

THE PEACE HUNTER

Arthur J. Gonzalez

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This book is my dedication to every dreamer who has ever lived.

*There is no more of a powerful feeling than that moment you realize your purpose, and
grasp your inner belief in it.*

Sometimes we must believe for those who possess the inability to believe in themselves.

Always offer your heart and hand to those who require so.

Never stop dreaming.

Never cease believing.

ALL is possible.

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THE PEACE HUNTER. 😊

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CHAPTER ONE

Everything is frozen. I'm cemented in this moment, in my grandmother Estelle's living room, where my best friend of three weeks is standing just seconds from beating the crap out of me. Suddenly I wish there was a rewind button. I'd slam it hard, stop this all from happening. I'd never leave my life in Nevada. I'd put up with the abuse from my adoptive father. I'd keep living that old life and pretend I had no living relatives.

But there are no rewind buttons in life. Just play. Sometimes fast-forward.

"Mario! Stop!" I scream, grabbing at his fingers. They're clenched around my neck, choking me. "Let me explain!"

"Tell me! Right now! Where's Edwin?" he snarls, his teeth pressed up against my ear. "What've you got to do with this?"

The veins in his arms are bulging like ropes. He's way stronger than he looks. I'm punching at the air trying to reach him, or anything that will help me free myself. Then I hear the sound of a pistol being cocked and we both freeze.

"Mario." It's Estelle's voice. Peaceful, not aggressive. "Let him go. Please. Give us a chance to explain."

I manage to turn my head and see that she's standing in the archway between the living room and dining room with Bud's gun trained on us. I feel Mario tense up even more, then his chest deflates and swells again as he catches his breath. Reluctantly, he loosens his chokehold around my neck and shoves me to the floor. I gasp to catch my breath and the rush of oxygen blurs my vision.

Estelle gestures toward the dining table with the gun. "Both of you. Sit down."

Mario glares at me, then stomps over to one of the chairs, spins it around, and plants himself on it defiantly with his chest wedged against its back.

I peel myself off the floor and wobble over to Estelle. Mario is so enraged that his lips are throbbing. "Those people..." I'm still having trouble catching my breath. "The ones who took Edwin...they're dangerous. You need to tell us what they said. Now!"

He shakes his head. "Who are they?" he shouts. "What the hell's going on? What aren't you telling me? They've got Edwin! He's all we've got left of Alanna!"

Estelle keeps the gun steady, but I see that although she's trying to keep her stance strong, her arms are shaking.

I kneel down next to her and hold out my hands palms up, to signify peace. "He means a lot to me too, Mario."

"Stop bullshitting me! He's *my* cousin's son. Why the hell would he mean a lot to *you*?"

Estelle and I look at each other. She nods, and I tell him, "Because he's my son."

Mario goes still for a second. He shakes his head, then sneers, "Your kid? Are you serious? That's fu—impossible! You gotta try harder than that."

"He's not lying," Estelle tells him. "I know it sounds crazy, but Gavin met Alanna by time- traveling to the past using some photos he took from her room—"

Mario's mouth drops open. "You're both bat-shit crazy!" He springs up and kicks the chair aside, then grabs it again and flings it at her. She jumps out of the way but loses her balance and only keeps from falling by grabbing the edge of the table. Mario wheels around and rushes for the front door.

"Mario! Stop!" I shout. I hesitate. Should I go after him or stay and help Estelle? Maybe she's broken something.

Before I can move, she gasps, "I'm fine. Go after him! We can't let him get away!"

When I reach the front door, he's already almost at the corner of our street. I race after him as fast as I can, but I'm still groggy from our fight. Three blocks down, he turns right. He doesn't know it because he doesn't know our neighborhood, but I know it's a cul-de-sac without any alternative exits. I pick up my pace and force my legs into one final sprint. When he's an arm's width away, I tackle him and pull him down onto the lawn outside a stranger's home.

"Get off me!" he roars. "I swear to God I'm going to kill you!"

We're rolling on the grass, kicking dirt into each other's faces from the patches we've both dug up with our hands.

"I can prove it!" I wheeze as he shoves my face down into the dirt. "I'll show you!"

He hesitates, then releases me. "You've got two minutes," he threatens. "That's it."

I spit dirt out of my mouth. *How am I going to make him understand?* "You know how I'm adopted, right?" I ask.

He nods reluctantly.

“My adoptive parents always told me my parents had died in a fire when I was four. I only found out three weeks ago that my grandfather and grandmother – Bud and Estelle – were still alive, and living here in DC. When I got here and they took me in, they told me that we belong to a family of Photo Travelers, people who can time-travel through images and photos.”

Mario stares at me, then snorts, “You’re so full of shit.”

“No, I’m not. I’m dead serious!” I’ve got to make him understand. “Some explorers found this purple fluid in a magical creek in Machu Picchu, and it’s stored in these crystal vials—”

“You really expect me to believe that?”

“Yea, because it’s exactly what the people who took Edwin are after—”

“You said you had proof!”

“Edwin’s amethyst necklace. I gave that to Alanna on one of my visits...” I can’t look at him. “That day I went to your house for the first time, when I saw her photo, right away I felt this... connection. When you found me in her room, I’d gone in there to get some photos of her. I wanted to visit her. I had to. So I borrowed four photos.”

“Stole, you mean,” he retorts. “Do you know how crazy you sound?”

I think back to the day when Estelle and Bud first told me I was a Photo Traveler. The freshly carved wounds from Bud’s recent death attempt to sweep me away. “Yea ... I do, actually.”

He grabs my face again and shoves it back down into the dirt. “Bullshit!”

I manage to turn my head aside and shout, “I know it’s a lot to take in! But is it bullshit that Edwin looks just like me? Even your Aunt Jeanie said so.” I squirm away from him. “Remember the Christmas party the year before Alanna died? I was there. You were just a kid. Maybe ten. Your uncle’s boss was plastered, singing on the microphone. You had candy all over your mouth, and your aunt took you to wipe off your face. Remember? I can tell you everything about that night. Even exactly where the Christmas tree was!”

“Okay ... so you supposedly traveled to the Christmas party. What does that prove to me?”

“Yeah. And we hit it off, and I kept visiting her. Remember the iPod that your uncle and aunt found? I gave her that too. We just fell for each other. I know it’s kind of weird, but that’s how it happened. Except that like an idiot I made the biggest mistake and changed something in the past that I can’t change back now.”

“Meaning, Alanna got pregnant with Edwin.”

“Yeah...”

“Except that he’s twelve. Only six years younger than you...”

“Yeah. His barely legal dad,” I say. “But that’s how it happened.”

“That’s creepy as hell.”

“I didn’t plan on it.”

Mario shakes his head. “So if what you are saying is true—which I’m not saying I believe you in the least—he would’ve never existed if you hadn’t gone around messing with the past,” he mutters. “So how come it feels like he’s always been around?”

“Because he has, actually. I changed time, and when that changes, your experiences and memories ... they all change with it.”

His grip suddenly relaxes and he shakes his head. I know he still doesn’t believe me. I edge farther away from him and sit up a little, wiping the dirt from my face. “Mario, please! I’m not lying to you. I can even show you how I do it—”

“Oh, right!” he sneers. “Back to the ‘photo traveling’ crap?”

“No, it *is* true! Look, I’m only telling you this because it’s the only way we’re going to be able to get Edwin back. How could I make something like this up? What could I possibly gain from lying about this? Think about it.”

“It’s not possible!”

I sigh. “Yeah, I thought so too, the first time Bud and Estelle told me about it. But it’s true. I’ve done it.”

“You’re messing with my head. If it’s so true, then show me. Now!”

“Okay.” I pull out my phone and scan through my photos until I find one from my first visit to the dinosaur exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum. “All right. Stand back.”

“Wait...” he says. “What’s going to happen?”

“It doesn’t matter. You don’t believe it anyway, right?” I stare at the photo and repeat the chant. “To this time, allow my travel. Take me there, let time unravel.”

The whirling winds carry me back to the museum, where the past-me is staring at the entrance to the exhibit and reminding myself to eventually come back and see Fred the elephant again. The past-me has our phone in his hand and drops it the moment he recognizes himself staring back at him.

“I’d watch out with your phone,” I say, throwing him—me—a wink before he can answer. “Wouldn’t want to break it.” Then I say my return chant.

When I reappear, Mario’s staring at me. “Are you kidding me right now? What the hell was that?” For the first time since we’ve learned of Edwin’s kidnapping, just an hour or so ago, he looks excited instead of furious at me.

“I photo-traveled. That’s what we do. I visited myself in the past and came right back. You’ve seen it now. I wasn’t lying ... I couldn’t tell you before. I mean, I’d just learned about it myself. Even I had trouble believing it. I never expected to get you and your family involved. None of this was supposed to happen.”

“This is crazy. How do you do it?”

“As long as I have an image of where I want to go, I repeat the chant you heard me say and I can travel to that time and place.”

He still looks unconvinced, but his body looks less tense and he isn’t so furious. “But how did Edwin get involved? Who took him in the first place, and what do they want with him? And why can’t you just go back and stop it from ever happening?”

“You don’t think I just would’ve already, if I could? Give me more credit than that. These people—they can time travel, too, but they’re a different breed of Photo Travelers. They’re a group of European psychos who call themselves the ‘Peace Hunters.’ They want my family’s crystal vials, but only so they can create what they call a ‘peace-centered world.’ Except they’re willing to kill people to make it happen. They already have. If I try to stop them by going back to the past, they’ll just find another way to come back around again. They’re not going to stop until we stop them altogether.”

“So why the hell did they take Edwin? What’s he got to do with it?”

“I think that the two you saw who came after him—Axel and Naima—are able to intercept our time travels. I think they were able to follow me whenever I visited Alanna. That has to be how they found out that I had a son, and where he lived. Or they’ve been watching me a lot more closely than I thought.”

“So, that night when you got drunk, when we went to Club Ego—those were the people you said were after you?” He slams at the grass with his fist. “I knew you weren’t just talking shit ’cause you were plastered.”

I nod.

He tenses up again and glares at me. “This is *all* your fault then! Everything about it! If you have the damn vials they want, then just give them to them!”

“You don’t get it. It’s not that simple!”

“Why not? They have Edwin—they want the vials—you have the vials. Give them the vials and we’re done!”

“This is bigger than you and me!” I snap. “If they get hold of all of our vials, the rest of the world will suffer. They’ll change everything.”

“Yeah, and your ‘son’—my cousin—is in the hands of who the hell knows who because of you! Not to mention the rest of my family, too! I don’t believe this!”

“I never thought anything like this would ever happen—”

“Well it did!”

My phone rings and an unfamiliar number pops up on the screen.

I pick up immediately. “Hello?”

“Hello, Brown Eyes.” It’s Naima’s icy British voice; the one that always sends chills crawling down my spine. My nerves claw through my skin. I turn to Mario and try to speak, but it takes a moment before I can mouth, “It’s her! Naima.”

“If you want your lad returned home,” she purrs, “you need to listen very carefully.”

“Where is he? If you hurt him, I swear to God I’ll kill you!”

She snickers as if I’ve just told her a joke. “Meet me at Hyde Park in half an hour. Alone. And do *not* screw this up.”

“Naima—” I shout. But the line is dead.

“What’d she say?” Mario asks.

“Total bitch. They want to meet me in thirty. You need to go back to Estelle and—”

He grabs me by the collar. “Fuck you, asshole! I’m going with you. I don’t care what you say. He’s *my* family!”

I shove him off me. “Listen! Whether you like it or not, he’s my son! These people are dangerous. Really dangerous! You have no idea what we’re dealing with. They’ve

been after me for almost a month now, and I don't even know what we're dealing with! And by the way, this may all be my fault, but you might try to be a little more grateful. Since I'm the reason why your parents are even still alive."

Mario looks more confused than ever. "What d'you mean?"

"Hey, you two!" a shaky voice calls out. We whip around and see a hunched-over elderly man standing in the door of the house at the edge of the lawn we're on. "Get off my property before I call the cops!" He waves his wooden cane at us. "You hear me? I'll call the cops right now! You bunch of hoodlums!"

I grab Mario's arm. "We need to get out of here."

He glowers at me but lets me lead him away from the house. "I will *die* for that kid," he says. I don't know if it's the sweat dripping down his face or not, but his eyes look wet. "Get it?"

Mario loves Edwin as much as he would love his own son. I don't know what to say. I glance back at the old man, who's trying to dial his cordless phone, and then tell Mario, "Fine. But you stay out of sight. Do you get it?"

CHAPTER TWO

We pull up in Mario's car about a block away from Hyde Park. The whole way there he makes it a point to fill up 98 percent of the time with an endless stream of impatient questions. And threatening to kick my ass if anything happens to Edwin. That leaves me the other two percent of the time to keep reminding him how the scene with Naima has to play out. "You've got to stay out of sight! You promised! You listening to me?" But I can tell he's ignoring me.

When we reach the park and the car lurches to a stop, I grab his arm. "One more time," I warn him. "Stay here!" But the second I open my door and get out, I hear his slam shut, too.

I bang my palms on the roof of the car. "Oh, come *on*, man!"

He glares at me. "If you think I'm gonna stay here like some five-year-old waiting for mommy to come back—I'll hide out behind those bushes."

Before I can say anything, he jogs over to a row of waist-high shrubs and squats down behind them. I head across the grass to a shabby redwood picnic table and check

my phone. Still no call from Naima. Another five minutes drag by until a soft breeze brushes against me carrying the scent of venom I know too well. I wheel around and see Naima stalking toward me. She's in her usual all white and silver—long white coat, cropped sheer top, metallic leather silver shorts, tall white heels with straps that crisscross all the way up to her knees. And, of course, her favorite accessory, her elbow-length white leather gloves.

She raises a perfectly stenciled silver eyebrow. "I take it you were smart enough to come alone?"

"Of course I did." But I can't keep from giving one quick glance at Mario's hiding place. I hope she hasn't seen it.

She gives me a mocking glance. "Okay, Brown Eyes, I have a proposition for you."

"I'm not making any deals with you until I know Edwin's safe."

She slants her head to one side and eyes me, then shakes her head. "Don't be silly. You're smart enough to know exactly what this is about."

"Spit it out then."

She rolls her eyes and sighs with pretend patience. "There's no reason to harm the boy. He's leverage. That's it. And you already know that."

She's right, of course. She waits for me to reply, then adds, "It's really quite simple. The boy for the vials. Quick, simple, easy. Obvious."

"And that's all? I give you the vials and you give me Edwin? How do I know you'll keep your end of the bargain?"

"Bloody hell. You Americans have such trust issues."

"I'm serious."

Her venomous scowl bends into a smirk. "Well, you'll just have to take my word for it. What choice do you have?" She takes a couple of steps toward me and holds up her hands. "Gavin, I'm not a monster. Believe me."

"No, you only kill people and use peace as your lame excuse."

"First of all ... I myself have never killed anyone. If your intention was to hurt me, you should know it will require much more than that. And second, we do what we must. If that means ridding the world of true evil, then so be it. Our cause is much greater than you can apparently comprehend."

“Your ‘cause’ is an excuse to kill others. I don’t understand how you don’t comprehend that. Whether you personally have or haven’t killed anyone up to now doesn’t matter. The point is, you’d do it without thinking twice. It’s all one big power trip.”

“Is that what you think?”

“I don’t think it. I know it.”

She swings around and gestures at the crest tattooed on the back of her skull. “This crest symbolizes everything we stand for. Everything I believe in. And everything I will die for. The dragons symbolize the Peace Hunters—fierce protectors of peace, harmony, and balance, which are represented by the trinity of doves in the center.”

“You guys really believe your lies!” I spit out incredulously. “You actually believe them!”

“Paix Eternelle.”

“What?”

She rolls her eyes again as if she can’t believe how stupid I am. “French for ‘Eternal Peace’—our sacred oath. Those two simple words define everything we live for. Our purpose will not be silenced by nonbelievers. And as you are well aware, we have vowed to do whatever it takes to achieve our goal.”

“Including kidnapping innocent children.”

She gives me an amused smirk. “Do we have a deal?”

“I don’t really have an option.”

“Look at that,” she scoffs. “The boy’s not as foolish as he seems.”

“I’m not a boy.”

I hear the sudden sound of fast footsteps on the grass and spot Mario darting toward us.

He tackles Naima to the ground. “Where is he?” he shouts as he straddles her and clenches his hands around her neck. “Where is he?”

“Mario!” I yell. “Damn it!”

He starts bashing her head against the ground. “Tell me!”

She’s gasping for air and struggling to pull his hands from her throat. Then she lets go and her hands reach around his back. Her left fingers scramble for her right glove.

Her gloves!

“Mario! Watch out!” I shout.

But I’m too late. She presses whatever button she was reaching for. A stream of violet gas erupts from the fingertips and hits Mario right in the face. As the gas hits his nostrils, his eyes wander up under his lids and he collapses. Naima seizes the opportunity and digs into the pocket of her coat with her other hand. She pulls out a narrow, razor-sharp knife and swipes at his ear, slashing off almost a quarter of the earlobe.

He shrieks. Naima shoves him off her and jumps to her feet. I run over to him, pull his shirt from his torso, and press the fabric against the blood gushing from his ear.

“You fool!” Naima hisses at me. “I warned you!”

“No! Let me explain!”

“Too late! The boy is done!”

“It’s... not... his... fault...” Mario mumbles, his mouth sagging at the corners. He sounds drunk from the gas.

I slap my hand over his mouth to keep him from making things even worse. “The vials,” I tell her. “They’re yours. Please, just don’t touch Edwin.”

She closes her eyes and takes several deep breaths. When she opens them and turns her viscous gaze on me again, it’s as if she’s reaching deep into my soul. “You *will* regret this. And your boy *will* pay the price for it.” She pivots on her heels. The long tails of her coat swish around her ankles as she raises her fists and snaps her fingers. A cloud of white smoke erupts from her gloves and expands around her until it veils her completely.

I’m too shocked to do anything except stare at the cloud. When it dissipates, she’s gone.

“Gavin...” Another agonized groan from Mario snaps me back into reality.

I’m so furious that I shove him onto his side. “Are you crazy? We were about to make a deal!”

“You guys were taking too long...” he mumbles. Saliva is dripping from the corners of his mouth.

“Yeah? Well, you may just have ruined our last chance at possibly getting Edwin back safely.”

I grab his arm and pull him to his feet. I want to punch him in the face and knee him in the gut, but his shirt is drenched in blood and it doesn't seem to be letting up. I shake my head and push him forward. "Come on. Let's get back to Estelle's and get your ear taken care of before you die on me."

CHAPTER THREE

When we get back to the house and Estelle opens the door, her eyes flicker with shock at the sight of Mario drenched in blood and hanging off my shoulder.

"Get him inside! Hurry!"

I drag him into the living room and settle him down on the floor while she runs into the kitchen and grabs towels and bandages. He's still mumbling incoherently, which means that whatever gas Naima used on him is still scrambling his brain.

As Estelle sets to work, I explain, "Naima called. She wanted to meet me. The Peace Hunters want to trade Edwin for our vials. But then stupid-ass here decided to tackle her. She shot some kind of gas at him from out of those damned gloves of hers and then sliced his ear, too."

"It looks like he's lost a lot of blood," she says, dabbing at the wound with a thick gauze pad dampened with alcohol and some generic antibiotic. "He also still seems sort of out of it."

"Yea, it's from the gas I think ... He'll be okay though, right?"

She shoots me an annoyed glance. "Why didn't you come to me first?" she scolds, just as Mario lets out a scream of pain and digs his nails into my thigh. My own ears tingle at his scream, like the time I saw one of my classmates back in Nevada break his leg on the basketball court and my own leg went numb.

Estelle continues pressing the gauze against the wound. "Shhh ... there you go. You'll be fine. Just hang in there a few more seconds."

She braces his other cheek against her chest and pats his shoulder gently while he moans. After a few more dabs, she covers the ear with another thick piece of gauze and tapes it against his temple and jaw. But the gauze turns red immediately. The bleeding doesn't seem to be stopping, although it's slower.

Estelle sits back. "We need to get him to a hospital."

“And what are we supposed to tell them?” I snap. “That some crazy lady who can time-travel cut off part of his ear?”

Estelle gives me an exasperated look.

“Sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

She smiles, reaches out, and ruffles my hair. “It’s okay. This has been a tough day.”

I haul myself to my feet and start pacing the living room. “I wish Bud was here.” I can’t help bursting out. “He’d know what to do.”

“I wish so, too, sweetie. I really do...” She sighs and pats Mario again, who suddenly seems to come to. He lets out another agonized groan. “Jeanie—my aunt—she used to be a nurse! Take me home.”

“But...” I go back over and squat next to her. “The cops’ll probably be there taking reports on Edwin. If we show up there with him covered in blood, what do you think they’ll say?”

“Give me your phone,” Mario shouts. “I’ll tell them I found him!”

Estelle nods and I ask Mario for his aunt’s number so I can dial out for him. When the phone rings, I nervously toss it to him. “Here, it’s ringing.”

“*Tia!*” He moans, biting back the grunts and moans. “I found him. Call the police department and tell them it was a false alarm. I’ll explain when I get home. Just listen to me. Please—*grunt—te quiero.*” He hangs up. “Done. Now let’s go.”

Jeanie and Mario’s uncle, Ralph, are waiting on their front steps when we pull up in Mario’s Mustang. Delva, their feisty pint-sized housekeeper, is hovering right behind them.

They run over and tug the car doors open.

“Where is he?” Jeanie shouts hysterically, poking her head into the car. “Where’s Edwin? He’s not in the car!”

Delva’s face is stained with tears, and she’s clutching a beaded cross against her chest. “*Ay dios mio. Por favor!* Please tell us he is okay!”

I jump out of the driver’s seat and hurry to help Estelle out of the passenger side.

“I’ll explain inside!” Mario struggles to get out of the backseat while keeping his hand pressed against his ear.

Jeanie jaw drops. “You’re bleeding!”

“What the hell’s going on?” Ralph explodes.

“*Que te pasó?*” Delva cries out.

Estelle and I remain silent.

“We need to get inside!” Mario repeats. He cranes around nervously, as if he’s worried that Naima might pop out of somewhere and slash off his other ear.

“Get him inside!” Ralph says. “Let’s go.”

Mario tries to stagger up the stairs into the house, but Ralph and I have to support him. We help him into the living room and guide him to the couch, where he collapses, moaning. Jeanie and Delva crouch over him and pick away at the gauze.

Ralph turns to me and Estelle. “He’ll be fine,” he says. “Jeanie was a nurse for ten years before we got married.” Then he eyes us and adds, “What exactly is going on? Where’s Edwin? When Mario called he said he had found him. All we know is what Delva’s told us—which isn’t much. We weren’t home at the time. Delva said she had just returned from the store when a man and women showed up and took Edwin. Then Mario stormed off.”

I open my mouth to try to explain but I don’t know how to even begin. I remember Naima warning me—“*Your boy will pay the price*”—and turn helplessly to Estelle. She doesn’t even know about that threat yet.

“*Ay, sí! Se lo llevarón!*” Delva says. “They took him!” Then she looks at me in anguish and says, “They said it was because of you! What did you do?”

Estelle looks up at Ralph, who towers over her by a foot or more. She may be small, but right now she looks totally in command. “Is there someplace the two of us can talk?”

He scowls at her. “I’m sorry. I’m just so confused. Just who are you?”

“Of course. I’m Gavin’s grandmother, Estelle Greene. He lives with me. I can explain everything outside.”

Ralph squints suspiciously at her, but whatever he’s about to say is interrupted by Mario letting out a shriek as Jeanie pulls the gauze away from his ear. The dark, drying blood, ragged flesh, and bright, wet blood make me want to throw up. An entire quarter

of the tip of his ear is missing. I have to turn my head away. It's either that or there's going to be a lot of blood from him and *a lot* of vomit from me. Not the best combination.

Mario reaches out and grabs my hand, squeezes it *really* hard.

"Mario, hold still! It's still bleeding." Jeanie orders him. "I'm going to have to clean it again and stitch it up." She turns to Delva. "*Ayuda me?*"

Ralph scans the scene, then jerks his head at Estelle. "We can talk out on the patio."

She throws me a reassuring nod. "Stay here with Mario," she says, and then follows Ralph outside.

Jeanie raises her eyes from examining Mario and looks around, confused. "Where's Ralph?"

"They went outside to talk..."

She glares at me, then hands Delva a towel and tells her, "*Agarra esto*. Hold it against his ear, but lightly." She marches over to me and grabs my chin in her hands. "Edwin—tell me he's okay." Her voice is low but she sounds desperate.

I keep my eyes on hers. "He will be. I promise."

"*Will* be? What is that supposed to mean?"

"It's ... um ... I ..." My mind suddenly goes blank. "My grandmother is explaining it to Ralph outside."

She sighs. "I hope you're right." I think she wants to cry—or punch me—but she holds herself back, glances at Mario, and tells me, "We have to get him to the bathroom and clean him up some more. I have my first-aid kit there. Tell Ralph when he comes back in."

I nod. Mostly because I don't know what else to say.

I'm okay as I watch them help him down the hall, but the minute I hear the bathroom door close behind them, my knees give way. I feel like I'm standing on clouds, overcome with light-headedness. Then I drop to the living room floor. I have to support myself by reaching out and touching the cold tile with my palms. I remember that Naima showed no indication that she was bluffing. What'll they do to Edwin? What if I can't save him? *We messed everything up!* My heart is rattling against my ribs, reminding me what could

become of him. Would they really hurt him? Or *kill* him? But I still have the vials, and that's what they want.

Terror is rising in the pit of my stomach. I pull myself to my feet and try to figure out what to do, but my brain is fogged. I need to get in touch with Naima before they can hurt Edwin ... obviously Paris has to be my next stop ... that's where they said they've taken him ... but then how will I find him? ... them? ... Paris is huge ... I think ... why do all the odds have to be stacked against me ... like a Jenga game gone horribly wrong ... and I don't even know how many Peace Hunters there are at this point ... or what their leader, Norrek, even looks like ...

"Calm down, Gavin!" I finally tell myself. I glance up and spot Ralph's face; wide-eyed in what I think is disbelief. I should go outside and help Estelle. This is my fault, not hers.

I head for the sliding glass door, slide it open and step outside.

"I don't care what needs to be done," Ralph is saying. "All that matters is getting Edwin back home. I don't care what or how."

They swing around to face me.

"We have to get to Paris," I say.

Estelle extends a hand out for me to grab. I do. "Are you sure about that sweetheart?"

My eyes trail the shiny marble-tiled patio floor. "Not really. But if they do have him hostage, then we'll have to find them. Aren't they based out of Paris?"

"Yes," Estelle says. "That's where they're based out of, but their headquarters is hidden."

"I'll take care of all of the preparations," Ralph says, his face dripping in distress. He's nervously rubbing at the mid-joint of his right pinky finger. "We all need to get to Paris and find him."

"But..." I say.

"But what?" Estelle frowns.

"You can't go." She looks smaller than ever to me. There's no way she can come along. It'd kill her. And that would kill me.

"Excuse me?" She looks stunned.

"It'd be too much for you. I won't allow it. I promised Bud I'd protect you."

“Sweetheart,” she says, “that’s not your decision to make.”

Ralph steps in. “We don’t have many options at the moment. What else are we supposed to do? Please tell me and we’ll do it. I’ll see to it that nothing happens to her. I still don’t really get what this is all about or how it happened, but I don’t care right now. All I care about is getting our boy back.” He gives me an odd, glaring look, and then turns to Estelle again. “Will you give Gavin and me a moment alone?”

Crap. Say no. Say no.

“Of course ... I’ll go and see if Jeanie and Delva need help.”

“They’re in the bathroom by the front,” I say.

Estelle brushes her hand against my arm as she passes me and goes inside.

Ralph watches her leave, then gestures at a patio chair. “Have a seat.” I notice that he seems reluctant to look me in the eyes, and I take it to mean that he thinks I’m undeserving of it. Which is fair enough. Or maybe he wants to punch me in the face, too. Which is probably even fairer.

I slouch down in the chair and wait to see what he’s going to say and do next. My anxiety and guilt about what I’ve caused and what could happen are sending beads of sweat trickling down my forehead.

He sits down across from me and runs his hands over his mouth—which are so big that I imagine how easily he could snap my neck if he wanted to. “Estelle told me about these people who are after you. But truthfully, I have no idea what to think. ‘Time travel?’ I ... I’m floored, really. But I will say this—and I said the same to your grandmother—I don’t give a damn right now. We have to save Edwin. He’s all we have left of Alanna. There’s no way to describe what that boy means to us. And we want him back.” The deep emotion and love in his voice make me want to cry.

I watch silently as he recalls the memories of Alanna. A wrinkle forms between his thick, manicured eyebrows, and the corner of his lips twitch. I see him blink hard a half-dozen times and I think that’s all that’s keeping him from shedding tears, too.

I’m surprised. I honestly thought he’d be screaming at me, cursing me to hell or something.

“There’s nothing I want more, either,” I say.

He gives me a faint smile. “This ... ability of yours. I don’t understand it. Part of me still thinks it’s bullshit. In spite of what your grandmother told me. But for now I have to accept that it *is* real. And it’s a gift.”

“I thought it was crazy, too,” I tell him. “But it’s not as great as you may think. Look at all the wrong that’s come of it. Everyone seems to suffer because of it.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, though.” He pauses. “What I would give to see my baby girl one last time ... I almost killed myself when she died. Life *stopped* for us. For Jeanie *and* me. She wasn’t supposed to die before us. Do you know what that feels like? Seeing your beautiful baby girl die before you?” He shakes his head. “For a very long time, nothing around us meant anything anymore. But ... she didn’t die because of you. That was out of your control.”

“But everything else. That’s all my fault.”

“No, everything you’ve done has brought us blessings. You gave us this home. You gave us Edwin. And you gave our daughter love.”

“What do you mean?”

“The day we found the MP3 player, after she died, we also found her diary. Hidden under her mattress. There were pages upon pages about this mysterious boy she loved. She wrote about a love she’d only seen in the movies. One that was instant. A love that others wouldn’t believe. One that she sometimes didn’t believe herself.”

I close my eyes so tightly that they hurt. I can’t look at him any longer.

“She wrote about the life she wanted with him, about her dreams of running away with him and raising their child together. And about the life she wanted Edwin to have. That’s when we knew, that for her sake, it was time to collect the all the broken pieces and pull ourselves together. If we lose him, I don’t think I can deal with another loss. Or with letting my little girl down.”

I have to open my eyes, but my vision is blurred by a thin layer of water and I still can’t talk.

He finally adds, “Gavin, you have to save him.”

I look him right in the eye. “I will. *I* won’t let her down either.”

He stands up. “Good. I have enough connections that I can get you your passport in thirty-six hours—if not faster. We’ll cover all the expenses. Whatever you need, we’ll see that you get it.”

I don’t know what to say except, “Thank you.”

He gives me a smile tinged with sadness. “I think it’s you I should be thanking. For Alanna’s sake.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Estelle, Ralph and Jeannie spend the next hour upstairs sorting out the logistics of getting us to Paris and making contact with the Peace Hunters. I asked about Mario’s parents—who shouldn’t be alive but returned from the dead after I changed the past by giving Alanna my MP3 player. They’re still on vacation and everyone’s decided not to say anything. They’re optimistic—or putting on a good show—about getting Edwin back before having to involve anyone else.

The whirlwind of emotions coming from all angles is killing me. I’m anxious about Edwin’s safety, still confused and angry about my dad’s affair, and stumped by the discovery that Yogi was my sister. That the quirky girl who had poisoned my grandfather, and who *I* had left behind to be devoured by molten lava and burned like charcoal, was my *sister*. And maybe she did deserve it ... but I’m not a murderer. That wasn’t my decision to make. I’m not God. *What’s happening to me?*

It’s too much to take in all at once.

Mario is lying on the couch across from me with his ear cocooned in bandages. He hasn’t taken his eyes off me—I’m sure he’s throwing mental daggers my way or contemplating which way of mutilating me he would find most satisfying since it’s my fault that Edwin’s gone. Finally I get up and move toward the stairs.

“Where do you think you’re off to?” he mutters.

“I need to see Alanna,” I say reluctantly, my voice low and strained.

He lets out a loud chuckle. “Dude—you *sweeeeeaaaar* I’m letting you anywhere near her!” He gets up and wedges himself between me and the first step. “Stay away from any photo she’s in! You’ve done enough damage. How about you leave it at that?”

“Let me say good-bye, Mario. At least give me that much.” We’re right in each other’s faces, so close that I can feel his hard, stale respirations against my nose.

He eyes me while he processes some decision. He pushes me back mildly, nods with a crafty grin, and drills his pointer finger into his chest. “Okay. *I* choose the picture. You wait here.” He stomps with surprising coordination upstairs and reappears no more than five minutes later with a photo that he tosses it at me. As it floats toward the floor, I dive from the couch to grab it. Alanna’s dressed in an off-the-shoulder black dress, welcoming my visit with her perfect, glossy smile. The photo is taken from her chest up, so I can’t see how pregnant she is. Her shiny hair is longer than before. It’s perfectly straightened, cascading down her back. She’s also wearing the amethyst necklace I gave her, which immediately steals my attention from focusing on the tension poisoning the air.

I don’t even look at Mario. I don’t have it in me. I mutter my chant and rush to her side. “To this time, allow my travel. Take me there, let time unravel.”

Alanna’s standing with her back to me as she faces the hanging mirror in the former foyer of the house I was just in. The old-school camera she’s holding up in her hands is blocking the reflection of her eyes in the mirror.

The suction noise of me appearing causes her to flinch. She moves the camera from in front of her face and her eyes fall on me. She stays staring in shock for a few seconds, then spins around with a gasp. “Gavin!” she shrieks, her hand over her chest.

“Alanna ...”

She shakes her head. “No. Don’t ‘*Alanna*’ me. It’s been months since you’ve visited. Where the hell have you been?”

“There’s a lot that’s happened,” I say, walking toward her.

I grab her hands and tug at them. I know she’s angry, but that doesn’t stop her from allowing herself to fall into my arms. Her protruding, round, pregnant belly rubs up against me and I take my hand from around her to brush it gently.

“He’s yours, you know?” she says. “I hope you’d know that—you *do* know that, right? You’d probably know that if you were around more. It’s a boy. Edwin. I hope you like it—the name,” she whispers with a hint of anger and sadness sewn into her words. “I

wanted you to help choose it, but ... you haven't been around. And I didn't ... I didn't know if I'd even see you again."

She steps back from me, but my eyes are locked on my unborn kid. I know I shouldn't be surprised. I've already met the twelve-year-old version of Edwin, but feeling her belly makes me feel all paternal inside. Emotional, even.

I kneel down close to her belly and kiss it softly. "Hey there, buddy," I whisper. "I can't wait to meet you." My stomach churns when it hits me. *I've missed out on so much.* The months of her belly growing. Being there for her. Choosing his name. Making fun of her awkward cravings. *All of it, gone.* I never once thought about any of this until now.

I glance up at Alanna, who's gazing down at me with a partial smile.

"I'm sorry it's taken me so long," I say. "A lot's happened. And I've had some trouble getting access to your photos." I stand up and grab her soft hands. "But I missed you so much." I wrap my hands around her head and bring her face toward mine until our lips meet, replenishing me with energy. When I open my eyes, hers are open, too, but she's glancing off to the side, avoiding meeting mine. "What's wrong?"

She shrugs. "It's been hard. Not knowing if you'd come back. Lying to people about who the father is. The thought of raising him alone, without you ... thinking he wouldn't have a dad, and that I wouldn't have any answers for him about who he was. The possibility of him having the same ability you do, and those people coming after him. It's taken a toll on me. You can't even imagine it."

I not only feel her emptiness, but the obvious signs of devastation pour from her eyes like spotlights. Her eyes used to gleam with joy ... now they're drained of that former brilliance.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper. My throat is tight. *This is not how I want to say goodbye.*

We're standing there facing each other in one of those awkward moments where you just don't know what to say next. I scan the room searching for something to talk about, to change the subject.

The best I can come up with to give her a hesitant smile and say, "You're all dressed up. Heading out somewhere?"

She laughs, and I know she's seen right through me. "Really, Gav? Is that the best you can do?" She shakes her head. I can't blame her for making fun of me. Then she

adds, "It's Thanksgiving. I'm getting picked up for dinner by my friend. We're going to her family's party before meeting my parents at my dad's coworker's house."

Thanksgiving!

No!

I can't believe it. Mario chose this picture *on purpose*. A picture of her on the day she'll die! How could he be so cruel? *Does he hate me that much?* Is he that angry at me? I'm horrified. I don't know what to do. Fuzzy spots form in my eyesight and I feel weightless. I'm going to faint. The reality of the moment whacks me across the face, like a rubber band. I lunge toward her and pull her against me. I breathe in the scent of her neck. Deep, aromatic berries. "I love you. I love you. I love you. I'm sorry for everything I've done..."

She doesn't say anything, just hugs me back. At first her touch is resistant, but then her fingers clutch at the strands of hair at the back of my head.

How can I let her go when I *know* she's about to die? I can't possibly let her walk out of this house. I feel like I have a python wrapped around my neck and it's squeezing all the breath out of me. I hold her close, gripping my fingers around the velvety skin of her arms.

I can't let her go.

I step back and just look at her. I need to take in everything about her one more time.

She looks puzzled. "Are you crying?"

"No!" But I put my fingers up to my eyes anyway. *Crap! I am crying.* "... Uh ... maybe."

"Why? What's wrong? Tell me what's wrong! Is it those people? Have they found you? Did something happen? Tell me!"

I shake my head. No way I'm going to wipe my eyes again. Not when she can see. "Nothing. It's just that I've missed you. So much."

She eyes me suspiciously. "Are you lying to me?"

"No ..."

She crosses her arms. "Then what's wrong with your eye?" she persists.

I can feel it. It's twitching uncontrollably. Usually when I lie, it's only a tiny flickering that gives me away. Not anything that anybody could see unless they're really

looking. But right now my bottom lid of my right eye is twitching nonstop. I muster up all the control in my body and force a smile.

“I’m just so excited to see you again.” I pull her closer to me and nuzzle my nose against her collarbone. “That’s all. It’s been too long.”

I don’t want to let you go. This is torture. But what other choice do I have? If I save you, it’ll somehow affect everything else. Possibly even Edwin’s birth.

We stand hugging each other in silence until a loud honk from outside breaks us apart.

“That’s my ride for dinner,” she says. “I have to go, Gav.”

She opens the front door quickly and waves to her friend that she’ll be right out. She turns back to me, and I see that she’s holding back her own tears. “Please promise me you’ll come back. And not in five more months, either.”

I don’t want to lie to you, but I have to. Please don’t hate me. “I will. I promise.”

We stand facing each other, each of us waiting for the other to say good-bye first. My neck and back are sweating, and my heart is pounding so fast that by default I’m breathing so fast to try and keep up with it.

She gives me a radiant, innocent smile, and all I want is to escape with her forever.

“You go first,” she grins.

“I don’t want to.”

She blows out a mock-frustrated sigh but then smiles again with her back against the door. She reaches slowly behind her to grab the knob. “Bye...”

“Don’t leave!” I burst out. “Please.”

Do I save the girl I love? If I decide to, this is my chance—my only chance. “Wait!” I tug at her arm and bring her against me again. Everything in sight blurs, goes dark and cloudy. All I see are her eyes sparkling back at me like loose diamonds in a sea of tar-black dirt.

“What’s gotten into you? You’re off. Are you sure everything’s all right?” She shakes her head. “I hope Edwin’s not half the spaz you are.” *I hope he’s not, too.* She tugs the hem of her dress down. It climbed up her thigh after I pulled her into me. “Talk to me. If not, then I need to go.”

I stand silently, thinking of Edwin. A thousand thoughts about what the three of us could've been come crashing over me. We could've been a family. Couldn't we have? I've messed everything up so badly. What was I thinking would happen?

Another honk from outside.

She snaps her fingers in my face. "Gavin!"

"I ... I ... don't leave me. Please!"

She sheds tears from her armored eyes and stomps her foot. "You know I don't want to!" she says. "That's not fair! I've been waiting for you for months! *Months!* And now, when I have to go, you tell me not to? I don't know how to keep up any more! I'm going crazy!" She drops to her knees, sobbing with her hands over her face. "This just is not fair to me!"

Jesus, what have I done to you? You're right, this is not fair. Not in the least.

I drop down beside her and take her tear-wet chin in my fingers. "Look at me."

She does. And although her eyes are puffy, she still looks beautiful. The tears gathering over her eyes shimmer every time she moves her head.

I kiss her nose and stare into her eyes. "Marry me."

Her eyes widen. "What did you say?"

"Marry me." I repeat matter-of-factly, although I know the idea is impossible. But it's all I have to offer her right now.

A smile expands across her face. "Of course I'll marry you." She accepts, throwing herself on me. "I don't know how that'll work, but yes."

Another honk from the car. I want to scream at whoever it is for interrupting our private moment. Send them to hell.

"Ugh. I need to go," she says, stepping backwards. "I don't want to." She squeezes my hand.

"I know. I don't want you to, either."

She begins to peel herself away from me. *Choose. Let her live, let her die.* I pull her back into me and cup her face in my hands. I kiss her. I kiss her like it's the last time I'll kiss her, because I know in fact that it is. *You're letting her die.*

"I love you, Alanna. Never forget that. Ever."

“Never,” she says, casting her smile over me. “I really need to go. I love you, too.” She kisses me one last time, and it takes everything inside of me not to crumble into a pile of ash.

She walks to the door, opens it, turns and says playfully, “I like big diamonds, by the way. The shinier the better.”

I nod, and as the door closes behind her I run to the window and watch her get into the car ... and leave my life forever.

With no one around to question anything, no one to hide from, no one to lie to, I pound my fists against the door and let it all out. The girl I love is not only out of my life, but on her way to losing hers. And I can't do a damn thing! Or ... I could have but decided not to.

You can't let her go!

I fumble to open the door, shouting, “Wait!” But the car is halfway down the street. I watch the flashing turn signal disappear around the corner.

What kind of man am I? How many lives can I possibly ruin? I can deal with ruining my own life, but what about everyone around me? Over and over and over again. Leyla, Bud, Estelle, Yogi, and Alanna. All of them destroyed by the decisions I've made.

I pull at my hair, nearly yanking each thread out from its follicle. At least the pain temporarily blots out my self-loathing and hate. But as soon as the sharp, prickling sensation fades, I return to the devastating reality. A very sad reality. One, where once again, I find myself, very alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

When I return to the present, Mario is behind me. His face is hard, the expression in his eyes is resentful.

“Asshole!” I shout. I lunge at him with my fist clenched and punch him across his mouth. He goes down immediately—the ear injury has slowed him down.

I mount him, grab the collar of his shirt, and shake vigorously. “I love her! I love her!” is all I can shout.

I can barely breathe. My limbs are limp.

I roll over off him and collapse next to him.

He could beat the crap out of me now, but I don't care. Truthfully—I'd rather he beat me to a blistering, raw death so I'd be incapable of feeling anything more. If I'm lucky, he will, so I don't feel the pain any hollowness anymore.

I lie there braced for him to attack, anticipating a major blow or a kick, but nothing happens. I open my eyes and I see him staring at me blankly.

"Bro..." he begins, "that was wrong of me. That was low."

"Yeah! It was."

"I'm an asshole. We're friends. I want to blame you, but it isn't your fault—well, it is but it isn't. You know what I mean. My bad ... Edwin's like my little brother. I used to be careless, didn't give a crap about anything. But after Alanna died, things changed for me."

"I almost couldn't," I say. "Let her go, I mean. I almost didn't."

His eyes gently meet mine. "Then why did you?"

My self-hatred kicks in again. "Haven't my decisions messed up enough things already? Bud's gone, Alanna's gone, now Edwin's God knows where. Bud and my dad were right. We're not gods. Now I get it. Crystal clear."

"Still, I'm a douche to've done that to you. With the photo."

"Yeah, you were. Major douche points. But I get it."

"You do? Really?"

"No. But that's what friends do, right?" I grin. "Lie when it's most needed?"

He chuckles. "Yeah. Guess so." Silence and tension fill the air until he breaks it by giving me a curious look and asking, "What'd you mean when you said you were the reason my parents were still alive?"

"Don't worry. It doesn't matter anymore."

He scowls. "Don't tell *me* what matters anymore. I want to know. I have a right to know whatever else you've screwed up."

"All right, fine. But you asked. When I first met you, your parents had died a few years back. But then I visited Alanna in the past and gave her my MP3 player. She wanted me to show her something from the future and it was all I had on me. But it reset the sequence of events in your lifetime somehow. Altered things so your parents' deaths never happened. "

“Are you screwing with me?”

“Do you honestly think I’d lie about something like that?”

“My parents ... were dead?”

“Don’t think about it. That’s not the reality anymore.”

“No, it’s that...” He still looks bewildered. “I’ve been such an asshole with you and you pretty much saved my parents. I should be thanking you.”

“I meant it—don’t worry. Let’s just say you owe me one.”

He shakes his head. “I can’t believe my parents were dead...” He pauses. “Thanks...”

“You don’t need to thank me. All I need is for us to work together to get Edwin back.”

“I swear to God I’ll kill that lady if I see her again.”

I can’t help laughing “Oh yeah, because that worked out so great for you the last time. You want to get rid of the other ear or something?”

He snickers and retorts, “Hey, if I wouldn’t have to hear the crap that comes out of your mouth anymore, it might not be such a bad idea. If she hadn’t had those gloves, I would’ve taken her down. She cheated. What the hell’s up with those things anyway?”

“No clue. But I bet they’re something Norrek came up with. I wonder what other toys they have that we haven’t seen yet.”

“I don’t even want to think about it.”

A door opens from somewhere in the house, and Estelle’s, Jeannie’s, and Ralph’s voices follow immediately after. I help Mario to his feet as they all come back in. Jeannie’s eyes are puffy and swollen. She’s obviously been crying. Ralph just looks serious, but I can tell that he’s only keeping together for Jeannie’s sake. *I know that feeling.*

Estelle comes over to me. “Sweetheart, Ralph’s already called in some favors to get your passport expedited. Luckily, I have a copy of your birth certificate.”

“You’ll fly on your own,” Ralph adds, “separately from us, but we’ll be going, too. I’ll make sure we have people keeping surveillance on you.”

“No,” I say. “If they find out you guys are around trying to stop them, they could hurt Edwin.”

Jeannie lets out a muffled sob that stops me cold. I go over to her and place my hand on her shoulder. “I won’t let anything happen to him.”

She covers her mouth with a trembling hand, looks up at the ceiling, and then turns to Ralph. I can hear her breathing faster and faster. She stares at Ralph as if she’s willing him to reassure her, to tell her “It’s going to be okay” or “He’ll be fine.” But he doesn’t, and she stumbles back down the hall toward the bathroom murmuring something about needing to be alone for a moment.

Mario raises his voice behind me. “I’m going with you guys too.”

“Absolutely not.” Ralph barks. “Ab-so-lute-ly not! You’re staying here.”

“Are you serious?” Mario throws his arms up in the air. “That kid’s practically like my brother! If you think I’m gonna stay around here when he’s in danger, you’re nuts—”

“Sweetheart,” Estelle puts in. “We don’t need any more trouble. Think about it.”

Mario takes in a deep, obvious breath, then snorts. “Okay—I’ve thought about it. And I’m *going!*”

“Mario,” Ralph says. “Jeannie’s staying behind. I need you to take care of her. She’ll need you here.”

Mario stomps his right foot on the floor like a kid having a tantrum. “This is bullshit!” He storms past us to the stairs and stomps his way up. A moment later, the slamming of his door makes the walls shake.

Estelle smiles over at me. “You okay? You sure you can do this?”

I glance at Ralph and then back at her. “Even if I thought I couldn’t, nothing’s going to hold me back. There’s no way I’m going to let Edwin suffer. They won’t win this.”

Everyone nods, but I know that underneath we’re all worried.

“So be it,” Ralph concludes. “Go home, get me your birth certificate and I’ll finalize the details of the trip. Remember, you still have what they want. So they’ll be back soon.”

“Yes, but in the meantime,” Estelle puts in, “we do need to make sure Edwin’s safe.”

“Which means we can’t wait to hear from them. I need to make contact with Naima,” I say. The thought of having to interact with her again sends a tingling cold shudder down my spine.

Ralph nods. “Then do it.”

CHAPTER SIX

When Estelle and I get home, I motion for her to stay behind me while I edge the door open and flip on the light. If we're planning on seeing Naima again, she and Axel could possibly be waiting for us here.

"Seems clear," I say.

The hall and living room are still trashed from when Naima and Axel broke in to steal our vials. *You let them go*, I remind myself, as if I could forget for even one minute. *And then they kidnapped Edwin*. The guilt stabs at me. I could've prevented it. Estelle had warned me, but I didn't listen. *I was right. I knew best*. When will I learn that I never know best?

Estelle drifts past me toward the couch and slumps down in the concave spot on the cushion. *Bud's old spot*. His image runs through my mind, and I'm assaulted by all the moments we shared, all the moments that have been stolen from me, all vandalized because of this stupid ability. In this exact moment, the guilt I felt for killing Yogi falls away completely. In this moment, I wish that all of them would just die, just stop breathing. In this moment, all I want is the opportunity to kill them all.

Estelle curls up on the couch, and she's so small that most her body fits perfectly on one of the square cushions.

"You've got to be exhausted," I tell her. "Why don't you go upstairs and take a shower? Maybe lie in bed for a little?"

"It's been a long day, honey. I think I'll just rest here for a while."

"Okay." I go over and drape the shawl lying on the back of the couch over her. The trapped molecules from Bud's cologne release into the air, and I breathe in the potent, dry scent. I give Estelle a kiss on the forehead, and start upstairs.

But the sound of her gasping sobs stops me halfway. She must be muffling her weeping in a cushion or the shawl so I can't hear her, but to me the sound is deafening, and it cripples me. This is too much for her to handle. She doesn't deserve all this. *I deserve it*. It's all *my* fault! If only I could free her from her pain. I wonder why it always seems to be that it's the best people who are the ones made to suffer the most. How the

kindest souls are the ones who constantly get trampled on. And how the evildoers always somehow seem to weasel their way into lavish and abundant lives.

I'm frozen in place, as if my feet are stuck in blocks of cement. Should I do what's right and turn around and go back down there and cry with her? *Leave her alone*, I convince myself. She's allowed to mourn, hurt, suffer. *I just can't handle any more today*; my mind sorts out the truth for me. I just can't.

With that I continue upstairs, open the door to my room, and toss my shirt to the floor. I wish I could throw it into an incinerator so I could burn away the memories of today and of the last weeks along with it.

"I do not think—"

I wheel around at the sound of that voice. That teasing, chalkboard-scratching, torturing voice. *Naima*. She's leaning against the edge of the bay window with her outstretched legs comfortably crossed and her usual mocking smile.

"As I started to say," she purrs. "I do not think that taking off your shirt is the most appropriate way to greet a lady. Did not your grandparents teach you anything?"

I don't dare shout. The last thing I want is for Estelle to hear me. "Where is he? Tell me you haven't hurt him!"

She's completely calm. Not a worry in her world. I envy her in this moment.

"My dear Gavin," she says, "did I not tell you that this could have gone very smoothly? All you had to do was hand over the vials and we would have left. Simple as that." She frowns, her wicked eyes sucking the life from me. "But you had to be hardheaded. Had to prove something, did you not?"

It takes everything in me to not to rush her, tackle her, and send her crashing through the window to death. *Don't do it. Remember Edwin. Edwin. Edwin*. It's all I need to hear to hold me back. I kick my shirt in the air with my toe, grab it, and pull it back on. "Those vials aren't yours to have. You think this is a game?"

She looks almost insulted. "A *game*?" She pushes herself away from the bay window ledge and takes a careful moment to tug at the seams of her trademark lethal gloves before adding, "Is that what you think we consider this? A *game*? Let me tell you something. This is no *game*. What we do will save the lives of millions. We are the past, present, and future of peace. The soldiers of amity. The heroes of harmony. And you

decide *that* is not worth it? You think *we* are the villains? *You* are the ones who do not deserve to have the vials. You have decided to use the power for recreation rather than for the good of humanity. You are selfish, foolish beings.”

I think this may be the first time in my life that I’m completely stumped for a comeback. As if she has some superpower that involves paralyzing my vocal cords.

She takes a few of her usual calculated steps toward me. Her face is angry, livid. “*You* are despicable.” Then, suddenly, like a light switch being flipped on, a false smile smudges out her frown. “But you’re also just a boy.”

“I’m not a boy,” I blurt out before I can stop myself. *Wow. Go Gavin!* Out of everything I could have come up with, that’s the best I could do? Yeah—woo-hoo! I really just one-upped her. “Please just tell me he’s okay.”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, the lad is fine. He will not be injured—at least for the time being. But if I were you, I would be careful. I am definitely the more considerate one. But Norrek . . . He will not hesitate to slice the lad to bits and pieces if that is what he deems necessary. So with that, I recommend that you do as we say.”

“No! He can’t! The vials—I’ll give them to him! But you have to promise me that nothing’ll ever happen to Edwin, or to any of my family or friends—”

She squints and places both hands on her hips. She shakes her head at me. *What is she thinking? They’re going to hurt him. They wouldn’t. Not yet. Would they?*

“Perfect. If this were yesterday, that would have done just perfectly. However,” she grins, “the terms have changed.”

“Changed? What do you mean, ‘changed’?”

“Norrek has instructed me that he no longer only wants the vials.”

“But—what else could he possibly want? I thought—”

This time she walks right up to me. It’s the closest I’ve been to her without fists being thrown or weapons being fired. She smells of cinnamon—if cinnamon were a deadly, volatile poison. She raises her hand slowly and presses her index finger against my forehead.

“You.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

I stare at her. “Me? Why would Norrek, want me? What good am I?”

“Thank you!” she smirks. “That’s exactly what I told him. It appears as though Norrek believes that your blood supply may very well be the key he needs to successfully carry out his attempt to isolate and replicate the DNA that allows Americans to time travel when members of our lineage cannot. He believes if he can compare your blood with ours and isolate the differences, he will be able to create a new army of Peace Hunters with greater powers than ever.”

I can’t stop myself. “That’s crazy!”

She shrugs. “*You* may think so. But since we have had difficulty locating other photo travelers he can experiment on, he wants to evaluate and assess you. Regardless, he will be the one to determine how useful you can be. So if you want the lad—your son, I should say—back, it’s in both of your interests to comply.”

My mind is in overdrive. I don’t have the right to any other decision. I have to do whatever they want. Edwin’s life is at stake. “I’ll do it! I don’t have my passport yet though. It’ll be here in a few days. Then—I promise—I’m all yours. But how do I know you’re not going to hurt Edwin? How can I be sure?”

“I’ve told you. You and I are both well aware that he’s simply the weapon we’re holding over your head. We don’t have any other use for the lad.” She lets out an exaggerated sigh. “I hate children as it is, really ... In any case, he’s being taken quite good care of. Once you arrive, we will do the swap. Then we will confirm that he leaves with someone of your party immediately. However you must continue on your own with us. No one is to stay behind with you. Is that clear?” She waits, then adds, “I recommend that you begin saying your good-byes.”

“But,” I insist, “how can I be certain that he’s not already hurt?” I take a step toward her. “All I have to go on is your promises, which isn’t saying much.”

“Don’t get testy, Brown Eyes. I will allow you to talk with him daily. I can call him now if you’d like. He was immediately transported to Paris on our private jet to our secret compound. We’re keeping him sedated, and he doesn’t even know that he’s in another country. You are the only person he will be allowed to speak with, but you can speak with him as often as you like so you can be assured as to his safety. As long as you live up to your side of the bargain, which is to deliver yourself to Norreck, no harm will come

to him. We are warning you—if you so much as attempt to interfere again in *any* way—we will not be responsible for what happens to him. Consider that a promise.”

“You’re sick!”

She places her hand over her chest and bows. “Thank you for the compliment, but I’m afraid that flattery will do nothing to improve your position.”

I can’t take any more. It’s killing me that she has the upper hand and I’m at her mercy. “How does someone become like you? What causes someone to become so messed up in the head that they think they should have the right to change time?”

“That’s none of your concern!” she hisses.

“What was it? Did mommy and daddy not show you enough love when you were a little girl?” I jeer. “Because let me tell you—I’ve had it pretty bad, and I wouldn’t ever do the things you guys are doing.”

“You cannot begin to understand what I have gone through.”

“So help me understand.”

“What does it matter to you?”

“I want you to make me understand how—why—someone would believe so much in what the Peace Hunters want to accomplish. I’m giving myself to you guys. It’s the least you can give *me*.”

“Fair enough,” she shrugs. “When I was seven, my mother and poppy took me and my twin sister from Wales to London on holiday. When we were catching the bus to visit the London Eye—the large Ferris wheel—we were caught in the middle of a terrorist attack.” The hard expression in her eyes is washed away by the old memory, replaced by something more . . . human. “I woke up in the hospital weeks later with severe burns. I have the marks on my back to prove it. My poppy and sister were blown to bits. My mother and five other women were taken as hostages.

“They abused her, starved her, nearly killed her. When the United Nations finally negotiated her return, three years later, she was a shadow of the mother I had known. Rail-thin, yellowed eyes, wrinkled skin, and a scalp spotted by patches of baldness from the malnutrition. When she came back to me, I thought everything would return to normal. I was wrong. It was far from ever being normal.

“Every night she would wake screaming from nightmares. The slightest noise made her shiver in panic. What you you call it? Posttraumatic stress? I was terrified for her—bloody hell, I was terrified *of* her. That went on for three weeks ... until the afternoon she threw herself from the top of our sixth story flat.

“I was thirteen. Taken in by my auntie. You can imagine how disturbing this could all be for a young girl. When I was sixteen Norrek found me. He offered me a chance to vindicate the evils that plagued my past. And rather than taking this anger out on others, he helped me to become part of the solution. And so I have. No one will have to suffer the pain my parents did.” Throughout her whole story, her face looks frozen. Her eyes are empty of any emotion. I don’t know how she does it. A part of me wishes she could teach me how to cancel out the past the way she has—at least in front of others. I hate to admit some of the childhood similarities between us. Completely different circumstances, but the same stained, tortured past.

“So why not just time travel into the past and stop the attack?” I ask. “Why join the Peace Hunters?”

“Oh, I did try. But my attempts were unfortunately futile. I tried changing the past several times, until I realized some things are part of a fate that no one can adjust. Every time I changed the sequence of events of that day, somehow or another, my family still ended up dead. I had to witness my family die several times. Finally, I traveled back and fixed it so that the original past was unaffected. But now, with you, and what Norrek might be able to do ... I’m optimistic that we can make it work. I will have access to go further back, to moments where I can potentially alter their short lives. I will be able to bring them back to me.”

“But what you’re doing isn’t the way to do it.” I say. “You don’t know what else you’re altering in the process.”

“I’ve seen enough. I’ll take my chances.” She removes a flat, thin, six-inch-long silver object from her pocket and tosses it at me. “Great chat, really. You have much to tend to. When you want to get in contact with me, open it, and press the button on the inside. It will immediately put you in contact with me. Don’t bother trying to trace it. Impossible.”

“Is it a phone?”

“Of sorts.” She bends over, closer into my ear. “Time’s ticking, Brown Eyes.” She brushes her fingers along my cheeks until both of her thumbs find their way directly beneath my nose. Before I can even process her movements, I’m inhaling an ice-cold gas that has sprung from her gloves.

My vision blurs and my entire body goes stiff. My mind is ordering my body to move, but I’m paralyzed. No control of any limb. Naima’s hazy silhouette blurs slides into the background of my smeared, distorted vision, until I can no longer make out the difference. Then, my mind goes completely blank.

I don’t know how much time passes before I feel the blood starting to circulate through my legs and arms again. I retch for a few moments, jump up and down, and shake out of my hands and feet. “What was that?” I call out to Naima.

I realize I’m alone. Naima’s gone. The window cracked open.

I flop onto the corner of my bed. The spike of blood rushing to my head is making me feel woozy. I fall onto my back, roll over, and reach for my camera bag. I pull out my camera and scroll through old images. My anxiety is pedaling fast, spiraling in the direction of a panic attack. My head is pounding from whatever fumes I just inhaled. Desperately, I scroll past each picture faster and faster. Old photos of Nevada. Of my old life. Of the people I thought would be my family forever. Photos from my old school. From the day I first arrived here.

But for the first time, looking at my photos—the one thing that has always comforted me—only causes me even more anguish. Even that’s changed. Just another reminder of how everything’s been flipped, shifted, altered.

I toss the camera aside and roll over onto my back. “Bud ... Leyla ... please. Please help me through this! Promise me they won’t hurt Edwin! I’ll do anything, just ... please...”

I continue begging until eventually the stress turns to mental exhaustion, which then turns to torture in the form of nightmares. *The nightmares*. The one thing that hasn’t changed since Leyla’s death.

I hear her voice—a mix of words and hums—coasting the air. “Hello?” I call out into the strange, unfamiliar darkness.

I peer down at my hands. They’re like a stranger’s, with fingers that are thin and long. It’s like they’re not even my own. I feel at my face. My cheeks are soaked with tears. I’ve been crying. I look down at my feet. Small and tiny. I roll out of a bed I’ve never felt or seen before. One I’ve never slept in. The pillows aren’t as soft. And it’s so much colder here than in my home.

The doorknob is higher than my head. The door is cracked open and I squeeze through it. The hallway is dark, but at the far end is a door with a soft light peeking around its edges. Her voice grows louder and more soothing. I want to hear more of it. I need more of it.

I press against the door and spot a woman draped in a lilac silk robe facing the window. She hears me and cranes around. “Hi, sweetheart. Did you have a bad dream?”

Her eyes are so bright against the dark night. She smiles and for the moment I feel okay, safe, protected. She tucks her springy golden curls behind her ear and I run toward her. I jump into her arms and begin sobbing so hard my tears seep right through the silk of her robe.

“Oh, honey ... it’s okay. Everything will be okay. Jet and I will take care of you. We’ll always protect you. You don’t have to be scared.” She clutches the back of my head and presses my face against her chest. I feel her lips touch the top of my head. Then she starts singing. “Let the night take all your fear ... Let my voice be all you hear...”

And even though I don’t stop crying, I know I never want to let go.

A moment later, another door into the room—one I hadn’t noticed—creaks open. A man’s voice speaks. “The boy all right?”

He walks over to us, his steps heavy and loud, and wraps his arms around us. “Now don’t you worry, little cowboy. You’re at home now. Ain’t nothing gonna hurt you from here on out.”

That night, and every night for the next year, I sleep between them. When the nightmares come, Leyla cracks open a bottle of the best remedy I’ve ever known.

Her voice.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I shoot up in my bed, my fingers nearly tearing through the sheets. Leyla's voice is still a soft but strong whisper in my ears. I smooth back the strands of sweat-drenched hair plastered to my forehead and collapse back onto the mattress.

Empty. That's what I feel. Not half full or half empty. Just empty.

"Nightmare?"

The sudden voice from just outside my door startles me so much that I almost fall off the mattress. "Jesus fu—Estelle!" I blow out a motor-sounding burst of air. "You trying to kill me?"

The morning light seeps through the cracks in the blinds and over her eyes and mouth, which breaks into a partial smile. "I'm sorry. I couldn't sleep any longer. Had a wicked case of nightmares, too. I've been watching you sleep for the past hour. Made me feel better to know you're safe."

"I *was* safe until you almost gave me a heart at—" *Whoa. Better add that to my list of things I shouldn't exactly refer to for a long time.* "I'm fine." I pat the mattress next to me. "Come on."

She comes over, settles herself next to me, and reaches for my hand. Together we stare at the ceiling.

"What do you think he's saying right now?" she asks.

I keep my eyes glued to the ceiling. "He's probably making a joke about how frisky of an old lady you are."

She begins to smile, but a moment later it turns into a muffled sob. She knows it's exactly what he would have said, and there's no denying how empty and lost we'll always be without him.

"Yeah," she murmurs. "He would say something silly like that—wouldn't he?" Her tears push beyond their barriers; free of her resistance, of the fear of me seeing her cry. "Oh, my Buddy! That crazy fool! That crazy, crazy fool! ... how he's left me broken-hearted..."

I tighten my grip around her small, wrinkled hand. "But right after, he'd also say you're in good hands. And that you're exactly where he'd want you to be if he weren't around ... with me."

This only makes her cry harder. “Yes, I am.”

We lie there for about twenty minutes just holding and comforting each other, sharing and relishing our love.

“Naima showed up here a while ago,” I finally say.

She doesn’t move. “Of course she did. Which is another reason why I couldn’t sleep. I knew she’d be back. Norrek is the one barking out orders, and he wants those vials more than anything.”

I roll over onto my side. “The latest is, now they want me in exchange for Edwin. Naima says Norrek wants to use me to continue his experiments.”

She sits up like a shot. “No! They’ve already taken everything from me! They’re not going to have you too! Especially not as some lab rat.”

“I don’t like it any more than you do, but I don’t have a choice.”

“We always have another choice. We just haven’t come up with one yet.”

I shake my head.

She throws her arm around my neck. “Don’t you dare do that now! We’ll find another way. I don’t want to hear any more about it!”

But I see from her expression that she knows I’m right. There is no other way. Even though this is out of my control, like the rest of my life has been, I’ve decided I will go. I’ll take the reins of my life this time. I know, that even though she tries to fight it, she too, knows what I’m feeling.

I will save Edwin.

I will put an end to the Peace Hunters.

And knowing that I will—knowing I won’t stop until I do—is the only peace I have. Because before, I couldn’t think of a single reason why to live, and now I have an endless stream of reasons I would die for.

Silence once again hovers over us.

“They gave me a device,” I finally say. “It’ll let me talk to him.”

“Have you tried it yet?”

“No. I’m nervous. I’m afraid of what I might hear. What would I tell him? I thought Ralph or Jeanie or Mario should talk to him first.”

“You’re afraid of how it’ll affect you.”

“I don’t know if I could handle it.”

She sits up and starts easing her way off the bed. “I know it’s hard, but we need to make sure he’s okay.”

“I know.” I pull out the device free and lift the cover. A series of beeps sound off.

“So soon?” Naima’s voice answers.

“You left before I could talk to him. I want to know he’s safe.”

“Very well.” The same beeps echo from the receiver.

An unfamiliar female voice answers. “Yes?”

I hear Naima say, “Gavin would like to hear the boy.”

“He’s sleeping.”

“So wake him up.”

The woman calls out to someone else, ordering them to wake Edwin up. Moments later, I hear a faint cry. The cry of a young boy. My heart sinks. What are they doing to him?

“Hello?” It’s his voice.

My eyes instantly well with tears and I have trouble getting any words out. “Edwin? Are you okay?”

“Who’s this?” His voice is muffled. Probably from being drugged. Or from crying. Or both.

“It’s me, Gavin. Mario’s friend—”

“Gavin?”

“Listen, everything’s gonna be okay.”

“Where am I? Where’s my family?” His voice is rising, he’s getting hysterical. “I wanna go home!”

“We’re gonna get you home. But I need to know you’re all right. Are you hurt?”

“No. But I wanna go home.” He begins to sob.

“Enough.” Naima’s voice cuts in.

“Edwin!” I shout. “I’ll be there soon!”

“Don’t leave—” he starts to say just as his voice cuts off.

“That will do for now,” Naima tells me. “We will be in touch.”

The line goes dead.

“Is he hurt?” Estelle asks.

“It doesn’t sound like it. But he’s so scared.”

“That poor boy...”

I fall back onto the bed, feeling uneasy, stressed, anxious.

“Why don’t you go in to work, sweetheart? You could use something to take your mind off everything.”

“No. I can’t leave now. I’m not leaving you alone.”

She chuckles. “If I’ve made it this far, I think I’ll be just fine.”

“The idea of you being alone ... it makes me crazy. I’m already going nuts with Edwin. What if something happens to you? I’d be all alone again. And you...” My voice shatters. “...what would I do without you...”

She takes my hand and fiddles around my thumb with her fingers. *Her touch is always so gentle. I wonder if she ever considered being a nurse.* “We cannot allow these monsters to ruin our lives. We must stand stronger and taller. We have what they want. We must use that to our advantage. They’re testing us. I’ve been thinking about this a lot. We have to make sure they know that we won’t go down without a fight.”

I open my mouth to object, but decide not to. She’s kind of right.

“Think about it,” she says. “Why haven’t they all just come to kidnap us or force us to give them our vials? If they mess this up, their only shot at getting the vials is done. Then what? Their ultimate goal would be destroyed. What would they be then?”

“Fine. I’ll go in. But only to tell Mitch I need to take a leave of absence or a sabbatical or whatever you call it when you have a job. And if he doesn’t like it, then I’m quitting. Plus, I have some explaining to do to Meesha. Then I’m coming straight back here.”

She smiles at me in that way I’m learning that only a grandmother can—the way that someone who was once a mother can—appreciating all my imperfections. “Deal, honey.”

CHAPTER NINE

When I get to the museum and start walking up the steps, nasty memories bubble up in my stomach. I see Yogi standing there with her animated smile and waving at me like a lunatic. Not having her around anymore feels wrong, but I don’t understand why. How

can I possibly be missing her? She killed Bud! How can I feel anything but hatred toward her? What the hell's wrong with me? *My God, I'm so screwed up.*

I hurry up the mountain of steps, past the memories, past the guilt, and into the building. As always, Fred the elephant greets me. He towers over me, reminding me of the feelings of power, change and infinite hope that charged through me when I first arrived in DC and laid eyes on this amazing city. This is how I want Naima and the rest of them to feel when they think of me. I will be a Fred to them. Tall, strong, fearless, dangerous.

I go right to the Gift Shop and into the back offices. Mitch wheels around in the chair.

“Hillstone, where the hell have you been? I've been calling you for the past day. This isn't Nevada. You want to get paid, you come to work.”

“Hey, Mitch. I'm sorry! A lot's happened. My grandmother hasn't been doing well, and—oh, if you don't mind, can you not call me ‘Hillstone’ anymore? I know it's my legal last name, but I'll be changing it back to Greene soon.”

He looks surprised by my response. “Listen, I get that you've had a lot going on. But in the real world, there's stuff happening all over. And all the time, too. Turn on the news—you can see for yourself. Doesn't matter what time of the day it is here, there's pandemonium, crime, death—all of the above—happening somewhere. But the world keeps moving right along. And so does this museum. Unless there's a bomb threat or it's after hours, it keeps going. And *we* keep working.” He glances down and flicks a smudge of sugared powder from his uniform. “Anyway, there are plenty of other kids that'd like this job. Who *want* to work. Just yesterday, I had two come in begging me to take 'em on. And they were sharp, too, they were.”

I almost can't hold in the urge to laugh. I feel bad for him. The Smithsonian is Mitch's everything—which is fine. But I couldn't care less about this place. Not at this point. Not with what's going on. I want to shout back and tell him that, but I know I'd only be taking my anger out on him. So I rein myself in. “You know, Mitch, you're right,” I tell him. “I've just had a lot going on. I should've been more responsible.” I remove my cap and slide it softly across his desk. “You should hire one of those two guys.”

“Whoa, whoa! You quitting on me? Come on now, you can't just do that!”

I gesture at my uniform shirt. “I don’t have a change of clothes with me, but I’ll make sure to return it to you.” I hold out my hand. He takes it automatically. I think he’s still speechless. “Thank you for everything,” I say. “I really mean that.” I take a brief look around, then turn to leave. When I reach the door, I turn around again and say, “You make sure that one of those new hires of yours watches those monitors. Last week, a kid made off with a bag of moon dust on one of the days I wasn’t here.” I throw him a wink and shut the door behind me.

I don’t know why, but I feel so liberated. I don’t have anything against Mitch, and I didn’t dislike the job, either. But being able to have a say, to have control over what I wanted and then *acting* on it—it feels like I’ve freed myself from the shackles that have kept me chained up my entire life.

I head in the direction of the café. It’s about noon-ish and if I know Meesha like I think I do, she’s stopped in for her coffee and chocolate croissant.

I’m right.

She’s leaning over the counter swaying her hips from side to side, wiggling one foot in midair ... and she’s chewing out the young employee. “Whaddya mean you don’t have any more croissants? Babydoll, that’s like telling a dog he can’t scratch his fleas. I know you may be new and all, but I suggest you go out there in the back and see if you got any more pieces of that baked deliciousness. ’Cause I know Pearl always hides one for me. Go ahead, now. Get!”

The girl backs away from her and disappears into the kitchen.

I step up behind her and before she notices me, I say, “I don’t know why you have to go ahead and scare people like that.”

She wheels around and exclaims. “Well looky what the fine Lord dragged in. Where you been?” She bends over and plants a wet one on my cheek.

I give her a hug. “You know that poor girl isn’t going to show up for work tomorrow. There goes her college funding.”

She gives me her devious, puffy-lipped smile. “Sugah, that girl needs to know how things work around here. And fast, too. You know Mama Meesha ain’t got time to play games.”

Moments later, the girl comes back out with a chocolate croissant on a small white dish. “Uh, here you go. It was in the back...”

“Mm-hmm. Just like I said it’d be.” Meesha tears it from her hands and turns to walk off without paying.

“Uh ... Ma’am...” the girl starts to stutter.

“You just let Pearl know,” Meesha flings over her shoulder. “It’s on her tab for distressing this old lady. Coulda had me an attack of the heart.” She stops and gives me a wide-eyed look that says, “So, you gonna follow me or not?”

I glance back at the terrified girl and mouth “Sorry!” to her. She smiles and fumbles through some receipts by the register.

Hurricane Meesha strikes again.

We sit down at one of the round tables in a far corner of the café. “Now how you been, sugah?” she asks. “Everything work out for you since you had me an accomplice to your no-good-doing?”

“Aw, now come on, Meesha! Why would you think I was up to no good?”

“Baybeh, if they bottled it up and made a cologne out of it, it’d be named right after ya.” She grins and takes a giant bite out of the croissant, sending a blizzard of flakes to the table. “Good Lord!” she exclaims. “Thank you for blessing me with these pastries that musta been baked straight from your hands! Mm-mm!” She holds the croissant out to me and points at one side of it. “The trick is, is that you gotta take a bite outta this side right here, ’cause that’s where the chocolate’s heaviest—right here.”

“Wow! You just changed my life.”

She sucks on her chocolate-covered index finger. “Don’t you be sarcastic with me, now. These lessons can change your life. Look how happy I am.” She swipes her tongue across her upper front teeth, then starts laughing. “I think you got yourself a promise to keep, hmm? Some explainin’ to do? Last time I saw you, you had me wait around to tear up that photo. Right after you and that Yogi girl disappeared into thin air. Now, either you’re a magician or this old lady is slipping into the world of dementia.”

I shift in my seat. “Oh ... yeah...”

“Come on, spit it out. Ain’t nothing you’re gonna tell me that I haven’t heard before.”

“I doubt that,” I retort. “Trust me.”

“You questioning my wisdom?”

“No, it’s not that.” How am I going to start? I lower my voice to a whisper, even though no one in the café looks like they care. “What I have to tell you ... believe me, you’re probably going to think I’m crazy.”

She hunches over closer to me. “Let me be the judge of that, sweet thang. But gimme another minute first.” She dips the croissant into her coffee and chomps in again, then closes her eyes and sighs with bliss.

I know she’s teasing me ... and I know she’s always been there for me before, but I feel my heart beat picking up to a steady jog, and then a sprint. I’m nervous, and I don’t know why. I can trust her. I know I can. *But can you really?* I ask myself. *Remember Yogi.*

She waits for me to begin, but I can’t find the right combination of courage and words. Finally she crumples her paper napkin, and flicks it on the table. “Fine.” She pushes herself away from the table and stands up, planting herself across from me. “I told you I wasn’t gonna force you to trust me. Unlike you, I’m a person of my word. And I got work to do.”

Just as she’s about to turn around, I reach out and grab her arm. “Wait! You’re right.” She lets out an exaggerated sigh, then just stands there waiting.

“Sit back down,” I urge her. I’ll tell you. Everything.”

She glances at her watch and shakes her head. “I don’t have time for it now.” But when she sees the look on my face, she gives me her wicked grin and plunks herself back down in her chair. “Just kidding, sweet thang. If you coulda seen the look on your face!” She hunches over again. “All right then. Let it out.”

CHAPTER TEN

After I’m done telling Meesha the whole story, she’s staring at me as if she’s having coffee with Sasquatch or Lord Voldemort. I wait for her to say something, but she doesn’t.

“Can’t you say *something?*” I finally ask.

She nods. “Yeah. You taking meds or something I should know about? Is there some loony bin out there looking for you?”

“No. I’m dead serious. It’s all true. All of it.”

“So show me.”

Just like Mario. Suddenly I feel like a circus act. I wonder if this is how celebrities feel when people ask them for their autograph. I guess it comes with the territory.

I look around and mutter, “I can’t exactly do it right here.”

“I see.” She leans back in her chair and crosses one muscular knee over the other. It takes some effort. “You ever wonder why this crazy lady always felt like she had to protect you?”

I look at her, puzzled.

“Honey,” she goes on, “with my first husband—God bless that man’s soul—we used to run a youth group at our local church. The Blossoming Flower of St. Genesis. There was this one boy. About your age. Gabriel. First time we met him, poor thing was lit as a candle and high as a kite. As drugged up as he could possibly be. We took him under our wing and tried to help with changing his life. He’d come over for dinner. We’d take him out for his birthday. We just about nearly took him off the streets. Turned his life right around, we did.

“But ... like they always say ... all good things come to an end. Take it from me, baybeh. *All things*. He met this girl. Cute little thing, too. But boy, was she hell in heels. Michelle or Melissa—oh hell, don’t matter. Might as well’ve been called Satan. She tore Gabriel’s heart right out. Stomped all over that good boy.

“So one night Gabriel found out she wasn’t, let’s just say, a one-man kinda gal. After that, he broke down. No one could stop him. Then he took a handful of who knows what. And that was it.” She closes her eyes and sighs. “Now, I’m not saying you’re some druggie, but that boy had heart. Like you. A special light. Such a waste of a beautiful life. And the minute I met you, you reminded me of him. Same hair, eyes, way you walk. I just wanted to grab you and cradle you ... So I guess I’ve made it my mission to look after ya—make sure I don’t let *your* life go before your eyes.”

She grabs my hand. Her grip is soft, reassuring, caressing. “I told you before, sugah, that I got my eyes on you. Now, I don’t care if you tell me you came straight from outer space or you can turn water to steel with a snap of your finger. That ain’t what makes you special to me. What makes you special is this right here.” She places her palm on my

chest, right against my heart. “And you just remember that.” She removes her hand and leans back. “Don’t get me wrong. I’ll have to get used to this ... uh ... this thing you do. But ain’t nothing more powerful than my promise, as God as my witness.”

I’m stunned. I’m not exactly sure if she believes me or thinks I’m crazy, but I don’t even care. Meesha genuinely cares about me. It makes me wonder when and how this happened. She loves me. And I love her too.

I feel the corners of my lips twitch upwards in a smile. “I don’t know why I met you either, Meesha, but I feel like one of the luckiest guys in the world.”

She lets out a breathy laugh. “Mm-hmm, you better say that. So, this trip to Paris or whatnot. When are you leaving?”

“As soon as my passport comes in.”

“And what about this boy of yours? Anybody worrying that they might hurt him no matter what they’re telling you? I mean, I wouldn’t be waiting around. Ya’ll is crazy now.”

“I promised Naima a trade. Me for Edwin. She and I both know he’s just leverage so they can get me to do what they want. He can’t do anything for them. And if anything happens to him, they’ll lose that leverage. She lets me talk to him. He sounds all right, but he’s terrified, and just knowing he’s with them is freaking me out. I know they most likely won’t hurt him, but I wouldn’t put it past them. As for Norrek, he seems to think I might be the answer to helping him replicate this army of Peace Hunters. So he wants to basically have me be his human science project. Now I know why I always hated science.”

“Oh no, he won’t!” she bursts out. “Let me tell you—if he even lays a hand on you, I’ll swim my way across the Atlantic and give him a piece of me!”

Her radio sounds off, hollering her name and some code word. “Can’t ya’ll take care of anything for yourselves?” she yells back. I cringe. She tucks the radio away and pushes her chair back again. “Okay, sweet thang, my time’s up for now. We ain’t done here, though. Let’s talk more later. You make sure you call me, text me, whatever works. But I better know you’re safe. Got it?”

I raise my hand and salute her. “Yes ma’am, Madame Meesha!”

She gets up, then comes around the table and and graces me with another kiss. “You’re a good boy, Gavin. Don’t you forget that. Now, after I go to the Lord’s house to pray, I want you to show me whatever it is you say you do.” She turns to march out of the cafe, but before she reaches the door she shouts out to the clerk, “I’ll be back again tomorrow! Same time!”

Before heading back home like I promised, I stop at the dinosaur exhibit. The fossils always blow my mind. There’s a real triceratops, called “Hatcher,” that was found in Wyoming in the early 1890s. Nearby, a forty-foot T. Rex that was found in South Dakota stares down on me and makes me wonder what it would feel like if this big guy was still alive. I mean, you’d have to know you were a goner. And then there’s a freakish winged dinosaur that hangs from the ceiling so it hovers over the other fossil in the center of the room, a long-necked, ninety-foot-long sauropod.

I start imagining Edwin and me strolling though the museum like other families and scanning information, discovering the different prehistoric eras together. But I shake the image from my head and continue reading the information signs on the displays. I didn’t realize that there had been more than one prehistoric era. The sign that grabs my attention is the one I’m most familiar with, the Cretaceous Period. At least, it’s the one my teachers went over in school most often. I just had no clue it was called this. Apparently the Cretaceous, the last phase of the Mesozoic Era, began around 145 million years ago and ended 65 million years ago, when the dinosaurs went bye-bye. This was also the period where plant life and flora flourished, mammals continued to evolve, continents were in a remodeling sort of mode, and oceans expanded.

I’m staring at a bundle of watermelon-sized dinosaur eggs thinking that you’d be able to cook up an omelet the size of a house with these babies—when another thought suddenly crosses my mind. Why I didn’t think of this before?

We have all five vials!

For a moment I’m tempted to use them and go back in time to kill off Norrek or something. But who knows what the downstream effect of that would be? However ... there is one place—or time—where I know I can go to and just watch. A time where I might just find some answers that can help me stop the Peace Hunters. All I need to do is figure out how to use all five vials to get there.

I'm going prehistoric.