hallway: a sort of underground tunnel of abrupt turns and dizzying twists. The walls pressed down on me. I wasn't a fan of small spaces, and the fact that the faery thugs kept jerking me around didn't help me any. We walked for so long that my feet began to ache, and I silently pleaded for the path to end.

A huge, intricately carved wooden door waited at the end of the tunnel—there was nowhere to run. I tried to put on a brave face, but I knew it was hopeless. All I wanted to do was crawl into the corner and cry. The entire situation was so absurd and unfair. What did I do to deserve this?

The door opened into a large, brilliantly lit room. Sunlight poured in from a ceiling made of glass, and living, green vines ran up the stone walls as if reaching towards the light. Somehow, even though we went down the stairs and through underground tunnels, we were aboveground again.

As we walked further into the room, a tall, rail-thin figure stepped out of the shadows. His hair was jet-black, and his eyes a deep, dark brown. His wings stood tall and proud behind him, inky and sparkling with edges that appeared frayed. He peered down at me with narrowed eyes from a craggy, unattractive face.

"She's an Aurorian faery?" he boomed.

"She does bear the birthmark," the shorter faery answered, his voice cracking slightly as if he were intimidated by the new man.

"I wonder at her ability." He tapped his finger to his lip as he walked in a circle around me. One of his wings brushed gently across my arm, and I shivered—it was the first time I'd felt another faery's wings. It was weird.

He leaned in so close that I could feel his breath on my skin. Strong fingers pinched my cheeks, and he turned my head to the left. With his other hand, he ran his long, skinny fingers over my

birthmark. Then he poked at it like it was a button and something was going to turn on. “You bear the mark. What is your name?”

I didn’t answer.

He grabbed me by the hair, and I let out a shriek. The man asked again, his words slow and enunciated. “What is your name?”

“Rylie.” My voice came out a squeak, and I flushed from head to toe. I wanted to appear strong and brave, not as if I were ready to melt into a puddle at his feet.

“That’s a human name.” He frowned. “What is your faery name?”

I squinted at him, wishing I could say something angry, and muttered, “Oleander.”

His eyes widened, but he didn’t remark on it. “Who are your parents? Your real parents?”

“I only know Azura. She said my father left.”

He let go of me and turned towards the two goons that had brought me here. “Let Varwik know immediately.”

They both bowed, and then scurried off.

Looking me over once more, he said, “She hid you well.”

I didn’t answer. My heart was racing, and my palms were sweaty. Obviously, I wasn’t hidden well enough, or I wouldn’t have been standing in a strange place with people out to kill me.

His gaze was contemplative. Mine was probably furious.

I cleared my throat, uncomfortable beneath his observation. “What do you want from me?”

“I’m not sure yet.” He turned and yelled, “Lena!”

A lady appeared in the doorway as if she had been waiting just outside. I’d know that white-blonde hair anywhere. She was the faery I had seen at the mall.

It all made sense now. She had seen me, seen my birthmark, and told the dark faeries. I could feel the blood draining from my face. This wasn’t good. Her aura and wings were definitely lighter than the others, indicating she wasn’t a dark faery. So that brought up the question…why would a light faery be here?

"Yes?" Her purple and white wings fluttered ever so slightly. Her beauty reminded me of that of an angel—pale skin, pale eyes, ethereal and slight.

"Take her to her room. She needs to get cleaned up before we bring her to Varwik."

Lena's blue eyes met mine. She nodded to the man, a movement that was almost a bow, and then grabbed my arm.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked her as she dragged me through the door and down a long hallway. Panic had begun to set in again. The ceilings soared high and the walls were made of huge blocks of stone, impenetrable like a fortress.

"Shut up," the light faery snapped, shaking my arm.

"No!" I barked, digging my heels into the ground and forcing her to stop. I was fed up with being pushed around; my arm was going to be nothing but bruises by the time the day ended. "I will not shut up. You people grab me from my home and drag me wherever it is we are, and I'm not supposed to ask questions? Now, where am I?"

"Varwik's castle," Lena answered, her eyes wide, and just a little impressed, I think.

*Varwik*. I recognized the name from Azura's story about the dark faery that made the deal with my father. What was with these people and their strange names? "So, who is Varwik?"

"Why, he is only the most powerful dark faery, of course," she said, like I was supposed to know who he was.

"Who did I just meet?"

The girl rolled her eyes. "That was Kyro. He's one of Varwik's advisors."

Lena began pulling me along again, her nails digging deep into my skin. Instead of fighting, and probably making myself bleed, I let her.

We came to a stop in front of a doorway. Smiling, she said, "Welcome to your new home. Take a bath and change. There are

clothes in the closet. I will come for you later." Then she pushed me in and slammed the door. I heard the bolt slide into position.

I was locked in.

"Hey! Let me out!" I yelled at the top of my lungs, as I banged on the door. "Do you hear me? My father will track you down. He's a detective, you know!"

I don't know how long I pounded on the door and yelled. Eventually, my voice grew hoarse and my hands ached. I fell against the door and slid down the wood until I collapsed into a heap on the floor. Pulling my knees up to my chest, I cried.

When I had no more tears to shed, I stood and found my legs were a little wobbly from all the walking and injuries. I steadied myself with the door. The room was large, but the furniture sparse. A tiny twin bed was in the back left corner with a tan blanket and pillow. I was so tired that it looked inviting.

The walls were bare, and there wasn't a window in sight. The gray stone made the room look more like a prison than a bedroom. I tentatively walked over to the door in the back of the room. I expected it to be locked, but it swung open when I turned the brass knob. I cautiously peeked inside. It was a bathroom. I was surprised to see a large sunken tub and pretty pink towels hanging on the racks. It was a stark contrast to the bedroom.

The woman did say I needed to clean up. I looked at myself in the mirror and cringed at how grimy I looked from the trek. Dried blood covered my hands, legs, and shoulders. I walked over to the tub, kneeled on the plush, gray carpet in front of it, and turned on the faucet.

Once the tub was full, I tossed off my dirty clothes and slowly lowered myself into the hot water. It felt wonderful on my aching muscles. I sank beneath until all that emerged was my face, and laid my head back. Closing my eyes, I let images of my parents and friends flood my mind. I thought of my family and how panicked they must be. Sierra must have been concerned when I wasn't there for her to pick up, and then when I never showed up for school.

I thought of Adam, and my heart felt like it was breaking. What if I never saw him again? I touched the bracelet on my wrist. I hadn't taken it off since he gave it to me.

The bathroom door flung open. I screamed, shrill and loud, and covered myself with both arms.

"Oh, please. You don't have anything I haven't seen before." Lena smirked. She grabbed my arm *again* and yanked me from the tub, tossing a towel at me with her other hand. "Enough relaxing. It's time for your meeting."

My head whirled. "Meeting?"

"I'll lay a dress on your bed," Lena went on, ignoring my question. "Don't get any bright ideas. I'll be waiting right outside the door for you."

"Why are you here?" The words escaped my mouth before I could stop them.

Lena turned to face me. "Much like you, I don't have a choice. Varwik fancies me. He collects things he finds beautiful."

"You're here against your will?" My jaw dropped. "But the barriers… How did he get you here?"

"When we enter the human realm, we put ourselves at risk to be taken. It's my own fault for being naive and thinking nothing would happen to me. Varwik likes the power of having light faeries in his castle." There was a note of disgust in her voice. "It makes him feel superior."

"What a jerk," I said honestly. "How long have you been here?"

"Enough with the questions," Lena snapped. I dove right out of sympathy and into annoyance at her tone. "Get dressed and hurry up. He doesn't like to wait for anyone."

I stood with my towel, gently patting myself dry, and watched as she walked back into the bedroom. She went to the closet and yanked out a formal, pale yellow dress with a long, gauzy train. She threw it on the bed and silently walked out the door.

Left alone, I noticed everything I needed was in the bathroom: brushes, perfume, and even items for my hair. Very strange since I was being held captive.

I had a feeling I didn't want to make this dark faery angry, so I hurried to get ready. The dress was sleeveless with a V-neck, classy and tasteful. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I felt as if someone else was staring back at me.

The door opened, and Lena called, "Get out here—now."

I glanced around for shoes, but when I couldn't find any, I ran out barefoot. For the first time, I felt like a faery.

Lena looked me up and down. "Much better. Varwik will approve."

She walked quickly, leading me down the massive hallway. I practically had to run to keep up. My mind raced. I had no idea what I was about to walk into, and that scared the hell out of me. I should have let Azura in when she came to me. I should have talked to her. There was so much I didn't know, and it was my fault. I had been stubborn and selfish, and now I was paying the price.

Lena stopped in front of wooden double doors that filled an entire wall from ceiling to floor. They were unfamiliar, a vivid red that I would have recognized. We must have been in a new part of the fortress.

The doors flung open on their own, and Lena walked forward, her head held high. She carried herself like a queen, with no fear or worry etched on her beautiful face.

Meanwhile, my hands were shaking so hard I had to clasp them in front of me to disguise the tremors.

It appeared to be a dining room. The walls were sky blue, made even brighter by the ever-present skylights that flooded sunlight into the hall. Bushy tropical plants flanked the walls, their scent intoxicating, and a wall of glass doors led out to a private verandah.

The biggest table I had ever seen sat before us, and at its head was a very large faery. He stood gracefully as we walked in. His hair was black as coal, his skin pale, and his face much younger than I

had expected. He had the most beautiful black and purple wings, and I wondered how wings that gorgeous could be on such an evil being. He was stunning.

He studied me for a long minute, making no move to come around the table. "Oleander—what an interesting turn of events this has turned out to be."

He paused, but I had no idea what to say in return. Until recently, I hadn't known anything about certain "events."

"I knew your father long ago," the man continued, stroking his dark goatee with a finger and thumb. "You were aptly named—lovely yet deadly."

Gritting my teeth at his pretense of familiarity, I said, "Well, I didn't know him, and I don't understand any of this."

"Of course." The faery inclined his head toward me in acknowledgment. "They hid you well from me."

"Why am I here?" I demanded.

The faery began a slow stroll around the table as he spoke. "It's such a rare treat when an Aurorian faery is born. This is a special faery, one with stronger than normal abilities. This child is born with a birthmark, like the one you have." His gaze lingered on my mark. "When you were born, we made a deal with your father: You for access to our magick, something we knew your father wanted. He was greedy and gladly made the deal. But when we came for you, Azura produced a dead baby and made us believe that baby was hers. That was the end of it until Lena saw you yesterday. She knew immediately who you were and came straight back to me with the news."

His voice was more pleasant than what I had expected; not evil in the least. Almost mesmerizing. He pulled out a chair, gesturing for me to have a seat, and I lowered myself into it. He returned to the spot across from me and sat, folding his hands on the tabletop.

I swallowed hard. "Why can't you just let me go? What do you want from me?" I met his cold blue eyes with as much bravado as I

could muster. Despite his handsome face and kind demeanor, this was an evil man.

"We want you on our side, of course!" His tone was incredulous. "What better than to have the most powerful faery with us? Just in case we ever go into battle."

"But I don't even want to be a faery." I knew I sounded like a toddler, and frankly, I didn't care. "I want to go home."

"What you want and what is reality are often two different things. If you don't want to join us, I'll have to kill you. Level the playing field," he said in a deadly calm voice. "I can't have the light faeries getting ahold of your ability."

"My father isn't even around anymore." I was grasping at straws. "He can't get your magick."

"A deal is a deal. You are ours. If he ever shows his pathetic face again, he can have access to our magick."

"And if he doesn't show up again?"

"You're still ours."

He obviously had no idea that I was completely harmless. I didn't know if that was a good or bad thing. For now, it was something I would keep to myself.

"We have been waiting a very long time for your arrival. You are even lovelier than your mother." Varwik smiled. "My son will be pleased."

Shock made my hands tense up. "What does your son have to do with me?"

He chuckled. "Oleander, your tone of voice is not appreciated. It would be unwise of you to get on my bad side. You have put me in a very difficult position. Be grateful I haven't decided to kill you outright." He paused. "You will marry my son on the autumnal equinox, therefore joining our people. It's the only way I see out of this quandary. If you marry a dark faery, you cannot use your power against us."

"What?!" I jumped out of my chair, knocking it over and stumbling away from the table. I banged my knee on the upturned

leg, but barely noticed the pain. “I’m only sixteen. I am *not* marrying anyone!” He couldn’t be serious…could he?

“Sixteen is a common age to marry in our world,” he told me. “I’m sure you will find that my son is not a bad mate.”

I looked over at Lena, my eyes wide, hoping for some kind of sign, but she just stared blankly at me. No help from that quarter.

Turning back to Varwik, I seethed. “You can go to hell. I’m not marrying your son or anyone else right now.”

He sighed. “I was afraid we were going to have to do this the hard way.” He turned towards Lena. “Lock her in her room and bring her just enough food to keep her alive.”

As Lena was dragging me away again, I overheard a familiar voice: the man from earlier, when I arrived. The one Lena had called Kyro. He questioned Varwik. “What are you doing with her?”

“She’s been promised to us. Last time I checked, I was in control of this land. If you dare question me again, it will be the last time.”

Back in my room—*my cell*—I burst into tears.

They couldn't do this. They couldn't hold me here and force me to marry someone. Adam. My heart sunk. I loved him, and wanted to marry him. For years, even before we started actually dating, he had been the one. No one could ever replace him. I had always dreamed of our wedding day and the perfect family we would have. All my plans were being ruined because I was born a magickal creature. It was almost laughable.

I walked to the mirror and stared at myself. The tears came harder and faster. "I hate you!" I screamed, slamming my palms to the glass. It cracked beneath my right hand, and I jerked away, blood already welling on my skin—a small, superficial wound.

I wanted to rip the wings out of my back and cut my ears off. *Stupid faery world.* My body filled with rage, and I lashed out at the mirror again, my fist cracking it right down the middle.

"Damn!" I yelled as pain soared through my hand. This wound was worse; a nasty-looking cut that oozed bright red. I yanked a towel off its hook and wrapped it around my hand. Feeling defeated, I walked over to the bed and curled up in a ball on the covers.

I must have fallen asleep for a little while. When my eyes finally opened, I had no idea how long I'd dozed since there weren't any clocks or windows to tell. I lay there and stared at the ceiling, letting my mind wander.

Dad had always taught me self-defense, and playing it safe or getting out of unlikely situations alive. Here was the unlikeliest situation of all—held captive in a stone fortress we'd arrived at by walking deep underground, only to emerge in sunlight. There had to be a way out of here. I would have to find an escape. Or make one.

I slipped out of bed and let my wings spread. I purposely flapped them a couple of times, letting them stretch as far as they could—it felt luxurious. I started in one corner of the room and examined the stone walls. I pushed on each big stone in the hope that one would move and a tunnel would be behind it. I rolled my eyes at how stupid that sounded. An escape tunnel was just going to magically appear?

But I tried anyway because there was no way to know. Someone else could have once been held in the same room and had fashioned a way to escape without anybody knowing. I continued to inspect the walls.

A loud clang signaled the lock on the door being released. I jumped away from the wall and waited. I was relieved when I saw it was just Lena.

"You're expected for dinner," Lena announced. "Make sure you wear a gown. The pink one would work."

"Why would I want to do that? Besides, I thought they were trying to starve me."

"Because he'll be there."

"He? He who?"

She sighed, obviously annoyed, and opened the wardrobe. "Your mate—Kallan."

"My mate?" I stared at her, aghast. "You people have lost your minds. I'm not marrying him."

Lena's blue eyes sparkled as she laughed. "That's what you think. What did you do to your hand?" She jerked a pale pink gown from the hanger and tossed it to the bed, eyeing my towel-wrapped hand.

"Nothing." I put my hand behind my back and avoided her gaze. It was a miracle she hadn't noticed the destroyed mirror.

"Give it to me. I can fix it." Lena walked forward and stood at the side of my bed reaching for my hand.

Tentatively, I extended my hand to her and watched as she carefully unwrapped the towel. A tingling sensation ran through my hand when she placed her warm palm on my skin. A minute later, she pulled her hand away and my wound was completely healed.

"How did you do that?"

"I'm a healer," she said simply and walked out of the room.

I sat on the bed and stared down at my hand, turning it back and forth in amazement. That was one of the coolest things I'd ever seen. I wondered if all faeries could do that.

Seeing the pink dress lying on my bed pissed me off. I didn't have to go to dinner, and I sure as hell didn't have to dress up. They couldn't force me to do it. I'd just sit here and sulk. Maybe they'd get sick of my attitude and free me. *Yeah, right.*

Lena opened the door again. "You really don't want to make them angry. Trust me, I know."

I picked up a pillow because it was the closest thing to me and threw it at her. "I don't care!"

She slammed the door quicker than the pillow could fly. There were voices on the other side of the door, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I scooted up the bed and pushed all the way back against the wall, willing myself to just disappear.

The door opened again, and Varwik and Lena entered the room.

"Where did she go?" Lena asked.

"She's just hiding," Varwik answered, looking right at me.

*Hiding?* What was he talking about?

"You see her?" Lena asked, confused.

"I can sense her like I can sense all faeries," Varwik answered, and then took a few steps towards me. Leaning in closer, he said, "Being invisible doesn't work with me. I'll always find you."

"What are you talking about?" I shouted.

Surprise surfaced in his eyes, but it disappeared quickly. A smile slowly crossed his face. "You have no idea what you can do, do you?" He sat on the edge of the bed and said, "All faeries have the ability to use glamour, which hides you as a human or shows you as a faery. However, the glamour can also cause you to become completely invisible or even hide other objects. That's how this place is hidden in the forest. Humans can't see it. If they ever happened to stumble upon our world, that is."

"I'm…invisible right now?" I asked.

"Yes."

Nobody could see me. *Wow.* "How did I do that?"

"You probably wished it." He shrugged and stood up.

He was right. I had, even though I hadn't actually known that it would work. Too bad it didn't seem to work well enough.

"When was your birthday?" Varwik asked me.

"Saturday."

"So, your transformation was only two days ago. You have a lot to learn. You're going to be at a disadvantage because you were raised human." Varwik stood. "Now, Lena tells me you are refusing to come to dinner. If you do not, you will not have any food at all."

That was fine by me. I would rather waste away in a prison cell than have to marry someone other than Adam. Or deal with dark faeries. "I'm not coming."

He smirked. "You will eventually."

After they left, I wandered to the broken mirror. Sure enough, my reflection wasn't there. I waved to myself, but could see nothing. I jumped up and down, and still nothing. I laughed. I could see my body if I looked down, but I couldn't see my reflection.

"Show myself," I whispered, just for fun, and suddenly, there I was. I narrowed my eyes at my reflection. "Be invisible."

I vanished.

This could come in handy, at least in the human world. Human world. The thought came so naturally. Just three days ago, I thought I was human. I never suspected anything different. And now, I was thinking of everything differently.

Remembering how Azura sent the papers on my desk up in the wind and back down again, I thought about how she had said all faeries have abilities. She hadn't known what mine would be, and I certainly didn't know. Would it just appear one day? Or would I have to know what it was to summon it?

Maybe it could help me escape.

I didn't even know what time it was. School was probably over. My parents would know I was missing. Were they out looking for me? And Azura, she said she was going for help, but nobody was here to help me. I could only hope the light faeries would be able to help. She was the only one who knew what had happened. I wondered if she even knew how to find the castle. I felt a surge of hope. If she brought my father he could get me free. Then again, could humans even get in? Could they even see it?

I fingered the small heart on my bracelet and thought of Adam. Oh, what I would do to be in his arms where I felt safe and loved.

How long would he wait for me?

Time seemed to pass very slowly. There was nothing to do, not even anything to look at but four bare walls and scant furniture. I tried figuring out what my ability was without any luck, and then I tried to find an escape. When that didn't work, I took a long shower just to feel something. I loved how it felt on my "new body." Lena didn't check in on me, nobody did, not while I was awake anyway.

After three days of not having any food at all, I could barely make it to the bathroom. I was fatigued and my legs were shaky. My stomach groaned in protest. *Don't give in*. I kept repeating it to myself, but every hour that passed, it was harder to keep up the morale.

The hunger pains came harder and wouldn't go away. Tears slipped down the side of my face, soaking my pillow; I knew I would have to give in. I didn't want to die. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore and rapped on the door.

Lena opened it, dressed in a short orange dress. The ends of her hair were curled up. She smiled sweetly. "Yes?"

"I'll come down to eat," I said, my voice a whisper.

She grinned. "You lasted longer than I expected. I'll be right back."

A couple of minutes later, she returned with a tall glass of thick green liquid. "Here, drink this."

I turned my nose up and made a face. "What is it? It looks nasty."

"It'll restore your energy so you don't look so pathetic tonight." There was something that appeared to be compassion in her eyes, though she hid it well.

I took the tall, clear glass from her. Whatever it was, it was really heavy and had a sickly sweet smell, like grass and fruit. I counted to three and downed the drink. It was so sweet that my lips puckered, but the effect was almost immediate. It filled me with warmth and clarity, and my constant stomach pain dissipated in moments.

"Go and make yourself presentable. The pink gown. Try not to cause any trouble," she warned.

A few minutes later, I stood in front of the broken mirror, my single reflection refracted into a hundred tiny pieces because of the cracks. The dress was beautiful, with a hem that trailed the ground and a puckered, sweetheart bodice that emphasized my curves. It was light and airy and actually made me feel like a magickal creature.

Lena breezed through the door and paused to give me an approving nod. "Yes, well done."

"Could you knock, please?" I snapped irritably.

She just smiled enigmatically and walked purposefully to the dresser. She opened a drawer and pulled out a headband that was almost the same color as the dress. “Here.” Gently placing it on my head, she nodded. “Perfect.”

I did feel beautiful. The only problem was, I wished I were dressing this way for Adam and not some monster who had abducted me.

Lena and I emerged from the bedroom, and she led me by the arm to the gigantic dining hall where I had first met Varwik. I recognized the abnormally large doors. Her grip was weaker than it used to be, and I entertained the thought that maybe she was starting to warm up to me.

I glanced at her from the corner of my eye as we entered the dining room, the doors groaning on their hinges. If I could get her on my side, maybe she would help me escape. It was a long shot, sure, but it wasn’t like I had many other choices. Befriend Lena and we both escape, or sit and twiddle my thumbs, hoping Azura would come for me.

I hadn’t noticed some of the smaller details of the room when I was last there. A large crystal chandelier hung over the massive table, and museum-quality paintings hung on the sky-blue walls. An Oriental runner covered the open space of floor just inside. Even though Varwik was crazy, he had great taste.

My mouth watered at the wonderful aromas coming from the food that covered the table. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed someone standing at the edge of the far wall of windows. At first, I thought it was Varwik. The man’s hair was ebony and his skin pale. But his wings weren’t purple—they were black and teal. A beautiful, vibrant teal. They fluttered for a second and then stopped.

Slowly, he spun around. My heart did a flip-flop, and my own wings involuntarily fluttered as his strange blue-green eyes rested on me. They almost matched the color of his wings. His face was cold and hard. He looked like a younger version of Varwik, so I

knew it must be his son. He looked me up and down, and then with a grunt, turned back to the window.

Varwik entered the room, his broad hands rubbing together. "Isn't this wonderful? Kallan, get over here."

My eyes flicked over to the window. Kallan turned and walked confidently towards his father, his face smooth and expressionless. His pale toes stuck out from beneath his long black pants, his steps silent on the floor. The black of his shirt was a stark contrast to his translucently white skin. His eyes and wings were the only splashes of color on him. He was one of the most gorgeous things I'd ever seen.

Dark faeries. I wondered if it was the way they looked or their evil nature that gave them their name.

Varwik held a hand in my direction, as if putting me on display. "I told you she was a beauty, didn't I, son?"

Kallan glared at his father, but didn't reply.

I watched the exchange with interest. There was no love lost between these two men.

"Oleander, I'd like you to meet your mate, Kallan." Varwik addressed the statement to me, but his eyes were still narrowed on his son.

"I came down here to eat, not to meet anyone," I said coolly. "I told you once, and I'll tell you again. I'm not marrying anyone." I stared into Kallan's unusual eyes as I spoke, my fists clenched at my sides and itching to punch something. Or someone.

Kallan's lips twitched as if he were suppressing a grin. He pulled a chair out from the table and sat in a graceful motion. His tone suggested boredom as he said, "The feeling's mutual. Do you honestly think I want to mate with a light faery?"

Varwik glared at his son. "You'll mate with who I say." Then he turned his attention to me. "Oleander, I suggest you watch your tone or you'll be sent back to your room without any food."

I looked back at the table and realized I would pretty much do anything to eat at that point. "Sorry," I mumbled.

"I didn't hear you," Varwik said, his stare unsettling.

"I said, I'm sorry," I snapped. These people were testing my patience. "Can I eat now?"

"Please, be seated."

I sat down in a chair across from Kallan and filled my plate with ham, potatoes, and rolls. I shoved a roll in my mouth, the buttery, spongy goodness melting in my mouth. Groaning with pleasure, I threw a slice of ham in with it.

Lena cleared her throat, and I glanced over at her as I shoved a forkful of potato in my mouth. She shook her head slightly and mimed eating slowly with her fork.

I guess I wasn't being *ladylike* enough for their tastes, but I really didn't care. I was hungry, and it was all their fault for starving me for three days. I shrugged and took another mouthful. Who knew when my next meal was going to be? I wasn't going to waste the one sitting in front of me.

Whenever I glanced in Kallan's direction, he was looking anywhere except at me. He obviously hated the idea as much as I did. At least that was a relief. He was pretty to look at, but my heart belonged to Adam. Always.

I hastily shoveled the potatoes into my mouth, half-afraid they might disappear if I didn't hurry. It was one of the best meals I'd ever had, and certainly better than anything my mother ever cooked. Thinking about dinner at home made me slow down, and my fork hovered over my plate. I swallowed hard to keep the tears away. As enjoyable as this food was, there was nothing I wanted more than to be sitting at my kitchen table with my parents eating dinner.

Varwik broke what was an increasingly uncomfortable silence. "We have much to discuss about your wedding."

*Don't say anything. Just eat.* I took another bite of ham without looking up.

"Father, marrying a light faery would be a disgrace. Surely, you do not wish this. We would be the laughingstock of the dark world."

Kallan's tone was so flippant and uncaring.

Whether I wanted to be a faery or not, he was talking about my people as if we were nothing but vermin. Anger boiled inside me, but I held my tongue.

"Her father promised her to us. She belongs to us. And you will marry her. Everyone will see the brilliance of the plan." Varwik paused to take a bite, and chewed slowly. "It's really the only option."

"We could kill her, Father. She is of no use to us." Kallan surprised me with his words. He didn't even know me, and he was willing to kill me?

I pressed my lips together and glared at them. "I do not belong to anyone, and certainly not your brute of a son."

"In our world, Oleander, when a promise is made, that promise is kept. We never go back on our word." He didn't even look at me as he spoke, his fork moving around his dinner plate as if we were talking about the weather.

I wasn't the weather. I was a living, breathing person. "I don't live in your world."

"You do now." He stared at me until I looked away. "After dinner, you two will stay here and have a conversation."

I wasn't going to have any kind of conversation with that guy. I sat back in my seat and brushed the hair out of my face, using the motion to sneak a peek at Kallan. He was pushing food around his plate; it didn't look like he'd even eaten anything. I quickly looked away before he caught me.

"Was the food satisfactory?" Varwik asked, noticing I'd put my fork down.

"Yeah, please thank the cook." It really had been delicious, so I didn't mean for it to come out so sarcastic. I wiped my mouth with the cloth napkin. I needed to shape up; I could probably get more answers if I wasn't acting like a brat. "Could you please tell me what happened to my father?"

"He disappeared," Varwik answered shortly.

“He just up and left and nobody knows where he went?”

“Nobody cared,” Varwik said with a laugh. “Your mother was mad as hell that he made the deal in the first place. Without being able to produce the child, our deal was null. He was probably worried I would kill him.” Looking from me to Kallan, he said, “I have things to do. I will leave you two to talk.” The conversation cut short, Varwik stood and walked out of the room with Lena trailing behind him.

So much for getting answers. I wasn’t having a whole lot of luck there.

The silence after their exit was absolute. Kallan didn’t say anything. He wouldn’t even look at me. He sat in his chair, his face turned so that he could study the paintings on the wall.

I drummed my fingers on the table, my lips pursed. “I have a boyfriend.”

He glanced up at me, just a flick of his blue eyes. “How nice.”

“We’ve known each other for a long time. We’ve been dating a while.” I offered more information, hoping it would let him know that he didn’t have a chance with me. My heart belonged to someone else. “I love him very much.”

Sighing, Kallan said, “Oleander—”

“That’s not my name.” Hot fury rushed through me. I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned back in the chair.

“What?” he asked, perplexed.

“My name is Rylie.”

His eyes softened for a split second before they turned hard again. “I have no interest in marrying you.”

“Good. So we’re on the same page.”

His face was emotionless. “We are. But you don’t know my father. He will force us to marry. He always gets his way.”

“We’ll just say no. He must want you to be happy. Doesn’t he?”

“You know nothing of the faery ways.” His jaw clenched and he looked away. There was pain in his eyes. I got a closer look at what

was around his neck—a beautiful necklace made of shiny black stones.

"Well, duh. I didn't grow up here," I shot back. "I just found out I was a faery a couple of days ago. This is all surreal and completely unbelievable."

"You have been made soft while living in the human world." Kallan caught my eye, his own gaze intense and unyielding. His voice was dangerous. "Let me clue you in on something. You don't say no to my father. What he says goes. We will marry."

"I am not marrying you!" I shrieked, fighting the urge to launch myself across the table and choke him. Instead, I picked up a roll and chucked it across the table. "I love Adam. Not to mention I'm only sixteen!"

Kallan caught the roll without flinching. "Trust me, if I knew a way to get you out of my life and back to Adam, I would gladly arrange it. You are putting a serious damper on my plans."

"Oh. Sorry to be an inconvenience," I spat, surprisingly bothered by his declaration. My emotions warred inside me, unsure whether to hate him for treating me like trash, or be hurt by his obvious loathing of me.

The door banged open and Varwik strolled back in, a frown on his face. "I had hoped this would go better."

"You can't force us to get married," I told him hotly. "This isn't the Middle Ages."

"You're right," Varwik said with a sinister smile. "I can't."

I let out a sigh of relief. Now we were getting somewhere. He could let Lena take me back home, and then I could beg my parents to move us somewhere far away.

"However, if you don't marry my son and unite with us, I *can* kill you. It's the only solution."

I gulped. "I don't have any great superpower! I'm not any help to you. Why can't you see that and let me go home?"

"Your ability will show itself sooner or later, and it will be great.

Of that I have no doubt." Varwik dismissed me with a sniff.

"And what if I don't want to marry her?" Kallan pushed his chair back and stood up, turning to stare down his father.

"Makes no difference, Kallan." Varwik put a hand on his son's shoulder and squeezed. "You must, and if you refuse, she will die."

"Don't be dramatic, Father. She doesn't have some *awesome* ability. Maybe because she grew up in the human world, her ability was lost." Kallan's gorgeous eyes landed on me, and he sniffed. "She's really quite pathetic. I mean, look at her."

"Hey!" I narrowed my eyes. "If anyone is pathetic, it's you. You can't even make your own decisions. Your father dictates your life."

Varwik held up his hand. "Enough! We all know looks can be deceiving, Kallan. I'll give you some time to think about it, but you know what I want from you."

Neither of us spoke, but I could read the fury just below the surface in Kallan. My anger had dissipated into something akin to despair.

Varwik called for Lena, and she appeared in the doorway immediately. It was like everyone in the place was at his total command. She took her place beside him. "Yes, my king?"

"Take her away."

Lena took me by the arm—not hard, but her fingers dug in where I was bruised and blackened. I winced. "Hey, you don't have to force me. I'll gladly go with you to get away from these two."

With a nod, she let go of me, and I followed her silently back to my room.

Once we were in front of the door, I turned to her. "I've been thinking. Why were you allowed out when I saw you at the mall? It seems too coincidental."

"I can come and go as I please, so it's really not that strange. I enjoy being out among humans." She pulled the clip out of her hair, letting the mass of blonde fall around her face. Her eyes looked tired, and her face was drawn.

“What? Why would he let you leave? I thought you said you were here against your will?”

“If I do not return, Varwik has promised to kill my family.” Her statement was so matter-of-fact.

I stared at her in disbelief. This just kept getting worse and worse. I couldn’t imagine living like that. “Your family? How could he be so cruel?”

“He’s really not that bad,” Lena told me with a careless gesture. “He’ll eventually grow tired of me and let me go. He’s used to getting his way, and he uses any means to get it.”

“I don’t even know how you can stand being in the same room with him.” I shuddered.

“It was hard at first, but once I got to know him better, I realized he was actually lonely and enjoys my company. Believe me, there are worse fates.” She paused, and then touched my hand. “You must consider the consequences of your decision.”

“Yeah, I get it,” I said wearily. “Say yes or die. Nice choice. But I can find another way out.”

“There is no other way. Get some sleep, Oleander.” She opened the door to my room and motioned for me to step inside.

The lock bolted shut behind me, and my shoulders sagged. *Another day in paradise.*

I lay in the bed and stared at the ceiling. *Marry him or die.* What kind of crap was that? I was not marrying him, but I certainly didn't want to die. There had to be another way out of this.

What was my ability? It would work out pretty nicely if it was the ability to teleport. I closed my eyes and willed myself to be home. *Please, oh please, work.* But when I opened my eyes, I was still in the cell, lying on the small bed. *Damn it!*

What else could it be? I racked my brain for anything I knew about faeries from folklore and myth. Azura could manipulate the wind, and I think I'd read before that conjuring elements was common. I focused on the wall and commanded it to burn down. Nothing happened. I jumped up and ran to the bathroom. Turning on the faucet, I stared at the water, trying to make it do something, but nothing happened.

It was then I noticed the mirror had been replaced. Someone must have fixed it while I was at dinner the night before.

Frustrated, I organized the toiletries from largest to smallest. One of the towels was off-center, and it was driving me nuts. I straightened it and looked around the bathroom. "There," I said to myself.

But the satisfaction didn't last long.

I made my way to the closet where all the gowns were hanging and organized them by color and length, hoping that would make me feel better. Every dress was stunning and must have cost a

fortune. I ran my hands over the different types of fabric and wondered if Lena had picked them out.

Thinking of Lena brought an entire wave of self-loathing that hit hard. I felt so alone. No one here was nice, and as stupid as that sounded, my feelings were hurt.

I sobbed, rushing to the dresser. Brush lined up to the edge of wood. I opened the top drawer—hair supplies. I began organizing them by size, color, and purpose, all the while, tears coming harder and faster, and my sobs becoming louder.

I pulled open the next drawer—undergarments. I tried to fold them all, but they were silk, and the material was too slick, so they kept falling off of each other. When I couldn't wrangle them into submission, I collapsed to the floor, a complete mess.

Ever since I was a little girl, I needed organization or else I would get stressed out. It felt a little like giving in, though, this mad cleaning. Like I was accepting my fate, and that was not what I was doing. This was not my room; it was my prison.

Fatigue finally set in. I picked myself up off the floor. I changed from my flowy pink gown and into a long cotton nightgown. I crawled into bed and pulled the soft tan blanket up to my chin. The tears silently fell down my cheeks.

*Adam, I'll find a way home to you.* Closing my eyes, I let the sleep come.

"Hey, beautiful."

I spun around and came face-to-face with Adam. We were standing on my front porch. "Adam! You're here." I covered his face in small, fluttery kisses. "You'll never believe where I've been."

He put his strong arms around me. "It'll be okay. I'll never let you out of my sight again."

"I was so scared," I told him, looking into his loving, green eyes.

"I know. You're safe now." He cupped my face and kissed me softly, his lips like velvet. "Let's go up to your room."

Taking his hand, I led him to my room where we lay on my bed, his arm draped over me. I closed my eyes and murmured, "Never let me go."

"I won't," he promised.

When I opened my eyes again, I was alone in my cell of a room. Tears filled my eyes once again, and I turned over to bury my face in the pillow as I sobbed. I don't know how long I stayed there before the door opened.

"Why are you still in bed?" Lena snapped. "It's almost time for dinner."

"Dinner?" Time was so screwed up…or I was. I put the pillow over my head and mumbled, "Leave me alone."

Lena grabbed the pillow and tossed it towards the other side of the room. "You need to get it together and do what is asked of you. I don't think you comprehend how serious this is. He will kill you and not think twice about it."

"I can't believe that's my only choice!" I yelled back.

"Well, it is."

I wished I still had my pillow so I could throw it at her. Or something harder would be good. "I'll find another option."

"Marry him! You will grow to accept this life," Lena reassured me.

"No," I said stubbornly. "I will not marry someone I don't love. They'll have to kill me."

"It won't be that easy. You need to think of your loved ones." She lowered her voice. "They can get to your family, your friends, your boyfriend."

I looked at her in horror. "Why would they do that? Varwik said one of his options was to kill me, why wouldn't he just do that?"

"I don't know. I'm just saying he can, and he might use that to convince you. He wants power more than he wants you dead. He is known to be cruel when he thinks it's called for."

I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to have dinner with those creeps again. I didn’t ever want to see either one of them ever again. I felt sick to my stomach and curled up in a ball, my head on the cool mattress.

“Playing sick won’t help. Get dressed and come out.”

“I’m not playing. Just leave me alone.”

I heard Lena’s dress ruffle as she left the room, the door closing softly behind her. I shut my eyes and willed sleep to come.

A few minutes later, the door opened. Peeking out from the covers, I saw Lena was back with a small cup. She held it out. “It’ll help your stomach.”

I met her eyes. “They won’t just let me be sick?”

She didn’t answer.

I took the cup from her and drank it. Within a minute, my stomach was feeling better. I handed the cup back to Lena and sat up. “Thanks, I guess.”

“Oleander, you only have a short time and your life could be over. Don’t allow that time to be miserable.”

I looked at Lena for a moment, considering her words. “It’s just so unfair. It’s hard to see the positive in this situation.”

“Life takes many twists and turns. Follow your path and be open to change. I know it’s not easy, but life is a wonderful gift.”

“I’m a prisoner. How can that be wonderful?”

“Get dressed. I’ll be waiting outside.” Lena practically floated out the door. I had no idea how she could be happy in her current life. I could not accept my fate that easily.

I dragged myself out of bed, used the bathroom, and rummaged through the closet. I refused to wear any of the black dresses. I didn’t want to look like I fit in. After dressing in a coral-colored strapless dress, I stepped out into the hallway.

The scent of garlic filled the air as we descended down the long staircase. The aroma made my mouth water. We entered the dining room to find Varwik sitting at the head of the table as usual. His son

was to his right. Once again, as soon as I saw him, my wings gave a little flutter. He didn't look up until I sat down. When he did, I noticed his wings did the same. Very odd that I had no control over the movement. I wondered if it meant something.

Kallan held my gaze for a few seconds and then looked back down at his food. His face was impossible to read. I wondered what he was thinking.

"Feeling better, Oleander?" Varwik asked in a neutral tone.

"Yes. Your medicine works fast."

"You're welcome. We have some of the best healers. They make amazing potions from the land. It's quite impressive. Lena has been kind enough to share some of the light ways with our healers."

"I'm sure humans would love to get their hands on it," I said lightly.

Varwik's eyes flashed. "We do not share with humans. It is forbidden. You really need to learn the laws of our land." He turned towards Lena. "You need to take time and explain the way things work in our world."

"Of course," Lena replied with a smile.

I ate the food in front of me—much more slowly this time—and accepted seconds when they were offered. The meal was interminably long and uncomfortable, as Varwik tried to make everyone talk and none of us did anything but give one-word answers.

When everyone was done eating, Varwik waved a servant over to the table. Immediately the faery with auburn hair began cleaning up around us.

"You have a decision to make." Varwik stood. "You better hurry up and make it." He took Lena's arm and walked out of the room, leaving Kallan and me at the table.

I sat back in my chair and crossed my arms over my chest, fighting a sense of déjà-vu since we'd only just done the same thing at the last meal. I waited for him to speak first, because I certainly wasn't going to.

He echoed my posture, and we just stared at each other. I was getting more and more annoyed by the second, but I wasn't giving in. I had no desire to be here and wasn't going to pretend I did.

I don't know how long we sat there until Varwik and Lena came back in. Looking at me, he said, "It's not looking good for you." He motioned to Lena. "Take her away."

Lena stood by my chair and waited for me to get up. Once I did, she led the way back to my room. I turned to her before she closed the door and locked me in for the night. "Can't I at least have a book?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks." I walked inside and the door closed with a loud clang.

A few minutes later, Lena returned and handed me a copy of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet.* "Really?" I asked. Just my luck to end up with Shakespeare again. "This was all you could find?"

"Do you want it or not?" Her eyes flashed with irritation and she shoved the book at my chest.

I took the book from her and once again, she locked me in. I paced the room with the book in my hand, flipping through it. Was I really supposed to fall for Kallan? Sure, he was gorgeous, but I hated him. He was cold and uptight, and I didn't like that at all.

Boredom set in. I sat down on the bed, propped against the headboard, and began reading the book. I finished a third of it before I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer and fell asleep.

Things went just as well at our next meal as they did at the last one. After I refused to play nicely, Varwik's eyes flashed with anger. "Both of you are stubborn!"

Lena knelt down next to him. "Varwik, I was thinking that it would be a good idea for Kallan to take Oleander out of the castle so she can get a glimpse of the beauty that comes with the fey life."

Varwik tapped his finger to his chin and glanced over at his son. There was affection in his gaze when he looked back at Lena. "That

is a brilliant idea."

The rest of the meal passed in idle chitchat and uncomfortable silences. Once the meal was over, the servant entered the room and cleaned up the mess. Varwik stood up to leave, and Lena followed. He stopped at the door and turned. "Kallan, take Oleander to see the grounds."

"Yes, Father," Kallan said in a tone that made it obvious he would rather scratch his eyes out than be with me.

He pushed his chair back and stood up, then walked around the table and held out his hand to me. I glanced at it and stood up on my own. I didn't need his help to get out of a chair. Just how pathetic did he think I was? My cheeks burned, and I seriously considered throwing something at him. I was doing that a lot lately.

He rolled his eyes. "Well, I won't bother offering you my arm, then. Let's get this over with."

"We could just go to our rooms and tell your father you took me." I crossed my arms and glared at him.

"My father has eyes all over this place. It's best just to do as he asks. It's really not a big deal."

"What is with you people? You just follow blindly, not willing to take a stand—it's annoying. How old are you anyway?"

"Seventeen in human years."

"Human years? What's the difference?"

Kallan started walking towards the door, and I followed, curious to hear his reply. "In our world, we age much slower once we hit eighteen in human years. I will look this way for several human generations."

"You mean when everyone else is almost forty, I'll still look like a teenager?" I had to admit that was pretty cool, but also scary. Adam would age, and I wouldn't. Suddenly, I realized the enormity of the situation.

"Well, if you decide to stay in the human realm you will age normally. It's only in our dimension that time is slowed."

I tried to process this information. I was relieved to know that I could grow old with Adam if that was what I chose. If I could find a way to get out of this place alive, anyway. I didn't know what to say so I just replied, "That's intriguing."

We were at the main entrance when Kallan paused and looked back at me. His intense blue-green eyes met mine and my wings fluttered again. That was so annoying. "You're going to see things that will amaze you and some that might scare you, but I assure you that you are safe with me."

*What the hell does that mean?* "Umm, okay."

He pushed the large wooden doors open and a whole new world appeared before my eyes.

"Wow," I whispered. "It's beautiful."

The sky was black, and the stars were several different colors: pink, purple, turquoise and more. Trees taller than I'd ever imagined with trunks as big around as houses flanked us on all sides but behind us.

I didn't want to tear my eyes away, but Kallan was already way ahead of me. He noticed that I was lagging behind and walked back to where I stood. His fingers closed on my elbow to steer me away. As soon as he touched me, a shot of electricity coursed through my body. I pulled my arm back and looked up at him, stunned. He stared at me intently for a moment, and then looked away. I wondered if he had felt it, too. What did it mean? First, my wings move involuntarily, and now his touch sends surges through my body.

I decided to ignore my feelings. For now. "Where are we?"

Kallan smiled wryly. "This is the world you were born into."

"But I mean, where are we? The sky doesn't look like this where I'm from."

"Just think of it as another dimension. There is only a thin veil between the magickal world and the real world. Which is why we are able to travel back and forth between them."

“Everything is so much brighter here. Even in the dark, the flowers seem to glow, and the trees look like something out of a fairy tale. I half expect them to start singing and dancing.”

Kallan laughed, and the sound made my heart leap. He always sounded so serious. To hear him laugh and see his face come alive in the moonlight made me think there could be some good in him after all. I had to force myself to look away.

What the hell was I thinking? Adam was the only one for me. I needed to shake these crazy thoughts from my head. Besides, Kallan couldn’t stand me.

We walked forward towards a path lined with huge shrubs sprouting with beautiful flowers. The amazingly sweet smell drifted to my nose. I leaned down to touch one, but Kallan yanked me back.

“Don’t touch them.”

I blinked, surprised, and snatched my hand back. “Why not?”

“They’re poisonous.” He continued to walk forward, and I tried to keep up.

“Oh. Why would you have poisonous flowers?”

“To keep enemies away. Extra security measure.”

“Oh. The dark faeries have enemies?” There really was so much that I didn’t know. It was almost overwhelming.

“Doesn’t everyone?” he said with a chuckle.

The trees erupted into childlike giggles, and I snapped my head up. “The trees are laughing,” I whispered.

Kallan scoffed. “Not the trees, the piskies.”

I caught his eye. “The what?”

“Piskies. They’re like miniature faeries.”

“Oh, right. Azura told me about them. Are they dangerous?” I asked.

“No, they wouldn’t hurt anyone. However, they do like to play, and when you play with them, you lose all track of time. So don’t

give in," he warned. "When I was a young boy, I often got yelled at because of those little trouble-makers."

I tried to imagine Kallan as a child, and it just wasn't happening.

The trees giggled again, and I wondered what these piskies looked like. Maybe I'd find out someday. Sadness filled my heart once again. I didn't belong here; this was not my home, no matter how beautiful or mystical it was. I longed to be back with my family and friends.

"We should get back," I said solemnly.

Kallan met my eyes and nodded. "Very well, then."

He escorted me to my room. At the door, I turned and faced him. "Thanks," I said, trying to be polite.

"You're welcome, but I'm not sure for what."

"The walk. I didn't realize how much I missed fresh air."

"Oh. Sure."

He was inches from me, and I had an odd desire to reach out and touch him, but I resisted. I bit my lower lip and looked at the door.

"It was a pleasure," Kallan finally said, but his face was distant.

Without bothering to respond, I hurried inside the room.

I got ready for bed with my mind bouncing around, utterly confused by the past few days. The fey world was beautiful, and I'd be insane not to want to be a part of it. But not like this. Not captured, not forced, and definitely not without Adam.

The next night, we walked around the side of the castle and took a different path. "Where does this go?" I asked curiously.

"A fountain." He didn't offer any details.

"Man of many words," I muttered. Even if I wanted to get to know him, I couldn't because he wouldn't offer anything. He didn't even seem like he wanted to be with me. What was the point? The only good thing to come out of Varwik's decree that we take walks together was I was able to escape my prison for a little while.

The further we walked, the better I heard the water in the distance. We soon stepped out of the woods into a circular clearing dominated by a giant, clear crystal formation that flowed water. The sun shone brightly, shooting facets of light through the combination of crystal and water. Three marble faery statues appeared to guard the crystal, their stoic faces facing away from the water and into the forest. The large, smooth rocks beneath my bare feet felt cool, and the mist of the fountain's spray hit my skin. Its beauty left me speechless. I didn't think I'd ever laid my eyes on anything so peaceful before.

I sat down on one of the low wooden benches surrounding the fountain and smiled. The sound of the water trickling was almost musical. I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the sun.

After a few minutes, Kallan said, "We should go."

I didn't want to leave the fountain. It was the most relaxed I had felt since I got to this awful place. "It's so serene here. Can't we

stay a little longer?"

"We need to get back to the castle," Kallan murmured, wrapping his long fingers around my elbow and propelling me to my feet.

I opened one eye and glared. "I don't want to."

"Well, you don't have a choice. Now, let's go."

I was getting madder by the minute. "You listen to me, you jerk. I'm not one of your father's servants. You can't order me around."

He pressed his lips together. "You seem to have forgotten that you are a prisoner here."

"No. There's no way I could do that," I retorted, yanking my arm from his grasp. "The way I'm jerked around and yelled at all the time keeps me reminded."

A brief look of sympathy passed through Kallan's eyes, and then he looked away. "I don't want you to get in trouble with my father. We've been out too long. Please, let's just head back."

"And what if I don't go with you?" I planted my feet. If he wanted to drag me kicking and screaming, I could make it fun.

Kallan ran a hand through his dark hair, his eyes closing briefly. "There are consequences."

"Oh, please." I rolled my eyes. "I've already been kidnapped, what else could you possibly do?"

"I assure you, whatever my father would do wouldn't be pleasant."

"*Everything* is up to your father. Don't you have a say in anything?"

He looked down and kicked at something on the ground with his foot. "No."

"You should stand up to him."

"Right." He gave a short laugh, and then glanced back up at me. "Things are different here. Not like the human realm. We have a leader, and we have to follow what he says. Unfortunately, that leader happens to be my father."

"You're pathetic."

Kallan drew a deep breath. “You’ve tossed that word out quite a few times. Makes me believe you’re nothing but a selfish brat.”

“At least I’ve never hurt anyone!” I screamed, shoving him with both hands.

“Neither have I!” he barked back, and a pained expression crossed his face. But then suddenly, he was gone.

“Kallan?” I stared at the space where he had been standing. When I didn’t get an answer, I laughed. “Good! With you gone, I can stay here longer.” I flopped back onto the bench and draped my arm across the back.

He grunted and invisible fingers grabbed my wrist. “We need to go.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Besides, you’re supposed to be spending time with me. What’s wrong? You have a hot date you’re missing?” I swatted at where I thought he might be with my other hand.

He caught it and became visible again. He was sitting right in front of me, holding both my hands. My breath hitched in my throat, I was so struck by his beauty.

“Why the attitude?” he asked.

“Why did you disappear?” I shot back.

Kallan cleared his throat, and one of his thumbs drifted over the back of my hand. It sent electricity through me. “Strong emotion can sometimes trigger it. It began when I was younger.”

“Oh.” I stared at him. He wasn’t perfect. Faeries could be flawed, so maybe there was a bit of humanity in him.

“Why are you being so difficult?”

My breath quickened, and my wings fluttered. I could get lost looking into his hypnotic eyes. Swallowing hard, I answered, “I don’t like being cooped up in that room. You don’t know what it’s like.”

After a long pause, he leaned a little closer. “I’m sorry.”

I bit my lip to keep from getting any nearer to him. *Keep your head on straight, Rylie. He’s the enemy.*

Oh, but how I wanted to kiss him. Just once to see how it felt. I could feel myself leaning towards him, as if I were in a trance. I wondered if that was possible. I felt such a strange pull towards him. *No! No! No!* my mind screamed, and I yanked my hands back. I had never been so attracted and repulsed by someone at the same time.

I hopped to my feet, brushing my palms down the front of my dress as if I could get rid of his touch. "We can go now."

He walked me to my room and opened the door for me. "Have a good night," he murmured, looking me in the eye.

I nodded and walked in, and I cringed as he shut it behind me. After a minute, I realized I didn't hear the bolt lock. Curious, I went to the door and pulled on it. Sure enough, it opened. A shiver went down my spine, but I slithered out the door into the hall.

I took a few steps, expecting someone to catch me and throw me back. Nobody came. It was quiet, so I continued on a few more steps. When I made it down an entire hallway with no one in sight, I began walking faster, peering around corners and into empty rooms. It all looked so similar: long hallways, large, open rooms. The only thing different was the decor.

I came to a closed door. All of the other doors had been open. Curiosity got the best of me, so I peeked inside. It seemed to be a closet. As I opened the door further, something on the floor caught my eye.

My backpack.

From down the hall, I heard footsteps getting closer. I looked left and right, panicked. Where to hide? Eyeing the closet, I thought, *What the hell?* I hurried inside and quietly shut the door behind me. I hid all the way in the back, pulling my backpack closer. I heard the footsteps pass by, but I didn't feel safe enough to leave the closet yet.

I unzipped the backpack. It was too dark for me to see anything, so I stuck my hand in the backpack and felt around.

My hand rested on my cell phone. I pulled it out of the bag and pushed the sleep button. The screen lit up, displaying ten missed calls. I tried to call home, but there was nothing but silence. I looked at the screen again—no service. *Damn.* Had I really expected there to be? I couldn't even listen to the voicemails. But, ten calls before it went out of service…at least someone was looking for me. I turned the phone off and slid it into my bra.

I cracked open the door and peeked out. Seeing nobody around, I snuck out and continued to walk the hall. I had no idea where I was going.

"Hey!" I heard Lena's voice behind me. "What are you doing out here?" she hissed.

I spun around and faced her. "I'm just taking a walk."

She narrowed her eyes. "Looks like you're trying to escape. That's a sure way to get yourself killed."

"If that was the case, I'd be running." I sighed. "Do you have to take me back?"

She nodded. "We'll take the long way."

I followed Lena as she led me down a different hall. "The library is on the right. Full of books from the human world as well as our world. Living area on the left." She kept on walking. "Sewing room, where all the clothes are made."

"Who makes the clothes? The dresses are amazing."

"Servants."

Of course. Probably light faeries that owed Varwik something.

"Further down is the kitchen, which connects to the dining room we eat in. Varwik's quarters are on the other side of that."

"And Kallan's?" I felt heat rise to my cheeks.

She glanced over at me, one dainty eyebrow raised. "There as well, down the hall from his father's."

I wondered if he was asleep and what his room looked like. I quickly admonished myself and touched my bracelet, visualizing Adam's face.

"What do faeries do, Lena?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"School? Work? Is there a whole faery town out there?"

Lena chuckled. "Of course. There is a whole village. But Varwik won't let you off the palace grounds until you've accepted your fate and married Kallan." She paused, as if considering her words, before she continued. "There's work to do, most of it out in nature. You'll learn more about that later. Right now, it's time to get back to your room." She turned a corner and stopped in front of the door.

Startled, I stared balefully at the cell where I'd spent the last five days of my life. We'd gotten there so fast.

"Thanks for the walk." I opened the door and went inside.

"Don't ever leave your room again without an escort."

This time, I heard the lock clang into place.

The next morning, I got up and in the shower before Lena had a chance to come harp on me. I let the water run down my wings, making them tingle in the intimate way I had come to love. I was able to relax, if only for the moment.

I stepped out on to the plush gray rug, wrapping a towel around my wet hair. With the hand towel from the sink, I dried off the mirror so that I could see myself.

I ran my fingers around the outside of my ears; the points seemed even pointier than usual. It still felt weird. My fingers traveled to my birthmark, which glowed a little, letting everyone know it was there. It was like a having a gigantic pimple waving a flag on the tip of your nose. I wondered how long it would take for me to get used to the changes.

I flapped my wings a few times, letting the droplets left on them hit the walls. They were beautiful, even if I did wish they were on someone else. In this faery world, I didn't have to use glamour. I was free to be who I was. The person staring back at me in the

mirror was who Kallan saw. But not who Adam saw. What would Adam think if he saw me like this? Would he still love me?

A rap on the door brought me out of my daydream. "Just a minute," I called.

"Hurry up, Oleander. They want you there for breakfast today." It was Lena.

I grabbed a short blue dress from the closet and stepped into it. Then I brushed my hair up out of my face, using a clip to hold it in place. On the bright side, it was a nice change of pace not to have to use makeup. Shower and go. I'd been missing a great thing.

"Good choice," Lena said as she looked me over.

"Where are shoes?" I asked her. "I've been barefoot for days."

I had actually startled her. She blinked. "Most faeries don't wear shoes."

Right. Being barefoot definitely made me feel more like a faery. I sighed and motioned to her that I was ready.

"I think I know the way by now," I told her as we entered the hallway, and Lena pulled my door shut.

"It's my job to escort you to the dining hall and be there in case you or Varwik might need something." This time, she linked her arm in mine instead of grabbing my bicep. Just that small touch of humanity made me feel a little better.

I heard raised voices as we reached the dining room, and Lena paused, her arm falling away from mine. We were silent for a moment, both of us straining to hear through the double doors.

"We're not compatible, Father. She's a light faery, and I'm not. She has an entirely different life out there. She didn't grow up here. She doesn't know our ways. We have nothing in common." It was Kallan's voice, highly agitated.

"Then show her our ways," Varwik grumbled back.

"Neither of us wants this. What about me? What about what I want?"

For some reason, I felt a rush of pride that Kallan was standing up to his father. Maybe our talk at the fountain had opened his eyes.

Varwik's tone was furious when he answered. "Are you talking about the faery girl you had your eyes set on recently?"

"What if I am?" Kallan challenged.

"She's not right for you. She's not good enough for our bloodline."

"And Oleander is? Give me a break."

"If you do not marry her, I will be forced to kill her. You do understand that, right?"

A long pause followed. "Yes, Father."

Rage filled me, and I shoved open the door, brushing off Lena's startled grasp on my arm. I cleared my throat as I barreled into the room. "It's not polite to talk about your guests without them present," I said sarcastically.

Lena rushed in behind me, her face stricken. "I'm sorry, my lord. I tried to stop her from entering."

Varwik held a hand up to Lena and studied my face. "I'm sorry you had to overhear that."

It wasn't worth answering. He wasn't going to apologize for being a heartless beast, and Kallan wouldn't apologize for being in love with someone else at the risk of my own life. I sat down and looked around the table at the huge selection. It was enough to feed an army, not four people. If I focused on breakfast, maybe I wouldn't cry. I grabbed a croissant from one of the baskets, and piled eggs, sausages, and potatoes onto my plate.

"What did you think of the grounds, Oleander?" Lena asked in a gentle voice.

I shrugged, tearing a piece off the croissant. I didn't want to admit how beautiful their world was; it felt too much like giving in. "What I saw was nice."

A servant passed by and refilled my glass of juice. I smiled up at her.

“Very different from the human realm, isn’t it?” Lena prodded.

“Yup.” I picked at the croissant and didn’t say anything else.

Lena kept trying to get us all to talk, but it was useless. Another uncomfortable meal. I would never belong in the faery world.

After breakfast, Kallan asked, "Do you wish to take another walk?"

Part of me wanted to say no so I could go back to my room and wait for them to kill me. But the other part was so captivated by the outside world, I found myself nodding. "I'd like to see what it looks like at this time of day. It'll be nice to stretch my legs."

"Very well." He stood and almost offered me his hand, but must have thought better of it, walking instead to the door, where he waited patiently for me. At least it seemed like he wasn't horrified at the idea of walking with me anymore, not to mention he'd figured me out enough to know I didn't want to be coddled.

The beauty of the land struck me speechless. There were so many colorful birds dancing through the sky above us, and the grass and trees were so lush and bright. It was like something from a dream.

We walked under the bright sun for a while before either of us said anything.

I finally had to break the silence. "You have a girlfriend?"

"In a way. It's not like what you're used to."

"You like her?"

"Very much."

"So you'd rather be with her than be forced to be with me?"

He paused. "I'm not sure she's 'the one,' but I don't wish to be forced to marry you—or anyone else for that matter."

I stopped walking. “Then why aren’t you standing up for yourself?”

“You heard him, Oleander. He’ll kill you. I may not want to marry you, but I don’t wish to see you dead. I would rather not have that on my conscience.” He paused, glancing away with that ever-present tick in his jaw. “I’m not a monster.”

I peeked over at him as we continued walking. His face was thoughtful, maybe even a little peaceful compared to the atmosphere in the dining room.

We approached a Japanese-style bridge flanked by long, leafy ferns and quaint rock sculptures. The bridge itself was arched gracefully over the stream, painted bright red. Halfway across, I stopped and stared down into the rushing water. Golden fish played in the water, darting about as if in some kind of water ballet. The water was a strange turquoise; I had never seen quite that shade of blue before. It was stunning.

“What do you like to do?” I asked after the silence started bothering me again.

Kallan shrugged. “We train a lot, so that takes up most of my free time. I really enjoy fencing, and I like to play sports. Father doesn’t allow me a lot of time to do trivial things.”

“Sports? What kind of sports?” Just the thought of sports made my heart ache. Adam was obsessed with sports.

Kallan stared into the water. “We have many sports that are similar to the humans. My favorite is close to what you would know as rugby.”

“That’s cool. I’ve never watched a rugby game before.” I finished walking over the bridge and glanced back at Kallan, who looked deep in thought. As he joined me on the opposite bank, I asked, “Do you have friends?”

He laughed, and that beautiful sound made me smile inside. “Of course I have friends. Do you find me so repulsive that you don’t think anyone else could possibly like me?”

I stole a glance at him, and for the life of me, I just couldn't imagine him having friends and playing sports. He wasn't *normal*. "No, it's not that. It's just hard to picture. I guess I just don't know much about you."

"I don't know anything about you, either. What do you normally enjoy?" He directed the question to me with eyes that seemed interested in my answer.

"I'm in the choir. I love singing and dancing. I'm horrible at anything athletic. Mainly, I like to hang out with my best friend, Sierra, and Ad—" I felt really uncomfortable talking about Adam to the guy I was supposed to marry, so I changed the subject. "Do you ever go into the human world?"

"No," he said curtly.

"Never? Not even once?"

There was a long pause. "I've gone once. My father doesn't like it. And I don't either. I don't see what's so great about it. Our world is far superior." His voice was filled with hatred.

I wasn't sure I understood his answer, but I knew better than to question him anymore. I wondered what had happened that made him hate the human world so much. It seemed to be much more than just his upbringing.

A thought crossed my mind, and I spun around to look at Kallan. "What's your power?"

"I wish you hadn't asked me that." Kallan ran a hand through his dark hair, and the front stayed spiked. It was eccentric and cute. "People fear me because of my power."

My curiosity was piqued. "Tell me."

He stopped in his tracks, studying me intently as he said, "Mind control."

"What do you mean 'mind control'? Like compulsion?"

"Kinda, but I also have the ability to completely erase someone's memories. I could turn someone into a blank slate." He looked at

the ground. “It’s a powerful tool. Your mind is your most valuable asset, and knowing you could lose control of it is scary.”

I heard Varwik in the assessment. It was seriously like he’d been completely brainwashed from birth. “I could see where that could cause fear.”

“I would never use it on you,” he told me quickly, one hand darting out to touch my hand where it hung at my side.

I met his eyes and was about to question whether or not he really would when I remembered that faeries can’t lie. Suddenly, I had another thought. “Why don’t you clear your father’s memory of me, and I can escape?”

He frowned, and I could tell he warred with himself over his answer. I could only imagine how difficult it would be to love and hate your own dad. “I wish I could. My father is immune to any kind of power. That’s how he became leader of our land. No one could best him.”

“Really? Immunity is his power?”

“More or less,” Kallan agreed.

That power would be one to truly fear. “I still don’t know what my power is. Can you help me figure that out?”

“No, it doesn’t work that way. Gifts just show themselves when it is time. I’m sure you will find yours soon enough.”

“Figures,” I said under my breath. Nothing was easy in the faery world, it seemed.

A few minutes later, he escorted me back to the castle and up to my room. “I’ll see you at dinner?” His tone of voice made it seem more like a question than a statement.

Like I had a choice? “Sure.”

I walked into my room and the door closed behind me, the lock sliding into place. Apparently, they told him to make sure the door was locked. Just my luck.

I flung myself on the bed and thought about what Kallan had said about his abilities and Varwik’s immunity to all abilities. Even if I

had an awesome ability, I couldn't use it on him, at least not now.

But if I had an ability to help me escape, he couldn't do anything about it. Now…if I could just figure out what my ability was.

I plopped down on the bed and tried to think of every book I've ever read, every movie I've seen. Maybe it would spark an idea. But nothing much came to mind. I let my head fall into my hands, frustrated.

The room was becoming smaller with every passing hour. I hated being cooped up. My hands were sweaty and shaky as I paced. I had to get out of here. I leaned up against the door and rested my forehead on it, praying for a way out.

The next day when Lena came, she said, "Varwik said you could walk around the gardens today, if you'd like, as long as I accompany you."

"Gee, how nice of him," I said sarcastically, turning another page in Romeo & Juliet. I was almost done with it.

"You shouldn't be like that," Lena told me gently. "He's giving you some freedom. You should be grateful."

"I wouldn't call it freedom," I told her without looking up from the words on the page. I fingered the corner of the page for a moment before turning it down. "But I guess I'll take what I can get."

A few minutes later, I was out in the sun, taking in the beauty around me. I could hear a bunch of low male voices ahead and followed the sound. Through the leaves, I spotted Kallan with three other faery men. They were standing in a group with what looked like lacrosse sticks. Kallan had a big goofy grin on his face as he talked to his friends. It looked so out of place from the Kallan I knew. He was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, something much different than the clothes he normally wore. This was a different side of Kallan. One I found myself wishing I could see more often.

*Ugh*. I needed to stop thinking of him like that. The only person I should be thinking about was Adam.

Lena tried to pull me back, but I shook my head. I wanted to see what they were doing.

One of them held up a finger. He was a short, thick-necked guy with platinum-blond hair. “There’s someone else here.” The boy spun in a circle, his eyes scanning the woods. They passed right over me.

Kallan’s eyes, however, landed right on me. “Come out, Oleander.”

Slowly, I walked into the clearing, heat rushing to my cheeks. I felt so exposed, and slightly embarrassed to be caught spying on them.

Kallan’s hair was ruffled, and his eyes cold. “What are you doing out here?”

“Just walking the grounds. I heard voices. I wanted to see who it was.” I stared at him defiantly. “Do you have a problem with that?”

The tall, red-haired faery to his right let out a whistle. “She’s hot and feisty, Kallan. I like it.”

Kallan shrugged. “She’s okay.”

“Okay?” the shorter blond one said. “She’s gorgeous. Look at those wings.”

“You want her? Take her. She’s yours,” Kallan said hotly.

He laughed. “Isn’t she promised to you?” The guy was giving me the creeps the way he kept looking up and down my body.

“She wants nothing to do with me, nor I with her. So, you go for it. Good luck. She’s a pain in the ass.”

I narrowed my eyes. I couldn’t believe how much anger welled up in my chest. “I hate you!” How dare he pawn me off on his friends? Who did he think he was? I picked up a rock and threw it at him before storming back in the direction of the castle.

Lena hurried to catch up. “He didn’t mean anything. He was just showing off for his friends.”

“Whatever.” I didn’t bother looking back. I wasn’t okay with the tears in my eyes, so I definitely didn’t want her to see them, either.

“You have to understand your rebuttal is hard for him to take. He’s used to getting what he wants.”

I spun around on the balls of my feet. “Are you kidding me? He doesn’t want me. He can’t even stand the sight of me.”

Lena just smiled.

I refused to eat anything at all that day, and just stayed in my room. I didn’t understand what had happened with Kallan, and I wanted to talk about it with Sierra. It made me more homesick when I thought about how truly alone I was.

That night, I dreamt of Adam. He was holding me in bed. He pressed his lips on mine, I closed my eyes, and the kissed deepened. When I opened my eyes in the dream, Adam was gone and Kallan was there instead. I woke up crying. My heart was pounding so hard I thought it was going to come out of my chest.

I heard the light pitter-patter of footsteps outside my door. Bursting into my room a few seconds later, Lena asked, “Oleander, are you all right?”

I wrung my hands in my lap and then pushed my hair out of my face trying to compose myself. “Yeah, just a bad dream.”

She narrowed her eyes like she was trying to figure out if I was telling the truth. Finally, she asked, “Do you need anything? I can give you something to help you sleep.” Her voice was gentle, and it reminded me of my mother. Just the thought of her made my heart ache. I wondered how she was holding up since I disappeared. I’m sure she and Dad were both a wreck.

“Oleander?”

“No, thanks,” I mumbled and rolled over on the bed. “Not unless you can bring me home.”

She nodded and closed the door softly behind her.

I tried to fall back asleep, but just couldn’t. I kept thinking about the dream and what it meant. Why would I dream about kissing Kallan? I didn’t like him that way. He was such a jerk! Every time I saw him, I wanted to throw something at him. He sure as heck wasn’t Adam.

Now I was positive I had to get out of this place. I felt like I was losing myself.

There was a knock at the door. I knew it was Lena. Her knocks were short, and she always paused before opening the door. "Morning," she said, sticking her head in. "Varwik said I could let you out a little early today, if you were up to it, and let you walk around before breakfast."

"Oh, lucky me. Breakfast and a walk. How nice of him to allow these things. I feel like a pampered pet," I said sarcastically. I'd been lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling. My book was finished on the nightstand, and I was going stir-crazy.

Lena flipped her hair back. "I guess he wants you to spend more time with Kallan. Take advantage of it."

As if two daily meals and a dream weren't enough?

"I'll go get ready." As much as I hated doing anything Varwik said, I had to get out of the room. I was starting to feel like a caged animal.

I showered and dressed quickly.

Lena met me outside my door with a smile. "You look beautiful. Where do you want to go?"

"Thanks. As far away as we *can* go would be nice."

"Very well." She began walking, and I followed, taking in parts of the house I hadn't seen before. Varwik really did have impeccable taste. I ran my hand across a long wooden desk in the library, then paused to admire a beautiful stained-glass lamp that sat on it.

When I looked up again, Lena was waiting at the door, tapping her foot. I hurried to catch up to her. She pushed the door open, and we walked outside. I was greeted with the bright sun and the tropical scent of flowers. I was beginning to get used to being barefoot outside, which scared me. I didn't want to get used to anything here, because as far as I was concerned, it was still a temporary situation. But the feeling of the soft grass felt comforting,

and even when I was walking on the rocky path, it didn't seem to bother me. I felt like I was one with nature.

I walked to a large, open area in the courtyard with all different kinds of flowers, most of which I had never seen before. I smiled and sat down in the middle of the field. I leaned back on my hands and closed my eyes, letting the sun shine down on my face. Out of nowhere, I began to sing my solo. I don't know what prompted me to do so, it just came out.

The notes came easily. I let the song surround me and comfort me. It was a piece of home in a strange and horrible place. It helped me forget that my life was in danger, that if I couldn't find a way out, I'd be forced to marry someone I didn't love.

Someone who wasn't Adam.

"Wow."

I snapped my head around to find Kallan staring down at me. He stood a few feet behind me, his hands shoved in the pockets of his dark pants. I suddenly felt very self-conscious. Blood rushed to my face.

"Your voice is amazing. I don't think I've ever heard anything so hauntingly beautiful before." The awe in his voice made my heart beat faster.

From my periphery, I noticed Lena standing up, and I glanced at her as she walked away. She didn't say a word as she headed up the same path we came, disappearing towards the castle.

After she was gone, I caught Kallan's contemplative stare and flushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sing. It just came out." I stood up and brushed the grass off my dress. I felt very awkward and unsure of what to do with my hands, so I clasped them in front of me to keep from fidgeting. I really didn't like the effect he had on me.

Kallan took a step closer, and my wings fluttered. "You don't have anything to be sorry for."

I looked down at the ground. "Guess I don't know what will get me in trouble and what won't."

"Singing won't get you in trouble…especially with that voice. I know you said you were in choir, but I guess I didn't realize how good you were."

"I have a solo coming up in a concert soon…or at least I did." I blinked my eyes a few times, trying to keep the tears from coming.

"Come with me. I want to show you something." He reached out, his hand dangling in the air between us.

I hesitated. If I took his hand, what then? I couldn't accept my fate being stuck here as his bride. But…there was something in Kallan that was so much better than the boy who had been shaped by an evil father.

I took his hand. It was large and cool in mine. Just his touch caused my breathing to quicken, but I hoped he didn't notice.

He pulled me along a winding, cobblestone path. Though I was dying to know where he was taking me, I didn't voice my questions. I already felt too…close. To him.

The path grew narrow and less traveled. The trees became thick, and the forest dark. If it weren't for Kallan beside me, I would have been scared. It was wild and untamed in this part of the forest. No sounds from the castle—like the steady clang of swordsmen at training or the whirring of the water turbine that powered the electricity.

We turned a sharp corner, and up ahead, I saw a small stone cottage. It was beautiful—the stones were pale gray and decorated in dark ivy. The windows were like gaping eyes, each flanked by bright yellow shutters. The cerulean front door looked like a smile.

His paced increased, and I practically had to jog to keep up.

In front of the cottage, he stopped and took me by the shoulders. "I've never shown anyone this, but I had a sudden urge to show you." He pushed open the door, and I stepped inside.

I covered my mouth in surprise.

The cottage walls were lined with canvases. Some blank, but most of them beautiful pieces of art. Paintings of the forest, waterfalls, and flowers brightened the room.

“Kallan, did you draw these?” I asked as I walked forward. Carefully, I touched a beautiful charcoal drawing of the forest. The details were insane. Possibly even better than Sierra, and that was saying something.

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “I’ve always loved to draw. Since I was little. It’s the only thing I have left of my mother. She was an artist.” It was the first time he had mentioned her.

I turned to face him. “What happened to your mom?”

“She was killed when I was five.” He touched the circlet of dark stones at his neck. “She gave me this. She taught me how to paint and would bring me here so we could paint together. That’s really all I remember about her.”

“Kallan, I don’t know what to say. That’s horrible.” I wanted to offer a hug, but I didn’t feel comfortable.

He shuffled through some images in a large file folder and pulled one out. It was a picture of a dark faery running through a field. Her wings were the exact color as Kallan’s. Her face was blurred.

“Your mother?” I asked softly.

“Yeah, I can’t remember what she looked like, so I did the best I could.” He put the image back behind some of the others and put his hands in his pockets. I had a sudden urge to brush the hair out of his face.

I forced myself to look away. I wandered around the cottage, looking at all of his artwork. He worked in several mediums, but the charcoals were my favorite—they were so real. In the corner near the window, an easel sat with a cover over it. I walked towards it, but Kallan grabbed my arm and spun me around.

“That’s private.” He dropped his hand.

“Oh, sorry.” I glanced back over at the easel and wondered what was under it. Probably a painting of the girl he liked. I was surprised to feel jealous at the notion.

“We should head back,” Kallan said quietly. “I don’t want to get you in trouble with my father for venturing so far from the castle without his permission.”

"Yeah, we wouldn't want that," I said wryly.

I thought I saw a hint of a smile on his face. It came and went, quickly replaced with his stony mask again.

As we headed for the door, I said, "Thank you for sharing this with me."

"Not sure why I did. I guess hearing you sing… I don't know."

"Whatever the reason," I continued, "thank you. Life has gotten so boring. I feel like all I do is eat, sleep, and walk."

Kallan laughed, his hand resting on the doorknob. "What else would you be doing in the human world? Isn't it more of the same?"

"Well, for starters, I wouldn't be locked in a tiny room all day," I told him, my lips pursed. "I'd spend time with my friends."

"You don't enjoy my company?" he teased.

This side of him made me blush. "You can be…"

"Yeah," Kallan said when I didn't finish my sentence. "I know. I'm sorry. I don't mean to hurt you."

We walked the path in silence until I could see the castle looming in the distance. It was black against the pale blue sky, the top craggy and mean. It was nothing like the romantic castles always pictured in the human world. I really didn't want to go back.

Kallan's steps faltered, and he fell behind me.

I turned back to him, raising an eyebrow. "Are you okay?"

He shook his head, his face half in shadow. The sun was sinking fast, already invisible from the forest floor.

"The way I feel when I'm with you." He wouldn't meet my eyes.

My heart pounded. I took a couple of steps forward and touched his arm. "What do you mean?"

Faster than I could respond, he had me pushed up against a tree. His long, lean body was pressed against mine, his hands trailing down my arms.

I should have been scared, but all I could think about was how much I wanted to reach up and run my hands through his hair. I

yearned for his red lips to touch mine. Something deep and primal inside me wanted him.

"Why are you so frustrating?" he breathed in my ear.

I trembled, his whisper sending chills through my body. Did he feel the same thing I did?

*Adam.*

The thought hit me like a wrecking ball, and my world crumbled. Adam was back home, waiting for me, probably frantic to find me. I had to stop this thing with Kallan before it had any chance to begin.

I placed my hands on Kallan's chest and pushed him away from me. "Stop. Take me back."

His gaze held mine for a long time before he finally dropped his arms and stepped away. Without another word, he walked briskly towards the castle.

I lingered behind, trying to compose myself. My hands still trembled, and my body ached for his touch.

I hated myself.

Once I was back in my room, I walked around muttering to myself. Why was I so attracted to Kallan? There was nothing about him that I liked. Sure, he was good-looking, but that's where the attraction ended. He was such a jerk, even if he had the most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen. I willed myself to stop thinking about him, and instead brought my attention back to the real problem. How was I going to get out?

Because now it was imperative, before Kallan got under my skin.

I thought about home. Not just of Adam, but my parents and Sierra, too. I wondered if the cops were searching the woods. How long would they look for me? Would they think I ran away or would they know for sure I had been kidnapped? My parents would know, and my dad never gave up on anything.

Then my thoughts turned to Azura. I wondered if she told my parents what had happened. If they knew where I was, would they still involve the police? Maybe they made up a story for the school and my friends?

I missed talking with Sierra and watching TV with my mom. Most of all, I missed being with Adam. I felt so alone and unwanted in this place. I curled up in a ball on my bed and let the tears pour from me until I succumbed to sleep.

The pain was still there in the morning when I woke. I wanted to go home. I wanted to sleep in my own bed, eat my mom's crappy cooking, and be with my friends. I wanted to feel loved and cared

about again. I wanted to feel like a normal teenager. I was starting to think that was never going to happen.

A short rap on the door caused me to jump. “Come in,” I said when the door didn’t open.

The handle turned slowly, and Kallan stuck his head in. “Morning.”

Quickly, I wiped the tears from my eyes. I didn’t want him to see me crying. “Morning,” I replied, my voice soft.

“Are you okay?” he asked, looking genuinely concerned.

“No. I’m not. What do you want?”

He studied me in silence for a long moment, and I shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. Finally, he spoke. “Why don’t you and I go for a walk?”

We walked to the castle gardens, where the sun was high and the staff was puttering around, hoses flowing water and clippers clipping hedges into geometric shapes. It was an idyllic scene, almost normal, like something found in the human world.

“Now, tell me what’s bothering you,” Kallan said, his hands clasped behind his back as we strolled.

I glanced over at him, and then back at the ground. “I miss my home, my family, my friends.”

“Your boyfriend?” Kallan’s voice was neutral.

“Yes, I miss Adam,” I snapped. “He’s the only person I’ve ever loved, and he’s also my best friend.” I met his eyes, daring him to say anything about Adam.

Kallan raised his hands. “I didn’t mean to upset you more.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t take it out on you. I know this isn’t your fault. I just wish I could find a way out of here.” I paused and looked down at my hands, trying to figure out how to word it without insulting his realm. “I don’t belong here, Kallan. This is your world, not mine.”

He walked forward, taking me around the castle to the back. He seemed sincere when he asked, “Tell me about your world,

Oleander."

"Wh-what do you want to know?" I was taken aback by his question.

"Anything," he stated simply.

I twisted a strand of my hair around my finger. "Well, I live in northern Virginia. It's quite beautiful. Not as bright and colorful as it is here, but it's still gorgeous. It's not the location I miss. It's my family and friends. My mom's a schoolteacher, and a horrible cook—although she tries. I'm sure she's worried sick. She just found out I wasn't her biological child, and then I disappeared. I can't begin to imagine what she's going through."

"You met your birth mother. What did you think of her?"

I thought about Azura, and shrugged. "Only briefly. I don't really know anything about her. As far as I'm concerned, she's a just a stranger. I'll never think of her as my mom."

"You should give her a chance."

I laughed bitterly. "I don't think I'll have that option if your father has his way."

"Not necessarily. If you agreed with my father's wishes, you would be free to come and go as you please."

I mulled that over in my mind. I hadn't really thought about what would happen if I agreed to marry Kallan. The idea was just so absurd. I was sixteen, for crying out loud. People didn't get married at sixteen. Not people, but faeries did, and I was a faery. "What would it be like if we got married?" I looked away, aware of his intense gaze.

"Well, my responsibilities would increase, as would yours. My father is equivalent to the king here, which makes me second in command. Thankfully, because we age slower, it will be a long time before I have to worry about becoming a leader. However, there is still a lot to attend to. As my mate, you would be required to accompany me to functions, and even sit in on council meetings." He paused as if gathering his thoughts. "I suppose we would move into our own home, and you would have to run that."

"Oh my God, we're just kids. We can't be expected to act like adults."

"It's different here, Oleander. If you had been raised in the faery world, you would be making plans with your mate or searching for a mate. It would seem natural to you."

I wrinkled my nose. "It's just so odd. My mind doesn't want to accept it."

"The human world is strange to me. It just depends on what you're used to."

"Why haven't you already married?" I asked, thinking of the girl he'd mentioned before.

"I said it was normal, not that it was the law. I just haven't found someone I want to be with till the end of time. My father didn't meet my mother until he was older, so he doesn't push me. At least, he didn't until you came back into the picture." He looked away so I couldn't see his face, but there was no regret or malice to his words.

"Do you think we could at least convince him to wait?"

Kallan shook his head. "No, he won't wait. Once he has his mind set on something, there is no changing it. He sees you as a threat, and as the leader, he has to eliminate any threats. I'm actually surprised he didn't kill you on sight. To him, if you're not with us, you're against us."

"Why didn't he?"

"I don't think he wants to kill you. He wants power. And to have an Aurorian faery on our side would give him more power than he ever dreamed. Killing you takes that power away. But he'd rather have you dead than with the light faeries."

*Interesting*. I wondered if I could use that to my advantage somehow. "I guess that makes sense, but he's still going to kill me, isn't he?"

"He won't hesitate to kill you. He's given you a way out. It's up to you if you take it or not. The days are passing quickly." His blue-green eyes settled on my face. "Have you made up your mind?"

“No, I just keep hoping I’ll find a way out,” I answered honestly. There wasn’t any use trying to evade the question. He knew where I stood on the matter.

“I wish I could help you, but there’s no way, I’m afraid.”

I stopped in my tracks and turned towards him. “You would help me? Go against your father?”

“I don’t want you to be forced into mating with me. It’s not exactly good for the ego.” Kallan laughed. “Marry me or die. I’d like you to have a little more say than that.”

I realized he didn’t say he *didn’t* want to marry me, just that he wanted me to have a choice. I wondered if he wasn’t as opposed to the idea as he had acted previously. I was too shy to ask, and not sure I was ready to hear the answer.

“Let’s keep going. There’s something ahead I wanted you to see.” Kallan touched my arm, and my heart jumped.

“Okay.” I looked around and noticed how deep we had gone into the woods. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” He grinned wickedly.

I couldn’t help but smile back. He was so calm and collected, but I got the feeling there was a lot more underneath his cool exterior. It was almost like he was locked away inside his own body, like me in my little prison cell.

We walked for what seemed like forever in silence, but it was probably closer to a mile, before he smiled at me.

“I hope you can swim.” He winked, and then broke into a run.

I followed, laughter bubbling up inside me, and we burst free of the trees. A glistening green meadow stretched before us, and the wind whipped through my hair, warm and tangible. I watched as Kallan headed straight for what looked like the end of the world, and then leapt off.

“Kallan!” I screamed, my heart pounding. I raced to look over the edge.

It was a long way down. A cliff! The rocks were chalk white and the water deep, brilliant azure. I watched his body hit the water with a splash, and when his dark head bobbed to the surface, his wonderful laughter echoed up.

"Oh my God!" I fought to catch my breath. He had scared me half to death. I wasn't a fan of heights, but I could swim like a fish after years of lessons at the YMCA.

"You're crazy!" I yelled down.

He squinted up at me, so small a figure in the water. "Afraid?"

"Yes!" I laughed.

"Come on. I wont let you get hurt. Trust me."

I hesitated as I looked at the drop. But then I figured, what the hell? I probably only had a few more days to live anyway. I took a few steps backwards, and ran. Next thing I knew, I was in free fall, and it felt fantastic. My wings were flapping, but I wasn't flying. The air felt fabulous against my skin. The water was approaching quickly, so I pointed my hands forward and tucked my wings. I sliced gracefully into the water.

My vision was as perfect underwater as it was above. I could see all kinds of unusual fish. I didn't want to surface, but my lungs protested.

My head popped up, and I looked around for Kallan. He was right next to me, treading water, and he grinned. "I'm impressed. I didn't think you would do it."

"I love a challenge," I replied, staring directly into his eyes, which were almost the exact color of the water.

He swam closer to me. My heart was still racing from the adrenaline of the jump. His presence made my body feel alive in ways that shouldn't be possible. I loved Adam.

"Follow me." Kallan swam off, and I cut through the water after him. He led me around underwater, pointing out different underwater creatures. When we would come up for air, he explained what they were. Some of them were dangerous, but most were harmless.

When we dove under again, I couldn't see him. Panic started to rise in my chest. Something grabbed my ankle, and I kicked, trying to get it to release.

Kallan crested the water, laughing.

I hit him with all my might. "You jerk! You scared me," I gasped, splashing water at him.

He caught my hand in the air when I moved to smack him again. "I was just playing," he teased, pulling me closer.

My breathing increased, and my wings were fluttering like crazy as my body pressed against his. *Kiss me!* I thought.

As if he heard me, his lips came down on mine. He tasted like saltwater, his mouth hot and wet. He pulled me tighter, and his hands tangled in my hair, holding me firmly in place as the kiss deepened.

It wasn't necessary. I wasn't fighting it. His kiss awakened me in a way Adam's never had.

Suddenly, he pulled back, his eyes wide. He stared at me in shock, both of us breathing hard.

My arms felt bereft, and the traitor inside me pleaded inwardly for him to never stop kissing me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that. I don't know why I did. I lost control," he rambled. After a few seconds, he swam away from me. I watched as he pulled his beautifully proportioned, muscular body out of the water.

I closed my eyes and tried to control my breathing, my legs kicking beneath the surface of the water. *What just happened?*

I swam to the embankment. It was awkward, but we had to face it. We couldn't pretend it hadn't happened. I pulled myself out of the water and walked over to Kallan. He was sitting on a rock with his hands in his hair, looking down at the sand.

"I'm sorry," I said lamely.

He snapped his head up. "What do you have to be sorry about? I kissed you. I should have better self-control than that. It was like

something told me to do it, and I couldn't resist."

Bells went off in my head. *Oh, goodness.* I couldn't believe it. "Kallan, I think we found out my power."

He met my eyes. The way the water dripped off his hair was charming. "What are you talking about?"

"Right before you kissed me, I thought 'kiss me' and you did. Mind control must be my power, too."

He tilted his head to the side, his blue eyes appraising me. "You wanted me to kiss you?"

I was horrified that I had admitted that fact to him. "Probably just the adrenaline high. I'm terrified of heights. I've never done anything that crazy in my life." Now I was the one rambling. I paused, trying to figure out what to say next. "Don't worry. I still love Adam and want to leave. It won't happen again."

Kallan nodded as if he accepted the answer, which kinda pissed me off. "Can I try it again to see if it was mind control?"

"As long as you don't will me to kiss you." He smirked.

"Very funny." I stared into his eyes and thought, *Stand up and turn around.*

Kallan stood up and turned around.

"Wow." He shook his arms, turning back with a strange look on his face. "Now I know what others feel like when I use my power on them. It's not cool to give up control." He sat back down on the rock. "I've never met another mind controller. It's not a common ability."

"Oh. That's kinda weird, huh?" I said, thoughts racing through me that were worrisome.

He nodded, his eyes on the horizon as he said absently, "It's very unusual that we both have the ability."

An hour later, I was back in my room. Not having anything else to do, I could only think about what had happened with Kallan.

I ran my fingers over my lips and thought of his lips on mine. I wavered back and forth on how I felt about it. I had used mind control on him, which meant he didn't do it himself. But the kiss had felt so real. Did he regret it?

I was torn. Part of me wanted to kiss him again, and the other part of me felt very guilty. I was still with Adam. I loved him, and I had kissed another guy. Not only had I cheated, but it had been with someone I didn't even like. Was I that lonely? Kallan wasn't my type.

So now I knew my ability. A world of opportunity had arisen, and I stared at a crack in the wall, considering options.

One that kept coming to the front of my mind was to use it on Kallan and make him show me the way out of here. But every time I thought of it, I knew I couldn't do that. I couldn't use my ability on him like that. Who else could I use it on? *Think, Rylie!* Time was running out. I had to find a way out of this place soon before my head was on a platter.

I could control someone else with my mind, which meant if I told Lena to lead me out of here, she would. A smile spread across my face. Time to blow this joint.

I wiggled the doorknob and, within moments, heard it being unlocked.

Lena opened it, a sweet smile on her face. “What’s the matter, Oleander? Do you need something?”

*Take me for a walk.*

She looked at me strangely. “Oleander?”

*Show me the way out.* I clenched my fists at my side and willed her to listen to me.

Lena sighed. “Cat got your tongue? What do you want?”

Why wasn’t this working? I tried something simpler. *Jump up and down*. Nothing happened. *Flap your wings*. Again, nothing. I fought the urge to scream.

“Okay, then, let me know if there is something you need.” Lena frowned at me as she closed the door.

Frustrated and annoyed, I sat on my bed and pulled my knees up to my chest. Why didn’t it work on her? It would just be fantastic if she was immune like Varwik, or even better if it meant I was defective. Was it possible that my power only worked some of the time? It could be a consequence of living apart from the faery world. That would be just my luck. Mind control that only worked some of the time. Lovely. Maybe it only worked on certain faeries?

After a couple more hours, Lena came in and told me it was time for my walk. I felt like a dog being let out a few times a day. At least I wouldn’t have to look at the same walls for an hour or so.

“Could we go to the kitchen?” I asked.

“What for?” she asked, surprised.

“Just want to see what kind of food is there. Maybe get a snack? I haven’t eaten, and I’m starving.”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

The kitchen was beautiful. It had dark hardwood floors. The countertops were also made of various shades of wood. Three faeries were bustling around. One was kneading bread, another standing over the stove stirring something in a pot, and the last one was mopping the floors.

I walked over to the faery that was mopping the floor and stared at her. Jump, I mentally willed her. Nothing. They were worried about my powers, and I was a dud. Talk about ironic.

"Can I have something to eat?" I asked the woman who was working on the bread. She wiped her hands and hurried over to the refrigerator.

"Would you like a sandwich or something sweet?" she asked. She was an older lady, her curly white hair tucked beneath a plaid kerchief and an apron wrapped around her middle. I assumed she had to be extremely old to have finally aged into middle age.

*I'd like to get the hell out of here*, I thought bitterly.

*Sorry, lass, that's not possible.*

My eyes widened. Did she just talk to me without speaking? Or had I said that out loud?

*I'm a mind reader with the ability to share thoughts.* She pulled out a plate of ham and set it on the counter, but her eyes never met mine. *Speak, child, so the other doesn't find the silence odd.*

"Umm, sure, a sandwich sounds good. Can you put extra mustard on it?" I asked. I was trying to wrap my mind around what was going on. She was a mind reader, but I could read her mind. Wasn't that strange? I didn't seem to be able to read anyone else's mind. She did say she was able to share thoughts, so maybe that was it.

*No. Others usually can't speak back to me. They can just hear my thoughts and respond out loud.*

*Huh*, I thought. The woman handed me the plate, and I walked back towards Lena. So, I could use mind control on Kallan and read the servant's mind. An idea came to me. Excitement welled up in my chest. I had to find out if what I was thinking was true. If it was… the possibilities were endless.

I saw a small carving knife on the counter and grabbed it. Carefully, I slipped it into the pocket of my dress. "Can we go outside to eat?"

"Of course," Lena replied and led me out a side door. We walked down a path to a wooden bench.

"Lena, I think I know what my power is."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Really? What is it?"

"Can I try something on you? It might hurt a little."

She hesitated. "I guess so. What is it?"

"Give me your hand." Lena gingerly placed her hand in my left hand. With my right, I reached down and grabbed the knife. Quickly, before she changed her mind, I put a small gash on her palm.

"Ouch! Why did you do that?" She tried to yank her hand back, but I held on to it tightly.

I placed my hand over hers, and I could feel an odd tingling sensation radiate through my hands. I waited a few seconds and removed it. The cut was gone. I was closer to proving my theory was true. If I was right, I could use the ability of a faery I was near. It was like I absorbed what they could do. But only when they were close.

"You're a healer? That's it? Well, that's not very impressive." She looked down at her hand and back at me.

I shrugged. I wasn't ready to give up my secret, and technically, I wasn't lying. I was a healer as long as she was there. "Maybe more will show up. Do faeries have more than one power?"

She looked skeptical. "Not that I know of, but you are obviously a different case because you are marked."

I ate my sandwich in silence. I wondered how I could use my gift to get me out of here. I was going to have to start learning what other gifts the rest of the household had. With Varwik being immune to abilities, I couldn't use anything against him, but I might be able to make someone else help me escape.

The next morning after breakfast, Kallan and I walked back to the fountain. I think he felt bad about making me leave so quickly last

time, but it was hard to say with him.

We sat on the bench facing each other. My left leg was tucked under me, and I rested my arm on the back. Being so close to him made my heart accelerate.

"What are you thinking about?" Kallan asked, squinting in the sunlight.

"I don't know. Everything, I guess. How crazy it is that I'm stuck in a realm of dark faeries? Not long ago, I wasn't sure there was anything else out there. Now I'm a faery, and not only a faery, but a marked faery. It's just a lot to digest. I don't know if I'll ever see my family again…" Tears sprang to my eyes.

"This life is all I've ever known. I'm sure it has all been very jarring to you."

"You have no idea. Life is so different here. Why do faeries get married so young?" I asked. I had so many questions and no idea where to begin, or if he would even answer them.

"I don't really know. It's just something we've always done. I think because our life span is so much longer. Time is thought of differently here. Age doesn't really matter."

"But you don't think to question it?"

"I guess not." He shrugged. "Like I said, it's not unusual here. It just is. Don't you like being with someone? I thought even humans dreamed of big weddings and finding a soul mate."

"Yeah, but sixteen is absurd. We're still in school trying to find ourselves. I wouldn't want to be forced into being with someone. I enjoy the freedom of free will."

Kallan shifted on the bench, his face very close to mine. "Our case is special. Most of the time, we fall in love or are matched perfectly. It's not something that is forced, only encouraged. Ruling families usually mate. On the other hand, there are also instances when faeries have been forbidden to be together."

Kallan's lips were dangerously close to mine. I could smell his sweet breath. I swallowed hard, trying to keep my wits about me. My body betrayed me by tingling all over. I couldn't let this happen.

No matter how attracted I was to him, I had to stay loyal to Adam. I was determined to find a way back to him.

Looking into Kallan's eyes, I wasn't sure how long I could resist him. I really needed to get out of there and back to my real life—before I was sucked into this life.

Ask something else, I told myself. "What about divorce? Is that common here?"

"It's rare, but it happens. Sometimes, faeries just go their separate ways. Like your parents."

My parents. I still couldn't think of anyone other than the couple that raised me as my parents.

"Azura and my father are still married?" I hadn't thought of that.

"Yes."

"Is it odd for a faery go to missing? How big is the fey world? Could someone go 'underground'?"

Kallan looked off in the distance as if trying to compose his words before he spoke. "Our world is not very large. It would be extremely unusual for a faery to go missing. In fact, faeries like to gossip so I assume we would have heard something about him. Unless…well, it's possible that he moved to the human realm."

"You think my father has been with humans all this time?" I leaned back, trying to take in this bit of information. Could he have been living near me? Maybe it was somebody I knew? Doubtful, as it sounded like he was a coward. He was probably living it up in Hawaii or somewhere nice.

"I'm not saying that, Oleander. I'm just saying it's an option. I know my father has been searching for him since you came back to let him know the debt has been paid, but he has had no luck. If he can't find him—"

"No one can," I finished for him. "Do you think he's dead?"

"That is definitely a possibility," Kallan said softly.

I turned to face the fountain, pondering different ideas of what happened to my father. Even though I really didn't care what

happened to the man that traded me for access to dark magick, I had to admit my curiosity was piqued.

I was lying in bed and counting the stone blocks on the walls when I realized I'd lost track of how long I'd been held there. That was not a good sign. Maybe Lena would get me a notebook so I could start marking off the days. Although, I guess at this point it didn't matter. Soon, I would be married—or dead—if I couldn't find a way to use my ability to escape.

I was startled out of my thoughts by a knock on the door. I got up and strolled over to answer. When I swung it open, I was surprised to see Kallan standing there.

"I see you're wearing black again."

One corner of his mouth turned up. "Observant."

"Do you ever wear colors?"

"No." After a short pause, he casually asked, "Want to eat lunch outside today?"

"Like a picnic?" I couldn't help but get a little excited. Picnics had always been my favorite, and I was going stir-crazy in the room. The thought of fresh air was like music to my ears.

"Yes." His eyes sparkled when he smiled. "Like a picnic."

"Okay," I said tentatively, trying to keep the excitement out of my voice. I didn't want him to know how badly I wanted to go. Not just with him, I wouldn't have cared who it was with. I just had to get out of that confined space.

He led me to the kitchen. Opening the door, he stuck his head

in. “Is the basket ready?”

“Yes, sir, just like you requested.”

A basket was handed out the door, and Kallan took it. His hand brushed mine as he turned around, sending my heart into overdrive.

I took a deep breath and stepped back, letting him take the lead again. “Obviously, you expected me to say yes.”

“I was being optimistic.” Kallan grinned.

We went out the back door and walked through the woods. The breeze felt wonderful against my skin and hair. Something fluttered by my face. What in the world? Was it a butterfly? Whatever it was landed on my shoulder and caused me to giggle. I looked closer. It was a little tiny faery.

“Follow me!” The piskie laughed and took off.

I started chasing after it, giggling, and before long five or six were flying around me. They were beautiful, shimmering magickal creatures. Their wings looked even more delicate than mine, and their eyes were happy. I would have followed them anywhere.

Suddenly, Kallan grabbed my arm and spun me around. “I told you not to get sucked in by them.”

I watched them fly away and sadness spread through me. Running with the piskies made me upbeat and joyful. Something I hadn’t felt in a long time. “But they’re so cute. I need to follow them. Please, let’s just go with them for a little while,” I begged.

“Not today. Maybe another time.” His tone brokered no argument, but there was a twinkle in his eye. “You need to learn to resist them. They use magick to enchant.”

“They spelled me?” My eyes widened in surprised.

“Pretty much.” Kallan looked around. “I guess this is as good of a place as any.”

He spread out a blue and green plaid blanket. He placed the picnic basket in the middle of the blanket, and we sat on opposite sides.

“I guess we should find out more about each other if we are to be mated.” Kallan laughed.

“I’m not marrying you.” I crossed my arms and stared at him, angry that he’d even brought it up.

“We’ll see. So I know you like to sing, and you’re not very good at sports. What else? Do you like to read?” He began to pull food from the basket.

“Not as much as I should. I just never seem to find the time. What about you?”

“I love reading. It’s always been an escape for me.”

“An escape? From what? Your father?”

“Yeah, I guess,” he said thoughtfully. He laid two identical sandwiches on the blanket. “It’s interesting to learn about the rest of the world. Hope turkey is okay?”

“I pretty much love all food.” I reached over and grabbed a sandwich. “Any chips?”

Kallan laughed. “No chips. Just fresh fruits and a couple of juices.”

“I’ll take a juice.”

He reached in the basket and pulled out a bottle and two cups. He poured the purple liquid into the cups and handed me one of them. I lifted the cup to my nose and sniffed it. A wonderful, sweet aroma filled my nose. I took a sip. “Mmmm.” I wasn’t sure what it was, but it tasted wonderful.

It was getting harder and harder for me to hate him as time went on. “What’s your favorite color?” Kallan asked and took a bite of his sandwich.

I glanced at his wings. “Teal.”

He smirked. “Has it always been teal or is this a new thing?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I’ve always loved teal, so nothing more than a coincidence. Purple is my second favorite. Do you like music?” I asked curiously, since music was such a passion in my life.

I'd already polished off half my sandwich and was seriously hoping he had another hidden in his basket.

"Sure." He took a swig of the drink, the tilt of his head revealing his neck.

I couldn't help but stare at his perfect features and the strong tendons beneath his skin. I pulled my eyes away. "What kind of music do you have here?"

"Mostly soft music. Handmade instruments."

"Soft?

"Yeah, harps and violins are big forms of entertainment here."

"Do you listen to any human music?" Sandwich demolished, I rolled onto my side and propped myself up with an elbow.

He hesitated. "I've heard some. A few of the guys like to visit the human realm and bring back music or go to concerts."

"Really? That's kinda cool. Do you like our music?"

"Some of it is okay, I guess."

I could tell he liked it more than he wanted to admit. I didn't think I'd be able to live without real music. And TV! I missed my shows. "What does your room look like?" I asked curiously.

He glanced at me and raised an eyebrow. I guess it was strange for me to ask about his bedroom. "It's a room."

Typical man. I rolled my eyes and threw out some adjectives. "Big? Colorful? Small? Plain?"

"It's got a big bed, bookshelves line one of the walls. I don't know. It's hard to describe. My father likes nice things so it's…nice. Guess you'd have to see it."

Our eyes met at that last statement. I felt the heat rush to my cheeks.

"I…I didn't mean…" His face was beet red, as well.

"It's okay. I know what you meant." Peeking in the basket, I asked, "What else do you have in there?"

He looked relieved at the change of subject. "Fruit and dessert." He handed me a bright yellow fruit.

I sunk my teeth into it. An interesting kiwi and apple taste exploded in my mouth. “It’s really good.”

“We have great food.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Despite the fact they’d locked me away and given me little to do, they’d certainly fed me well.

After eating a gooey chocolate brownie, we packed up and headed back to the castle. The sun had already started to set. As much as I hated to admit it, the day had been wonderful. Just as quickly as the sun went down, the darkness set in. It was strange the way the days passed here.

We stood underneath the starry sky. It was quiet except for the chirps of nearby critters and the faraway giggles of piskies. Fireflies flew around us, electric lines in the night.

“It’s so beautiful here,” I whispered. “Peaceful.”

“The human world is bright and noisy,” he replied.

“That’s true, but there is beauty there, too, Kallan.”

He scoffed at my comment, and then said, “As a faery, you should naturally be drawn to nature. I don’t know what you see in the city.”

I laughed softly. “I don’t exactly live in the city. The part of Virginia I live in is more rural, mountains and trees. I think you would like it there.”

Kallan leaned forward and brushed a strand of my hair out of my face with his soft fingers. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the brief moment of closeness we shared. When I opened them, our eyes met, and I felt a sudden urge to grab him and make him mine.

But I couldn’t. I turned away from him and took a few deep breaths. I heard him sigh behind me as I headed back towards the castle.

I didn’t see Kallan at all the next morning, and he wasn’t at breakfast or lunch. I was surprisingly bummed that he wasn’t around. I felt like we’d forged some kind of tentative alliance in the

past few days, and his absence—much as I hated to admit it—was really felt.

Later that evening, Lena brought me downstairs for dinner as usual. I'd always noticed the doors on a certain room that we passed. They were the dark maroon of old blood, edged in some kind of black metal that made them seem more dungeon-like than anything else. As we passed this room today, we heard raised voices.

"I won't marry someone who is in love with another." Kallan's voice was strong and harsh. I could picture him, his handsome face set in anger, and his long legs wide as he stared down his opponent.

"Fine. You know what I have to do." Varwik's voice was equally as harsh.

My heart skipped a beat in fear. They were talking about me.

There was a moment's pause, and Kallan snarled, "Then get it over with."

I gasped, my body going cold. Kallan had just told his father that it was okay to kill me.

Panic set in, and I had no other thoughts than to disappear. I took off running, unsure of where I was going in the mammoth labyrinth of a castle. Somehow I reached the dining room, and from there, I knew the way to the door that led into the gardens.

I heard Lena yelling after me, but I ignored it and ran as fast as I could. I burst into the warm, flowery air and stumbled as I hit the grass. I glanced back over my shoulder once, and Lena was nowhere in sight. My heart still racing like mad, I kept running, through the gardens and into the woods.

Limbs pulled at me as I left the path. Fallen logs hindered my progress, and the forest animals watched blankly as I burst through their domain. Despite the obstacles, I didn't stop until I felt like my chest was going to burst open.

I was deep in the woods. Nothing looked familiar. The air was stagnant and humid here, and I could hear nothing but the birds.

Not even the piskies' giggles. Leaning up against a tree, I closed my eyes and tried to catch my breath.

*Keep going*. I knew it was important to get as far away as I could, but I couldn't run anymore. My reserves were worn out. I walked another ten minutes, hopelessly lost, until I left the trees for a small clearing. I shielded my eyes from the rays of the early-evening sun and looked around. I had been here before.

With Kallan.

"God, don't think about him!" I hissed at myself, my voice alien among the daily sounds of the forest. I fought against the sob that welled in my throat.

*He'd rather me be dead than with him.*

The tall grass swayed in the light wind, almost as if it were telling me which way to go. I walked further, entering the trees on the other side of the clearing, continuing away from the conversation that still echoed in my head.

A few minutes later, I was in front of the cottage. Nothing had changed since the day Kallan brought me—still quaint, with the climbing ivy and the sunshine shutters. I walked up and turned the front doorknob, surprised when it opened. I looked back to make sure I hadn't been followed, and then stepped inside, closing the door behind me.

The scent of charcoal and paint was overwhelming, but the interior was cool and comfortable after my marathon. I wandered around the tiny living room for a minute, looking at the extraordinary pictures. How could someone who made such beautiful things like this be so cruel?

My eyes rested on the one picture he had kept hidden from me. I was gonna die anyway, so I figured I might as well take a look. I crossed the room and came to a standstill in front of the picture. I knew I shouldn't invade his privacy, but I was just too curious. I tossed the cover aside and turned the canvas around. A gasp escaped my lips.

Staring back at me was myself. My eyes were haunted, my face sad yet incredibly beautiful. I was wearing the long pink gown I had worn when Kallan and I first met. My aura was bright, and a stark contrast to the dark forest behind me.

"Ohhh…" I whispered, completely in awe. The picture was done with such care and attention. The person who drew it couldn't have hated the subject—me. Kallan didn't hate me. He had feelings for me. But then why was he okay with his father killing me?

The door burst open, and I jumped back, my heartbeat leaping from my chest.

Kallan's face was livid, and his hands were clenched by his sides. He strode into the cottage like a man on a mission.

I swallowed hard. Would he be the one to kill me?

"What are you doing in here?" he seethed.

"How did you know where to find me?" I shot back, easing away from his wrath until my back was to the wall. At least I could see his attack coming, and maybe do some mind control to escape—banking on the fact he wouldn't control *me* in the meantime.

"You left a trail a mile wide!" he snapped, crossing the room so fast that I cringed. "If you're going to run from magickal creatures, you need to learn to not be so sloppy."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do," I said wearily. I leaned against the cool stone wall as if it were the only thing keeping me on my feet.

"And you thought it was okay to look at my private things?" Kallan went on as if I'd not spoken. "I told you this painting was off limits."

"I didn't come here on purpose. It just…happened." I motioned to the canvas. "It's beautiful."

He jerked the cloth back over the picture of me. I could read the tension and anger in the quiver of his shoulders. "Get out!" he ordered, not bothering to turn around or acknowledge me.

He didn’t have to tell me twice. Running again, I let my feet take me as far as I could. I hadn’t had a chance to fully recover from my first long sprint, so it didn’t take long at all for my lungs to burn, but I kept going.

“Oleander! Wait!” Kallan yelled. I could hear his heavy steps chasing me.

I didn’t stop. I needed to get out of this place, away from evil dark faeries and a guy I should never have gotten close to. I ran faster and harder than I had before, trying to find a way out. There had to be a gateway or something. If there was a way in, there had to be a way out.

“Rylie!” His voice sounded desperate.

I froze when I heard him call me Rylie. There was something in his voice that made me turn back to him. Not once in the time we had spent together had he called me Rylie, yet now he did. That meant something.

Kallan caught up with me.

Our eyes met and our wings gave a quick flutter at the same time. My gaze moved from his eyes to his lips and back again. Every ounce of my body wanted him kissing me even though I knew it was wrong. He held my face between his hands with a gentle touch I never imagined he could have. His lips grazed mine, ever so softly. The tender kiss was quickly replaced with an increasing passion. I surprised myself by letting out a small moan and tangled my hands in his hair as the heat radiated between us. The kiss made me feel safe in his arms. I didn’t want to let go. He pulled away slowly, leaving me breathless and wanting more. I opened my eyes and met his.

“Why?” I asked, touching my lips. “Why did you kiss me? You told your father you were fine with killing me.”

“You overheard that?” His eyes were wide in dismay.

I nodded.

“I was testing him. I wanted to see how far he’d go.”

“And?”

“We need to get you out of here.” His fingers touched my lips lightly, sending shivers through my body. “But are you sure, Rylie? I could make you happy.”

I stared at him in disbelief, and then shook my head. “I have to go home.”

“Then I’ll take you there.” He took my hand firmly in his and tugged me as he began to walk. “I’ll deal with my father later.”

“Now?” Was this really happening? My lips still tingled.

“Yes. We must leave now. It’s our only chance.”

I followed him through the thick forest. “Why are you doing this?”

Kallan just shook his head. “I’m not a murderer.”

I had a feeling there was more to it than that.

The walk through the forest was long and arduous. I saw creatures I never knew existed. Kallan answered all my questions with patience, explaining the differences between my world and his. I loved listening to him talk. His voice was smooth, and he was so knowledgeable. We walked until it was almost dark.

"Kallan, what do you have against my world? It seems like your friends think it's cool to visit. Why would your father care if you went?"

His face hardened, and he avoided my gaze. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not? I don't get it. It's really not that bad. There's lots to do." I really wanted to know, so I pushed on. "You have the ability to come and go as you please and blend in."

"Humans killed my mother!" he snapped. He hastened his step. "There, are you happy?"

I inhaled sharply. That was the last thing I expected him to say. "Killed her? How?"

"She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. She got caught in the cross-fire of a drive-by shooting—in your civilized world."

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry." I didn't know what else to say.

"It was a long time ago. Let's talk about something else."

In the silence that followed, my stomach grumbled. I looked down, embarrassed. I didn't want to ask anything more of him; he

was already trying to help me.

"Would you like to eat now?" Kallan asked, his voice softer.

"What would we eat?"

"The forest provides everything we need," Kallan said, reaching down and pulling something from a bush. "Try this." He handed me a circle-shaped object.

I eyed it cautiously. It looked like a large piece of candy. "Are you sure it's safe?"

"Yes." One corner of his mouth turned up. "I would never hurt you."

I bit into it. The taste was amazing. It was juicier than an orange, but much sweeter. "Mmmm. This is delicious."

"It was my mother's favorite, as well." He grabbed another one off the bush and took a big bite.

I had to keep from giggling as juice dripped down from his mouth. He quickly wiped it with his sleeve. Just watching his lips move, I thought of our kiss. How perfect it had felt. How our wings fluttered at the same time. I wondered if I should ask him why they did that, but decided not to. He was taking me home. I didn't want him to lead him on any more than I already had.

And I was scared that I had feelings for him.

They weren't like the feelings I had for Adam, but they were definitely there. I loved Adam, but I was obviously attracted to Kallan. Something in me had awakened, and I was frightened I wouldn't be able to make it disappear.

"We should find a place to sleep," Kallan suggested.

"Okay." I didn't argue. My legs were aching and sleep sounded wonderful. If Kallan thought we were in a safe enough spot to camp out without anyone finding us, I trusted him.

I watched as his serious blue-green eyes scanned the forest. Pointing to the right, he said, "There's a place that way where we can spend the night."

He held out his hand, and I took it without much thought. It just seemed natural. He led me down a narrow path, which opened into a small clearing.

I hadn't even noticed that Kallan had a backpack on until he tossed it on the ground. Kneeling beside it, he pulled out a gray and black blanket and spread it out on the ground. Suddenly, I felt very shy as I lowered myself to the blanket. We lay on our backs, looking up at the moonless sky. The stars were entrancing. I could stare at them for hours. There was a heat radiating between us, and it was hard not to respond to it. I just kept thinking of Adam and how much I loved him. I couldn't betray him again…I wouldn't.

I stole a peek at Kallan. He turned towards me at the same moment. I laughed nervously, but his face was serious. For a long moment, his gaze met mine. I wondered if he was going to kiss me again. Instead, he sighed and turned to his side.

"Kallan," I whispered

"Yes?" He turned back over to face me.

"I know what my power is, it's not mind control. They were right, it's dangerous—well, it could be."

His face went blank. "Tell me."

"I can use the ability of another faery I'm near. I absorb what their ability is. But only when they're close," I whispered softly. I knew I shouldn't tell him, but I felt I owed him that much. He was risking himself to get me home.

He was silent for a moment. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Remember how I can control your mind? I tried it on others, and it wouldn't work. After trial and error, I realized I could use whatever ability they had. When I'm with Lena, I can heal. There was a cook in the kitchen, and with her, I could use mind speak."

"Wow." He placed his hands behind his head and stared up at the sky. "That is definitely something people would kill over. I wonder what happens when you're around more than one faery at a time?"

Good question. I hadn't thought of that. Oh, the possibilities…I could very well be dangerous.

"You're not going to tell your father, are you? Or take me back?"

"I will get you to your home, Rylie. I swear to you." His lovely eyes met mine. "As far as my father, if he asks me directly, I have to tell him. Lying is not an option in our world."

I kept forgetting about that. It was such a foreign concept to me. "I understand. I guess he'll find out eventually anyway."

"Hopefully not anytime soon. He won't give up until he has you under his control."

I knew he was right. "Thank you for rescuing me."

"You're welcome." He turned away from me without another word.

It took all my self-control not to wrap myself in his arms. Just the feeling of his body next to mine was almost too much to bear. I was very grateful that Kallan wasn't a mind reader. The entire situation was embarrassing enough without him knowing how I felt about him being so near.

Eventually, I dozed, but the next thing I knew, Kallan was shaking me awake. He had a finger to his lips telling me to be quiet. I looked around, trying to understand what was going on. The forest was still dim, but the rose hints of dawn had begun to filter gray through the branches above us. I rubbed my eyes, still groggy from sleep, but didn't see anything unusual.

He pointed to his ear. I strained to listen, and I could faintly hear the murmur of voices in the distance. My eyes widened and my heart raced.

They'd found us.

Kallan grabbed my hand. *Run*, he mouthed.

We barely made any ground before a voice shouted into the still morning, "Over there!"

Kallan pulled me behind him and whispered, "Make yourself invisible."

I closed my eyes and willed myself invisible. I had no idea if it was working, but when I looked over at Kallan, he was gone.

Loud laughter erupted from the search party. Varwik. I would know that evil laugh anywhere. If I survived, I'd probably have nightmares about it.

"Son, I know your aura anywhere," Varwik called, as if he were hailing a disobedient dog. "You can't possibly think you can escape me."

Silence. I pressed against the trunk of a tree, wishing I could merge with it and remain safe.

"Show yourself now."

Silence.

"Really, son, must we do this? Where are you?"

Kallan appeared and glared at his father.

"Where is the girl?"

"I don't know. I can't see her." He laughed bitterly. "I cannot lie, if I do not know. Why can't you just let her go?"

"You know why. This is our land, and we must protect it. Don't blame me because you could not get Oleander to care for you."

Fury filled his eyes, and Kallan drew back and swung at his father. Two goon faeries were on him before the punch could connect.

"How dare you raise a hand at me!" Varwik growled.

I was so surprised by the exchange that I forgot to keep ahold of my invisibility glamour. Faster than I realized I was visible, strong hands were on me, and I was being dragged towards the evil faery king, kicking and screaming.

Kallan thrust a hand into the abdomen of one the guards. When he pulled back, I realized he had a dagger in his hands. He turned to the other guard and slashed. Both guards went down, clutching their stomachs.

Several dark faeries closed in on Kallan. I tried to think of a way to help, but I was next to useless. I had no fighting skills. Then it

dawned on me. I could use Kallan's ability.

*Let me go*, I commanded the guards who held me. They immediately released me, both with identical expressions of shock.

Standing on the outside of the circle that surrounded Kallan, I started commanding Varwik's men to stand down. One by one, they obeyed, falling to their knees around us. I kept my face stoic—I didn't want to give away what I was doing.

Kallan stood across the clearing from me, his chest heaving from exertion. When his eyes rested on me, there was a tilt to his mouth that suggested he knew exactly what I was doing.

Before I knew it, Varwik had Kallan by the throat. "Stop using your ability," he told him. "You have overstepped your bounds, my son. Desist at once."

I couldn't use mind control on Varwik, and I didn't know what else to do. I felt helpless—Kallan was being punished for my actions. His face was a dark shade of red, almost purple. Would Varwik really kill his own son?

"Lena!" Varwik's voice boomed through the forest.

Lena appeared as if out of nowhere. I wanted to feel sorry for her, always at that monster's beck and call, but everybody had a choice.

"Heal them." Varwik pointed to the guards on the ground, the ones felled by Kallan.

She nodded and bent over their bodies.

Varwik dropped Kallan to the ground, drew back, and kicked Kallan in the gut, causing him to cough and double over. Varwik began kicking him over and over. "How dare you disobey me!" he spat. His eyes were those of a crazy man. He had lost control.

"Stop!" I screamed. Tears poured down my cheeks. "Leave him alone!"

Varwik looked up and stalked towards me, a sword drawn. "You had your chance." He raised the sword high in the air.

I closed my eyes. Peace fell over me. This was it—I would die, here, at the hands of the leader of the dark faeries. I thought of my parents losing not only one, but two daughters. Of Sierra and Adam who would never know what happened to me. Of all the dreams I had.

But above it all, I couldn't shake an image of Kallan.

"Don't!" Kallan's shout was like a gunshot.

I opened my eyes, face to face with Varwik's sword. Behind the leader, I watched as Kallan tried to push himself to standing, but he stumbled back to his knees with a grimace. "Father—I love her."

The sword drifted down to Varwik's side, tip resting on the ground as he turned to face his son. My heart had stopped as if I were in a free fall. Not only had I almost died, but Kallan had just declared his love for me.

"You what?" Varwik and I questioned at the same time.

Kallan finally stood tall, one hand pressed to his stomach as he stumbled a few steps forward, and met his father's eyes. His shoulders were square and confident, not a flicker of hesitation. "I love her. Please, don't kill her."

For once, Varwik was dumbfounded. After a long silence, he said, "Why do you think that matters?"

"You were in love with my mother," Kallan said softly, and there was a hint of pain in his voice. "You know what that feels like."

"That was a long time ago."

Lena had jumped to her feet when Varwik charged me, and now she came to stand beside him, touching his arm. "There is another way, my lord."

Varwik turned his attention to Lena. "If you have a solution, speak now."

"What if she promised to return when she is eighteen, when humans are considered adults? She would still be promised to your family, but able to be with hers until she finished school."

I watched as Lena touched Kallan, healing him while Varwik considered her idea.

Varwik rubbed his chin. "Interesting. I suppose I could live with that. If Oleander agreed to be promised to Kallan and return when the time comes. She could do us no harm if she was promised to Kallan." He turned to face me. "Would you agree to those conditions? We allow you two more years with your precious humans, and then you return to us and join our family."

I thought of the sword that almost ended my life a few minutes ago. I thought about my life being over before it had really had a chance to get started. I didn't want to die. If nothing else, it gave me two years to find another way out of this crazy predicament. Maybe Azura would have a plan, some kind of breach of contract that could restore everything to its proper place.

I glanced over at Kallan. His face was unreadable. One thing I did know without a doubt…he loved me. It was impossible for him to lie. I wasn't sure how I felt about that knowledge, but I was grateful he saved my life.

"Yes," I said, knowing in my heart that I meant the words.

Varwik closed the space between us. Standing inches from me, his eyes bore into mine. "If you betray me, not only will I come after you, but also your family and friends. I won't be as merciful in dealing with them as I was with you."

Varwik, Lena, and the army of dark faeries that had accompanied them went back the way they came with not another word spoken. Lena glanced over her shoulder once, a smile flitting across her lips.

I seriously owed her one.

Kallan came to stand beside me, his strong hand sliding into mine. "I'll take you."

"You're going to take me home? But you hate my world," I argued.

"Yes." His other hand lifted to brush gently across my cheek. "I want to make sure you make it back safely."

We walked in silence for a few minutes, our hands still intertwined. I wasn't sure how to respond to any of what had just happened. The adrenaline of nearly dying began to wear off, and all I could think about was what he'd said as Varwik ran at me with the sword.

"Kallan?"

"Yeah?" He didn't slow down.

"Do you really love me?" I asked softly.

"Faeries can't lie," he said, not really answering my question.

Part of me wanted to hear a more in-depth answer—I wanted him to tell me yes, to pledge his undying love and tell me he would wait forever. But mostly, I was grateful he was making the situation easier on me, because I loved Adam.

"Thank you for taking me home," I told him, squeezing his hand. "I know it's hard for you to understand, but I need to be with my family."

"And your boyfriend. I get it."

My heart broke at the pain in his voice.

"Rylie, my father is only giving you a couple of years. You'll have to come back." He finally looked my way.

I stared at his face, taking in every detail. I wouldn't see him again for at least two years, or maybe never again, if I could find a way out of the deal.

I couldn't tell Kallan that I didn't want to come back. I couldn't tell him that I planned to find another way out of this mess. I wondered if my silence was answer enough.

Because I also couldn't tell him that maybe I loved him, too.

We came to a huge, ancient tree. Its enormous roots were spread like a blanket over the ground. I had to be careful not to trip.

"This is the end of our territory," Kallan told me.

"Are you leaving me here?" I asked in a panic. I wasn't sure where to go from here, and I didn't want to go alone. Truth was, I wasn't ready to let him go yet.

He turned and looked into my eyes. "I told you that you will always be safe with me. I will make sure you make it all the way home."

I nodded and whispered, "Thank you."

One corner of his mouth turned up. "Come on, then."

"So, this is light faery territory?" I asked as we walked. The forest looked different, the colors were more pastels, and the sun seemed brighter, if that were possible.

"It's more of a neutral ground."

"Will anything happen to you if you're found out of your own territory?"

"Not as long as it's neutral land."

"You can never go to the light faery side?" This was all so confusing to me.

"Well, technically if I were invited, I could enter the light world, but I would not be welcomed."

"You really hate each other that much?"

“Yes,” he said simply. “But Rylie, you really must stop thinking of us as ‘them.’ You’re one of us. A faery.”

“But I’m a light faery. Why don’t you hate me?” I asked stubbornly, stopping abruptly. If I was going to go back to my real life, then I wanted all of my questions answered.

Kallan sighed, rubbing his brow. “I don’t know. Maybe because you didn’t grow up with the light, or maybe because I’m just so damn attracted to you that I don’t care where you came from.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“Anything else you want to know?” Kallan started walking again, and I tried to keep up.

“What’ll happen to me if I do marry you?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, his brow furrowed.

“Will I become a dark faery?”

He laughed. “No. You’ll always be light.”

“So my wings won’t change?”

He shook his head. “Nope. They’ll always be the beautiful color they are now.”

I was secretly dancing inside that he thought my wings were beautiful. “Why do our wings flutter when we see each other?”

“It means we’re physically attracted to one another.” He clenched his jaw and kept walking.

That was pretty much what I thought, but having it confirmed made it seem real. I wondered if his wings fluttered often at other faeries. I was surprised to feel slightly jealous at the thought.

I blushed. “What if we had children?” I slowed my pace and waited for his answer.

His head jerked up, and he looked over at me. “Children?”

“Just curious,” I said, looking away. “Would they be dark or light?”

“I’m not sure. I guess they would be a mixture. You have to understand that not all dark faeries are bad.”

“I can only think of one that isn’t,” I muttered. “Would I be able to come and go into light faery territory as I pleased?”

“Yes.”

“What about the human world? Could I come and go there as well?”

“You wouldn’t need to.” He bristled.

“But I might want to. Visit my parents or friends.”

He sighed. “That’s not how it’s done.”

“Well, maybe it should be,” I countered.

He stepped over a fallen tree and took my arm to help me over. I let him. “I’m sure something could be arranged,” he conceded with a smile.

“What about humans? Can they come here?”

He paused before replying, “Yes, but it’s rare.”

There was a strong wind and a burst of vivid color as Azura appeared before us. I stared, shocked.

“Oleander!” she cried out. “We’ve been searching for you! Are you okay?” Her forehead wrinkled as she looked between Kallan and me.

As relieved as I felt to see her, I was glad she wasn’t trying to hug or kiss me. I still didn’t have those kinds of feelings for her.

She reached out and grabbed my wrist and pulled me towards her. “I won’t hesitate to hurt you if you try to take her away again,” she threatened Kallan.

“Azura, Kallan is a friend. He’s okay.”

“He’s the son of the evil one. He cannot be trusted.”

“Not only did he stand up to his father to save my life today, but he’s taking me home. I trust him.” I didn’t know how much to tell her. “Please, let me go.”

“Are you okay? Physically?”

“Yes.”

She dropped my wrist, but her eyes didn't leave Kallan. "I will take you the rest of the way."

"You can come with us if you want," I told her while smiling at Kallan.

Kallan stifled a laugh. "Let's go."

We walked on silently, Azura in front of us. "Your human father has been patrolling the area constantly," she told us. "He loves you very much."

"I know he does. What did they tell everyone about my disappearance?" I asked curiously.

"Nothing."

"Why not? I went missing!"

"You've only been gone a few days in human time."

"What?" My mouth dropped open.

I glanced over at Kallan, and he shrugged. "I told you. Our time is different."

"You could have been more specific."

Azura turned to face us. "I knew you had been captured by the dark faeries. That's not exactly the type of thing you run and tell the police. I told your family this, as well as the fact that they'd never be able to find you. But they insisted on searching. They haven't stopped."

Tears welled in my eyes. I couldn't wait to see my parents, but this time difference was confusing. I thought I had been gone a lot longer than a few days—weeks, even.

Kallan's pace slowed. "We're almost there," he muttered with a pained look on his face. It was dusk now, and I could make out some familiar lights between the trees.

"My house!" I exclaimed, wanting to break out into a run. I refrained as I caught the expression on Kallan's face. He didn't show much emotion, so to see him looking so sad sent a stabbing pain through my heart. "Azura, can I have a minute?"

She looked surprised, but nodded and walked ahead a little.

“I’m sorry.” I touched his hand. “This is where I belong. I hope you understand.”

Kallan’s eyes were unfathomable. He reached up and unclasped the necklace of shiny black stones around his neck. As he moved to place it around my neck, I stepped back, shocked.

“No way,” I told him. “Your mother gave you that!”

“Hematite,” he said, as if I hadn’t even spoken. He closed the distance between us and snapped it around my neck. “It repels negativity. It will protect you.”

I didn’t need protecting, but I wasn’t going to argue. I touched a cool, shiny stone. The necklace was heavy, but it was comfortable. “Thank you.”

“I’ll be back on your eighteenth birthday,” he told me softly. He stepped close, and I felt a breeze as his gorgeous wings flapped absently behind him. “My father won’t let it go. You have to realize that.”

Ignoring his comment, I said, “Thank you for helping me. I’ll never forget it.”

He looked over at Azura, and then back at me. He reached up and gently brushed my wings with his hands, sending a shiver down my back. Gasping at the feeling, I closed my eyes. When I opened them, he had disappeared into the forest without another word.

Azura was staring at me when I walked up to her. "Something is different. You're different."

"It's nothing. I just want to go home."

Her face softened. "I'm sorry, Oleander. This is all my fault. I should have forced my way into your home and told you everything that could happen. I should have prepared you better. Maybe if I had hidden you further away…but I was selfish. I wanted you close by so I could watch you grow up."

I felt guilty. "It's okay. We can talk about everything later. Right now, I just really want to go home."

She nodded. "Don't forget to glamour yourself."

Good thing she mentioned that. I hadn't done it in so long, I would have forgotten. "Thanks." I quickly visualized myself as a human.

"I'm so glad you're safe." She reached out and cupped my face. I let her have her moment. "I love you."

I just stared at her, unable to respond.

"What did Kallan mean about your eighteenth birthday?"

"Varwik allowed me two years here, and then I'm to return."

"Why?"

"To marry Kallan. Apparently, this makes my oh-so-special ability 'theirs.' Thanks to a deal my father struck." I narrowed my eyes and

glared at her. Even though it wasn't her fault. She could have picked a better person to have a child with.

"Did you promise this?" She looked worried.

"Yes. I had no other choice."

"Then you must, Oleander. Contracts in the faery world must always be obeyed."

"I'm planning on finding a way out of it by then." I looked towards my house. "I need to go. I'll see you later." I left her in the woods.

I wanted to leave behind everything faery.

I ran through the back door of the house, yelling for my parents. The house was so quiet. There were dishes in the sink, mail on the island, and there was clutter everywhere.

I heard a thump, and then footsteps from upstairs. "Rylie?"

"Mom?" I ran to the stairs just as she was coming down them.

Upon seeing me, her hand flew to her mouth and tears sprang to her eyes. Her hair was a mess and she had dark circles under her eyes. I wondered if she'd slept at all since I went missing. "Rylie?"

"It's me, Mom." I took a step closer.

She reached out, grabbed me, and pulled me to her. "Oh my God, oh my God. I can't believe you're home." She started bawling. "This isn't a dream, is it?"

"No, Mom. I'm really here." I hugged her tighter, inhaling her warm vanilla scent. The tears fell down my cheeks. Being in her arms was a dream come true.

She pulled away and looked me over. "Are you okay? Are you hurt? Where have you been?" She bombarded me with questions.

"I'm okay. I'm not hurt. I was captured by the dark faeries. They kept me in in a castle."

She shook her head. "It's so odd to hear you say that. They didn't hurt you, though?"

How could you tell your mother that if you didn't marry a certain faery, they would kill you in a couple years? "No, Mom, they didn't

hurt me."

"How did you get away?" She brushed my hair out of my face.

"One of them helped me, a boy named Kallan." I didn't feel like going into details.

"Oh! We have to call your father! He's out searching. He's going to be so relieved."

"What are we going to tell people, Mom?" I thought about what Azura had said, but I couldn't believe it was true. I was gone close to two weeks at least.

"Azura said we didn't have to worry about that as long as you came back shortly. Apparently, time is different in their world. Your friends think you were sick." She grabbed the phone and called Dad. "She's home! Hurry back." As soon as she hung up, her arms were around me again. It felt like she might never let go.

"How long have I been gone?" I asked, wanting to confirm what Azura had told me.

"Today is the fifth day."

"It's been almost two weeks for me."

"Two weeks? My God."

The time thing was really strange. The days did seem to blur together, and Kallan said they aged at a slower rate than humans. I made a mental note to ask Azura to explain it better. Like it or not, I was going to have to let her into my life so she could explain the faery world. I needed to find a way to get out of the agreement I made with Varwik. I also needed to understand the different types of power that I had the ability to tap into.

Ten minutes later, the door flew open, and my father rushed in. He looked horrible. His eyes were bloodshot and it looked like he'd just rolled out of bed. His hair was standing all over the place. Not the calm and collected father I knew and loved. "Oh, Rylie!" He gathered me in his strong arms. His body shook with sobs. "You're okay, you're really okay. I thought I'd lost you forever."

"I missed you both so much. All I wanted to do was come home." I didn't have any more tears left in me. I just let him hold

me.

We all sat on the couch. Mom sat on my left side stroking my hair, and Dad was on my right. I filled them in on what happened, skipping over some of the details.

As long as they didn't ask, I wasn't lying.

I heard Adam's truck pull up before I saw it. I took a few seconds to make sure I was glamoured before I rushed out of the back door and onto the porch. He had already jumped out of his truck and for the first time in almost two weeks, I laid my eyes on him—the boy I was in love with. My heart leapt, and I ran down the steps of the porch and into his arms. He pulled me close to him, and I could smell the warm, comforting scent of his body.

He pulled away. Our gazes met, his own green eyes concerned. "Are you feeling better? Your mom said you've missed school because you were sick," he said, caressing my face. "School's been lame without you. It felt like it was never going to end. I tried to text you…why didn't you text me back?"

"I was really taken by dark faeries, and we had no service." Damn it! I forgot about the lying thing.

"Sure you were." He laughed. "I'm just glad you're feeling better."

"Me, too." Slowly, he leaned toward me and pressed his lips to mine. My eyelids fluttered closed and all my worries about the future faded away in his arms. I was finally home and with Adam.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too," I told him before kissing him again.

As wonderful as the kiss was, I found myself thinking of Kallan and the way he had kissed me with such passion. The kisses Kallan and I had shared had been so different than the ones I shared with Adam. With Adam, it was familiar and safe, and with Kallan, it was unknown and exciting.

My heart was breaking in two. I felt stuck between two loves. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I was falling in love with Kallan, but I also loved Adam. I knew who I would choose. I didn't belong in this faery world. I belonged home—with Adam.

# Epilogue

Kallan stood invisible in the forest behind Rylie's house. He watched as her human boyfriend pulled up in his truck. He clenched his fists when she came running out of the house and into his arms with a passion he'd never seen. And then he watched as they kissed.

Jealousy coursed through his veins. He knew she loved this human boy. And even though she promised to return in a couple years, he wasn't sure he could wait that long. He wanted her to love him. He needed to be near her. He had felt more alive in the short time they had been together than he had in his entire life.

"I will win her love," he whispered to no one but himself.

# About the Authors

## Julia Crane

Julia Crane is the author of the YA paranormal fiction novels: Keegan's Chronicles, Mesmerized and Eternal Youth. Julia was greatly encouraged by her mother to read and use her imagination, and she's believed in magical creatures since the day her grandmother first told her an Irish tale. Julia has traveled far and wide to all the places her grandmother told her about, gaining inspiration from her journeys to places like Nepal, Cyprus, Sri Lanka, Italy, France and many more. And who knows? Maybe the magical creatures she writes about are people she met along the way.

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# Talia Jager

When Talia isn't hiding in the closet from her six children munching on a chocolate bar, she enjoys hiking the red rocks in Utah or sitting on the beach with a Kindle in her hands and her toes in the ocean.

Talia has written a number of books for young adults, including Damaged: Natalie's Story, Teagan's Story: Her Battle With Epilepsy, If I Die Young, Secret Bloodline, Lost and Found, and The Gifted Teens Series. Connect with Talia online at taliajager.com

# Also by the Authors

## Mesmerized

WARNING: This is a mature YA. Due to sexual content and some language it is not recommended for younger teens.

Seventeen-year-old succubus Lily Anderson can't have a normal life: She isn't allowed a boyfriend, she has no friends, and school is just one mess-up after another.

Lily's parents send her away to the prestigious Emerson Academy. It doesn't appear to be any different from the others. That is, until she meets her roommate, Hannah, and a blue-eyed boy named Jake.

Lily makes an almost deadly mistake, and Jake has a mysterious past that has come back to haunt him. Together, they must go on the run from things neither of them understand in order to save the people they love—and each other. But, Jake's foe is more dangerous than they realized, and it will take the help of friends and family to save the man Lily loves.

She must learn to use her powers for good before it's too late.

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